

## A Study in the Book of Romans

# 21

## Romans 8:29

### Key Verse

“ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ”

Paul has already written, with a great sense of awe, something of the wonder of that which awaits us (8:17-18,23). And in 8:28, he has shown how God works in *everything* for the good of those who love him and are called by him for his special purpose. Now, in 8:29, he has revealed what that glorious purpose is:

- We are to be conformed to the image of his Son
- Jesus is to be the firstborn among many brothers

First of all, let's take a look at the first half of God's marvelous plan. Two aspects are contained in this statement: the ultimate aim (the image of God's Son), and the process by which we reach it (we are being "conformed").

### The Ultimate Aim

God's ultimate aim for us – his magnificent goal for our lives – is that we reach “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). This is the aim for each of us as individuals and together as a corporate Body (John 17:20-26). The wonder of what this means is emphasized in Hebrews 1:3, where it declares that Jesus is the “radiance of God's glory” and the “exact representation of his being.” As the *King James Version* translates it, the Son is the “express image” of the Father. Thus, if we are to be conformed to the image of

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the Son, this is also our high calling! (**Colossians 2:9-10; Philipians 3:12-14**). It is little wonder, then, that **Ephesians 5:27** tells us that God's goal is for the Church "to present her to himself as a *radiant* church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

There are three main areas in which we are being conformed into his likeness:

### ***His character***

#### **Read Psalm 103:8**

The character of the Lord Jesus is described in **Galatians 5:22-23**, expressed in the fruit of the Holy Spirit who is indwelling us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

### ***His power and authority***

#### **Read Ephesians 2:6-7**

The Throne is the expression of God's power and authority. And we are called to be sharers of his Throne! **Colossians 2:9-10**, speaking of our corporate experience as his Church, declares:

"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority."

#### **Read Revelation 3:21**

### ***His glory***

**Jude 24** says that when we are presented before the Father at the end of this age we will be "faultless before the presence of his glory." Imagine that! Even with the fullness of the light of God's glory shining on us, we will be found without fault because of the Holy Spirit has caused us to be fully conformed to the likeness of Christ! For some powerful descriptions of Jesus' glory, check out these passages:

#### **Read Matthew 17:2**

#### **Read Revelation 1:12-18**

How can this possibly be? How can such an "impossible" goal ever be attained?

## **The Process**

In **8:29**, Paul not only describes the goal itself – "the likeness of his Son" – but also the process that is taking us toward that goal – "[being] conformed." This "hope of the glory of God" (**5:2**) is not a frustrating mirage, but a "hope [that] does not disappoint us" (**5:5**).

Peter praises God in **1 Peter 1:3** because:

"In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope..."

From the moment of our spiritual birth, the maturity process begins within us. Just as in the natural a newborn baby bears the family likeness, so we too are

born in the spiritual likeness of our Father. Now, like babies, we are to begin to grow to full spiritual maturity. And so Peter goes on in **1 Peter 2:2-3** to describe how the “living hope” is realized in our lives:

“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

The Lord has four main agents in bringing about our growth into the full measure of his image:

- **The Holy Spirit** – *God’s Spirit* is the life-force within us that the process of being conformed to the image of Christ (note **2 Corinthians 3:17-18**). As the Lord Jesus said: “The Spirit gives life...” (**John 6:63**).
- **The Word of God** – *God’s written Word* is our nourishment for growth. As Paul explains in **2 Timothy 3:16-17**: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking correcting and *training in righteousness*...”
- **The Body of Christ** – *God’s people* are also involved in the maturity process in our lives. In **Ephesians 4:7-16**, we see this process in action. In **verse 13**, Paul give us the ultimate goal: “...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” In **verses 11-12,15-16**, he describes the Body of Christ is a major agent used by God to take us to that goal. God has placed ministries in the Church for the express purpose of bringing us to maturity. **Verses 11-12** list the specific ministries commissioned by God for this purpose, and **verses 15-16** broaden the ministry portfolio to include every member of the Body. Each of us ministers strength and growth to other Christians through mutual love and spiritual gifts.
- **Circumstances** – God’s intervention in circumstances is also an important mechanism for growth in our lives. We have already seen how God uses all the circumstances of life as molding instruments to develop his character within us. As we walk with the Lord, situations arise that challenge our faith in God. God’s plan is that in each and every trial we gain the victory through faith in him. When we respond in faith, God in turn responds to our faith with his grace to meet the situation. And that also works something within us that changes us into another dimension of his glory. So, as we go in our lives from trial to trial (**1 Peter 1:6-7**), we also go from faith to faith (**Romans 1:17**), and thus from grace to grace (**John 1:16**), which then causes us to go “from strength to strength” (**Psalms 84:7**), which in turn transforms us “from glory to glory” (**2 Corinthians 3:18**, KJV), until we arrive at God’s ultimate target – we have been conformed his full likeness!

As J. B. Phillips renders **2 Corinthians 3:18**:

“But all of us who are Christians...reflect like mirrors the glory of the Lord. We are transfigured in ever-increasing splendor into his own image, and the transformation comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

## Jesus, the Firstborn

In the first part of this lesson, we've examined the first aspect of God's plan – to conform us to the image of his Son. The second aspect of God's plan is expressed in the last part of **8:29**. Not only has the Father a special call for us, but our call also fulfills a special plan the Father has for his Son! The Father's final purpose in creation and redemption is the supreme exaltation of his Son (**Ephesians 1:10; Philippians 2:9-11**) – that he might be “the firstborn among many brothers.”

In **Colossians 1:18**, Paul describes the Lord Jesus in these terms:

“And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the *firstborn* from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”

As we saw in **ES106-01**, in calling Jesus “the firstborn,” Paul is using an Old Testament concept. God gave specific rules to the people of Israel in the Old Testament concerning their firstborn sons. His purpose in doing this was to provide a picture for us of the glory and preeminence of his Firstborn, the Lord Jesus.

## The Picture in Israel

To understand fully the significance of this title given to the Lord Jesus, let's summarize what we already know about the biblical concept of the firstborn. If you remember, to be “firstborn” in the Old Testament culture of Israel did not *necessarily* mean they were the first child born. Though this was the general rule (**Exodus 13:2**), there were many exceptions. For example:

- Isaac (**Genesis 16-22**)
- Jacob (**Genesis 25-27**)
- Joseph (**Genesis 37,49:22-26**)
- Ephraim (**Genesis 48:10-20**)
- David (**Psalms 89:19-37**)

These exceptions are significant because the family culture of Old Testament Israel (which included the laws concerning the firstborn) was instituted by God himself to picture the relationship of the Lord Jesus to God the Father and to us as God's children. As we look back into the Old Testament culture of Israel we find that to be “firstborn” was a title for a special status in the family. The firstborn had:

### ***Special position***

He was the father's “right-hand man.” He represented the father's authority to the family. Next to the father, he was “lord” over his younger brothers (**Genesis 27:37**). In the same way, as Firstborn, Jesus Christ is eternally Lord of the Church! Even though, in his grace, he has elevated us to be enthroned together with him (**Ephesians 2:6**), yet throughout eternity we will be continually praising him for what he has done, and worshiping him for who he is! (**Ephesians 1:11-14**).

This is the grand message of the book of **Revelation** (see **7:11-12; 15:3-4; 19:1,4-9**). The 24 elders, seated on the throne with him, demonstrate what the attitude of our hearts will be throughout eternity. Stepping down from the throne and laying their crowns at the feet of the Lamb, they fall down and worship him.

### ***Special inheritance***

In the Old Testament, a father gave his firstborn “a double share” of all he had (**Deuteronomy 21:15-17**). This meant that if, for example, a father had four sons; his total possessions would be divided into five parts. The firstborn received two parts, while the other sons received one part each.

Here again is a picture of the double honor that belongs to the Lord Jesus as the Firstborn. He is the “heir of all things” (**Hebrews 1:2**). This only goes to emphasize the wonder of his love for us, for we have been made joint-heirs with Christ! (**Romans 8:17**). He is the Firstborn *by right*, but we share in the inheritance of the Firstborn *by grace*.

### ***Special responsibility***

The firstborn sons of Israel were separated by God to perform a priestly function before him on behalf of their families (**Exodus 13:2**). The tribe of Levi later took on the role of “firstborn” of the entire nation (**Exodus 44:22-23; 19-6; Numbers 3:11-12,44-45; 8:17-19**), and as priests, they ministered firstly to God, and secondly to the people.

The Firstborn also held responsibility for the welfare of the family. This is why he received the double-portion inheritance. He had sufficient to help any of the family should they be in need. And so, as Firstborn, Jesus is the expression of the Father’s love and grace to us – ministering help in time of need (**Hebrews 4:14-16**).

## **Three Dimensions to Christ as Firstborn**

As we have seen so far in **8:29**, Paul has declared that the purpose of the Father is two-fold. His goal is not only that we might be “conformed to the image of his Son,” but also that the Lord Jesus might be the “firstborn among many brothers.” As we look further into this magnificent title that is given to Jesus – “the Firstborn” – we find that Scripture calls him Firstborn in three distinct relationships:

- Firstborn over all creation (**Colossians 1:15-17**)
- Firstborn from among the dead (**Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5**)
- Firstborn among many brothers (**Romans 8:29**)

Each of the Lord’s relationships as Firstborn is an outworking of the one before. He is Firstborn among many brothers because he is Firstborn from among the dead, and he is Firstborn from among the dead because he is Firstborn over all creation. And in each of these Firstborn roles, as we have seen, Jesus has:

- Special position
- Special inheritance
- Special responsibility

## Jesus – Firstborn Over All Creation

This is Jesus' primary role as Firstborn. He is, and always has been, the Firstborn over all creation. This involves:

### *Special position*

Paul declares in **Colossians 1:15** that Christ is “firstborn over all creation.” As the *Holman Bible Handbook* explains:

“Paul described Jesus as Lord of creation, the ‘firstborn’...The term ‘firstborn’ stresses uniqueness and sovereignty rather than priority in time. Jesus is the “firstborn” because He is the agent of creation and the heir of creation.”<sup>1</sup>

As John states in **John 1:1-3** (echoing the first three words of **Genesis 1:1**):

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

**Hebrews 1** declares in great detail the nature of Christ's status as Firstborn over all creation. He is Firstborn over:

- **The Angelic Creation** – He is supreme in name (**verses 5-6**), in position (**verses 7-9**), in power (**verses 10-12**) and in authority (**verse 13**).
- **The Natural Creation** – Christ is “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (**verse 13**). *The Amplified Bible* translates the depth of meaning in the original Greek when it states that Jesus, as the Firstborn, is “upholding and maintaining and guiding and propelling the universe by His mighty word of power”!

The status of the Lord Jesus as Firstborn over all creation means that the whole of creation – both heaven and earth – stands behind his word! The Spirit of God puts his word into action (compare **John 1:3** and **Genesis 1:2-3**) and the hosts of heaven stand at attention to do his bidding (**Psalms 103:20-21; Matthew 26:53**). By virtue of his position as Firstborn over all creation, *nothing* can withstand the authority of his word:

- Not winds and waves (**Luke 8:23-25**)
- Not sickness (**Matthew 4:24; 8:8-9,13**)
- Not animals (**Jonah 1:17; 2:10; Matthew 17:27**)
- Not those who oppose him (**John 18:4-6; Revelation 2:16; 17:14**)

### Read Revelation 1:17

When Christ calls himself the First and the Last, he is taking on a divine title – a description applied only to God himself (see **Isaiah 44:6; 48:12**). As *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament* explains:

“Among the Jewish rabbis it was common to use the first and the last letters of the Hebrew alphabet to denote the whole of anything, from beginning to end.”<sup>2</sup>

But the single term “First” that Jesus uses also means “absolutely first”<sup>3</sup> and thus has a Firstborn application. Jesus is supreme in every conceivable way. He is in all things “the First.”

### Read Colossians 1:18

As with all other aspects of Christ’s Firstborn status, the primary focus is on Christ’s “supremacy” (NIV) or “preeminence” (KJV). The Greek word translated “supremacy” or “preeminence” literally means “to be holding the first place.”<sup>4</sup> As the Firstborn Over All Creation, the Lord Jesus is “before all things,” says Paul in **Colossians 1:17**.

### *Special inheritance*

As Firstborn Over All Creation, Jesus also has special inheritance, for **Colossians 1:16** tells us:

“For by him *all things* were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created *by him* and *for him*.”

**Hebrews 1:2** proclaims of Christ:

“...in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, *whom he appointed heir of all things*, and through whom he made the universe.”

Christ’s inheritance (“heir of all things”) and Christ’s creative action (“he made the universe”) are linked together. He is “heir of *all things*” (**Hebrews 1:2**) because “*all things* were created by him and for him” (**Colossians 1:16**). As the Firstborn Over All Creation, everything he created is his inheritance.

And as the Firstborn Over All Creation, the Lord Jesus’ inheritance also includes an inheritance of worship and honor. **Hebrews 1:6** tells us:

“And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’”

As *The Message* so beautifully puts **Colossians 1:16-20**:

“For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels – *everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment...He was supreme in the beginning and – leading the resurrection parade – he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he’s there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.”

Thus we see that Christ’s supremacy in position translates into supremacy in inheritance. Just as he is “far above” all things in position (**Ephesians 1:20-22**), so he possesses all things as his inheritance. The magnitude and breadth of his inheritance match the magnitude and breadth of his position.

## ***Special responsibility***

### **Read Luke 19:10**

But as the Firstborn Over All Creation, the Lord Jesus is also responsible for his creation. So when mankind – the pinnacle of that creation – fell, he fulfilled his special responsibility as Firstborn Over All Creation and came down to the earth to rescue us and bring us back into relationship with the Father again. And it is precisely because Jesus took responsibility as Firstborn Over All Creation that he became the Firstborn From Among the Dead.

## **Jesus – Firstborn From Among the Dead**

### **Read Colossians 1:18**

Jesus still remains Firstborn Over All Creation, but now he has a new title – Firstborn From Among the Dead. And as Paul states so clearly in **Colossians 1:18**, God’s purpose in this was “so that *in everything* he might have the supremacy.”

You see, when mankind fell into sin, this was a direct challenge to the Firstborn status of God’s Son. Adam sought independence from God’s rulership – he sought out a firstborn status of his own. So even though the Son of God was still Firstborn Over All Creation, there was one small speck in all the unimaginable expanses of the created universe that stood in defiance of God’s will. Man had arrogantly set himself up as supreme on earth.

And so, taking up his responsibility as Firstborn Over All Creation, the Lord Jesus entered into the arena of mankind’s rebellion. He faced the Cross, suffered and died. But then, on the third day, he rose back to life and opened a whole new chapter in the saga of human history. For at that point, Christ became more than just the Firstborn Over All Creation. He became the Firstborn From Among the Dead. Let’s take a look now at the special position, special inheritance and special responsibility of this second Firstborn status.

## ***Special position***

Take a look at what Paul reveals in **Philippians 2:9-11**. After stating in **verses 7-8** that Christ “emptied himself” (NASB) of all his divine privileges and “humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (NIV), Paul writes:

“Therefore God exalted him *to the highest place* and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

We must remember that Jesus was, is and eternally will be the Firstborn Over All Creation. He already had supremacy by right, but because of Adam’s rebellion, he did not have supremacy in practice. This is why Jesus went through death, burial and resurrection, “so that,” as the *New Revised Standard Version* translates **Colossians 1:18**, “he might come to have first place *in everything*.”



J. B. Phillips' *The New Testament in Modern English* provides an interesting slant on **Colossians 1:18**:

“Life from nothing began through him and life from the dead began through him, and he is, therefore, justly called the Lord of all.”

At the resurrection of Christ, the pecking order of the universe changed. Whereas prior to Christ's resurrection, Satan was called “the prince of this world” (**John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11**) and claimed a local supremacy upon the earth (a pretense he still continues), now Jesus is rightly called, as J. B. Phillips put it, “Lord of all.”

Even though Christ always was supreme in the created universe, after the Resurrection, “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name...” The result of this post-Resurrection exaltation is that “at the name of Jesus *every knee* should bow, *in heaven* and *on earth* and *under the earth*, and *every tongue* confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...” (**Philippians 2:9-11**). Christ's position as Firstborn has now been declared even over his enemies. This is the nature of Christ's status as Firstborn From Among the Dead.

### Read Ephesians 1:19-22

This too is a description of Christ's post-Resurrection exaltation. It is as Firstborn From Among the Dead that Christ is now seated at the right hand of the Father “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”

**Ephesians 4:10** gives us another clue as to the significance of Christ's transition from Firstborn Over All Creation to Firstborn From Among the Dead:

“He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, *in order to fill the whole universe.*”

### ***Special inheritance***

What is the special inheritance that is connected with Christ's status as Firstborn From Among the Dead? We have already seen that as Firstborn Over All Creation, Christ is “heir of all things.” What could be better than that?

As Firstborn From Among the Dead, Christ's inheritance is twofold. Firstly, it is mankind itself – the nations of the earth. In **Psalms 2:8**, we see the promise of God the Father to his Firstborn:

“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.”

Secondly, as Firstborn From Among the Dead, Christ has inherited “the name that is above every name” (**Philippians 2:9**). In the words of **Hebrews 1:4**: “...the name he has inherited is superior...”

By right, Christ holds the supreme position over all of creation – including the earth. But in the Resurrection, Christ took that right and made it reality. He has “bought” the world through the price of his blood (**Revelation 5:9**). That which

had been lost to God has been redeemed through the Cross. Now Christ's inheritance is the whole of mankind!

The prophecy of **Daniel 7:13-14** pictures what took place after the resurrection and ascension of Christ:

“...He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. *He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him.* His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

### ***Special responsibility***

If the special inheritance of Christ as Firstborn From Among the Dead is the nations of the world, what is his special responsibility? **1 Corinthians 15:24-26** describes that special responsibility:

“Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet...”

In his Resurrection, Christ conquered death, but death's final destruction will come at the return of Christ. This, says Paul, is the “last enemy to be destroyed.”

As Firstborn From Among the Dead, Christ's special responsibility is to “reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” The aim of this reign is found in **Ephesians 1:9-10**:

“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – *to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*”

**Read Hebrews 2:9**

## **Jesus – Firstborn Among Many Brothers**

But, says Paul in **Romans 8:29**, that's not all! Because of his supreme sacrifice upon the Cross, the unique Son of God has now brought “many sons into glory” (**Hebrews 2:10**). The family of God has swelled into millions upon millions of members, all adopted through Christ into the very inner circle of relationship with God. And in this family of the redeemed, Christ now also holds the supreme position. He is the Firstborn Among Many Brothers.

### ***Special position***

Christ is our elder brother. He is eternally the Firstborn of a family that includes people “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (**Revelation 7:9**). In this family, he always has the unrivalled supremacy. He is the focus of our adoration and worship (**Revelation 7:10**). He is and always will be our Lord – the one who commands our allegiance and love.

## ***Special inheritance***

As Firstborn Over All Creation, creation itself is Christ's inheritance. As Firstborn From Among the Dead, the nations are Christ's inheritance. But as Firstborn Among Many Brothers, *we* are his inheritance. In **Ephesians 1:18**, Paul writes:

“I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know...the riches of *his* glorious inheritance *in the saints*...”

In each stage of Christ's Firstborn status, his inheritance has become more finely focused – from creation (the whole universe) to the nations (the whole world) to the Church (all the redeemed). This is the special treasure, hidden in the field, that Christ gave up all to purchase for himself (read **Matthew 13:44**). The Church is the priceless gem within the treasure chest within the field that belongs to Christ.

## ***Special responsibility***

In **Hebrews 7:25**, we discover Christ's special responsibility as Firstborn Among Many Brothers:

“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

As Firstborn Among Many Brothers, the Lord Jesus continues to intercede on our behalf. And what is Christ's prayer? It involves two things:

- That we may be one (**John 17:20-23**)
- That we may be conformed to his likeness (**Romans 8:29**)

Christ's relationship to us as Firstborn plays a crucial role in the goal described so clearly in **Romans 8:29**. Through the power of the Spirit, we are being conformed to the likeness of our elder brother. And the starting point for this conforming process is our total identification with Christ in his firstborn position, firstborn inheritance and firstborn responsibility. We share in:

- **Christ's position** – We are seated with Christ (**Ephesians 2:6**) and are now called “the church of the firstborn” (**Hebrews 12:23**).
- **Christ's inheritance** – Even as Christ is “heir of all things” (**Hebrews 1:2**), so we share this inheritance as “co-heirs with Christ” (**Romans 8:17**).
- **Christ's responsibility** – We are not Christ's co-heirs but also his co-laborers. As sharers of his throne, we are now called into the responsibility of reaching out to the world with the good news of the Gospel (**John 20:21**).

<sup>1</sup> *The Holman Bible Handbook*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

<sup>2</sup> *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

<sup>3</sup> *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

<sup>4</sup> *New Commentary on the Whole Bible*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.