

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

All Things Working Together for Good

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And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28



It is always a humbling experience to study the Word of God, and I have been humbled as I have moved from our last study about knowing the will of God to the tremendous text that is to occupy us now: Romans 8:28. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

It seemed to me that the last study was rather difficult. At any rate, in writing it I had difficulty trying to distinguish between the various ways in which we use the term “God’s will” and in trying to suggest what we can know and cannot expect to know about it. But then I came to our text, and the problems I had been laboring with in the last study suddenly seemed quite simple. Earlier Paul said, “*We do not know* what we ought to pray for.” Now he writes, “*We know* that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” We do not know! We know! The first knowing concerns the details of what God is doing in our lives; we do not understand these things, we puzzle over them. The second knowing concerns the fact of God’s great plan itself. Paul tells us that we do know this; we know that God has a plan.

He teaches this quite simply. If God has “called [us] according to his purpose,” he must have both a purpose and a place for us in it. Moreover, we know that everything will obviously work together for our good in the achievement of that purpose. This is tremendous! Because of these truths this verse has been one of the most comforting statements in the entire Word of God for most Christians.

FAITH AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Yet this verse also poses an obvious problem. “In all things God works for the good of those who love him,” the text says. But how can this be? How is this possible when the world is filled with hatred and evil, and when good people, as well as evil people, suffer daily?

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Two days before I wrote this study, the ministerial staff of Tenth Presbyterian Church had its regular weekly meeting, and the ministers shared some of the problems they were dealing with. Three days earlier one of our members had been murdered. She was a lovely Korean girl, only twenty-one years old, and she had been very active in Tenth's ministries. Her name was Julee Yang. She sang in the choir, tutored disadvantaged children from one of the city's housing projects, and participated in a young people's group that is focused on the city. Julee worked in a jewelry store and was shot in the back when two young thugs came into the store to steal money. In a surprising turn of events, the murder was captured on a hidden video camera. According to some reports, it was the very first actual murder to have been captured on videotape. The funeral was the day of our staff meeting.

Other staff members shared counseling concerns. One was dealing with a person suffering from extreme personal setbacks, including a case of cancer. She had been thinking of suicide. Another was dealing with a young man who had been diagnosed as having AIDS.

The night before, I had conferred with another pastor who was planning a memorial service for a stillborn infant and wanted to talk about what comfort he could give the grieving parents. That same day, I was to visit another pastor who was under pressure in his church and was quite possibly going to be forced out of it, in spite of nearly two decades of faithful Bible teaching in that place. The combination of these seemingly tragic situations had depressed us all, and we spent a great deal of time praying about them. Later I went to the New Jersey shore, about an hour and a half away, to gain some breathing space and pray for the staff and these problems.

"We know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love him." But do we really know that?

When times are good—when we have steady jobs, when our families are doing well, when no loved one is sick, and there have been no recent deaths—in times like these, well, it is easy to say, "We know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love him."

But what about the other times?

What about times like those I was describing?

In such times we need to be sure we know what we are professing and are not merely mouthing pious nothings.

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“ALL’S RIGHT WITH THE WORLD”

This great text has some built-in qualifications, and we need to begin with them. I call them “boundaries.”

1. *For Christians only.* The first boundary is defined by a question: To whom does this promise apply? Obviously it does not apply to everyone, for Paul’s statement says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” That verse is talking about Christians. So, to read on to the closely linked verses that follow, it is saying that everything works for the good of those whom God has predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, those he predestined and called and justified and glorified. This is not a promise that all things work together for the good of *all* people.

3

Do you remember Robert Browning’s well-known couplet: “God’s in his heaven—/All’s right with the world”? The lines are a small capsule of nineteenth-century Victorian thinking, when the world was more or less at peace, and progress in all areas of human life and endeavor seemed unlimited and inevitable. Nobody thinks that way today, and rightly so. It is because all is not right with the world, and anybody who thinks so is either out of his or her mind or is just not seeing things clearly.

Several centuries before Browning, the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz developed a line of thought known popularly as “the best of all possible worlds” philosophy. But this, too, was an illusion and still is. For most people this is not the best of all possible worlds at all. In fact, for many millions of people this world and the things they endure in it are terrible.

According to our text, it is only of Christians, not of all people, that these comforting words can be said.

2. *To be like Jesus Christ.* The second boundary to our text comes from another question: What is meant by “good”? That is an important question to ask, because if “good” means “rich,” as some would like it to mean, the text is not true, since most Christians have not been given a great supply of this world’s goods. The same thing is true if “good” means “healthy.” Not all believers have good health. Similarly, “good” cannot mean “successful” or “admired” or even “happy” in the world’s sense, since God asks many Christians to endure failure or scorn or very distressing personal experiences or severe disappointments.

What does “good” mean, then, if it does not mean rich or healthy or successful or admired or happy? The answer is in the next verse: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.”

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That is what the “good” is: “to be conformed to the likeness of his Son,” in other words, to be made like Jesus Christ. That is an obvious good. It is impossible to think of a higher good for human beings, to be like one’s Maker. Pastor Ray Stedman rightly calls this “what life is all about.”¹ But at the same time, seeing this allows us to see other not so obviously good things within the greater purpose. We can see how sickness, suffering, persecution, grief, or other ills can be used by God for this good end.



3. *A good use of bad things.* That leads to a third boundary for this text, and it comes from a third question: Are the things used in our lives by God for this good end necessarily good in themselves or only in their effect? The answer is the latter. In other words, this text does not teach that sickness, suffering, persecution, grief, or any other such thing is itself good. On the contrary, these things are evils. Hatred is not love. Death is not life. Grief is not joy. The world is filled with evil. But what the text teaches—and this is important—is that God uses these things (and others) to effect his own good ends for his people. God brings good out of the evil, and the good, as we saw, is our conformity to the character of Jesus Christ.

4. *Knowing rather than feeling.* The fourth and final boundary for the meaning of this text comes in answer to still another question: What is our relationship to what God is doing in these circumstances? The answer Paul gives is that “we know.” He does not say that we “feel” all things to be good. Often we do not feel that God is doing good at all. We feel exactly the opposite. We feel that we are being ground down or destroyed. And it is not even that we “see” the good. Most of the time we do not perceive the good things God is doing or how he might be bringing good out of the evil. The text simply says, “we know” it.

Paul was no sentimentalist. He had been persecuted, beaten, stoned, and shipwrecked. He had been attacked and consistently slandered by the Gentiles as well as by his own countrymen. Paul did not go around saying how wonderful the world was or how pleasant his missionary endeavors had been. On the contrary, he reported that he had been “hard pressed on every side ... perplexed ... [and] struck down” (2 Cor. 4:8–9). But Paul came through the things that pressed down and perplexed him precisely because he knew that God was working out his own greater and good purposes through these events.

How did Paul know it? He knew it because God had told him this was what he was doing. And now Paul is telling us. He is saying that we, too, can know it and be comforted in the knowledge that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”

¹ Stedman, Ray C. (1978). *From Guilt to Glory*, vol. 1, *Hope for the Helpless*. Portland: Multnomah Press, 298.

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THE PART WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

We have spent the first half of this study looking at four qualifications for this text: (1) that it is for Christians only; (2) that the good is not our idea of the good but God's idea and that it is to be made like Jesus Christ; (3) that the things God uses for this supremely good end are not necessarily good in themselves; and (4) that we can "know" this even though we may not feel or see it. However, having established these boundaries, we can turn joyfully to the one part of the text that has absolutely no boundaries whatever.

5

It is the term "all things." This tells us that all things that have ever happened to us or can possibly happen to us are so ordered and controlled by God that the end result is inevitably and utterly our good. Even the worst things are used to make us like Jesus Christ.

What is more, when we begin to look at this closely, we see that they are used not only for our good but for the good of other people as well.

Here are three examples.

First, *Joseph*. Joseph's story shows how God controls circumstances. Apart from God's purpose, most of which was hidden from Joseph for a very long time, no one would suspect that God was doing anything good at all. Joseph was a young man favored of his father, with what we would call a bright future before him. His brothers hated him because of his righteousness and their own sin, and they conspired to do away with him. At first they threw Joseph into a dry cistern, planning to leave him there to die. But when some Midianite traders passed by, they seized the opportunity and sold him to them to be a slave. In their turn, the Midianites sold him to a military man in Egypt whose name was Potiphar.

What a horrible experience for a young man. Joseph was only seventeen years old, and he was now a slave in Egypt, where he could not even speak the language. But even this was not all. For a time he prospered as Potiphar's slave. But when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and he refused, Joseph was accused of trying to violate her and was thrown into prison where he spent the next two years as an abandoned and seemingly forgotten man.

All this, bad as it was, was only the path by which God was planning to raise him to the throne of Egypt to be second in power only to Pharaoh himself.

Pharaoh had a dream. No one could interpret it. Then Pharaoh's chief butler, who had been in prison with Joseph two years before, remembered how Joseph had interpreted

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one of his dreams. He told Pharaoh, and Joseph was removed from the prison and brought to court, where he easily supplied the explanation. Pharaoh was so impressed that he promoted the former slave on the spot, and Joseph was able to direct the Egyptian grain harvests and store large quantities of grain. Thus he saved many lives during the ensuing famine.

The favor of his father, his dreams, his brothers' hatred, the passing of the Midianite caravan, his being sold to Potiphar, the enthrallment of his master's wife, two years in prison, the Pharaoh's dream—all these diverse circumstances, some quite evil in themselves, were used by God for the great and ultimate good of Joseph and others.

His own testimony, uttered years later in a reassuring conversation with his eleven brothers, who had since been reunited to him, was this: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:19-20).

Second, *Job*. From the world's point of view the story of Job is one of the saddest in the Bible. Job was a mature and upright man, one who feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and his wealth consisted of seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys. He had many servants. Then, suddenly, in one day all this was taken from him. Raiders carried off the donkeys and oxen. Lightning killed the sheep. Chaldean bandits stole the camels and killed the servants. Finally, a building collapsed and his children were all killed in an instant.

Satan, who was behind this, stood back and expected Job to curse God for his ill fortune. But instead Job "fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart./The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised' " (Job 1:21).

The next stage of the story tells how Job was afflicted with ill health, being covered with boils from his head to his feet. Then his friends heaped even greater pain on him by their shallow counsel. Job did not understand this at all. Even at the end of the story, when God restored his wealth and gave him a new family, he seems not to have known what God was doing. God was developing Job's character and confounding the supposed wisdom of Satan, who had said that God's people serve him only because he makes them prosperous. Job did not see this or feel it. But everything was nevertheless working together for good in the life of this great patriarch.

Third, *Peter*. Peter sinned in his pride, telling Jesus that although the other disciples might deny him, Peter at least would not. Not Peter! Then, he, too, sinned in his weakness, doing

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precisely what he had told Jesus he would not do. Peter denied the Lord three times, the last time with oaths and cursings.

What was the outcome? Jesus turned even these very bad things to good. He interceded for Peter so that the apostle's faith would not fail, and he asked the Father to order things so that, when Peter was restored, he would be stronger for his fall and able to strengthen his brethren. This is what Peter did, for later he wrote to other Christians:



Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

1 Peter 4:12-19

ALL THINGS

Years ago I had a watch that my father had given me when I graduated from high school. It was an unusual watch in that its back was transparent. You could look into it and see the mechanism working and the wheels turning. Some wheels went forward. Some went backward. Some turned quickly, others slowly. There was a large mainspring and a few small hairsprings. There were levers that were popping up and down.

The Christian life is like the parts of that watch. At times the events of our lives move forward quickly and we sense that we are making fast progress in being made like Jesus Christ. At other times events move slowly, and we seem to be going slowly ourselves or even slipping backward. Sometimes we seem to be going up and down with no forward motion at all. At such times we say that our emotions are on a roller coaster or that we just can't seem to get on track. Our lives have petty annoyances that spoil our good humor. Sometimes we are overwhelmed with harsh blows, and we say that we just can't

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go on. It may be true; perhaps we really can't go on, at least until we are able to pause and catch our spiritual breath again.

But God has designed this timepiece of ours—this plan for our lives. That is the point. It has been formed “according to his purpose,” which is what our text is about, and it is because we *know* this, not because we feel it or see it, that we can eventually go on.



What can possibly come into our lives that can defeat God's plan?

There are many things that can defeat human planning. Our plans are often overturned by our sins and failures, others' opposition or jealousy, circumstances, or our own indifference. But not God's plans. He is the sovereign God. His will is forever being done. Therefore, you and I can go on in confidence, even when we are most perplexed or cast down.

What can happen to me that can defeat God's purpose?

Can some thorn in the flesh? Something to prick or pain me? Paul had his thorn in the flesh, but God's grace was sufficient for him and it was in his weakness that God was glorified.

Sickness? Job had boils, but God glorified himself in Job's sickness and even matured Job.

Death? How can death hurt me? “To be away from the body” is to be “at home with the Lord,” says Paul (2 Cor. 5:8). Therefore, my physical death will only consummate the plan of God for me. And as far as those who remain behind are concerned, well, God will work his will for good for them also. No one is indispensable, so if I should die this afternoon, the next service of Tenth Presbyterian Church would still be held. The gospel would still be preached. Christians would still be strengthened and unbelievers won. This is because “in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”²

I was writing about Romans 8:28 in the previous study, I said that for most Christians that verse is one of the most comforting statements in the entire Word of God. The reason is obvious. It tells us that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” That is, God has a great and good purpose for all Christians and he is working in all the many detailed circumstances of their lives to achieve it.

Wonderful as that verse is, the verses that follow are even more wonderful, for they tell how God *accomplishes* this purpose and remind us that it is *God himself* who accomplishes

² Boice, J. M. (1991–). *Romans: The Reign of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2:903-910.

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it. The last reminder is the basis for what is commonly known as “eternal security” or “the perseverance of the saints.”

Some time ago I came across an amusing but apparently true story. In 1966 the Hindu holy man and mystic Rao announced that he would walk on water. This attracted a great deal of attention, and on the day set for the feat a great crowd gathered around a large pool in Bombay, India, where it was to occur. The holy man prayerfully prepared himself for the miracle and then stepped forward to the pool’s edge. A solemn hush fell over the assembled observers. Rao glanced upward to heaven, stepped forward onto the water, and then immediately plummeted into the pool’s depths. Sputtering, dripping wet, and furious, he emerged from the pool and turned angrily on the embarrassed crowd. “One of you,” he said, “is an unbeliever.”

Fortunately, our salvation is not like that, because if it were, it would never happen. In spiritual matters we are all unbelievers. We are weak in faith. But we are taught in these great verses from Romans that salvation does not depend upon our faith, however necessary faith may be, but on the purposes of God.

And it is the same regarding love. The apostle has just said that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. But lest we somehow imagine that the strength of our love is the determining factor in salvation, he reminds us that our place in this good flow of events is not grounded in our love for God but on the fact that he has fixed his love upon us.

How has God loved us?

Let me count the ways.

These verses introduce us to five great doctrines: (1) foreknowledge, (2) predestination, (3) effectual calling, (4) justification, and (5) glorification. These five doctrines are so closely connected that they have rightly and accurately been described as “a golden chain of five links.” Each link is forged in heaven. That is, each describes something God does and does not waver in doing. This is why John R. W. Stott calls them “five undeniable affirmations.”¹ The first two are concerned with God’s eternal counsel or past determinations. The last two are concerned with what God has done, is doing, or will do with us. The middle term (“calling”) connects the first pair and the last.

¹ Stott, John R. W. (1984). *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 5–8*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 101.

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These doctrines flow from eternity to eternity. As a result, there is no greater scope given to the wonderful activity of God in salvation in all the Bible.

DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE

The most important of these five terms is the first, but surprisingly (or not surprisingly, since our ways are not God's ways nor his thoughts our thoughts), it is the most misunderstood. It is composed of two separate words: "fore," which means beforehand, and "knowledge." So it has been taken to mean that, since God knows all things, God knows beforehand who will believe on him and who will not, as a result of which he has predestined to salvation those whom he foresees will believe on him. In other words, what he foreknows or foresees is their faith.

Foreknowledge is such an important idea that we are going to come back to it again in the next study and carefully examine the way it is actually used in the Bible. But even here we can see that such an explanation can never do justice to this passage.

For one thing, the verse does not say that God foreknew what certain of his creatures would do. It is not talking about human actions at all. On the contrary, it is speaking entirely of God and of what God does. Each of these five terms is like that: *God* foreknew, *God* predestined, *God* called, *God* justified, *God* glorified. Besides, the object of the divine foreknowledge is not the actions of certain people but the people themselves. In this sense it can only mean that God has fixed a special attention upon them or loved them savingly.

This is the way the word is frequently used in the Old Testament, Amos 3:2, for example. The King James Version translates God's words here literally, using the verb "know" (Hebrew, *yāda*): "You only have I known of all the families of the earth..." But so obvious is the idea of election in this context that the New International Version sharpens the meaning by translating: "You only have I chosen..."

And there is another problem. If all the word means is that God knows beforehand what people will do in response to him or to the preaching of the gospel and then determines their destiny on that basis, what, pray tell, could God possibly see or foreknow except a fixed opposition to him on the part of *all* people? If the hearts of men and women are as depraved as Paul has been teaching they are—if indeed " 'There is no one righteous, not even one ... no one who understands, no one who seeks God' " (Rom. 3:10-11)—what could God possibly foresee in any human heart but unbelief?

John Murray puts it in a complementary but slightly different way: "Even if it were granted that 'foreknew' means the foresight of faith, the biblical doctrine of sovereign election is not thereby eliminated or disproven. For it is certainly true that God foresees

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faith; he foresees all that comes to pass. The question would then simply be: whence proceeds this faith, which God foresees? And the only biblical answer is that the faith which God foresees is the faith he himself creates (cf. John 3:3-8; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Peter 1:2). Hence his eternal foresight of faith is preconditioned by his decree to generate this faith in those whom he foresees as believing.”²

Foreknowledge means that salvation has its origin in the mind or eternal counsels of God, not in man. It focuses our attention on the distinguishing love of God, according to which some persons are elected to be conformed to the character of Jesus Christ, which is what Paul has already been saying.

FOREKNOWLEDGE AND PREDESTINATION

The chief objection to this understanding of foreknowledge is that, if it is correct, then foreknowledge and predestination (the term that follows) mean the same thing and Paul would therefore be redundant. But the terms are not synonymous. Predestination carries us a step further.

Like foreknowledge, predestination is also composed of two separate words: “pre,” meaning beforehand, and “destiny” or “destination.” It means to determine a person’s destiny beforehand, and this is the sense in which it differs from foreknowledge. As we have seen, foreknowledge means to fix one’s love upon or elect. It “does not inform us of the destination to which those thus chosen are appointed.”³ This is what predestination supplies. It tells us that, having fixed his distinguishing love upon us, God next appointed us “to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” He does this, as the next terms show, by calling, justifying, and glorifying those thus chosen.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out that the Greek word that is translated “predestined” has within it the word for “horizon” (Greek, *proōrizō*). The horizon is a dividing line, marking off and separating what we can see from what we cannot see. Everything beyond the horizon is in one category; everything within the horizon is in another. Lloyd-Jones suggests therefore that what the word signifies is that God, having foreknown certain people, takes them out of the far-off category and puts them within the circle of

² Murray, John (1986). *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 316.

³ Murray (1984), 318.

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his saving purposes. “In other words,” he says, “he has marked out a particular destiny for them.”⁴

That destiny is to be made like Jesus Christ.

TWO KINDS OF CALLING

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The next step in this golden chain of five links is what theologians call effectual calling. It is important to use the adjective *effectual* at this point, because there are two different kinds of calling referred to in the Bible, and it is easy to get confused about them.

One kind of calling is external, general, and universal. It is an open invitation to all persons to repent of sin, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved. It is what Jesus was speaking of when he said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Or again, when he said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). The problem with this type of call is that, left to themselves, no men or women ever respond positively. They hear the call, but they turn away, preferring their own ways to God. That is why Jesus also said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him ...” (John 6:44).

The other kind of call is internal, specific, and effectual. That is, it not only issues the invitation, it also provides the ability or willingness to respond positively. It is God’s drawing to himself or bringing to spiritual life the one who without that call would remain spiritually dead and far from him.

There is no greater illustration of this than Jesus’ calling of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, who had died four days before. Lazarus in his grave is a picture of every human being in his or her natural state: dead in body and soul, bound with graveclothes, lying in a tomb, sealed with some great stone. Let’s call to him, “Lazarus, Lazarus. Come forth, Lazarus. We want you back. We miss you. If you will just get up out of that tomb and return to us, you’ll find that we are all anxious to have you back. No one here is going to put any obstructions in your way.”

What? Won’t Lazarus come? Doesn’t he want to be with us?

The problem is that Lazarus does not have the ability to come back. The call is given, but he cannot come.

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, D.M. (1976). *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter 8:17–39, The Final Perseverance of the Saints*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 241.

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Ah, but let Jesus take his place before the tomb. Let Jesus call out, “Lazarus, come forth,” and the case is quite different. The words are the same, but now the call is no mere invitation. It is an effectual calling. For the same God who originally called the creation out of nothing is now calling life out of death, and his call is heard. Lazarus, though he has been dead four days, hears Jesus and obeys his Master’s voice.

That is how God calls those whom he has foreknown and predestined to salvation.

CALLING AND JUSTIFICATION

The next step in God’s great chain of saving actions is justification. We spent a great deal of time discussing justification in volume 1 of this series, so we need not discuss it in detail here. Briefly, it is the judicial act by which God declares sinful men and women to be in a right standing before him, not on the basis of their own merit, for they have none, but on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done for them by dying in their place on the cross. Jesus bore their punishment, taking the penalty of their sins upon himself. Those sins having been punished, God then imputes the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ to their account.

What does need to be discussed here is the relationship of the effectual call to justification. Or to put it in the form of a question: Why does Paul place calling where he does in this chain? Why does calling come *between* foreknowledge and predestination, on the one hand, and justification and glorification, on the other?

There are two reasons.

First, calling is the point at which the things determined beforehand in the mind and counsel of God pass over into time. We speak of “fore” knowledge and “pre” destination. But these two time references only have meaning for us. Strictly speaking, there is no time frame in God. Because the end is as the beginning and the beginning is as the end, “fore” and “pre” are meaningless in regard to him. God simply “knows” and “determines,” and that eternally. But what he thus decrees in eternity becomes actual in time, and calling is the point where his eternal foreknowledge of some and his predestination of those to salvation finds what we would call concrete manifestation. We are creatures in time. So it is by God’s specific calling of us to faith in time that we are saved.

Second, justification, which comes after calling in this list of divine actions, is always connected with faith or belief, and it is through God’s call of the individual that faith is brought into being. God’s call creates or quickens faith. Or, as we could perhaps more accurately say, it is the call of God that brings forth spiritual life, of which faith is the first true evidence or proof.

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Romans 8:29–30 does not contain a full list of the steps in a person’s experience of salvation, only five of the most important steps undertaken by God on behalf of Christians. If the text were to include all the steps, what theologians call the *ordo salutis*, it would have to list these: foreknowledge, predestination, calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification.⁵ The full list makes the point. After predestination, the very next thing is our calling, out of which comes faith which leads to justification.

The Bible never says that we are saved *because of* our faith. That would make faith something good in us that we somehow contribute to the process. But it does say that we are saved *by* or *through* faith, meaning that God must create it in us before we can be justified.

GLORIFIED (PAST TENSE)

Glorification is also something we studied earlier, and we are going to come back to it again before we complete these studies of Romans 8. It means being made like Jesus Christ, which is what Paul said earlier. But here is one thing we must notice. When Paul mentions glorification, he refers to it in the past tense (“glorified”) rather than in the future (“will glorify”) or future passive tense (“will be glorified”), which is what we might have expected him to have done.

Why is this? The only possible but also obvious reason is that he is thinking of this final step in our salvation as being so certain that it is possible to refer to it as having already happened. And, of course, he does this deliberately to assure us that this is exactly what will happen. Do you remember how he put it in writing to the Christians at Philippi? He wrote, “I always pray with joy ... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:4, 6). That is shorthand for what we are discovering in Romans. God began the “good work” by foreknowledge, predestination, calling, and justification. And because he never goes back on anything he has said or changes his mind, we can know that he will carry it on until the day we will be like Jesus Christ, being glorified.

ALL OF GOD

⁵ There is a classic exposition of the *ordo salutis* in John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 79–181. (Original edition 1955.)

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I have a simple conclusion, and it is to remind you again that these are all things God has done. They are the important things, the things that matter. Without them, not one of us would be saved. Or if we were “saved,” not one of us would continue in that salvation.

Do we have to believe? Of course, we do. Paul has already spoken of the nature and necessity of faith in chapters 3 and 4. But even our faith is of God or, as we should probably better say, the result of his working in us. In Ephesians Paul says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:9). When we are first saved we think naturally that we have had a great deal to do with it, perhaps because of wrong or shallow teaching, but more likely only because we know more about our own thoughts and feelings than we do about God. But the longer one is a Christian, the further one moves from any feeling that we are responsible for our salvation or even any part of it, and the closer we come to the conviction that it is all of God.

It is a good thing it is of God, too! Because if it were accomplished by us, we could just as easily un-accomplish it—and no doubt would. If God is the author, salvation is something that is done wisely, well, and forever.

Robert Haldane, one of the great commentators on Romans, provides this summary.

In looking back on this passage, we should observe that, in all that is stated, man acts no part, but is passive, and all is done by God. He is elected and predestinated and called and justified and glorified by God. The apostle was here concluding all that he had said before in enumerating topics of consolation to believers, and is now going on to show that God is “for us,” or on the part of his people. Could anything, then, be more consolatory to those who love God, than to be in this manner assured that the great concern of their salvation is not left in their own keeping? God, even their covenant God, hath taken the whole upon himself. He hath undertaken for them. There is no room, then, for chance or change. He will perfect that which concerneth them.⁶

Years ago Harry A. Ironside, that great Bible teacher, told a story about an older Christian who was asked to give his testimony. He told how God had sought him out and found him, how God had loved him, called him, saved him, delivered him, cleansed him, and healed him—a great witness to the grace, power, and glory of God. But after the meeting a rather legalistic brother took him aside and criticized his testimony, as certain of us like to do. He said, “I appreciated all you said about what God did for you. But you didn’t

⁶ Haldane, Robert (1958). *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*. MacDill AFB: MacDonald Publishing, 407, 408.

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mention anything about your part in it. Salvation is really part us and part God. You should have mentioned something about your part.”

“Oh, yes,” the older Christian said. “I apologize for that. I’m sorry. I really should have said something about my part. My part was running away, and his part was running after me until he caught me.”⁷

We have all run away. But God has set his love on us, predestined us to become like Jesus Christ, called us to faith and repentance, justified us, yes, and has even glorified us, so certain of completion is his plan. May he alone be praised!⁸

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⁷ This story is told by Ray C. Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory*, vol. 1, *Hope for the Helpless* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1978), p. 302.

⁸ Boice, J. M. (1991–). *Romans: The Reign of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2:911-918.