

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

A Golden Chain of Five Links

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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. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Romans 8:29-30



When 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 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.

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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.

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,

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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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 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.

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

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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 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

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).

³ Murray (1984), 318.

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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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.

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?

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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.

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

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

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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.

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ALL OF GOD

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

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

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

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