

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

Foreknowledge and Predestination

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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.*

Romans 8:29



There are quite a few misunderstandings about Reformed or Calvinistic Christians, and one is that we are always talking about predestination. That is probably not so, though there are Calvinists who like to beat this drum, just as those in other communions like to emphasize certain forms of church government, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, or modes of baptism.

This study is about foreknowledge and predestination. But if you are inclined to think that I am overemphasizing these truths by talking about them here, I need to point out that this is the first time in our long study of the Book of Romans that I have explicitly spoken about either. This is my hundred and twelfth study of Romans, but it is the first one specifically addressing these themes. The reason is obvious. This is the first place in Romans at which Paul introduces these two terms. God's foreknowledge of a chosen people and his predestination of them to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ lies behind everything he has been teaching in the first seven and a half chapters. But Paul has not discussed these ideas until he has first presented our desperate condition due to sin and God's remedy for sin through faith in Jesus Christ.

Strikingly, this is also the procedure John Calvin followed in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin is known for teaching about predestination. But a discussion of the doctrine does not appear until near the end of Book Three, after more than nine hundred pages devoted to other themes and more than two-thirds of the way through the volume.

"ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE"

Where do we start in discussing this doctrine? We have already made a start in the last study, showing that foreknowledge and predestination are two of five great doctrines described as a golden chain by which God reaches down from heaven to elect and save a people for himself.

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Yet Paul's own start is in verse 28, where he has written, "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." Since the word *called* also occurs again as one of the five doctrines in this chain, we are alerted to the fact that the chain of divine actions merely explains how God achieves this purpose. In other words, it is not foreknowledge or predestination that is primary but the purpose of God itself. What is that purpose? Clearly, it is that from the mass of fallen and perishing humanity God might save a company of people who will be made like Jesus.

We could put it like this: God loves Jesus so much that he is determined to have many more people like him. Not that we become divine, of course. Nothing in the Bible teaches that. But rather that we might become like him in his many communicable attributes: things like love, joy, peace, holiness, wisdom, patience, grace, kindness, goodness, compassion, faithfulness, mercy, and other qualities.

In order to do that, God selects, predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies this people. That is, verses 29 and 30 tell *how* God accomplishes the purpose of verse 28.

FOREKNOWLEDGE

I said in the last study that foreknowledge is the most important of these terms and that it is the most misunderstood. I also said that I would be returning to it to discuss it further, which is what I want to do now.

The problem with this term is that if we break it down into its two constituent parts, the word itself suggests the wrong idea. The first part of the word is "fore," which means "before," and the second part is "knowledge." So the word seems to refer only to knowing something before it happens. Starting from this point, many people have gone on to supply what, in their judgment, God is supposed to know beforehand, concluding that what he foreknows or foresees is faith. According to such suppositions, it is on the basis of a faith which God foresees that he saves people.

That is not what the verse says, of course. It says that God foreknows people, not what they are going to do, and faith is not even mentioned. In the flow of these verses, what we are told is that God: (1) has a purpose to save certain people, and (2) does something to those people as a first step in a five-step process of saving them.

Actually, as soon as we begin to look at the word carefully, we discover that it is used in a very specific way in the Bible. And for good reasons! When we use the word *foreknowledge* in relation to ourselves, to refer to knowing beforehand, the word has meaning to us. We can anticipate what a person we know well might do, for instance. But

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that sense of the word is meaningless in relation to God. Because God is not in time, as we are, he does not know things *beforehand*. God simply knows. He knows all things. That is what omniscience means. But even if we think in time categories, which is all we can do as creatures locked in time, we have to say that the only reason God can even be said to foreknow things is because he predetermines them. As Robert Haldane says, “God foreknows what will be, by determining what shall be.”¹

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No, the word *foreknowledge* has quite a different meaning in relation to God than it does in relation to us. It means that God “sets his special love upon” a person or “elects” a person to salvation.

This is a characteristic use of the word in the Old Testament. In Amos 3:2, which I mentioned in the last study, the King James Version has the words, “You only have I *known* [Hebrew, *yāda*] of all the families of the earth.” That does not refer to God’s knowledge in the usual sense of knowing all things, because in that sense God would have to be said to “know” all people and not just the people of Israel. In this verse the word has the meaning “set a special love upon” or “choose.” In fact, as I have already pointed out, so obvious is the idea of election in this context that the New International Version sharpens the meaning by translating Amos 3:2 with the words, “You only have I *chosen*....”

We see the same idea when we examine the use of “foreknowledge” (or “foreknew”) in the New Testament, where the references occur seven times. Two of these occurrences are of man’s foreknowledge, our common usage of the term. Five are of God’s foreknowledge, and they are the determining passages.

1. *Acts 2:23*. This verse occurs in the middle of Peter’s great sermon on the day of Pentecost, in which he was explaining the plan of salvation to the Jews of Jerusalem: “This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” In this speech Peter is not merely telling his listeners that God knew Jesus would be crucified. That is not the point at all. Rather, he is saying that God sent him to be crucified; that is, that God determined beforehand that this is what should take place. This is what foreknowledge means in Peter’s context.

The same idea is present two chapters further on, although in this passage the word *foreknowledge* is omitted. There the believers are praying and say, “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles [the “wicked men” of Acts 2:23] and the

¹ Haldane, Robert (1958). *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*. MacDill AFB: MacDonald Publishing, 396.

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people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:27–28).

Both these passages say that human beings were merely carrying out what God had previously determined should happen in order to save sinners by Jesus’ crucifixion.

2. *Romans 11:2*. In Romans 9–11 Paul is defending the doctrine of the eternal security of the elect against the argument that it cannot be true since many Jews have not believed in Jesus. There are six or seven answers to that objection in these chapters, and in chapter 11 there is one that includes the word *foreknew*. “I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew” (vv. 1–2).

What does that mean? Does it mean that God does not reject those whom he sees in advance will not reject him? Of course not. That is not what Paul is talking about, and if it were, it would not help his case at all. What he means is that, even in the case of Israel, God has not elected each and every individual to salvation, instead choosing only a remnant, but that those whom he has elected to salvation are kept in that salvation. Paul introduces himself as an example. His argument is that those whom God has foreknown (that is, “chosen”) will never fall away or be rejected—the same point he has been making in Romans 8.

3. *First Peter 1:2*. Peter was a great preacher of predestination, and two of the New Testament’s explicit references to foreknowledge occur in his first letter. Writing to Christians scattered throughout the Roman provinces of what we call Turkey, he says at the very beginning of his epistle: “To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood” (vv. 1–2). Verse 2 does not mean that God chose them because he foresaw that they would believe on or obey Jesus Christ, but rather the reverse. They believed and were being sanctified because God chose them to be saved.

4. *First Peter 1:20*. In verse 20 of the same chapter Peter is speaking of God’s determination to send Jesus Christ to be the Savior. The text literally says that God “foreknew him [that is, Jesus] before the creation of the world.” But in this verse “foreknew” so clearly means “foreordained” (as in kjv) that the New International Version translators use the word *chosen*: “He was chosen before the creation of the world.” In other words, God the Father appointed Jesus to be the Savior even before the creation of man or man’s fall.

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That same translation could have been used in each of the other passages I have mentioned:

Acts 2:23—“This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and choice (or predetermination)....”

Romans 11:2—“God did not reject his people, whom he chose....”

First Peter 1:2—“[To God’s elect] who have been chosen according to the choice (or preordination) of God the Father....”

5. *Romans 8:29*. The fifth New Testament reference to God’s foreknowledge is in our text, and the meaning, as I have been arguing, is the same as in the other verses. *Romans 8:29* means that God set his special or saving love upon a select group of people in order that his good purpose, namely, to create a people to be like his Son Jesus Christ, might be achieved.

Interestingly, some of the versions, knowing that this is the true meaning of the verb *foreknow*, have tried to suggest it by freer translations. The New English Bible says, “God knew his own before ever they were, and also ordained that they should be shaped to the likeness of his Son.” Charles Williams rendered the verse, “For those on whom he set his heart beforehand he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.” Goodspeed wrote, “Those whom he had marked out from the first he predestined to be made like his Son.” The Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible is particularly sharp. It says, “They [that is, the ones called according to his purpose] are the ones he chose specially long ago.” These all suggest the correct meaning nicely.²

PREDESTINATION

The second of our five golden terms is predestination, the one that bothers most people, though what bothers them is more accurately included in the word *foreknowledge*. That is, that God should set his love upon a special people and save them while overlooking others. Predestination means that God has determined the specific destiny of those he has previously decided should be saved and be made like Jesus.

² The only version that misses the idea entirely is that of Kenneth N. Taylor, who did not translate from the Greek text and therefore unwittingly incorporates his own Arminian bias into *The Living Bible* paraphrase: “For from the very beginning God decided that those who came to him—and all along he knew who would—should become like his Son, so that his Son would be the First, with many brothers.”

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This is a good place to look at the objections people have to this doctrine, whether described by the word *foreknowledge* or *predestination*.

1. *If you believe in predestination, you make salvation arbitrary and God a tyrant.* Actually, there are two objections here. Let us take the second one first. Does predestination make God a tyrant, crushing justice by some willy-nilly saving of some and damning of others? We can understand how people who know little about the Bible's teaching might suppose this, particularly since they think of God as being unjust anyhow. But anyone who has studied the Bible (or even just the Book of Romans) knows how wrong this is. What will happen if we seek only an even-handed justice from God? The answer is that we will be lost. Justice is what Romans 1 is about. The justice of God condemns us and can only condemn us. If we seek justice from God, we will find it by being cast into outer darkness forever.

In order to be saved, we need mercy and not justice, which is what predestination is all about. It is God showing mercy to whom he will show mercy. As Paul says in Romans 9:18, "... God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

As far as salvation being arbitrary is concerned, we must admit that from our perspective we cannot see why God chooses some and not others or even some and not all, and therefore his foreknowledge and predestination do seem arbitrary. But that is only because we are not God and cannot see as God sees. We cannot understand the full scope of his purposes in saving some and not others, but that does not mean that God is without such purposes. In fact, everything we know about God would lead us to conclude that he has them, though we do not know what they are. What we know about God shows that he is infinitely purposeful in his actions.

Ephesians 1:11 puts predestination in this framework, saying, "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." That is the opposite of being arbitrary. Similarly, in Ephesians 3:10 and 11, Paul says, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

2. *If you believe in predestination, you must deny human freedom.* This is a common objection, but it is based on a sad misunderstanding of the freedom we are supposed to have as fallen human beings. What does the Bible teach about our freedom in spiritual matters? It teaches that we are not free to choose God. "There is ... no one who seeks God" (Rom. 3:10-11). "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it

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do so” (Rom. 8:7). Predestination does not take away freedom. It restores it. It is because God foreknows me and predestines me to be conformed to the image of his Son that I am delivered from sin’s bondage and set free to serve him.

The matter can also be looked at practically, in answer to a related question: Does predestination destroy freedom in experience? Sinclair Ferguson answers, “We have a practical illustration in the life of that man who of all men was most clearly predestined by God, namely, Jesus. Jesus was the freest and most responsible man who ever lived. Has there ever been a life in which the sense of God’s predestining purpose has been more clearly seen than in our Savior? Is he not spoken of as the elect, chosen and predestined one? Were not his ways determined for him in the pages of the Old Testament? Yet was there ever a freer man in all the universe?” Ferguson summarizes: “We may be told that the doctrine of predestination turns God into a tyrant and man into a slave. But we discover to the contrary that it shows God to be a God of great grace and the children of God to be the freest men and women.”³

3. *If you believe in predestination, you will destroy the motivation for evangelism. For why should we labor to save those whom God has determined to save anyway?* The theological answer to this is that God determines the means to his ends as well as the ends themselves. So, if he has determined to bring the gospel to Mary Jones by a faithful witness to her by Sally Smith, then it is as important and necessary that Sally Smith be a witness to Mary Jones as it is that Mary Jones become a Christian.

But I would rather answer the objection in another way. Suppose God does not elect to salvation and thus, because he has determined to save some, does not commit himself to create new life within them that will break down their hard hearts and enable them to respond in faith to the message of the cross when it is made known. I ask: If God does not commit himself to doing that, what hope do you and I as evangelists have of doing it? If the hearts of men and women are as wicked and incapable of belief as the Bible teaches they are, how can you and I ever hope to present the gospel savingly to anyone?

To put it in even more frightening terms, if salvation depends upon *our* efforts to evangelize rather than the foreknowledge and predestination of God, what if I do something wrong? What if I give a wrong answer to a question or do something that turns others away from Christ? In that case, either by my error or because of my sin, I will be responsible for their eternal damnation. I do not see how that can encourage evangelism. On the contrary, it will make us afraid to do or say anything.

³ Ferguson, Sinclair B. (1983). “Predestination in Christian History,” *Tenth: An Evangelical Quarterly*, October 1983, 7.

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But look at it the other way. If God has elected some to salvation in order that Jesus might be glorified and that many might come to him in faith and be conformed to his image, then I can be both relaxed and bold in my witness. I can know that God will save those he has determined to save and will even use my witness, however feeble or imprecise it might be, if this is the means he has chosen.

Far from destroying evangelism, predestination actually makes evangelism possible. It makes it an expectant and joyful exercise.



SALVATION IS OF THE LORD

As I close, I come back to something I said earlier. All five of these great terms—foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification—refer to things God does. Why is this? That is a meaningful question when we remember that there are also things that we are to do ourselves. Faith is something we do. God does not believe for us. Similarly, sanctification involves our efforts, though it is also of God. Why does Paul not mention these things in Romans 8:28-30?

The answer is obvious. The apostle is dealing with our eternal security, and he is emphasizing God's work so we might understand from the beginning that this wonderful plan of salvation cannot fail. It would if it depended on us. Everything we do fails sooner or later, and that would certainly be true of salvation. Our faith would fail. Our ability to persevere would be extinguished. Our hold on God would weaken, and we would let go and in the end fall into hell.

But salvation is not like that.

It is not our choice of God that matters, but rather God's choice of us. It is not our faith, but his call. It is not our ability to persevere, but the fact that he has determined beforehand to persevere with us to the very end and even beyond.⁴

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⁴ Boice, J. M. (1991-). *Romans: The Reign of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2:919-926.