

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

God's Effectual Call

JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE, THD

1

And those he predestined, he also called...

Romans 8:30



My wife Linda and I have many different personality traits, which is a natural thing for husbands and wives, and one of them is the way we respond to someone's call. If we are walking down the street and someone calls out so that we can hear the voice but cannot quite distinguish the words, my wife assumes that the person is calling her and turns around. I assume that the person is calling someone else and keep on going. The same thing is true if a driver of a car blows the horn. I ignore it; it must be for someone else. Linda thinks someone is trying to get her attention.

I do not know what that says about the two of us, perhaps only that Linda is more "people oriented" than I am and that I am more "task oriented" than she is. But it is an interesting observation in view of the word we need to look at in this study. The word is "called," and it occurs in the statement that "those he [that is, God] predestined, he also called ..." (Rom. 8:30).

This word is the next link in the great golden chain of salvation by which God reaches down from eternity into time to save sinners. The point of this word, the third link, is that, unlike myself but like Linda, those whom God calls not only hear his call but actually respond to it by turning around and by believing on Jesus Christ or committing their lives to him.

CALLING: EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL

But we need to back up at this point and review a distinction I made two studies ago, when I first introduced the golden chain. It is the difference between a call of men and women that is merely external, general, and (in itself) ineffective for salvation, and a call that is internal, specific, and regenerating.

The first call is an open invitation to all persons to repent of their sin and turn to Jesus. As I have mentioned, it was spoken by Jesus himself in many places. For example, he said

WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG

© 2026, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—1305 CHESTER ST—CLEBURNE, TX 76033

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” In Matthew 16:24 he explained, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” He said in John 7:37, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.”

This last invitation was spoken in Jerusalem on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, when people from many lands and nationalities were assembled. There were Jews from every part of Palestine as well as from many regions of the Roman Empire. There were also Gentiles, some who had become Jewish proselytes but also some who, no doubt, were merely interested bystanders. We get a feeling of what this audience must have been like by remembering the composition of the crowd that had assembled at Pentecost when Peter preached the first sermon of the Christian era, likewise extending a general call to all to believe on Jesus. We are told that on that occasion Jerusalem was filled with “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs ...” (Acts 2:9-11).

When Jesus (and later Peter) called such people to faith, the call was universal. It was (and is) for everyone. Anyone who wishes can come to Jesus Christ and be saved.

Today that same call flows from every true Christian pulpit and from all who bear witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in every land.

The difficulty with this external, universal, and (in itself) ineffectual call, however, is that if people are left to themselves, no one ever actually responds to it. People hear the gospel and may even understand it up to a point. But the God who issues the invitation is undesirable to them, and so they turn away. Jesus told a story about a man who had prepared a great banquet and invited many guests (Luke 14:15-24). When the feast was prepared he sent servants with the invitation: “Come, for everything is now ready.” But the guests all began to make excuses.

“I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it,” said one.

“I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out,” said another.

A third replied, “I just got married, so I can’t come.”

That is the way it truly is, since Jesus was not making up this story out of thin air. That was the way the people of his day responded to his general call. They would not accept his invitation. They rejected it, preferring to go their own ways and about their own business.

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

One of the great newspaper organizations in this country is the Howard organization, and if you are acquainted with it, you may also be aware of the Howard Company logo. It is a lighthouse beneath which are the words: "Give the people the light, and they will find their way." The idea is that people make foolish mistakes and bad decisions because they do not know the right way. Show it to them and they will follow it, is what the motto means. But that is not the way the Bible describes our condition spiritually. When Jesus was in the world he was the world's light. The light was shining. But the men of his day did not respond to Jesus by walking in the right path. Instead they hated the light and tried to put it out. They crucified the lighthouse.

This is how people still respond to the universal invitation. It is why Jesus said, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). It is why Paul wrote, "There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Rom. 3:11). And it is why Jesus declared, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him ..." (John 6:44).

But this is where the second kind of call comes in, the kind that is actually spoken of in Romans 8:30. Unlike the first call, which was external, universal, and (in itself) ineffective, this second call is internal, specific, and entirely effective. In other words, it effectively saves those—and *all* those—to whom it is spoken.

The best discussion of the effectual call I know is in John Murray's small classic, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, where he begins by making the distinction I have just made, showing that there is such a thing as a general or universal call and that there are examples of it in the Bible. But then he points out rightly that "in the New Testament the terms for calling, when used with reference to salvation, are almost uniformly applied, not to the universal call of the gospel, but to the call that ushers men into a state of salvation and is therefore effectual. There is scarcely an instance where the terms are used to designate the indiscriminate overture of grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹

Here are some examples:

Romans 1:6-7—"And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.... called to be saints."

Romans 11:29—"For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

First Corinthians 1:9—"God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."

¹ Murray, John (1970). *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 88.

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

Ephesians 4:1—“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Second Timothy 1:8-9—“So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life....”

Second Peter 1:10—“Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure....”

In each of these texts and many others, including our text in Romans 8:30, the call of God is one that effectively saves those to whom it is addressed. Putting the above texts together, it is a call that unites us to Jesus Christ, bringing us into fellowship with him, and sets before us a holy life in which we will be sure to walk if we have truly been called. Putting the call into the context of Romans 8, it is the point at which the eternal foreknowledge and predestination of God pass over into time and start the process by which the individual is drawn from sin to faith in Jesus Christ, is justified through that faith, and is then kept in Christ until his or her final glorification.

Effectual calling is the central and key point in this great golden chain of five links.

THE POWER OF GOD’S CALL

Now that we have distinguished between the external and internal calls, we need to ask why it is that the internal or specific call is so effective. Why does it bring those who hear it to salvation? The answer is not at all difficult to find. The reason the effective call is effective is that it is God’s call. It issues from his mouth, and all that issues from the mouth of God accomplishes precisely that for which he sent it.

This is what Isaiah 55:10-11 teaches us, when it records God as saying:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

God’s words are always effective. They accomplish their purpose. But to be faithful to our text we need to point out that what we are dealing with in Romans 8:30, in terms of

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28–30

God's calling of sinners, is a call to salvation rather than another purpose. So we need to ask exactly how the effective call of God works in the achieving of this goal.

The chief thing the effective call of God in salvation does is to cause the *regeneration*, or *rebirth*, of the one thus summoned. In the study by John Murray that I referred to earlier, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Murray says that it does not make much difference whether we put regeneration before effectual calling, or effectual calling before regeneration, since the critical determining act is God's in any case.² But when the relevant texts are carefully considered, the order nevertheless seems to be as I have indicated. That is, God calls the individual with a specific and effective call, and the call itself produces new spiritual life in the one who hears it, on the basis of which he or she is enabled to respond to the gospel.

In my judgment, the best illustration of how this works is that of the raising of Lazarus from the dead recounted in John 11, the illustration I introduced in the earlier, introductory study of these terms. We are encouraged to take it as an illustration, because it is in the midst of this story and in obvious reference to it that Jesus utters the well-known words, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die ..." (vv. 25–26).

What happens in this story? Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus and calls out to this dead man, "Lazarus, come out!" and Lazarus does. Clearly the call of Jesus created life in the formerly dead corpse, as a result of which Lazarus responded to Jesus by emerging from the tomb.

That is what happens when God calls us to salvation. His call creates spiritual life in the one called, and the proof that spiritual life is there is that we respond to him. How do we respond? We respond by turning from sin—the theological word is repentance—and by believing on Jesus Christ. In other words, the call of God produces life in the sinner, just as the word of God brought the heavens and earth into existence at the very beginning of creation. The first evidences of that new life are repentance from sin and faith in Jesus.

A moment ago I said that, according to John Murray, it makes little practical difference whether we put regeneration before calling, or calling before regeneration, and that is probably true, though the correct biblical picture seems to be calling first, then regeneration. However, this is not the case in regard to regeneration or calling, on the one hand, and faith and repentance on the other. In this case, the calling of God necessarily

² Murray (1970). 86, 93.

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

comes before the fruit of that calling. It is only after God calls and regenerates that one repents of sin and believes the gospel.

Which comes first, faith or life? The person who knows the Bible answers, "Life." Otherwise, salvation would depend on ourselves and our own ability, and none of the certainties that Paul is speaking about in Romans 8 would be possible.



SOME IMPORTANT OBSERVATIONS

There are a few important qualifications and observations on what I have been saying, and it would be a mistake to overlook them. Let me list three briefly.

1. *Two responses.* I said earlier that the trouble with the general call is that men and women do not naturally respond to it, meaning that they do not become Christians by this call alone. But I need to balance this by adding that, although they do not respond to the call of God unto salvation, they nevertheless can respond superficially by such outward things as coming forward at a religious meeting, making outward profession of faith, or even joining a church. And not only can they, many do. That is why Peter says in the text quoted earlier, "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure ..." (2 Peter 1:10). He means that we must be sure that we really have been called by God and are truly born again, and have not merely been called by the preacher.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of my predecessors as minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (1927–1960), wrote:

If men heed no more than the outward call, they become members of the visible church. If the inward call is heard in our hearts, we become members of the invisible church. The first call unites us merely to a group of professing members; but the inward call unites us to Christ himself, and to all that have been born again.

The outward call may bring with it a certain intellectual knowledge of the truth; the inward call brings us the faith of the heart, the hope which anchors us forever to Christ and the love which must ever draw us back to him who first loved us. The one can end in formalism, the other in true life. The outward call may curb the tendencies of the old nature and keep a soul in outward morality; the inward call will cure the plague that is in us and bring us on to triumph in Christ.³

2. *The importance of the general call.* My second qualification concerns the importance of the general call. Everything I have said thus far has stressed the necessity of the special, or

³ Barnhouse, Donald Grey (1963). *God's Heirs: Exposition of Bible Doctrines, Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 7, *Romans 8:1–39*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 7:171-172.

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

internal, call of the individual to salvation by God. I have said that no one naturally responds to God on the basis of the general call alone. But now I need to add that although that is true, it is nevertheless also true that the general call is necessary, since it is through the general, or universal, call that God calls specifically.

Let me say it this way: The effectual or specific call comes *through* the general call. That is, it is through the preaching of the Word by God's evangelists and ministers and through the telling of the Good News of the gospel by Christians everywhere that God calls sinners. He does not call everyone we Christians call. We sow the seed broadly; some of it falls on stony or shallow soil, just as some of it also falls on good soil. But when the seed falls on the soil God has previously prepared and when God, the giver of life, blesses the work of sowing—so that the seed takes root in the good soil and grows—the result is a spiritual harvest. People are saved, and they do pass into that great chain of God's saving acts, including foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification, that is outlined in the eighth chapter of Romans.

Let me put it still another way. If God calls effectively through the general call, it is as necessary that there be a general call if some are to be saved as it is that there be a specific and effectual call. Our call does not regenerate. God alone is the author of the new birth. All must be born "from above." Nevertheless, the way God does that is through the sowing of the seed of his Word, which is entrusted to us.

Nobody but God could invent this way of saving human beings. If it were left to us, we would say that either (1) God has to do it; we can do nothing, or (2) we have to do it; God can do nothing. As it is, the work of effectively calling people to Christ is of God, yet using human beings.

3. *Am I elect?* There is this last qualification. Sometimes people get bogged down by the subject of God's foreknowledge and predestination, and they end up saying, "Well, if God is going to elect me to salvation, he will just have to do it. There is nothing I can do." Or else they get hung up on knowing whether or not they are elect. They say, "How can I know I am elect? If I am not, there is no hope for me," and they despair. This question bothered John Bunyan, the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for a long time and caused extraordinary despair in him.

But there is no reason for either such passivity or such despair. How do you know whether or not you are elect? The answer lies in another question: Have you responded to the gospel? In other words, have you answered God's call?

How do we know that the patriarch Abraham was an elect man? It is because, when God called to him to leave Ur of the Chaldeans and go to a land that he would afterward

James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28-30

inherit, Abraham “obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (Heb. 11:8), and because he persevered in that obedience to the very end of his life.

How do we know that Moses was predestined to be saved? It is because, though raised in the lap of Egyptian luxury, when he had grown up he “refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter,” choosing “to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time” (Heb. 11:24–25). He sided with God’s people.

How do we know that Paul was elected to salvation? It is because, though breathing out hatred against God’s people and trying to kill some of them, when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, calling, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” the future apostle to the Gentiles was transformed. He saw his sin and turned from it. He saw the righteousness of Christ and believed on Jesus. He obeyed and served God from that time on. Moreover, when he wrote about salvation later, as he did in the letter to the Romans, he showed beyond any doubt that it was not he who chose God, but rather God who chose him and called him to be Christ’s follower.

How do you know if you are among the elect?

There is only one way, and it is not by trying to peer into the eternal counsels of God, stripping the cover from the book of his divine foreknowledge and predestination. The only way you will ever know if you are among the elect is if you respond to the gospel. We are told in the Bible: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved ...” (Acts 16:31). Do it. Then you can know that God has set his electing love on you and that, having loved you, he will continue to love you and keep you to the end.

Will you believe? It would be a delight if God would use this study of the effectual call to call you effectually.⁴

NOTE: This post is in compliance with the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act of 1976 (17 U.S. Code § 107). The US Supreme Court has issued several major decisions clarifying and reaffirming the fair use doctrine since the 1980s, most recently in the 2021 decision *Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc.*

⁴ Boice, J. M. (1991–). *Romans: The Reign of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2:927-934.