

Paul introduces the glorious fact of God's sovereign grace as the foundation of our salvation.

“The Golden Chain”

Romans 8:28-34

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Text Comment

v.30 The question people have about v. 30 is why other things were not mentioned. For example, why did Paul not mention sanctification between justification and glorification? Well Paul's way of describing salvation is not as systematic or programmatic as that of later theologians. He uses terms for the various dimensions of salvation in looser ways than we do today. For example, what Paul means by “called” is in Reformed theology discussed under a variety of terms and broken down into a number of what are thought to be “calling's” constituent parts: calling itself, regeneration or the new birth, conversion, and faith. All of that calling as Paul uses the term. Paul was not so systematic nor given to exact analysis or terminological consistency as later theologians would be. So, it is quite possible that with “glorification” Paul thought both of our moral transformation here in this life – what we call sanctification – and its consummation in moral perfection in heaven, what we call glorification. Paul might well have included both ideas in the one term. After all, the difference between sanctification and glorification is only one of degree, not kind. [Bruce, 178] On the other hand one doesn't have to say everything that might be said to make the point he intends to make. It is enough to say that those whom God foreknew and predestined, he called, justified, and glorified.

The Puritan John Arrowsmith was one of the Westminster divines, one of the ministers charged to produce the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms in the middle of the 17th century. If you are interested, he had a glass eye, having lost one eye to an arrow. But he also had a way with words; was famous for it in his day. It was Arrowsmith who referred to Romans 8:29-30 as “the golden chain” that “God lets down from heaven that by it he may draw up his elect thither.” You can see the image, God letting down this chain and pulling us up to heaven with it. And there is a chain here, as you will see, a chain with five links.

It begins in divine foreknowledge. There has been, of course, a longstanding argument about what “foreknowledge” means in such a context as here in Romans 8:29, but there is little dispute among the reputable commentaries on Paul's epistle to the Romans. In the Bible the word “know” is used of God's special love and electing grace. In Genesis 18:19, in a statement the Lord makes about Abraham, the NIV reads, “For I have *chosen* him...” but the Hebrew is not “chosen” but “know.” For God to say that he *knew* Abraham is not to say that God knew *about* Abraham but to say that he loved him and had chosen him to be his man. God is not saying he knew *about* Abraham; God knows *about* everybody. This divine knowledge is a knowledge that makes a difference; this is a knowledge that brings Abraham into fellowship with God. In Jeremiah 1:5 the Lord said to his prophet, “before I formed you in the womb I *knew* you...” Clearly God is not talking about merely having information about Jeremiah. He is talking about a special relationship that he had with Jeremiah before Jeremiah was conceived or born. God

stands above time so he can love a person whom he has not yet brought into existence! So for Paul to say here that God *foreknew* a people is to say in an entirely typical and characteristically biblical fashion that he loved a people and chose a people beforehand; not only before they lived in the world, but, as Paul will say in other texts, before the creation of the world! Take 2 Timothy 1:9, for example.

“...God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time...”

What Paul says here he says in many other places and what he says is said just as emphatically by many other biblical writers: God chose a people for salvation before the foundation of the world. Before any human being was created God had already set his love on certain ones of the human race and chosen them to live forever in the happiness of heaven. *That* is foreknowledge.

There are earnest Christians, troubled by this notion of God choosing those to be saved and choosing them before they even existed, who have argued that the term “foreknowledge” as Paul uses it here must be given another meaning. They think it must mean that God saw ahead of time that some people would believe in Jesus when the gospel was preached to them. He *foreknew the faith* of those eventual believers in Christ. He chose them because he knew they would choose him. But that is not the meaning of the term in the Bible and virtually everyone admits it is not. And, of course, it bears repeating that Paul does not say that God foreknew something *about* these people, say, their faith; Paul says that God foreknew *them*. It was particular people themselves whom God *knew* or loved beforehand.

We move on to the second link in this golden chain. Those whom God foreknew he then predestined. The term “predestine” or “foreordain” means precisely what it appears to mean. God ordered their lives beforehand so that they would reach a specific goal he had chosen for them. He determined their destiny, the end and result of their lives beforehand. He ordered beforehand that these people should be conformed to the likeness of his Son and made the Lord’s brethren; that these people would be recreated by the Spirit of God and be enrolled in the family of God. Before there was a world, before any of these people existed as individual human beings, their happy end was already determined. Their destiny was fixed in the plan and purpose of the God who does what pleases him in heaven and on earth.

All of that – God’s pitching his love on certain people; his foreordaining their destiny – all of that, I say, happened before the world was made. But then, in the third place, to bring that divine plan to fulfillment, God laid hold of the lives of the people he had foreknown and predestined to be conformed to Christ. “With this third link of the chain, we are in the realm of historical time” and the Christian’s own experience. [Cranfield, i, 432] He *called* them, which, in biblical parlance means he summoned them by his all-powerful and all-conquering word to faith in Jesus Christ. God brought the whole universe into being by speaking a word and he brings new life into being by *summoning* a human soul to faith in Christ. In biblical usage, “calling” and “conversion” are two sides of the same coin. When God calls, the man or woman obeys and believes. Human beings, dead in sin, are like Lazarus in his grave tightly wrapped up in the grave

clothes; but when Jesus called, Lazarus heard and obeyed and came to life. Such is the case with every Christian. God's call cannot be resisted. As John Arrowsmith put it:

“Election, having once pitched upon a man, will find him out and call him home, wherever he be. Zacchaeus out of cursed Jericho; Abraham out of idolatrous Ur of the Chaldeans; Nicodemus and Paul out of the college of the Pharisees, Christ's sworn enemies; Dionysius and Damaris, out of superstitious Athens. In whatever dunghill God's jewels be hid, election will both find them out there and fetch them out from thence.”

But, of course, we musn't forget that there is a world of magnificent genius and variety in that term “call.” God calls some in the womb; he calls others in infancy; he calls some in childhood; others in young adulthood and adulthood; and others still in old age. He calls some dramatically and some very quietly. He calls some through their reading of the Bible, like Augustine or William Cowper; he calls others through hearing the Bible being read, such as Bishop J.C. Ryle; he calls others through preaching, such as Charles Spurgeon; he calls others through the witness of lay Christians, such as Justin Martyr in the second century and Abraham Kuyper in the nineteenth century; he calls vast multitudes through the nurture of a Christian home.

And he uses all manner of circumstances to call his people to life: crises through which he makes them pass – sickness and the fear of death (think of Thomas Chalmers, who, although a minister for some years, came to faith in Christ because he was sick and feared he might die; or think of John Newton in that great storm at sea fearing for his life), or heartsickness (think of John Bunyan), or shame (think of Chuck Colson, converted after his humiliating fall from power and favor in the Watergate scandal) – ; God uses books that people read (think of Abraham Kuyper and the novel he read that contributed to his spiritual awakening); God uses people he causes his elect to meet or come to love (think of the shining example of Christian holiness and love that Pascal saw in his sister or John Newton's love for Mary Catlett); and so on. But in every case, by whatever means and on whatever sort of occasion, it is a matter of God summoning the soul to new life and the soul answering and obeying because it cannot do anything else because it is Almighty God who is speaking.

And, so Paul continues, once a man has been called to new life in Christ, reborn by the Spirit and made a believer and follower in Jesus, then he is justified, his sins are forgiven. Justification has already been thoroughly explained in chapters 3-5. But here we learn that a sinner believing in Jesus and being declared righteous in God's sight was the fulfillment of a plan and purpose *for that man or that woman, that boy or that girl*, a plan that existed from eternity past. Justification is one link in the chain; the sinner's pardon part of the divine plan to get him or her home to heaven.

And, after their justification, so certain is the eventual consummation of their salvation, their moral, spiritual, and physical perfection in communion with God in heaven, that this too can be spoken of as if it had already happened. Paul puts the believer's future glory in the past tense not the future, a Hebrew figure of speech that conveys the certainty of some eventual outcome. “Glorification,” as Paul uses the term here describes the perfection of human life in the presence of God in heaven at the end of time. In 5:2 Paul had spoken of the glory of God which believers *hope* for; that is, what they know is coming but which has not yet arrived. And in the previous

paragraph Paul has spoken again of the believers' coming glory. Christians in this world live in hope. You don't hope for what you already have, you hope for what you are waiting for. That is, there is a great part of your salvation that you have not yet received. But you *will* receive it.

Once again John Arrowsmith summed this up in his inimitable way:

“Rejoice,” our Savior cried (Luke x. 20), “rejoice in this — that your names are written in heaven,” in, that is, the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. xxi. 27)... [which is] “a book of love — the writing of our names in which is the firstborn of all God’s favors.”

Whom God foreknew – that is, those whose names he wrote in the book of life – they, they only, and all of them, will finally be glorified! Count these five golden links, all God’s own acts, and note how they are welded together in one unbreakable chain, so that all who are set apart in God’s discriminating love are carried on by his grace, step by step, up to the great consummation of that glorification which realizes the promised conformity to the image of God’s own Son. It is “election,” that does all this; for “whom he foreknew, . . . them he also glorified. [B.B. Warfield, “Election,” *Selected Shorter Writings*, i, 290]

Christ came into the world and gave his life for us, we already read in Romans 5:8, because God loved us. Christ on the cross is the demonstration of God’s love. But Christ’s cross is effective. It could not be otherwise. As Paul says in 5:10 “we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.” God loved us and sent his son, and his son put us right with God. To be sure, we had to be called to faith in Christ, we had to be justified and someday we will be glorified, but all of that is simply the inevitable outworking of the divine love that God had for us before the foundation of the world and the divine plan that God contrived to serve the purposes of that love.

There can be no getting round the fact: *we* are saved because God decided to save *us* because God wanted us to be saved. Why? Who can say? Why us and not others? No one knows. Why us and not everyone? There is no answer to such questions given us in God’s Word. Why did Jesus raise only Lazarus from the dead? There were many dying people in his day. Why only Lazarus? We do not know and cannot say. We put our hands over our mouths and say, as Paul will say when he is through with his discussion of election at the end of chapter 11:

“Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”

Or, even better than this, we can say as Jesus himself taught us to say about this very truth of election, of God’s choice of a people for salvation,

“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.”

This is something to praise God for “After all, men are sinners and grace is wonderful!” [Warfield] The marvel is not that God has not chosen all, but that he has chosen anyone among the utterly undeserving mass of humanity for this indescribably magnificent future. The amazing truth is not that God hated Esau – we would have hated Esau too – but the amazing truth is that

he loved Jacob! He wasn't anymore deserving of that love than Esau was – the ingrate, the cheat. For us, surely; for us who believe and who await with confidence the eternal future that God has in store for us, it is ours not to quibble; never to quibble; never to ask our questions in a thinly-veiled spirit of complaint, but to rejoice and to give thanks and to love God with all our hearts in return. As Bernard of Clairvaux put it, who was a man who deeply understood such things,

“God deserves love from such as he has loved long before they could deserve it” and “his love to God will be without end, who knows that God’s love to him was without any beginning.” [Cited in Warfield, 298]

Now we will have the opportunity to say much more about this divine discriminating and electing love of God that is the explanation for anyone’s and everyone’s salvation. Paul is going to deal with this subject at length in the next chapter. He knew very well how controversial the subject was, how difficult to grasp, how easily misunderstood, and so he took time in his letter to the Romans to clear away some of that misunderstanding and to settle some of that controversy. We have that still before us. This morning I want to consider the place of this doctrine in our thinking and the place it has here in the argument of Paul’s letter to the Romans. I’m not going to defend the doctrine; we will have time and occasion for that later.

- I. *Let me say then, in the first place, that election, God’s sovereign and personal choice of certain individuals for salvation which guarantees that all the rest of salvation will come in due time, is only part of the revelation of God’s grace and salvation that we are given in the Word of God. This doctrine has a larger context and we must never forget that context.*

We are deep into the 8th chapter of Romans before Paul brings up the fact that the salvation he has been describing is a gift that God gives to some and not to others and that this gift is rooted in a discriminating love for certain persons that God had in his heart before the world was made. We have heard about human sin and guilt, about man’s willful refusal to submit to God, about the sinner’s justification through faith in Christ who reconciled us to God by his death on the cross, and about the transformation of life that must and will follow that justification. Those are great subjects, large parts of the Christian message about salvation. And it is not until Paul has finished with his exposition of the way of salvation that he comes to explain how it was that one person believed when he preached the gospel and another did not. Paul obviously did not think that he had to begin with the doctrine of divine election in order to explain the gospel accurately.

In a similar way, if you examine the sermons that were preached by Paul and others as we have a record of them in the book of Acts, it is clear that they did not belabor the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners in what they preached to the world as the gospel made its way out from Judea to the rest of the world. They exposed men as sinners before a holy God and invited them to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. To be sure, Luke will explain the various responses that were made to Paul’s preaching, by saying, “All who were appointed for eternal life believed,” or “The Lord opened Lydia’s heart to respond to Paul’s message,” but that is explanation after the fact; the doctrine of election does not feature in the sermons themselves. The apostles often explained the gospel and preached the gospel without ever mentioning divine election. My grandfather was a Presbyterian evangelist. He believed in divine election. He knew very well that those who responded in faith to his presentation of the gospel would do so because they had been appointed to eternal life and God was calling them as he was not calling others. But he was

listened to gladly by multitudes of people who would have been offended had he told them what he believed about divine election. It was not what they needed to hear. It is not the business of an evangelist to teach election and sovereign grace and the decrees of God to the unconverted.

When I was in high school I had a history teacher, a very good history teacher as a matter of fact. He was a non-observant Jew but he knew a good bit about religion. I remember once his pointing out in class that I was a Presbyterian. “You,” he said, “are one of those people who believe in *predestination*,” laughing as he said it. He wasn’t being mean, but he was definitely expressing a kind of wonderment that people believed in such a thing. I didn’t have the presence of mind to reply that Presbyterians had learned their predestination from the Jewish prophets. But most of us who have believed in election or predestination or God’s sovereign grace – call it what you will – have discovered that there are a great many people, including a great many Christians who find this teaching incredible and offensive and consider those of us who believe it to have put a huge stumbling block in the way of unbelievers believing the Christian message. Who is going to want to believe such a message? Who is going to admire a God who plays favorites?

It is true that we believe in predestination. We believe it because it lies face up on the pages of Holy Scripture and because it is taught everywhere in the Bible in all manner of different ways. It is right for us to point out that virtually without exception all the great doctors of the Christian church, the men of history who are regarded as the authoritative teachers of the Christian faith – from Augustine to Aquinas; from Bernard to Luther, from Calvin to Bavinck and Warfield – have taught this doctrine. We do not apologize for our conviction that a discriminating divine love and election is the teaching of the Bible and lies at the foundation of our Christian faith.

It is, however, equally true that we believe in the cross of Jesus and the power of faith; we believe in the promises of God and the free will and the moral responsibility and accountability of man. We believe in the necessity of obedience to God’s commandments and the sincere gospel offer made again and again in the Bible: “whoever wishes let him take the free gift of the water of life.” We believe in all of those things as well as in election and predestination.

The fact is there are many Christians with whom we cannot agree about election but with whom we heartily agree about the rest of the gospel. This is how the great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, himself an outspoken defender of election and God’s sovereign grace, once put it:

‘We give our hand to every man that loves the Lord Jesus Christ, be he what he may or who he may. The doctrine of election, like the great act of election itself, is intended to divide, not between Israel and Israel, but between Israel and the Egyptians, – not between saint and saint, but between saints and the children of the world. A man may be evidently of God’s chosen family, and yet though elected, may not believe in the doctrine of election. I hold there are many savingly called, who do not believe in effectual calling, and that there are a great many who persevere to the end, who do not believe the doctrine of final perseverance. We do hope that the hearts of many are a great deal better than their heads. We do not set their fallacies down to any willful opposition to the truth as it is in Jesus, but simply to an error in their judgments, which we pray God to correct. We hope that if they think us mistaken too, they will reciprocate the same Christian courtesy; and when we meet around the cross, we hope that we shall ever feel that we are one in Christ Jesus.’ [NPSP, vol. 6, 303]

There is, in other words, a great deal more to our Christian profession of faith than a belief in the doctrine of divine foreknowledge, election, and predestination. There is much that we can share with other believers with whom we may not share our conviction of the electing grace of God.

II. But, in the second place, the doctrine of election takes its place as it does in our hearts and in our profession because it is so fundamental to so much that all Christians take for granted whether or not they can account for those things.

It may not be everything in our faith, but it is a key element of it and part of its foundation. In the context, Paul's statement here in Romans 8 is meant to assure believers that God *is for them*; the very statement Paul makes in v. 31 as a summary of what he has just said in vv. 29 and 30. See the word "for" with which v. 29 begins. What Paul says in 29-30 is the proof, the demonstration of his previous statement that all works together for our good. It is so because God has an unchangeable plan for us founded upon his immutable love for his people. What all of that amounts to – God's eternal election leading inexorably to the believer's glorification; God's plan for our salvation that stretches from eternity past to eternity future – all of that means *that God is for us, he is on our side*. We are safe. No matter the trials and difficulties and sorrows of life. Our salvation has been secure since before the world was made; our place in God's heart is indestructible. No one can shorten *his* hand; no one can overturn *his* purposes. He carries all before him in bringing his plan to pass and our glory forever – yours and mine – is the centerpiece of that plan.

All Christian believers know this at some level and believe this and always take their comfort from this; from the certainty that God will accomplish his plan for us. We are glad for their confidence. We simply point out that the reason Paul gives us for this confidence is the all-conquering, predestinating, discriminating, personal sovereign love of God for his people, pitched on them before the world began.

What is more, this doctrine is a sentinel posted to guard against the infiltration, however subtle, of the thought that our salvation is due in some part, in some way, to some degree to our own morality, our own good works, or our own choices. Election is the nail in the coffin of all self-congratulation. We are going to heaven because of God's love for us, not ours for him; because of his determination to take us there not because of our desire to go; because of his interfering in our lives and changing us into something other than what we were by nature and inclination, not because we had somehow proved ourselves worthy of the glory of God. Again, all Christians know this, no matter what they say when standing on their feet debating the doctrine of election. Something happens to the shoulder muscle when you are born again and you are unable ever after to get your arm far enough back to pat yourself on the back for having the good sense to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

That is why we cannot give up the doctrine. To give it up is to give up the gospel as a message of God's love and grace to the helpless and to give in to our pride and the worship of ourselves. You cannot deny the assertion that God's discriminating love is the ultimate and efficient cause of everyone's salvation from beginning to end without in some way asserting that your salvation rests to some degree on your own virtue. And you know, and every Christian knows, that is not right. This we cannot and will not do. It is contrary to the whole of Scripture, contrary to the witness of our own conscience, and contrary to the experience of the gospel in the world.

Here is Spurgeon again.

“When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young convert is at first aware of this. I can recall the very day and hour when I first received those truths into my own soul – when they were, as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron, and I can recollect how I felt that I had grown on a sudden from a babe into a man.... One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher’s sermon... The thought struck me, ‘*How did you come to be a Christian?*’ I sought the Lord. ‘*But how did you come to seek the Lord?*’ The truth flashed across my mind in a moment – I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to *make me* seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, *How came I to pray?* I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. *How came I to read the Scriptures?* I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that he was the Author of my faith, and the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day.... I ascribe my change wholly to God.” [*Autobiography*, i, 164-165]

If you have difficulties with this doctrine, if you wonder how you can believe it and believe other precious things about God and salvation at the same time, I urge you first to remember what those who love this doctrine *love it for*. They love it because by it they ascribe all credit and all glory to God for their salvation. They love it because it is the grand foundation of all their assurance that God being for them, who and what can possibly be against them. That there are difficulties we do not deny. Paul is going to spend some time dealing with those difficulties. But that there are grand conclusions to be drawn from this doctrine, the grandest conclusions to which the human mind can ever come, we also cannot deny! Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, saw *me and you* and loved *me and you* and gave himself *for me and you before the world was made!*

And remember, there is much else to know and much else to believe and we wish to be firm believers in all of that as well. There is many a great preacher who believed in election but many, if not most of his sermons never mentioned it. The perhaps most famous 20th century preacher of the Reformed tradition, Martyn Lloyd Jones, preached many sermons that left his congregation wondering whether he believed in election or not and he did most firmly. We do not talk about it all the time and in that we have learned our craft from the Bible. But we talk about it often enough as the Scripture also teaches us to do. As the great 19th century Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge once wrote,

“The doctrine of the sovereignty of God [i.e. election and predestination] is to all other doctrine what the granite formation is to the other strata of the earth. It underlies and sustains them, but it crops out only here and there. So this doctrine should underlie all our preaching, and should be definitely asserted only now and then.” [*Princeton Sermons*, 6]

And, more practically, John Bradford, the English Reformer and 16th century martyr, said,

“Let a man go to the grammar school of faith and repentance before he goes to the university of election and predestination.”

Paul never treats this doctrine philosophically. He is not interested in simply asserting that God is the cause of everything. He teaches us this doctrine for two great reasons and two only: He wants us to know to whom alone we owe our great good fortune and the happiness that stretches before us forever so that we might love him with all our hearts in return. And he wants us to know that our salvation is secure come wind, come weather. We cannot fail to reach our goal because we are only making the journey in the first place because the Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, pitched his love upon us and predestined all things so as to secure our safe arrival in the heavenly country.

We cannot fail to reach heaven unless God's love can fail, and God's power can fail and God's will can fail; and they cannot and will not fail unless God should cease to be God!