

Romans 8:28-30: Called

I thank You for the ministry of my brothers and sisters in prayer, Lord. What a blessing it is to give and pray. We commit our class time to You. Teach us, we pray, concerning matters that we confess are beyond us or our trying to understand what You did before the creation of the world. But Lord, help us to stick to Your Word. Illumine us, I pray. Help us to understand as much as we can and to believe Your truth. Work in us we ask, for Your honor, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After concluding our brief study concerning the doctrine of God the Holy Spirit, we move now to the doctrine of election. Our purpose will be to lay a foundation with Bible study and to present the classic debate from the Arminian and Calvinist perspectives.

In order to put the doctrine of election in its biblical context then we must consider salvation in its broadest terms. We consider it as planned, accomplished, applied, and consummated. Our interest right now is in studying salvation planned. This is a panorama of the Bible's teaching on salvation. We can view it as planned and here we are talking about the doctrine of election or predestination. Salvation accomplished would involve the doctrines of the person and work of Christ. Salvation applied involves the ministry of the Holy Spirit. All of these, of course, involve the Trinity since the Trinity is inseparable. But planning is most especially the work of the Father. The accomplishment of salvation is most especially the work of the Son and His cross and resurrection. The application of salvation is the work of the Trinity, but especially the work of God the Holy Spirit. We did that in an overview fashion previously. Salvation consummated is the work of the Trinity. Here we are talking about the resurrection of the dead, the final glorification, and entire sanctification of believers. Our immediate concern is the doctrine of election.

God has planned and worked out our salvation from beginning to end. We will start with the beginning. I am going to work with some of the great passages that deal with this. There are many references in Scripture to these matters, but I am choosing passages that are extensive passages dealing with these subjects. I will not focus on incidental references to election or predestination, but rather on the great passages whose subject is these particular matters. There are three of them at least. Romans 8:28-30 is our first one, Ephesians 1:3-14 is next, and then the famous passage in Romans 9.

Romans 8:28-30 says, "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. 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." The immediately preceding context of that passage talks about present sufferings. The readers were suffering for their faith and Paul puts those present sufferings in the context of future glory. I am referring of course to Romans 8:18-27. We need that future dimension in order to see God's perspective on the matter. It does not make their present suffering, their difficult lives, go away, but it does help them gain a much broader perspective on those matters. The apostle could say, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." He does not minimize their hardships, but he wants them to consider their hardships in light of what God will do for them in salvation consummated, to use the terms that I just mentioned.

"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." This is an important principle. I once had a friend who devoted something like 100 hours to studying this verse, and he is kind of a practical fellow. He was studying theology at the school where I was teaching at the time and where he is a professor of mathematics. You must

understand he is a very pragmatic fellow who likes definite answers. I said to him, “Oh, that is wonderful. I have never studied that in such detail. What did you conclude? What did you find out?” He said, “I found out nothing. I found out that what it means what we always thought it meant.” I said, “Gary, there is nothing bad about that. You just saved me 100 hours of work. Thank you, brother.” Novelty is not our goal in theology. Having a heretofore unheard of explanation of a verse or a doctrine is not our goal, although it is possible. The church has been wrong before. But our only goal is to be faithful to what the Bible says. Gary found out that the things we have already hinted at even include present sufferings, hardships, and difficulties. We know that in all things God works for the good.

There are minor differences in the Greek text that are really insignificant for our purposes. Whether it says “He” works all things together for good or whether the name of God is actually used makes no difference. If it says “all things work together for good,” that may be more of a passive idea. It is not a problem if it leaves God’s name or uses a pronoun referring to Him, because certainly even in that construction, all things work together for good. The Bible is not teaching fatalism. They only work together for good because it would be assumed that the providence of God stands behind that working. There is no other possibility in the apostle’s thought. So this is the essential sense no matter how we translate it in particular.

Paul writes that “in all things God works for the good.” And then he specifies. God works for the good of those who love Him. Here the people of God are described. Paul could have done it in many different ways. He could have said “for the saints or for the believers.” Here he describes the people of God as lovers of God and he qualifies that description when he says, “Those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose.” There is the idea here of calling. The Greek text literally says, “according to purpose,” but the translation is certainly right. Certainly the implication is “according to God’s purpose.” There is no notion of calling ourselves and whose other purpose could it possibly be but God’s? So to paraphrase and expand Romans 8:28 it would say, “We know—we are confident of this fact—that in all things, even present difficulties and tribulations, God works for the ultimate good of those people who love Him, that is, those who have been called according to the purpose of God Himself.”

The Bible knows of two kinds of calling. There is what Hoekema calls the “Gospel call.” The older terminology was the “external call” and it speaks of the Gospel falling on the ears, which may or may not be believed. There is also the effective or effectual call, sometimes called the internal call. I like Hoekema’s terminology—Gospel call and effectual call—better than external and internal call because the internal call of old, that designation, was technically an “external/internal” call. The meaning was that when the Gospel fell on the ears, the Spirit of God, invisibly and sovereignly, worked on the hearts of people to actually bring them to the Lord. Paul must be speaking of that special call in this passage because he refers to those who actually love the Lord, who have been called according to God’s purpose.

The word “purpose,” which speaks of God’s will, points us to verse 29. The first thing we want to notice about that verse is it starts out with the word “for” or “because.” We know that God works even in present tribulations for our ultimate good because—and here is how we know that as he explains further—“those God foreknew he also predestined.” Let me give you the bare bones of verses 29 and 30. Here is how we know it: “because those God foreknew he also predestined.” Then we skip to verse 30, “And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” We have five verbs there. Each of them is the past tense: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Actually these are five variations on a theme. They are five different ways of

saying “saved.” Instead of saying saved, saved, saved, saved, saved, we have this richness that the Lord uses to describe our salvation.

What or who is the subject of the five verbs? Surely God is the subject of the five verbs. It is indisputable. God foreknew. God predestined. God called. God justified. God glorified. He is the doer of the action, whatever the action is. My suggestion is that each verb means “saved” in five different pictures or ways of talking about being saved.

Another important question is what is the object of the five verbs? The object is those who were called according to His purpose, those who love God—saints, Christians, the people of God. However you want to say it, it means the people who are saved. Thus we have that God foreknew His people. God predestined His people. God called His people, justified His people, and glorified His people. It is simple, basic information that we really need to keep in mind. So when we consider foreknowledge, we know it does not necessarily mean God foreknew the people’s response, but rather it refers to God foreknowing people. Notice the object is consistent throughout. It is the same people whom God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified.

Now I am going to have to enter into debate here, and I feel unclean criticizing such a godly Christian man as John Wesley. So let me say right off the bat that I have great respect for him. He was a wonderful evangelist and mightily used by God. If I were privileged to know him, it would be an honor to know him. And I would fellowship with him in a moment. Having said that, he wrestled with this passage and I do not like what he did with it. For one thing, he said it is not certain that those who come in the front come out the other side. That is a mistake. A scholar named Judith Gundry-Volf has written a tremendous book called *Paul and Perseverance*. She studied this passage, among many others. And here she notes that that comment of Wesley is a mistake because he missed the figure of speech that is called “climax.” Climax involves reaching back to grab hold, and reaching forward. It is tying things together, in a sort of chain. That is exactly what is going on here. In the original language it is even more specific. For example, we read this in Romans 8:30: “And whom he predestined, these also he called.” There is a “whom” and then a “these also.” It refers back to the previous term and then takes it in the other direction as well.

“And whom he called these also he justified. And whom he justified these also he glorified.” Wesley’s opinion notwithstanding, the object is consistent throughout. It is the same people of God whom God foreknew all the way through to those whom He glorified. By the way, it is a remarkable thing that he could put glorification, which is certainly future salvation from the vantage point of his readers, in the past tense. If you ask me why he could do that, it seems to me the major thrust of verses 28 to 39 is to teach God’s keeping of His people. It is one of the four ways, by my analysis, that Paul says, “You are safe in the love of God. God keeps you. You will not fall away from His grace.” This is not a security that should lead to laxness or sinful living. That would be a terrible lack of disrespect for God’s grace. Rather it refers to God keeping His people. Furthermore, if the object is consistent throughout the passage, then my analysis is right, unless you are an absolute universalist and you believe that everybody is saved in the end. It is very hard to believe both the Bible and that view since in Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus is teaching about the sheep and the goats. He teaches that which fits with other Scripture as well, that in the end there will be a great separation of the human race into two groups: the saved and the lost. Therefore all those who are glorified are not every single human being. There is a large number, no doubt, but it is not talking about everyone. So my thesis is that if indeed it is the same object, the people of God, all the way through, then not everybody is foreknown on the front side.

Another point before we turn to another controversy is that God's plan of salvation stretches from the time of His foreknowledge and predestining unto glorification on the other side. Ephesians 1 is very plain saying, "God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world." We are not told here a time indicator, but if we compare Romans 8:29-30 with Ephesians 1 then we are talking about something God planned before the creation of the world. So it is a panoramic view from before creation unto final glorification in the space of just two verses. Thus how does verse 29 give a real foundation for verse 28? We know that all things work together for good for the people who love God. We know it because the people God foreknew He also glorified. The conclusion then is that we know all things work together for good because God has planned the greatest good for His people. They will not fail to be glorified. To say it differently: you need to put your present sufferings in light of future glory. Here he says it in another way: God will work all things for our good because here is what He has done and is doing for us—He is saving us from beginning to end.

Let me present the controversy. The key is the meaning of the word "foreknow." Tell me what foreknow means and we can go a long way toward understanding the passage. There are two main suggestions as to what it means in this particular passage in Romans 8. One is the notion that it means foresight. It means intellectual foresight on God's part. Another way to say it is precognition, God knowing facts beforehand. Prescience is another term which means the same as the other two words. Wesley and other godly Christians have held and taught and confessed this idea that God's foreknowledge means God looked forward from before the creation of the world and on the basis of His foresight, His knowledge of the response to the Gospel beforehand, He chose some and He did not choose others. Thus He is the one who ratifies human decision. When the Bible says God predestined or chose people the meaning is He foresaw what they would do with the Gospel and He either chose or did not choose accordingly. Ultimately, this teaching means that the God who is free relinquished some of His power or domain or that it would be set up that way. In that way, this is all part of God's sovereign grace and good pleasure. That is how He set it up. He chose to base His choice upon His foreknowledge of human choice.

Is this notion of foreknowledge correct? Almost all theologians say it is. Not that it is the meaning of the passage here especially. Calvinists and Arminians are divided on that. But it is only a few people who would deny to God knowledge of the future. So although Calvinists disagree that this view is the meaning of the Romans 8 passage, they do not disagree that God knows the future in that way. Clark Pinnock is an example of one Arminian theologian who denies that God knows the future like that. He says we cannot possibly hold that viewpoint because if we say God knows future responses like that, then the only way He could know them is to control them and then we are playing into the hands of the Calvinists. But I would quickly say Pinnock is in the distinct minority in denying God's knowledge of the future. That is a good thing because Isaiah and other places teach that God does know all things, including the future. If Pinnock is right, then Wesley is inconsistent, but I would applaud Wesley's inconsistency in the name of believing the Bible when it says God knows the future.

So the debate for most of us is not whether God knows the future. The debate is whether foreknowledge should be understood as precognition, as God knowing the facts beforehand. Is response to the Gospel the basis of election? That is the debate. Arminians say yes, it is. Calvinists say no, it is not. Calvinists say, if that is the meaning here, then we have a doctrine of conditional election. Conditional election means God's choice of His people is conditioned upon His foreknowledge, understood as prescience of their response. Thus there is conditionality, a contingency, based upon the creature's response.

Where did this terminology come from? Where do we even get these terms, Calvinist and Arminian? You may have heard about the so-called five points of Calvinism. Did John Calvin really concoct those? Is that why his name is associated with them? Let me try to answer some of those questions. Many

Christians do not know, including people who espouse the five points of Calvinism, that historically the five points of Arminianism were first. They occurred before the five points of Calvinism. The name comes from a Dutch pastor, Arminius, who was a godly man who loved people and worked hard in his parish ministry to explain the Bible. He reacted against what he considered a hyper-Calvinism in Holland of his time. I tend to think he was right. It was an overstated version of Calvinism. This was in the early 1600s. Arminius became a professor at the University of Leiden and he began teaching a new doctrine because prior to him the Dutch theologians, and the Dutch church, were staunchly Calvinistic or Reformed in their understanding of salvation. The party that followed him was called Arminians by their enemies. It was not a pleasant term at first. It meant followers of that rascal. That is what the enemies meant. They were also called “remonstrants,” which means protestors, or protestants. Protestants and remonstrants overlap in meaning. In 1610 they presented a formal protest, or remonstrance, to the government since religion and government were tied to the church and the civil state of Holland in 1610.

Here are the five points of Arminianism. Although the numbering is not technically their own numbering, you will see it sets up the five points of Arminianism over against Calvinism in a very neat way. (1) Although the fall severely crippled human nature, we are still able to choose God. Sin has affected us in many grievous ways so that we are born corrupt and we are sinful, but we retain the ability to believe the Gospel. (2) The Bible teaches a doctrine of predestination and election. God is its author but He has conditioned His choice of His people upon His foreseen knowledge of what they would do with His Son offered in the Gospel. Thus election is conditional in terms of the people’s response. (3) The work of Christ is universal. That is, Jesus died to save every human being. That is so-called unlimited atonement or universal atonement. Jesus died to save everyone. His death is therefore not technically a ransom that secures salvation. If it were, everyone would be saved, and the Arminian party did not believe in absolute universalism. They believed in a relative universalism. That is, God gives everyone an equal chance to be saved. Those He foresees will believe—remember we have the ability to believe—He chooses. But Jesus dies for them and everyone else, that each might have an opportunity to be saved. God provides a universal atonement. (4) While grace is wonderful and necessary for salvation and we cannot save ourselves, grace is universally given and it can be resisted. That means God does not overpower the sinner or save anyone against his or her will. Remember, we are able to believe. Are you detecting a harmony or symmetry between these points? They make good sense. And I am trying to present them fairly. (5) Perseverance is an open question. At the presentation they made, the remonstrants said there are many powerful passages that seem to teach God keeps His people to the end. On the other hand, there are apostasy passages—they singled out some in Hebrews 6 and 10—that seem to teach the people of God can fall away from God’s grace and be unsaved again. They did not want to be dogmatic and their conclusion was to encourage the church to study this point further.

The five points of Arminianism preceded the five points of Calvinism historically. And the five points of Calvinism are exactly a response to the five points of Arminianism, which tells me one thing right away. How would you like your views on anything, whether politics, religion, or any other thing, to simply be your answers to your opponent’s best case? You would not like that at all. That would put you on the defensive and it would not be the sum and substance of your view. You would want to set your view forth positively. The other person’s view needs to be answered, but in that way the five points of Calvinism have been misunderstood. They are not the essence of Calvinism, the sum and substance of the Reformed faith. They are a slice of it presented in terms of a debate that the Calvinists did not really start, except by teaching their Calvinism over the years pretty consistently. It was an extreme form of Calvinism that brought forth the opposition of Arminianists and others.

Now I will present the five points of Calvinism. This summary was given at the synod of Dordt in Holland in 1618-1619. So the five points of Calvinism really did follow historically the five points of Arminianism. The Dutch church taught these things pretty consistently before the Arminian protest. But now they formally answered the Arminians. (1) Total depravity. This is a terrible term even as most of these five are terrible terms. It sounds like it means that every human being is as bad as he or she could be. That is not intended at all. Hoekema uses the word “pervasive” instead of total. It means the effects of sin pervade the human being and human life so that there is no part of man that is not affected by sin. The Calvinists said it is the mind of people that is singled out by the apostle Paul as the center of their depravity. So if that sounds to you like a denial of the ability to believe, that is exactly what it is. It is a forthright denial of the notion that sinners have the ability to believe. They do not have that ability. They have lost it in the fall and they need God’s grace in order to be saved.

(2) Election is unconditional in terms of the creature. God knows the future in the way the Arminians say. God knows everything. He knows the future like that, but it is not the basis of His choice. If He really did look down the corridors of time to see who would choose Him and base His choice upon that, it would be an empty set. Nobody would choose Him. We would all be lost. We are worse off than that so that we need stronger grace than that. Election is unconditional in terms of the creature. It is not without rhyme or reason and ultimately it is because of God’s will and His grace that He chooses a people for Himself.

(3) Limited atonement, which is another terrible expression because it sounds like something is lacking in the work of Christ. The Dutch Calvinists insisted that God’s grace is universal in the free offer of the Gospel to all people. It is not universal, however, in the work of Christ. Christ did not work at odds with God the Father’s work in election—His plan. The Father and the Son worked in harmony. The Trinity is not divided with itself. The Father chooses a people. The Son makes atonement for those people. The Spirit draws those people to the Son as He has offered in the Gospel. The work of Christ is not just the provision for the sins of people, for the salvation of people. That would do us no good. We need more than a provision. We need an actual atonement that saves, an atonement that actually accomplishes salvation. If you accomplish salvation for every individual like the Arminian party wants to say, then everybody would be saved in the end. That is not the Bible’s presentation. So Christ must have died to actually purchase the salvation of the elect. This is not to deny that some of the benefits of His work extend to all of God’s creatures, even unsaved people. But in terms of saving efficacy, the cross was designed by God. That is the key. What was God’s plan? It was designed to save the people of God.

(4) Irresistible grace. God’s grace is resistible, in a sense. It is resisted every day. By some it is resisted unto death. But God’s grace is never successfully resisted by any of the people of God. God brings His people to Himself. Unsaved people resist God’s grace. Even the people of God resist God’s grace until God brings them to salvation. He brings His people to Himself. “Irresistible” is a terrible expression, too. It sounds like people get saved against their will. That is not the thought at all. The thought is closer to invincible grace. It is unconquerable grace. Our hearts are so set against God that if He did not work in us by His sovereign grace, we would never choose Him. That is why that foreknowledge business will not work, because God would look forward and all He would see is unbelief. But He gives His Spirit to His people and He quickens them. He gives them spiritual eyes to see and spiritual ears to hear. He takes out the heart of stone and gives them a heart of flesh, to use some biblical pictures of this matter. When Christ is offered to them in the Gospel, they embrace the Lord Jesus Christ. They say, “How foolish I have been all my life! Jesus is precious. He is the pearl of great price.” So they do not come kicking and screaming. God woos us according to His own good pleasure and according to our own need and situation in life.

(5) The perseverance of the saints. This involves two ideas. God saves His people and keeps them to the end. Preservation, I call it. Roger Nicole calls it God's perseverance with the saints. He puts up with us. The corollary of that is the perseverance of the saints themselves because God keeps us. That is, true believers do not utterly quit believing in Christ, loving God, or living a basically holy life. Not that they live a perfect life, but a godly life, so that 1 John could say the people of God, those born of God, practice righteousness.

Those are the five points of Calvinism set in comparison to the five points of Arminianism. Let me emphasize one more time that the historical impetus for Arminius' move in the direction of a new theology was reaction to a Calvinism that was very extreme. The teaching of certain professors at the same university where he went to teach, at Leiden in Holland, was a hyper-Calvinism that drove Arminius to the other extreme. To be fair to him, in his own Bible study of Romans 9, in which he spent a great deal of time, he had already reached other conclusions. But the views of his opponents fortified him and pushed him further away. Gomarus was one such teacher. He taught a Calvinism that included his presentation of God's own plan of salvation. According to Gomarus, in the first moment, God decreed to damn the reprobate. He was talking about in the eternal past. In the second moment, God decreed to create the reprobate because He needed to have reprobate to condemn. In the third moment, God decreed to permit the Fall so He could justly damn the reprobate. That obviously had a one-sidedness to it. To Arminius that seemed to deny the Gospel. That seemed to Arminius to be so heavily weighted in the direction of divine sovereignty, even over the fate of the lost, that he just could not go to bed at night. That was the same issue that drove John Wesley. He said he came within a hair's breath of Calvinism. I would say it was a pretty big hair, but I respect him on that and love his preaching of the Gospel, as I said. But he recoiled because he said you cannot have a single election or predestination without a double predestination. That double predestination business was just demonic in Wesley's estimation so he had to redefine even the single election. It was an extreme. It was extreme in the Dutch teaching that did not put side by side God's control of all things and genuine human responsibility. That is what I am going to try to do when I work with Romans 9. I think it is exactly what Paul does in Romans 9 and 10. Those complementary perspectives are very helpful.

Sometimes people wonder if the Arminian position is a throwback to Catholicism in some ways. The Catholic tradition is sufficiently diverse so that Augustine, I mean St. Augustine, since he was sainted by the Roman Catholic Church, certainly qualifies as a good Catholic teacher. Likewise Thomas Aquinas is and they both taught unconditional election. Other strains of Catholic teaching deny that. In fact, in the late middle ages, it was the teaching of William of Ockham and other Catholic teachers that Luther was taught and that caused him to react and reject. Again it was an extreme emphasis upon the freedom of the will which Luther saw as a denial of God's sovereignty. Luther went the other way and taught what we have been calling unconditional election.

Since the Bible teaches predestination and election, let me briefly mention some books, because some of the writers arguing from the Arminian side emphasize that they do believe in predestination. Why do they emphasize that? Because sometimes other Arminians have said they do not believe in it. In our Master of Divinity program, I have future pastors read *Grace Unlimited*, a book edited by Clark Pinnock. There are key chapters such as the one on predestination in the Old Testament by David Kleins, a very capable British Old Testament scholar, and predestination in the New Testament by the world-famous Howard Marshall, a well-known Scottish New Testament scholar. *Grace Unlimited* is the best book I know from the Arminian side. That book was followed up by *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, also edited by Pinnock. *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* contains other essays following up topics that were not presented in the first book. They both present essays that are biblical, theological, historical, and philosophical, handling all kinds of angles. There has been a two-volume response edited

by Bruce Ware and Tom Schreiner, called *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*. If it sounds like they are playing off the other title, they definitely are. That work also has godly and capable writers, this time writing from a Calvinist perspective.