

## Romans 8:28-30 Foreknown & Predestined

### **Prayer for Illumination**

[Psalm 119:33-40] Teach us, O LORD, the way of Your statutes; and we will keep it to the end. Give us understanding, that we may keep Your law and observe it with a whole heart. Lead us in the path of Your commandments, for we delight in it. Incline our hearts to Your testimonies, and not to selfish ambition. Turn our eyes from looking at worthless things; and give us life in Your ways. Confirm to Your servants Your promise, that You may be feared. O Lord, Holy Spirit, we long for your precepts! In Your righteousness give us life. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

### **Please rise for the reading of God's Word: Romans 8:28-30**

While I'm not crazy about the government taking my cheap incandescent light bulbs off of the shelf, I do like my 1600 lumen daylight bulbs that we recently put in one of our rooms. These two bulbs are in one room, but they practically bathe half of the house with light when they're on. What's remarkable is that they barely put off any heat. You can actually change the bulbs while they're burning and not get blisters on your fingers. Less heat; more light. It's nice. Sometimes that's what we need in theological conversations, less heat, more light. But, mention the word "predestination," and suddenly the temperature starts to rise. People on every side of the debate are passionate about this subject, because it entails what we believe about God and about ourselves. What is God like? What can He do? What *does* He do? What is humanity capable of? Is humanity free? Do I have libertarian free will, or is my will bound in some way? Ever since I can remember, I have felt strongly about the doctrine of predestination. In my early years, I was strongly opposed to it. In my

adulthood, the more I studied the Scriptures and wrestled with the biblical truths about God and mankind, I became a strong advocate of it. While I still feel very strongly about the biblical teaching of predestination and election, I hope this morning to expound this text and open up this doctrine in a way that has more light than heat. Now, having said that, I also want to add that I truly believe, and it has been my experience, that this doctrine, as it enlightens the mind, also warms the affections, as it reveals to us the gracious heart of God and comforts us in all of our afflictions.

Here is where it may help us to remember the context for this doctrine as we find it in Scripture and in the WCF? This is not the stuff of ivory tower philosophy. Nor is this the squabbling banter of arm-chair theologians, or, in this day, of blogosphere theologians. This doctrine, while certainly revealed from heaven, was forged for articulation in the heart of Paul through the things He suffered for the name of Christ (Acts 9:16), for life in a fallen world. Just skimming the context of the second half of Romans 8 you pick up on the experience of the Christians in first century Rome. Here is a sampling of what lies behind the Holy Spirit's comfort for Christians in a fallen world through the doctrine of election and predestination. We read that we will be glorified with Christ, "provided we suffer with Him" (v. 17). We read of "the sufferings of this present time" (v. 18). We live in a time, Paul writes, in which "the creation was subjected to futility" (v. 20), is in "bondage to corruption" (v. 21), and "has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (v. 22). Not only the creation, he goes on, but "we ourselves . . . groan inwardly" (v. 23). The evil we experience in this world can be so bewildering that in our weakness "we do not know what to pray for as we ought" (v. 26). Then we hear of our enemies who are "against us" (v. 31); who bring charges against us (v. 33); who would condemn

us (v. 34); who, if they could, would “separate us from the love of Christ” (v. 35). According to verse 35, we might expect tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword. He says that the Old Testament text that may seem most applicable to saintly life in a fallen world is Psalm 44:22, “For Your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered” (v. 36). We read not only of human enemies, but also of spiritual enemies in verses 38-39: death and life, angels and rulers, things present and things to come, powers, heights and depths, at times it can seem that everything in the cosmos conspires against us.

It’s into this grueling context that the Holy Spirit says, “I want you to know, beloved of God, that God has called you according to a purpose, a glorious purpose, and all of these things are working together for your good, just as you have been called, just as God has purposed. Paul writes to the church in the trenches to say to us, don’t be afraid of this fiery trial, and don’t grow weary of living for Christ in this fallen world, but know that **in the Father’s eternal purpose to glorify the Son, He loved us and predestined us to be like His Son.** We are going to unfold this under three divisions: first, we will see that the whole of redemptive history is for the glory of God. If you cannot accept that fact, then you will never warm up to the biblical doctrine of election and predestination. Second, we will see that the Father chose to love us from eternity. That is the meaning of “whom He foreknew.” Third, we will see that the Father ordained our end from the beginning. And so this morning we are going to fly over the history of redemption from eternity past to eternity future to see what comfort we have from God’s eternal plan for life in the here and now. And we’ll do it all in under two hours!

**The whole of redemptive history is for the glory of God (vv. 28-29).** When we say “for the glory of God,” that “for” indicates purpose. Why did God plan redemptive history? What we find here may not be what we expect. Paul speaks of God’s purpose in verse 28, “who are called according to His purpose.” The Greek word translated purpose has a prepositional prefix that means “before” or “beforehand.” So God had planned ahead. He planned ahead for all of creation and history, with special emphasis on redemptive history, the story of God rescuing fallen people from their sins and reconciling His enemies to Himself. Because this plan was made prior to God’s actually making anything, we refer to this as His eternal purpose. In Ephesians 1:4 Paul refers to God’s choice of us being made “before the foundation of the world.” In the Book of Revelation John uses this phrase “before the foundation of the world” of those whose names are or are not recorded in the Lamb’s book of life (13:8; 17:8). So, before God ever spoke anything into existence He laid out a plan for the ages and for each one of our lives, and all for a specific purpose.

Before we look at that specific purpose, let’s consider that everything that happens in this world works together for that purpose. Paul says that “all things work together for the good of those who are called according to His purpose.” Now, we might limit “all things” to those sufferings that Paul mentions in the surrounding context, and that is certainly what Paul and his original readers would have principally in mind. But taking in the whole counsel of God, we see that it includes even more than these immediate circumstances, but in fact all things everywhere at all times. And these things are not just falling out by chance; they are being worked out by God’s providence. Some very early manuscripts actually read “God works all things together for the good,” rather than “all things work together for the good,” showing that this was the

church's understanding from its earliest days of reflecting on this text. So, everything was ordained by God in His eternal decrees, and He is executing this plan in the works of creation and providence. His is superintending all His creatures and all their actions to serve His people and His ultimate purpose.

Now we must ask what that ultimate purpose is. What was God's chief end in creation and history? Well, we see that all things work for our good. So, some have concluded that God's chief end or ultimate purpose is to do us good. Some believe that God exists for their good pleasure, and that the universe was created to revolve around them. A more chastened view notes that we don't define "good" in this verse for ourselves, but we define it according to verse 29, which says, "to be conformed to the image of His Son." So, they would say that God's ultimate purpose is our salvation, and specifically the goal of our salvation which is our glorious conformity to Jesus Christ. Well, that is certainly an improvement on thinking that God exists and the universe exists to serve my every whim. Now, God and the universe serve the noble function of conforming me to Christ. Yet, this is not much of an improvement, since it still has me, a creature, at the center of everything, rather than God. And it stops short of Paul's complete thought. In describing God's purpose, Paul does not stop with saying that all things work together for the good goal of conforming us to the image of His Son. He continues in verse 29, "in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers." By firstborn, Paul does not mean that Jesus was born before all others, or that He was the first of God's creation, like some false teachers have thought. "Firstborn" speaks of Christ's preeminence in the household. We are saved to be brought into God's household. We are made heirs of God and brothers and sisters to one another. But the purpose, the chief end, for all of this, the reason why you and I were saved

and conformed to the image of His Son is “that He might be the firstborn among many brothers,” or as Paul puts it in Colossians 1:18, “that in everything He might be preeminent.” In other words, the Father saved us for the glory of Christ. Now I’m not going to take the time this morning to demonstrate the Trinitarian nature of God’s self-glorification, but I will just state that as the Father saves us for the glory of the Son, the Son lays down His life to save us for the glory of the Father, and the Holy Spirit applies the work of redemption to us for the glory of the Son. The point is that God is God-centered.

We learn early on from the Shorter Catechism that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” What Paul tells us is that “God’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Himself forever.” All of creation and history, all of redemptive history specifically, serves the glory of God. Yes, God has purposed to do us good, even ultimate good of conforming us to Christ, but this is not an end in itself, but is a means to the end of showing the preeminence of God the Son over all.

This can and should promote humility, to know that you are not ultimate. God is God. God is ultimate. His glory is supreme. We need what John Piper once described as a Copernican Revolution in our view of the universe, but not going from a terra-centered universe to a heliocentric universe, but rather going from a man-centered universe to a God-centered universe, going from a me-centered universe to a God-centered universe. There was a little baby girl who got all the attention you would imagine from her parents and grandparents and just about anyone else in her vicinity. She was used to being the center of attention. It seemed like no matter what she did, laugh, smile, wiggle, or cry, baby-girl got applause. One day her parents brought her to a sporting event,

where just as they were entering the stadium the crowd erupted with enthusiasm. Baby-girl of course was used to this response to her presence, so she immediately got that coy smile on her face and threw her arms out as if to embrace all of her adoring fans. It's sweet!—when you're a baby! But as we mature, we're supposed to realize that the universe does not revolve around us. Paul would help us to see that God's eternal purpose, as good as it is for us, is not ultimately about us, but about the glory of God. This can promote humility.

It can also promote gratitude, because it tells you that God has made you significant. You are significant because God has chosen to bless you as a vessel of honor to bring Him glory. What's more important, the hands that go around the face of the clock or the springs and gears that keep the hands moving in time? Each part of God's grand design is specially designed and maintained to accomplish His glorious purpose, which makes each part significant as it shares in that glory by God's grace. Life is not meaningless. Even the things we suffer in this life are not meaningless. The Word says in Ephesians 3:10 that God holds up His people, the Church, in order to display to friend and foe alike the many-splendored, manifold wisdom of God. We exist for His glory, and that is our enjoyment forever. **The whole of redemptive history is for the glory of God.**

Second, **the Father chose to love us from eternity (v. 29a).** Much debate continues to swirl around this word "foreknow." Whole denominations have formed around particular understandings of this word. Based on biblical background and usage, and not on the discourses of philosophers, I am convinced that "foreknow" in this context signifies to choose to love unconditionally from eternity. Before making the case for this understanding, I want to mention two errors in relation to

this word, two faulty interpretations. I do not call these “heresies,” in the sense that a person who believes these faulty views cannot be a Christian, or that a person who teaches this view is leading people away from Christ. There are sincere Christians who are orthodox in their understanding of God who hold to these errors regarding the use of “foreknow” in biblical theology. While these views are not heresy, I do believe that they are wrong and are unhealthy. I do not believe these errors honor God or promote Christ-like attitudes and living.

The first of these errors is known in theology as conditional election. The idea is that God’s choice in the past is based on man’s choice in the future. Or, God’s election is based on man meeting some condition. According to advocates of conditional election, foreknowledge means mere prescience, or seeing something before it actually happens. In this case, foreknowing is simply fact-gathering or observation. God does not choose according to His mere good pleasure as Paul says he does in Ephesians 1:5, but based upon man’s choice in the future. So God’s eternal plan for you is written only after He sees how your life unfolds without His interference. In answer to Arminianism, which teaches conditional election, the WCF III.II says, *Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.* And WCF III.V says, *Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or*

*causes moving Him thereunto; and all to the praise of His glorious grace.* So much for conditional election.

The second error is known as corporate election. In this view, God has impersonal knowledge of a corporate body in Christ, but not of individuals within that body. God says, "This ship is going to heaven." Anyone on that ship goes to heaven. Anyone not on the ship does not go to heaven. God chose the ship, now it is up to you to choose which ship you will board. This view correctly understands "foreknow" as "chose to love from eternity." But it fails because it has God choosing the way of salvation, but not those who will be saved. But Paul says, "He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). He says, "Those whom He foreknew" (Rom. 8:29). He says, "He predestined us for adoption" (Eph. 1:5). Foreknowledge is not impersonal knowledge. I know that I used the analogy of a watch and its gears earlier, but you must know that God does not look upon you as a cog in a machine. He knows you as a person. And He chose you to be His person. So much for corporate election.

So, now to the question of why interpret "foreknow" as "chose to love individuals from eternity"? My understanding of this word "foreknow" and the word "chose" used in other places is known in theology as unconditional election. This means that God's choice is not conditioned by anything in you or me, but is grounded in His own being, grounded in His grace. He finds nothing attractive in me that warrants His choice of me, but as Paul says in Ephesians 1 over and over again, it is "according to the purpose of His will," "according to the riches of His grace," "according to His purpose," "according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will." And it is all "to the praise of His glory," or, "of His glorious grace." Unconditional election.

We begin with the Old Testament background of knowledge as positive and personal. When God says that He *knows* the way of the righteous, but that the way of the wicked will perish in Psalm 1:6, it is clear that knowledge is more than just cognition of facts, but a positive acknowledgement of the lives of His people. When God says to Israel in Amos 3:2 “You only have I known of all the families of the earth,” God is not saying that He is ignorant of what is going on in Egypt or Assyria. Of course, God has the facts on everyone. So what does He mean when He says He has only known Israel? He is speaking of a deeply personal and positive acknowledgement that is akin to love. When God says of Abraham in Genesis 18:19, “For I have known him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD,” we do not suppose that Abraham’s family was set apart simply because God had the Abraham trading card with all the stats on Abraham’s career. When God reassures Jeremiah, the prophet, that before God formed him in his mother’s womb God knew him, this is not merely a statement of God’s omniscience, that he knows everything about Jeremiah, but it is a statement about God’s gracious choice of Jeremiah and about God’s sovereign purpose for his life (Jer. 1:5). When I was a young fellow, before anyone had explained the birds and bees to me, I read in Genesis 4:1 that “Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived and bore a son,” and I thought, “Boy! You really do have to be careful who you know.” Obviously, Adam had done more than read Eve’s Christian Mingle profile for him to “know” her to that effect. The Old Testament background for Paul’s use of the word “foreknow” suggests that what Paul intends is a positive acknowledgment or love that implies choice. God loved and chose Abraham. He loved and chose Israel. God loved and chose Jeremiah. And here Paul says that God loved and chose you before the foundation of the world.

We begin with the concept of “knowing” in the Old Testament, and then we see an incontrovertible example of this usage in Romans 11:2, where Paul says, “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew,” speaking of the elect Israelites.

Grammatically speaking, we must note that Paul does not say “based upon what He did foreknow” or “those whom He foreknew about.” Instead he uses the simple, personal object “whom,” “whom He did foreknow. God’s predestination for salvation was not based on foreseen faith or perseverance, but on an eternal love that includes choice.

Furthermore, we note the unbroken chain from foreknow to glorified: “those whom He foreknew He also predestined . . . those whom He predestined He also called, . . . and justified . . . and glorified.” Everyone God has foreknown in this way is ultimately glorified. Since God knows the facts on everyone and everything, it is plain that this “foreknowledge” is a special kind of knowledge that insures God’s saving grace will be worked out in that person’s life to the very end.

The reason we speak of God’s electing love as being eternal is because of the three pros—protithemi (purpose), proginōskō (foreknow), proorizō (predestine). The purposing, knowing, and destining, were all done before everything got started. The pre-creation context for election, and the unconditional nature of election, is made more explicit in Ephesians 1:4-5, where Paul wrote, “even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will.”

What we find in the God-breathed writings of Paul, we also see in Jesus' teaching. In John 6:37-39 Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me, but raise it up on the last day." The Father has a chosen people whom He gives to the Son. Jesus assures us that "all" of those will come to Him, and that He will lose nothing of "all" that the Father gives Him. I ask you, has Jesus failed to do the Father's will? Is it possible for Jesus to fail to do the Father's will? So if someone is not found safely in Christ's fold in the end, we must conclude that this person was not given to the Son by the Father from the beginning. The alternative is that the Father gave Jesus every single human being for safe-keeping, but Jesus failed to keep a significant portion. Of course, we know that this is not a viable alternative because Jesus says to His detractors in John 10:26, "You do not believe because you are not part of My flock." Now, we often hear this idea twisted to say, "You are not part of My flock because you do not believe." If Arminians do not rewrite the text to say that, it seems that is at least what they hear when they read it. But that is not what Jesus says. In answer to the question, "Why don't they believe?" Jesus says, "You do not believe, because you are not of My flock."

I will not take the time to expound on the theological dilemma of making God's eternal purpose contingent on the whim of fallen humanity (Isa. 46:8-11). But I encourage you to explore this doctrine and its implications for our understanding of the nature of God.

I do want to make the application that God's love for you is eternal, and, therefore unchanging (Rom. 8:33). Deacon Sim-

mons made a good point on this the other day. He observed that our election is “in Christ.” God set His electing love on us in union with His Son. So, for Him to stop loving us would be tantamount to Him not loving His only begotten Son, which is impossible. God loved you with full knowledge of every careless word you’ve spoken and every thoughtless deed you have done. He had seen the darkest thoughts of your imagination, that you hope no one ever gets a glimpse of. Yet He loved you and chose you. That deep, deep love that we see on display at the cross was in the heart of God from eternity. That is why Revelation not only speaks of our names being written in the Lamb’s book of life before the foundation of the world, but John also says that the Lamb was Himself slain before the foundation of the world. The Covenant of Redemption was established and the death of Christ pre-determined. That is how God loved you when the Scripture says, “those whom He foreknew.” So sing with the hymn writer: *When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look and see Him there, who made an end of all my sin.* When you fear that God must stop loving you, look to Christ and hear these words, nothing “in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39). The whole of Redemptive History is for the glory of God. So, for His glory, the Father chose to love us from eternity.

**Third, the Father ordained our end from the beginning (v. 29b).** The concept of predestination takes us from the beginning of our salvation to the very end, from start to finish, from before creation to the fullness of the new creation. The pre in “predestined” points to the past. But “destined” speaks of our future. God has predestined or foreordained our end. He has determined our full salvation beforehand. Having loved us and chosen us before the foundation of the world, He said,

“this is what I will make of them. I will conform them to the image of My Son.”

The Bible speaks in many ways of our salvation. It tells us what we are saved from and what we are saved unto and what we are saved for. We are saved from the penalty, power, and ultimately the very presence of sin. We are saved from death and hell and the condemnation of the law. We are saved from our rebellion against God and the tyranny of Satan. We are saved from the sinking ship of a world system that is passing away. In verse 29 the Holy Spirit’s focuses our attention on what we are saved unto. We are saved, not to return to the innocence of Adam in the Garden of Eden, as much as that would improve on our present circumstances, but we are saved to be conformed to the image of God’s Son, the last Adam, Jesus Christ. Look at the humanity of Jesus, beloved, in its perfection in union and communion with the divine nature, and behold your God-ordained destination.

We are predestined to the immortal, indestructible life of the resurrected Christ, who overcame death and corruption, rising from the grave on the third day. We are predestined to love God with all of the filial affection witnessed in the perfect, loving, faithful obedience of Jesus when He went to the cross praying, “Not My will, but Yours be done.” We are predestined to love one another with the compassion of Christ, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. We are predestined to have such purity of heart that we will see God. Beloved, we do not yet know what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is! (1 John 3:2).

As we remember what we are saved from and what we are saved unto, let us not forget what we are saved for—“that He

might be the firstborn among many brothers.” We are predestined for the eternal praise of Jesus Christ. We are predestined to proclaim His preeminence.

The Father’s sovereign decree to conform you to His Son is good to bear in mind as we plod along our pilgrim way. Sometimes the way is difficult and slow. We may even discern at times that we have made no progress or that we have even regressed a bit. Rather than growing discouraged with our lack of progress, which can lead us to greater lethargy, let us take encouragement from the knowledge that while our progress may be slow, God’s purpose guarantees our perfection. The light at the end of the tunnel is not an oncoming locomotive. It is the glory of the Risen Son. You are predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.

One area of the Christian life in which I have been especially helped by the doctrine of predestination is evangelism. I have read evangelism text books that actually puts lost people on a spectrum of “savability.” What I mean is that people are rated by their likelihood to respond positively to the gospel. The analysis of where someone is on the scale is of course based on externals, which we are to use to evaluate what is going on in their hearts. So we can judge whether or not someone is ready to hear the gospel based on the party they belong to, the clothes they wear, the people they hang out with, where they go on Friday nights, and so forth. Of course, you would never espouse such a despicable philosophy of evangelism. But do you do this? Even if you disagree with this philosophy of measuring a person up for gospel readiness, do you look at certain people and decide they are not worth the time? Predestination is a great antidote for that kind of fallacy. We can evangelize indiscriminately, confidently, and with integrity because God’s purpose is not contingent on “where a person is in his/her life.” Because salvation is all of God’s grace, and not

dependent on a person “being ready,” we can be indiscriminate, or promiscuous in sowing the gospel seed, as the Puritans liked to say. Because God’s purpose will not fail, we can proclaim the gospel confidently, knowing that this is the means that God has ordained to bring His elect children home. Because it is by God’s power and decree, we don’t need to rely on salesmanship or gimmicks, but we can proclaim the undiluted gospel with integrity, knowing that God will get His man, whether or not modern people believe in the supernatural.

There is great security when you look back to God’s eternal choice to love you. There is great expectation when you look ahead to God’s determination to glorify you with Christ. Now, you may be wondering, “But how do I know if God has chosen and predestined me?” Well I’m glad you asked. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Church of the Thessalonians and said, “For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:4-5). Are you fully convinced of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are you trusting in Him for your salvation? Do you believe that He died as the sacrifice for your sins? Do you believe that He rose again for your justification? Have you turned from your idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven? Paul will say in chapter 10: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” God’s choice of you does not depend on your choice of Him. But if He has chosen you, then you will choose Him, you will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved. For in **the Father’s eternal purpose to glorify the Son, He loved us and predestined us to be like His Son.**

**Let us pray:**

O Sovereign Lord, You are merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. You have mercy on whom You will have mercy; and You have compassion on whom You will have compassion; and Your purpose will stand. May we be humbled by Your sovereign grace, assured by Your electing love, and stirred up with hope by Your immutable promise to conform us to the image of Your Son—all to the praise of His name and the glory of Your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.