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WHY ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD FOR US

Romans 8:29

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Romans Lesson 52

Why All Things Work Together for Good for Us Romans 8:29

Last week I had an email from some guy in Nigeria who wanted to give me \$14 million. All I had to do was send him my bank account numbers and he would deposit the money. If I had counted on that promise as true and reorganized my life around the hope that I would receive that money, you'd rightly question my sanity. If we're going to bank our lives on such promises, we'd better make sure that they're true.

So how can you know that Paul's promise in Romans 8:28, that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose," is true? That verse explains why as believers we can endure present sufferings with hope in the future glory that is to be revealed to us (8:18), namely, because we *know* that God will work it all together for our ultimate, eternal good.

But, what if that promise is about as likely as the one from the guy in Nigeria to give me \$14 million? You can only bank your life on Romans 8:28 if you know for certain that it's true. So in 8:29-30 Paul explains why ("For") you can know that verse 28 is true:

We know that God works all things together for good for us
because our salvation is part of His eternal purpose
to glorify His Son.

Verse 29 specifies what "good" in 8:28 means. The "good" that God is working toward through all our trials is that we be conformed to the image of His Son. But the ultimate reason that God is working all things together to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ is *not* about us. It may shock you to hear this, but God didn't save you to make much about you. Rather, He saved you so that Christ would be the firstborn among many brethren. God saved you so that you will make much about His Son. Our salvation is all about the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

And since our salvation is bound up with God's eternal purpose to make much of Jesus Christ, it's secure. If His purpose to

glorify Christ could fail, then our salvation could fail. But if His purpose to make Jesus the firstborn among many brethren is sure, then our salvation is sure. And that means that you can build your life on the promise of Romans 8:28, that God is working all the trials in your life, great or small, together for your ultimate good.

Verses 29 & 30, plus 8:33 and much of chapter 9, plunge us into some deep doctrines that have caused a lot of confusion and controversy: foreknowledge, predestination, effectual calling, and election. It's important to approach these truths by remembering that Paul didn't write Romans as a textbook for theologians to write difficult treatises about and seminary students to debate.

Rather, his aim was pastoral and practical. Romans was aimed at common people in the church of Rome, some of whom were uneducated slaves. Paul wanted to give these saints the understanding of God and His salvation that they would need to be comforted and filled with hope in the midst of some very difficult trials. Some of them would face severe persecution and even martyrdom. How could they not only endure, but "overwhelmingly conquer" (8:37) through such things? How could they trust God and believe in His love when terrible trials happened to them? Paul wanted them (and us) to know that we can bank our lives on the fact that God is working all of these things together for good for us because our salvation is part of His eternal purpose to exalt His Son. Since He will not fail to accomplish that purpose, our salvation is secure.

1. God's eternal purpose is not ultimately about us, but about the preeminence of Jesus Christ.

How shocking is this? I thought that God loves me and has a wonderful plan for my life. He does, but that's not the main reason that He sent His Son to die on the cross. But, doesn't God want me to be happy? Yes, but my happiness isn't the final goal. God sent His Son to save us and to make us happy in Him so that our lives will glorify Him, not only in this life, but through all eternity. As John Piper often says, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."

Here Paul says that our salvation, which results in our being conformed to the image of His Son, is "so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren." This does not mean that Jesus as

God's Son had a beginning or that there was a time when He was not. The main idea of "the firstborn" in that culture was that he had supremacy or preeminence over his brothers. The firstborn son inherited special rights and privileges.

In Colossians 1:15, Paul calls Jesus "the firstborn of all creation." This does not mean that Jesus was created first (as the Jehovah's Witnesses claim) because He existed before creation and He created all things, as Paul specifically explains in the next verse (Col. 1:16; see, also, John 1:3; Heb. 1:2). And in Colossians 1:17, Paul says that Christ "is before all things," where the meaning is that He pre-existed all things. By "the firstborn of all creation," Paul means that Jesus Christ has supremacy over all creation as its rightful Lord because He made it.

Paul goes on to say (Col. 1:18), "He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He himself will come to have first place in everything." Jesus is the sovereign over the church, which has its origin in Him. His resurrection was the first of its kind. Others, like Lazarus, were raised from the dead, but they died again. But Jesus' resurrection was the first in which the resurrected person received a new, indestructible body, which is a prototype of the bodies that we will receive. When we receive those new bodies, we will forever be singing the praises of Jesus, who died for us, whom God highly exalted (Phil. 2:9-11). God's purpose, which He *will* achieve, is that Jesus will be the firstborn, supreme over all.

But Paul adds that Jesus will be the firstborn "among many brethren." Charles Spurgeon (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 18:189-191) waxes eloquent on this for three pages of fine print in a way that I cannot, but let me summarize his insights. He says (18:189), "First, God predestinates us to be like Jesus that his dear Son might be the first of a new order of beings, elevated above all other creatures, and nearer to God than any other existences." He goes on to explain that we will be closer to God than the angels are, because we are His sons and daughters.

Second (18:190), Spurgeon says, "The object of grace is that there may be some in heaven with whom Christ can hold brotherly converse." The Lord saved us so that we can have fellowship with Him, not only for time, but also for all eternity. Spurgeon adds

(18:191), "What bliss to know that he who is 'very God of very God,' and sits on the eternal throne, is also of the same nature with ourselves, our kinsman, who is not ashamed even amidst the royalties of glory to call us brethren."

Third, Spurgeon explains (18:191), "God was so well pleased with His Son, and saw such beauties in him, that he determined to multiply his image." We will be conformed to the image of His Son. This implies that Jesus, the second Adam, succeeded where the first Adam failed (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 454). God created man to bear His image, but that image was defaced when Adam sinned. But throughout eternity, the perfect image of God will be restored and reflected in us who are in Christ, whom God predestined "to adoption as sons," "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:5, 6). So the important (and very practical) point to see is that God's eternal purpose is not ultimately about us, but rather about the preeminence of Jesus Christ.

2. God's eternal purpose to glorify Jesus Christ includes our salvation.

We must see our salvation in the context of God's greater purpose to glorify His Son, a purpose that can't fail because God is the author of it. God is the active subject in all of the verbs in Romans 8:29-30: He foreknew; He predestined; He called; He justified; and, He glorified. Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 332) observes, "Paul is saying that God is the author of our salvation, and that from beginning to end. We are not to think that God can take action only when we graciously give him permission. Paul is saying that God initiates the whole process." In other words, God wouldn't leave His eternal purpose to glorify His Son in the hands of fickle sinners. Rather, He takes the initiative and insures that the complete process cannot fail.

There are five links in what has been called "the golden chain of redemption": foreknew; predestined; called; justified; and, glorified. But we can only look at the first two (in 8:29) today.

A. Our salvation began when God foreknew us.

This is the key term to understand, since it begins the entire process. But, unfortunately, there has been a lot of misunderstanding and controversy over the meaning of the word.

Some say that it means that God knows everything in advance (which is true) and thus God foreknew who would believe in Jesus and He predestined these to salvation. Some who hold this view say that God predestined individuals based on foreseeing their faith, while others say that it's a group thing. God predestined the church as a group to salvation, but it's up to the free will of individuals to join that group. But in either case, the process is triggered not by God's sovereign choice, but rather by God's knowledge of the choices that people would make by their own free will. Thus the initiative in salvation rests with man, not with God, except that God sent Jesus to make salvation available to all.

But there are huge problems with this interpretation. First, the theology behind that view is at odds with all of Scripture, including the context here. It would mean that God made up His eternal purpose based on what sinners would choose to do, rather than on what God would do. Thus it makes man sovereign, not God. Salvation would not be according to God's call according to His purpose (8:28), but rather according to man's will.

But God didn't look down through history and see that Paul would choose to believe in Him, and say, "Whew! I'm so glad that Paul chose Me, because he will make a good apostle. Because he chose Me, I'll make him one of the elect." Read the story of Paul's conversion and see if that interpretation fits! It is clear that God chose to save Paul because God had a sovereign purpose for Paul's life (Gal. 1:15). If foreknowledge only means that God knew in advance who would believe, and thus He elected them, then He did not purpose to save a people for His glory. He just saw how the parade would go and jumped to the front of the parade. But the Bible is clear that God determined the parade route. As Everett Harrison puts it (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelien [Zondervan], 10:98), "We are called according to purpose, not according to foreknowledge, hence foreknowledge is included in the electing purpose."

Also, the view that "foreknowledge" simply means that God knew in advance who would choose Him goes against what Paul said in Romans 3:10-18, that no one seeks for God. "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8), which includes

faith in Christ (Heb. 11:6). So if it were a matter of God foreseeing what men would do, He would see that none would believe.

The Bible repeatedly shows that all of salvation, including the spiritual understanding, repentance, and faith that accompany salvation, is God's gift (Phil. 1:29; Eph. 2:8-9; Acts 11:18; 16:14; 2 Cor. 4:4-6; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Tim. 2:25, etc.). Grace is *unmerited* favor; if it were conditioned on our faith, it would be based on some good in us. If we could take credit for our spiritual insight or repentance or faith, we would have reason to boast over those who are not saved. So to say that "foreknow" means that God foresaw who, of their own free will, would choose to believe in Jesus, goes against the entire biblical theology of salvation.

A second reason to reject that interpretation is the biblical usage of this word. Granted, there are two times when men are the subject that the verb means "to know in advance" (Acts 26:5; 2 Pet. 3:17). But when God is the subject, to foreknow means to choose or determine before, often with the sense of, "enter into a relationship with before" (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 532). It means that before time began, God chose to set His love on some, whom He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. He isn't said here to foreknow what people will do, but rather to foreknow the people themselves.

In Romans 11:2, with reference to the Jews, Paul says, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew." In Amos 3:2 (ESV) God says to Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." God obviously knows everyone, but He chose to set His love on Israel. In Jeremiah 1:5, the Lord tells the prophet, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations." There are many other references where the word "know" means to choose, especially with a view to entering into a relationship with the person (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 7:6-8; Ps. 1:6; Jer. 1:5; Hos. 13:5; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9). God knows in advance everyone who has ever lived; but some He chooses to foreknow in love. That is the meaning in Romans 8:29.

When God is the subject, foreknowledge has the implication of foreordaining or choosing. Geoffrey Bromiley explains (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Baker], p. 420), "What [God] knows, he

does not know merely as information. He is no mere spectator. What he foreknows he ordains. He wills it." In this sense, Peter (1 Pet. 1:20) says of Christ, "For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world...." In Acts 2:23, Peter says of Jesus, "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." He doesn't mean that God just knew in advance that Jesus, of His own free will, would offer Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. Rather, God chose and ordained Jesus for that role before the foundation of the world.

The same is true of biblical prophecy: God doesn't just foreknow how history will happen to turn out and then report it to us. Rather, He *ordains* how history will turn out. If God only knows in advance how things will turn out, but He didn't ordain it, then He would not be sovereign.

I thought it necessary to take so long on this because it is so often explained as if God just knew who would choose to believe in Christ and elected them to salvation based on their choice. But it is inconceivable that God would leave His eternal purpose of glorifying His Son through saving a people who would be conformed to His image up to the fickle choices of sinful people!

- B. Our salvation stems from the fact that God predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son.

Those who argue that "foreknowledge" does not mean to foreordain contend that if it did, the word "predestinate" would then be unnecessary. But as we've seen, Peter uses the two words together (Acts 2:23) and there is a nuance of difference. To foreknow connotes God choosing to set His love on certain individuals, while to predestine indicates the aim of God's distinguishing love. It means that God determined in advance to save these people and conform them to the image of His Son, so that He would have supremacy over many brethren.

Many stumble over the doctrine of predestination, but at its heart, it is really a matter of letting God be God. Ichabod Spencer (*A Pastor's Sketches* [Solid Ground Christian Books], 1:244), a 19th century pastor in Brooklyn, recorded a lengthy conversation that he had with a young man who had not yet believed in Christ, but was

hung up over predestination. Spencer told him, "When you are entirely willing that God should be God, election will trouble you no longer."

He goes on to explain to this young man that if God had not planned what He would do before He acted, He would be most unwise. If He created the universe with no plan or purpose, or ruled it haphazardly, according to whim, He would not be the all-wise God. Thus, Spencer says (p. 245), "Predestination is God's eternal purpose to rule his universe *just as he does rule it.*" God's decrees are "his wise, holy, and eternal purposes, wherein he has determined beforehand what he will do, and how he will do it" (p. 246). He points out to the young man that God didn't ask his advice before He made these plans. And so, he says, "*Just consent to let God be God.*"

Spencer (pp. 236-238) points out three reasons that the Bible emphasizes the doctrine of predestination. First, it teaches us "the character of God—His grandeur, wisdom, and incomprehensibility." It should cause us to bow in wonder and praise before Him. As Paul says in Ephesians 1:5-6, the fact that He predestined us to adoption as sons is "to the praise of the glory of His grace."

Second, predestination represses "the audacity of the wicked." It shows them that in spite of their evil schemes, they cannot thwart God's eternal purposes. They can kill His Son, but they are only doing what His hand and His "purpose predestined to occur" (Acts 4:27-28).

Third, the main purpose of this doctrine is "to comfort God's people." In all our weaknesses and sins, we might despair of our salvation. How will we ever be conformed to the image of God's holy Son? Answer: God *predestined* us to be conformed to the image of His Son, so it *will* happen! If we know that God began the good work of salvation within us, by giving us eternal life, then we know that He will perfect His work (Phil. 1:6). Through Jesus the Father will bring many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10-11). Properly understood, predestination will not lead us to kick back and think, "My sins don't matter because God will eventually conform me to Christ." Rather, it will motivate us to fight against our sins and to perfect holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1).

Being conformed to the image of Christ means primarily to be progressively molded into the character of Christ in your heart. Of course, this inner transformation is seen in our outward behavior. But it begins in the heart (Matt. 6:1-18; Mark 7:21-23). We will not be perfectly conformed to the image of Christ until we see Him (1 John 3:2), but if we have experienced God's saving grace, we should be growing in purity and obedience (1 John 3:3-10). The fruit of the Spirit should be increasingly evident in us.

Conclusion

The truth that God set His love on us and predestined us to become conformed to the image of His Son means that our salvation does not rest on our performance. Rather, God called us and saved us in connection with His eternal purpose to glorify Christ. Thus our salvation is secure. Nothing can separate us from God's great love (Rom. 8:38-39). No one can snatch us from the Father's strong hand (John 10:29).

It also means that the promise of Romans 8:28, that God causes all things to work together for our good, is solid. It's not like the promise of the guy in Nigeria to send you \$14 million. You can bank your life on God's promise according to His purpose. Whether it's the minor frustrations and problems of daily life or the major catastrophes, we can trust that God will use them in the process of conforming us to the image of Christ. That is your destiny as one who is called according to His purpose!

Application Questions

1. Why is it crucial to understand that salvation is not primarily about us? What errors stem from the view that it is mainly about us?
2. How does the view that God predestined us on the basis of foreseen faith undermine His grace? What are the practical results of this error?
3. Does the doctrine of predestination mean that people do not have a choice to believe in Christ or not? Are we just pre-programmed robots? Why/why not?
4. Discuss: When you are willing to let God be God, election will no longer trouble you.

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