

At bottom, *Paul viewed the believer's salvation as the outworking of divine purpose*. For this reason, it is not limited to time and space, but has eternal significance; it spans the distance between eternity past and eternity future. And if this is so, it clearly comprehends all of the believer's experience in this world; the purpose and work of the triune God in salvation extends to every aspect of sanctification as well as justification. God has called men "according to purpose," and that purpose has a predetermined goal. Will not the Father, then, oversee everything that exists and transpires between the saints' calling and their realization of His goal for them? Paul provides the answer in 8:29-30.

The salvation of men is according to divine purpose, and in these verses Paul unfolded the movement and fulfillment of God's purpose in five distinct aspects or steps: *foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification*. These steps are sequential, with each being connected to those on either side of it like links in a chain. This connection takes the form of a linear arrangement in which each aspect presupposes the preceding one and finds its own immediate goal in the one that follows after it. Moreover, four grammatically similar sentences are used to connect the five, so that together the whole structure forms an unbroken sequence connecting divine purpose with divine accomplishment.

In a uniquely succinct way, these two verses provide rich and broad theological content pertaining to the doctrine of salvation. At the same time, they were not intended to exhaust the subject. Paul's statements have a *context* – they serve a specific purpose within the flow of his argument in the epistle. *His intention was not to articulate a systematic theology, but to join together in summary fashion the "bookends" of divine purpose and fulfillment*. Failure to recognize this has led many to misuse these verses, if not miss Paul's point altogether.

- 6) The first sentence comprises the entirety of verse 29, and it links together the first two aspects of *foreknowledge* and *predestination*. It is the most extensive of the four statements, as it contains two subordinate modifying clauses. The other three are grammatically identical to one another, being constructed with a main clause modified by a subordinate relative clause.

There are two obvious reasons for the complexity of the first sentence:

- The first is that it serves as the *foundation* upon which the other three sentences build. This is true not simply because of the sequential nature of the five aspects, but also because the first statement supplies the foundational content necessary to properly understand what follows.
- The second reason is that it provides a *summary* for the whole sequence. Already in his opening statement Paul disclosed the end point to which the "links" in his "chain" were progressing. That is to say, the saints' glorification is their conformity to the Son.

Paul's movement through the sequence begins where verse 28 left off, namely with the eternal purpose of God. God's calling of men is according to His eternal plan, and Paul located the origination of that plan in God's *foreknowledge*. This is the first of the five links in his "chain of redemption," each of which must be biblically defined if Paul's argument is to be rightly understood.

As a first observation, it must be recognized that theological and/or philosophical presuppositions tend to drive the way foreknowledge is defined. This is particularly true where there are differing views of divine sovereignty and its operation in relation to human freedom. In this context Paul employed the verbal form of the term, and, apart from any clarifying context, it simply means *to know something prior to present time, or prior to its coming to pass*. For this reason it is just as appropriately used of men as it is of God (cf. Acts 26:5; 2 Peter 3:17). However, this is not to say that God's and men's foreknowledge must be understood in exactly the same way. But it is to say that the *Scripture in its totality* must determine the nature and extent of the difference, rather than presuppositions derived from theological or philosophical systems of thought.

Given the larger context, many have associated this foreknowledge with God's advance knowledge of men's faith. In other words, He knows in advance those who will seek their righteousness in Christ and enter into the adoption of sons. While such advance knowledge is certainly true of God, and falls within the biblical range of meaning for this term, foreknowledge *in relation to God* has a different meaning in the Bible.

- In the New Testament, God's foreknowledge of people is not so much concerned with knowledge as with *relationship*. It indicates knowledge associated with intimacy, and yet an intimacy that is *beforehand*. Foreknowledge refers to a relationship that has its basis in divine purpose and determination. Thus, when the New Testament refers to God "foreknowing" someone, it is speaking of His determination to establish some sort of purposeful relationship with that person. In this way foreknowledge implies divine *choice*. Most importantly, every such relationship presupposes, is in accord with, and serves to advance God's overarching *redemptive* purpose (ref. 11: 1-6; 1 Peter 1:17-21).
- Though the term "foreknowledge" is not used in the Old Testament, the concept is certainly present. It is expressed primarily under the terminology of *knowing* (cf. Jeremiah 1:5; Amos 3:2; etc.). Here as well the concept of relationship is in the forefront (Psalm 144:3; Hosea 13:5 (KJV)). The Old Testament also clearly expresses the idea that God's knowledge of people is a matter of divine volition and initiative.

When the full biblical context is considered, *God's foreknowledge of men is seen to refer to His loving determination to bring them into covenant relationship with Himself*. Thus the Old Testament scriptures indicate that God “knew” the nation of Israel as His “chosen covenant son” in accordance with His promise to Abraham (cf. Exodus 3:1-10, 4:22-23 and 6:1-8 with Deuteronomy 7:6-8). But inasmuch as Israel was to find its own fulfillment in Abraham’s spiritual descendents who are joined to his singular Seed (Galatians 3:1-29), so every Christian – every true son of Abraham – is preeminently “foreknown” by God.

This conclusion is also supported by the immediate context in Romans. For Paul did not state that God foreknew people’s *faith* (or anything else about them), but that He foreknew *them*. Even more, if all Paul meant by foreknowledge is God’s knowledge of all things before they happen, then his comment that God’s “foreknows” Christians serves no real purpose. For, not only does it merely state the obvious, but the same thing can be said of everything and everyone. In that case, attributing God’s foreknowledge to believers has no special significance whatsoever.

- 7) Paul’s statement becomes pertinent and consistent with the larger context only when foreknowledge is understood in terms of divine determination with regard to covenant relationship. Only then is God’s foreknowledge limited to *believers*, which is exactly what Paul intended to communicate: all those whom God foreknew “*He predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.*”

Divine foreknowledge has an immediate outcome, and that outcome is *predestination*. By this it is evident that Paul had more in mind with the idea of foreknowledge than simply God’s knowledge of everything in advance (God’s *prescience*). For this particular knowledge finds its goal in the conformity of human beings to the image of Christ; it has its goal in a new humanity restored to its intended communion with God.

- God’s predestining activity is the focal point of verse 29, and Paul mentions foreknowledge simply to provide a backdrop for it. Foreknowledge makes predestination coherent, which is to say, foreknowledge provides the *why* behind the *what*.

Predestination addresses what God does; it refers to His activity in marking out ahead of time a determined outcome or destiny. On the other hand, foreknowledge addresses what God desires. In context, Paul has expressed that God predestines men “according to purpose” – that purpose being His eternal determination to enter into covenant relationship with them. And this being God’s intention, He preordains them for that outcome. Thus His foreknowledge expresses itself in His act of predestination.

As a sidelight, it needs to be reiterated that Paul was confining his discussion entirely to believers. He was not in any way applying the concepts of foreknowledge and predestination to those who perish in unbelief, let alone to the totality of the created order. This ought to be obvious simply from the contextual meaning of foreknowledge as God's determination to join Himself to men in intimate covenant union. Paul was not concerned here with God's prescience as such, nor was he addressing the matter of His predestining activity with respect to those who die as unbelievers. Whatever may be true about these realities, they cannot be directly addressed from this particular context.

Foreknowledge expresses itself in the act of predestination, with predestination being God's activity in preordaining His people to realize the outcome He has purposed for them. And that purpose is their *full conformity to His Son* (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). But Paul went still further, declaring to the Romans that this conformity has its own ultimate goal, namely the saints becoming *brethren of Christ*. These are profound truths that implicate all of the core facets of Paul's gospel. First of all, they point to Christ's role as the *last Adam* (5:12-21). They implicate His Incarnation as serving God's intention to inaugurate a new humanity through Him.

They secondly implicate Jesus' role as the *first-born*. Here the term does not mean the first to be born, but the first in priority or preeminence; the *leader, source, or head*. It implies that Christ is the first in a line of successors connected to Him. He is "first-born" in two related ways. He is the first-born as the head of a new humanity, and He is the first-born from the dead. By His incarnation the Son introduced to the created order a new kind of human being – a new Adam, and by His atoning death and resurrection He has secured men's share in His perfect humanity. His humanity is theirs because they participate in His death and resurrection (6:1-11; cf. also 1 Corinthians 15:12-58).

Finally they speak to Jesus' role as *brother*. God has predestined men to be conformed to the likeness of His Son in order that they should become His brethren. *And if they are Christ's brethren, then they are equally sons of the same Father* (8:14-17; cf. also Matthew 6:1-18; John 14:20-23, 20:17; Hebrews 2:5-18). The Father's purpose is that He would become the Father of men as He is the Father of the first-born Man. His eternal desire is that His house should be filled with beloved and loving children who share His own image and likeness.

Christ the first-born Son is the first in a line of brethren who share His filial relation with His Father. But they do so by sharing *in Him* – by sharing in His death and life, and so also in the righteousness and glory of His perfect humanity. They are *sons in the Son*, and thus co-heirs with Him. In every respect, "in Christ" is the sum and substance of the gospel.

- 8) God's eternal purpose was to become the Father of a countless multitude of sons (*foreknowledge*), and He accordingly set them apart and appointed them to realize that outcome (*predestination*). His appointment was made before time began, but, since it pertains to people, it must be realized in the context of their own personal existence. Thus Paul continued: "...and whom He predestined, these He also called" (8:30a).

In their own experience, God's fulfillment of His purpose begins with the saints' calling. Again, this opening statement of verse 30 is the first of three grammatically identical sentences that continue and close out Paul's "chain" in 8:29-30. This chaining effect is accomplished in two ways:

- First of all, it is accomplished through the use of *repetition*. Paul began each of the three sentences with the verbal idea contained in the preceding main clause. In this way each verb points to a successive one until the endpoint of the chain is reached.
- But the most important factor in the chain is the *objects* of the verbs. It is their objects rather than the logical relation between them that effectively conjoins the verbs. Although it is true that the movement from foreknowledge to glorification follows a logical progression, Paul was connecting them by the fact that they share the same objects. In other words, the individuals who are the objects of God's foreknowledge are also the objects of His predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. The exact same persons are the referents throughout, as Paul's use of the demonstrative pronoun *these* makes clear.

Paul previously insisted that believers are called "according to purpose," and here he clarified his meaning: God's calling goes out to those who are the objects of His foreknowledge and predestination. Thus the "calling" of verse 28 is the same one spoken of in verse 30a. The Father's eternal purpose lies behind His effectual call to His own (8:28), and that purpose begins with His foreknowledge and predestination (8:29-30).

- 9) The children's realization of God's purpose for them begins with their calling, but it does not stop there: "...and whom He called, these He also justified" (8:30b). The Father's call to men is His effectual drawing of them. He calls them into union with Himself as sons, but they cannot be united with Him until their estrangement is ended and they are reconciled to Him. This reconciliation demands two things: the satisfaction of God's justice as it regards their alienation, and the impartation to them of a new nature suitable to their communion as sons. Both of these are contained in the idea of *justification*. Toward His goal of making sinners beloved sons, the Father accomplishes by Himself all that is needful: satisfaction and righteousness in His Son, and transforming power in His Spirit.

- 10) The foundation for believers' salvation is God's foreknowledge – His intention to make them covenant sons who enjoy everlasting communion with Him. But before they can enter into communion with their Father as sons, they must first be renewed in their humanity and restored from their alienated state. This “homecoming” begins with their justification through faith in the Son and personal union with Him, but is not complete until the Father's eternal purpose is fully realized in the final consummation: “...and whom *He* justified, these *He* also glorified” (8:30c).

By this final statement Paul closed out his argument and brought it full circle. In spite of abiding weakness, the Christian's hope is not imperiled. The reason is that all things – even the various manifestations of his comprehensive infirmity – are working together for his good. That good is his final glorification in his obtainment of the inheritance the Father has purposed for His sons and promised to them. Every believer stands as a son eternally foreknown by his Father, and that relationship of sonship cannot fail to be realized for the simple reason that it does not depend in any way or to any extent on those appointed for it. God's foreknowledge advances toward its determined goal by *His* own work in predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. For this reason, the weakness of His children has no bearing upon the accomplishment of His plans.

The absolute certainty of God's realization of His purpose is evident first from the chaining together of the five verbs, but even more from Paul's use of the aorist tense with all of them. This grammatical structure indicates that the verbal actions of all five are viewed as equally complete. Thus Paul's point: God's foreknowledge and predestination are eternal verities, but so also are the time-space realities of calling, justification, and glorification. As certainly as the Father has eternally foreknown His children, equally certain is their obtainment of what He has prepared for them. Just as *foreknowledge* is a “done deal,” so also is *glorification*.

Far from jeopardizing their hope, the saints' weakness is fundamental to it. For Christian hope depends upon the confident assurance that, what *God* began, *He* will complete. The saints' sure hope of glory begins with God's foreknowledge and predestination, and advances through His work in calling and justification to the day when He will exercise His great power in the renewal of all things. The believer's personal infirmity cannot hinder or overthrow the divine work; rather, his weakness acts to keep him properly mindful of it and to rest his hope entirely in it. Thus infirmity is fundamental to hope, for “*power is perfected in weakness.*” The “chain of redemption” stretches from eternity past to eternity future, with the result that everything in the saints' present existence and circumstance is defined by it; nothing falls outside of it. And because it is God's own chain, forged upon His purpose and power out of His materials, it is an unbreakable chain that fully secures all who are bound by it.