

Sermon 81: Romans 8:29: The Foreknowledge of God

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INTRODUCTION

On account of sin every sinner has a natural sinful religion that has self in the centre as an organizing principle. With self at the centre of our thinking we arrange all things around ourselves, in service to ourselves, putting self in the place of the true God. Natural religion exists for the service of self; true religion exists for the service of God. This is the religion that we are all naturally inclined towards and need to unlearn. This is the religion that arises out of the sinful human centred heart and not from God's revelation. In the theology of our religion of self every doctrine is arranged by this organizing principle. Creation is not God making man in order to glorify Himself, but God making man in order that He might serve us. The Scriptures are no longer God's authoritative, unquestionable revelation upon which we are dependent upon for truth, but rather an optional guide and promise box intended to make us feel good all the time. God Himself is man's love slave who limits His power and sovereignty in order to give us free will. His Son is given in death to bring about only the possibility of salvation because He would never dream of making salvation a sure thing lest He infringe on the sacred ground of our free will. In other words it is hypothetically possible that Christ could have died and not one person have been saved. Then He also sends His Spirit to live inside of us as a personal servant. He gives us super powers on tap; He is a personal satnav that tells us, 'In 500 metres turn left,' so we can leave our brains and our bibles aside while we just listen to an inner voice. We ourselves are not so affected by sin so that we fit the biblical description of being dead in sin, but rather we are only sick in sin and we have a mind that is free and a will that is free from the effects of sin. When we think of our worth before God we secretly think that God can't help Himself but love us because of some worth or potential that we might have. This religion of self intrudes itself into every doctrine including the more obscure doctrines like the doctrine of God's foreknowledge. Instead of an all powerful, free and sovereign God making His plans we rewrite this doctrine by making God arrange Himself around our free will. This natural religion makes God passive and not active, one who has to learn by looking into the future and not one who determines all things according to His own will; one who serves our free will and not His. We think God's foreknowledge is a God who does not know and determine all things looking into the future and learning what we would do as if it were not determined, and having to react and arrange Himself around our wills in a self-limiting fashion. Once again we find self at the centre and God in service of self, this is the heart and the organizing principle of the religion that arises naturally out of a fallen heart. It is this thinking that we are seeking to overturn in our look at Romans 8:29 today, 'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.'

Today we are going to try and expose and correct something that is deep seated in every human heart. When we practice natural religion it is our reason and not revelation that is put in the authoritative position. Let me give you an illustration of this. Have you ever heard or uttered words to this effect, 'I don't think that a God of love would....' Add whatever you have said or heard, 'send people to hell,' 'send the unevangelized to hell,' 'elect some and not others for salvation.' We trust to our own logic and finite thought. Now in most endeavours in life we can trust our minds. When we read a book we can understand it, when we look through our eyes we are seeing what is there, we use our brains and reasoning to good effect in most things. However, when it comes to God we are out of our depths, the human mind and experience cannot penetrate to the spiritual, the finite cannot comprehend the infinite, we can only know what God reveals to us about these things. And when it comes to the plan and person of God we cannot pull back a curtain, or look through a microscope, or reason ourselves to a safe conclusion. We are dependent upon God's revelation of Himself in His word. We need to remember this and learn to distrust our reason when it comes to God. We have minds that on account of sin are biased against God and have a desire to exalt self and enthrone self at the centre again. We see Paul's account of this in Romans 1 where we take the knowledge of God as it can be found in nature and how we suppress it in unrighteousness and exchange the glory of God for images. John Calvin called the human heart an 'idol factory' and in this he was correct. We want then to see what God has revealed about His foreknowledge.

I am taking great pains to introduce our topic today because it is perhaps one of the most explosive and divisive ones in the Bible. The topics that are going to arise from the next couple of verses are going to be the topics that are going to dominate our discussions in Romans until the end of chapter 11 as well. We are heading into the doctrine of predestination or election. We are opening up that can of worms known as the Arminianism versus Calvinism debate. I do ask you as you come in the coming weeks that you bring your seat belts, your thinking caps, your bibles and your assumptions ready to be tossed and replaced with biblical ones. There is barely a more challenging portion of Scripture to preach and think through, it is deeper than many parts but its yield is also richer.

Let's remind ourselves then of the context of the verse we are looking at today. The main thought of the passage leading up to this portion is this, the hope of glory in spite of suffering. Christians living in a fallen world and surrounded by suffering and in pain themselves, this might recommend itself as an argument that God is not in control, that He does not love us and we cannot be sure of getting to heaven if this is the type of job that He does. Paul has responded by telling us that God is in fact in control, and that we will indeed get to heaven for '...we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.' We are dealing now in the following verses with Paul's explanation of that last phrase, 'called according to His purpose.' What is God's purpose? to ensure that His church will be in eternal glory with Him. V29-30, are Paul's laying out the plan of God as it concludes in the hope of glory. We have been saying that Paul is arguing for the certainty of our assurance on the basis of God being able to make His plan come to pass. Well we now get to look into that plan. It is a plan that begins in eternity past with God's foreknowledge and predestining, and which will end with

our glorification, or as it is put in v29 with our conformity to Christ and Him being glorified. V29 then is a supportive verse of v28. It is a deeper clarification and illuminates when the plan was made, eternity past, and when the plan will be consummated, in our glorification and the praise of Christ. Taking v29-30 together we see a golden chain of unbreakable links that begin in eternity past and end in eternity future, a series of events that once begun cannot be stopped because they are brought to pass as God's will by His power. The links are foreknowledge-predestination-calling-justification-glorification. The logic goes something like this: are you justified? Have you believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and been made righteous by His work? This reveals that God set His love upon you in eternity past, that He exerted His power in drawing you to faith in His Son and you can be confident that God will finish what He has started even though your life may be full of pain, He will glorify you! If you are a believer you can have confidence in God even though your situation is perilous that God will see you to His eternal presence.

But it is here that some become uncomfortable. I became a Christian in my late teens and had not been brought up in the faith. I came cold to all things Christian and was dependent upon my youth pastor and pastor and bible study leader to guide me in things. Quite early on I heard about these terrible people called Calvinists who taught terrible doctrines like 'born to burn' and 'once saved always saved.' That they believed in an arbitrary God who was sitting in heaven with a flower pulling out petals saying, 'elect, reprobate, elect, reprobate.' I was told about this terrible teaching that would stifle all evangelism and prayer, a doctrine that would breed arrogance because I was one of His favourites; that would breed uncertainty because I would have to have to agonize over whether I was one of God's elect; that this teaching would result in an antinomian life because I would be complacent because I could never lose my salvation. I didn't know any better and trusted those who taught me trusting that they knew this Calvinistic teaching intimately and were not presenting straw men to bias my ignorant mind. I accepted this teaching and went on trying to grow as a Christian. It was then that I was confronted with certain verses in the bible which taught election and predestination. And I was shocked that the bible said these things and looked for a way to understand them. I thought I was the first person who had seen it clearly when I read Romans 8:29 and came up with this interpretation. Here is the basic break down of the typical view.

God does predestine people. However, this verse tells us that His foreknowledge informs and determines His predestination. Foreknowledge is to know something ahead of time. I have a free will which God will never violate, and I am to be saved by faith. So putting 2 and 2 together God looked into the future, God saw who would believe and on the basis of foreseen faith decided who would get a chance to hear the Gospel. The others would be born bushmen or OT people who also never got to hear the gospel. I was so sure of my understanding of this that when speaking to my mentor when discussing these things I said it this way, 'I wrote the book of life, I wrote my own name in the Lamb's book. God looked into the future and saw I would believe and that is what wrote my future.' The basic assumptions driving my construction were not the biblical ones of a God who is sovereign who has decreed the end from the beginning and is free in choosing and executing His will. I only later learnt that Jacob Arminius taught the same thing. My basic assumptions were

firstly the notion of a free will which the Scriptures do not support; that foreknowledge for God is the same as foreknowledge for man; that faith can arise naturally from a fallen sinner apart from God's enabling and that my choice to believe is the determining factor not God's choice to save me. I was wrong on all counts. I have since studied the Scripture at length and come to believe in a sovereign God, a salvation by grace not foreseen works, and that as a sinner I am totally incapable of believing apart from God's intervention.

Because of the difficulties surrounding this verse we are going to have to spend some time clearing the way and showing why this sort of reasoning is not the teaching of the text. This sort of interpretation of the text is the preferred one because we cannot ordinarily conceive of a God who is love electing some and not others, and how all of this would square with us being held responsible and not robots. We will first clear the air of the wrong view proving at length why a God who saves us by foreseen works cannot be the teaching of Scripture and then we will try and answer the objections that are raised. I would like to give us four reasons why 'foreknowledge' does not mean God foreseeing our faith but rather the setting of His love upon us in Christ and setting us apart for salvation in Him.

Analogical language

Someone has quipped, 'God made man in His own image and it didn't take man long to return the favour.' On account of sin we exchange God's glory for that of idols or we make God in our image. The Greeks were guilty of this and made gods who raped women and got drunk. Even as Christians when we use the language that God has used to describe Himself in the Bible we can fall into this trap. When the Bible says that God is jealous we are automatically uncomfortable with this language because we automatically associate God's jealousy with our own sinful jealousy making God out to be like us. Or when the Bible speaks about God's wrath, and the book of Romans mentions it 10 times we are also uncomfortable with it because we automatically fill up the meaning of the word wrath with our own experience of it. Our own experience of wrath is one of sinful extremity, of unpredictable, malicious, overkill anger poured out at a moment of weakness when we allowed irrational feeling have all of us.

We regularly fall into this error because we fail to grasp the way in which the bible uses language and pictures to describe God to us. Language cannot exhaustively explain God to us because God's infinity cannot be conveyed by the images of association that we depend on to communicate when we use language. Our experience shades our understanding and there are three ways in which language has been viewed when speaking about God. Here are the three technical terms some see the language of the bible using when it describes God as univocal, equivocal or analogical. Univocal would say that the language is exhaustive and perfectly describes God's being and actions. Equivocal views see the language as having no relation to what is being said amounting to lies and not truth. Analogical language is the way that Christians have understood the bible to speak about God that the bible makes assertions but that language is limited in what it can convey and there is a measure of like and unlike. I say these things to make us aware that language is

not neutral and we carry baggage into what we want to say about God when we use certain language. So when we speak about God's foreknowledge we have to be very clear that we are not equating God's foreknowledge with man's foreknowledge. You and I are creatures who are bound by space and time, if we ever have a precognition of the future it would be like looking into a window at another time and place. All we see there would be new and we would see things we did not know. It is this vantage point that is often forced upon God when we speak about His foreknowledge. We sneak in the human laden experience and put it upon God. That He is subject to time and space instead of eternal and omnipresent, that He has to look into the future in order to learn instead of knowing all things immediately. We see God as a creature that has to look into a future time as if He were not the Creator and that there is no future time that is not caused and upheld by Him in which He is not intimately involved in and not a mere spectator. In other words there is no future faith that God is observing that He is not sovereignly electing to cause because a sinner cannot believe apart from God enabling Him. This view creates 3 false things in God. It creates a God who is passive, that is, a God who looks into a future He is not causing. Secondly, it creates a God who has to learn, for He has to look into the future to learn who will and won't believe before He can determine the future. Thirdly, we create a reactive and not a proactive God who has to first consult us before He can make His plans and arrange His will around our wills accordingly. How different a picture the bible paints when it reflects on Nebuchadnezzar's revelation of a God who does what He pleases, Daniel 4:34-5, 'At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" The only free will that God considers when He planned His will was His own free will.

Etymological fallacy

The second wrong way of thinking we need to be aware of is what is known as the etymological fallacy. There are many words we use in English that are the sum total of their parts. We use words that are made up of other words like aero-nautical or para-military. However not all words that are made up of two words equal the joint meaning of its parts. For example think of the word butterfly. We have two words butter and fly but a butterfly is not flying butter. Likewise when it comes to biblical words we need to be careful of this fallacy. Words when used by someone who is using Greek as a second language, or who is using it with a theological not a typical philosophical use can have nuances of meaning that can only be determined by a study of how all the instances of the word are used. When we do this we see that the word is used 7 times in the NT and it has three shades of meaning.

The three ways in which the word are used are the expected meaning of 'knowing before' Paul uses it to describe the Jews knowledge before the time of his trial that he had been a faithful Pharisee (Acts 26:5). 2 Pet. 3:17 speaks of the Christian's knowledge of the coming judgement of the wicked. Secondly we have the word bearing the sense of not merely a

passive knowing but an acting foreordaining. This sense is evident in 1 Peter 1:2, 'according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.' We see that the foreknowledge results in obedience and sprinkling indicating more than a passive observance but an active willing. This word appears again in the same chapter in 1:20, what is interesting about this verse is that in other translations like the KJV although the word is literally 'foreknown' they translated it 'foreordained' once again shedding light on the fact that the word is intended to be understood not merely as knowing but as determining. Acts 2:23 sees the words 'definite plan' and 'foreknowledge of God' placed side by side and seem to be synonyms supporting this aspect of meaning again. The third meaning is one that would be unique to Biblical usage, and unique to those familiar with the OT themes of God's love to His people. The word 'know' indicates love and intimacy, and foreknow means to love before. This meaning is found in Romans 11:2, 'God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel?' This meaning would flow from verses like Amos 3:2, "'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' Now obviously God would know of all the nations of the world but the word know is a technical term for intimate covenant knowledge. This use is confirmed when we find the same ideas found in different words in Eph. 1:4-5, 'even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.'

Why did He love us in this fashion? Did God know that we would believe, or that we would make better Christians? Did we do something that put Him in our debt that He owed us salvation? No, we see that God practiced election in the OT as well and when He explains to the Jews why they were chosen we see that He distinguishes His love in choosing the children of Abraham not the other nations of the world, Deut. 7:6, "'For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.' We see that God chose them not because of anything in them but because of His faithfulness and mercy, Deut. 7:7-8, 'It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.' We see that even when Israel continues to sin God does not stop choosing to love them but continues in His love, Deut. 9:4-7, "'Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. 5 Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. "Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people. 7 Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD

your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD.'

There is much that we still need to say but let us conclude with a quick refresh of what Paul is saying in these verses. We have a sure hope of glory. Even though we are surrounded by storms and things that appear to imply God is weak or unloving. We know that God is in control and is able to bring about His plans. And His plan is an eternal love story that those who He set His love upon in Christ before the foundation of the world, these are the ones He will ensure that they get to heaven. He did not look into the future and learn of their faith, but knowing of their sins He chose to love His enemies and make them a bride for His Son. He will ensure that they will get to heaven be conformed into the image of His Son that He loves and that His Son will be glorified in our salvation.