

Sermon 82: Romans 8:29: The Foreknowledge of God: Part Two

OUTLINE

Exegesis against foreseen faith

Exegesis for God's distinguishing love

INTRODUCTION

When we talk about the doctrine of the foreknowledge of God, many Christians think that we are talking about something that is unimportant, something that Christians can afford not to think about. This is incorrect, the differences of opinions over God's foreknowledge, is the differences between a God who is remade by our own imaginations and the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture. God's glory for our salvation is at stake. Let me ask you, who do you thank for your salvation? Do you give God 100% of the glory for your salvation? If you believe in the doctrine of foreseen faith then you can't give God 100% of the glory, you have to say, 'God saw my action of foreseen faith and that is why I am a believer!' You may not be able to take credit for Jesus dying on the cross, or the evangelist bringing you the message, but if you believe in foreseen faith you have to believe that you are to thank in part for your salvation, because without your foreseen faith you wouldn't be here today. So those who believe in foreseen faith inconsistently say they give 100% of the glory to God, because they believe that without their faith influencing God's predestination they would not believe.

At the heart of these differences over the doctrine of God's foreknowledge are two different views of salvation, two different views of man, two different views of God, and two different views of grace. For those who hold to foreseen faith they believe that they made a contribution to their salvation, although only foreseen; where those who hold to salvation by sovereign election believe that God gets all the glory for their salvation. Those who hold to foreseen faith do not believe as the Bible teaches in the description of man being dead in trespasses and sins and not being able to have faith at all apart from God's enabling; but those who hold to sovereign election believe that we are here in spite of our selves through God's enabling ability through the Spirit's regeneration. Those who hold to foreseen faith believe in a God who learns, is reactive and arranges His will around ours; those who hold to sovereign election believe that God decides who will believe not us, and that His free will is the determining will of all history. Those who hold to foreseen faith have a view of grace where God does not give to those who have done nothing to earn salvation, but who considers the actions of sinners to see if they meet certain prerequisite conditions in order that He can save them; those who believe in sovereign election believe in free grace where God saves us not for anything we have done but according to His good will.

The notion that this is an unimportant issue that we can ignore is merely one of the many attitudes that Christians have in order to avoid the often confusing and emotionally charged discussions that go on around these doctrines. Friends as we approach these doctrines I have to speak to your hearts as well as your heads, in fact in every message I will have to

address attitude in order that we might be able to continue to learn in this contentious area of doctrine. So let me address some common evasive attitudes that are excuses for Christians to disengage from these issues and hide away in ignorance.

Firstly, 'Everyone has their verses.' Have you ever been in a disagreement where two people are just throwing texts at each other and both sets of texts seem legitimate? You might want to think that this is merely a matter of a stalemate and there can be no resolution. I believe we cannot say that. The Bible does not contradict itself, and if we contend that there are two legitimate sets of verses that are at odds with each other we are implying that the Bible contradicts itself. I myself, and I hope you, are uncomfortable with that disposition and seek to investigate more deeply in order to show that the Bible speaks coherently and in a united fashion about these things. I dare not level the accusation at the bible that it is contradictory.

Secondly, 'There are good men on both sides of this debate.' As much respect as I might have for a man like John Wesley who would be on the opposite side of the debate to myself, my response to this view is, 'so what!' I refuse to be intimidated out of seeking the truth because someone who God used more than me disagrees with me. My concern is what does the Bible say, and to seek to ground my understanding on the firm ground of God's revelation and not man's opinion. I know that we all feel safe when we have numbers on our side, but let me urge us all to be more interested in God's opinion not man's.

Thirdly, 'No one can know, it is a mystery.' There are many things that are mysteries, however, we can also use this to hide behind and try and avoid the discussions. When is something to be decided as a mystery? When God does not reveal something then we gladly shut our mouths and practice self-control; however if God has revealed something it would be dishonouring to God's revelation to not speak where He has spoken and say all that He has said. Deut. 29:29 is our guide in this, '"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.' We believe that God is good at communication, that He invented the brain, and writing, and language and is able to be understood when He reveals something. For this reason we must resist casting a cloud of mystery over everything merely because it may be harder to understand or an area of contention.

I am well aware that there is much to think about and remember in this debate, and I would encourage you to come and speak to Grant or I on these issues. Let me say that I will probably make reference to various views and so let me assure you that when I prove a view to be wrong it is not because it am singling you out from the pulpit but because the view you hold may be typical and in need of correction. So if you do come speak to me and I address your concern in a sermon please don't think that I am victimizing you.

We are looking at the doctrine of God's foreknowledge from Romans 8:29. We have seen that it is God's foreknowledge that influences and informs God's predestination. The fact that God predestines is not very controversial, both Arminians and Calvinists would agree that God has a plan from eternity that He is carrying out. The disagreement comes in at the issue of God's foreknowledge, does God look into the future, or possible futures and choose me on the basis of my choice, arranging His will around mine? Or does God plan the end

from the beginning, and freely, and proactively determines all things by His will not ours? We have been showing why the view of foreseen faith is impossible. We have tried to show that it flows from the self-centred approach to all religious thinking that we need to unlearn when we become Christians placing God's word and not our reason in the place of authority. We have also reminded ourselves that we are not to make God in our image and misunderstand the way the Bible uses language about God. So that when the Bible says that God foreknows we are not to imagine that God is a creature bound by time and space and needs to learn in order to know what His next move is. And we also looked at the etymological fallacy, and demonstrated that the biblical use of the word foreknowledge when applied to God means foreordain and forelove than the conception of precognition as we laden it with the human experience. We have to conceive God's foreknowledge in a way that is consistent with what the Bible tells us about Him. Because He knows all things immediately and determines all things freely God's foreknowledge is exhaustive and determining, not in need of knowledge before it can act and respond.

Today we continue to investigate the two different views of God's foreknowledge looking today into the exegetical reasons why foreseen faith is not taught in the context of Romans 8:29, and how the Bible does teach a distinguishing and electing love from eternity past.

Exegesis against foreseen faith

The argument of this passage goes something like this. God will finish the work has started in you. You can be assured of your salvation even though you are experiencing suffering in this life because God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him. He will complete His purpose concerning you. The emphasis of the context is God's working and purpose. Paul is seeking to ground our assurance in God's working and God's purpose. This is brought in the fact that the five links in the chain of redemption are all credited a God's doing. It is God who foreknows (read foreloves and foreordains); it is God who predestines; it is God who calls; it is God who justifies, it is God who glorifies. God is the hero of this narrative; God is the author of this story; God is the actor in the play. The final destiny of our salvation is secure because it is He who is purposing and working, it is He who is foreloving and ordaining, predestining, calling, justifying and glorifying. It would cut against the grain of this God focused perspective to suddenly want to say that God had to react to my foreseen faith, that a vital cog in this story is my foreseen faith. With the focus on God we should be embarrassed to suddenly try and include ourselves as contributor to Paul's point. Paul is seeking in the context to ground our assurance in God's purpose and work not ours.

Secondly, notice that there is no mention of foreseen faith in the context. This is an alien element that we intrude into Paul's discussion because of our own assumptions that God responds to my free will in salvation, and God's predestination needs to be toned down lest He look arbitrary. So we strap and confine it by making His foreknowledge submit itself to our foreseen faith before He can make a move. Our inability to conceive of God being loving and good and predestining His church, or our unwillingness, results in us eisogeking,

that means forcing an alien meaning into the text, instead of exegeting, that means to allow the text to speak for itself.

There are two varieties of the foreseen faith teaching, the Pelagian and the Arminian. Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians believe that we need no help in believing but that it lies within the ability of even our sin affected natures to love God, hate sin and turn in dependence for salvation to Christ. Arminians believe that we are fully affected by sin and cannot believe apart from God's enabling, but that God has universally enabled all to freely choose. As each one of these views teaches a doctrine of foreseen faith, there are differences and similarities. The Pelagian view is less gracious drawing the ability for foreseen faith from our own natures; the Arminian view is more gracious teaching that God enables all people in the hypothetical future to freely believe annulling the obstacle of our depravity which would ordinarily hinder faith. Although they are slightly different they are the same in these two regards. Firstly, the both see our faith as defining God's will, that God is reactive and not proactive, that our wills inform God's eternal purposes. This is very different to the Bible which teaches that God does what He pleases and does not consult us when He planned His will. Secondly, these views also hold to a synergistic as opposed to monergistic view of salvation. Synergism is where two or more parties work together, monergism is when one party works alone. Arminians and Pelagians see a part for themselves in the planning of our salvation (synergism) where we believe the bible teaches that the planning of our salvation is a work of God (monergism). It seems odd, forced and presumptuous to us that there is such a zeal to have our wills determining our own salvation that we feel the need to intrude our wills into eternity to have a part to play so that we are partly responsible for the outcome.

In the very next chapter we have a clear denial that God elected us on the basis of anything foreseen in us, whether it was faith or works. Romans 9:11, 'though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad---in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls.' Paul is here describing Esau and Jacob in the womb, Paul is showing that God does elect some and not others, and here indicates that His decisions were not determined by anything in the persons He chose and rejected, but His election stands by the counsel of His own will. Notice that Paul emphasizes that God's election is not determined by what a person will will, this would include the foreseen willing of faith, nor what a person would work. He stresses that it is God's power and prerogative in calling that determines who will be elect not anything foreseen in us. We have to agree with Jesus that the teaching of Scripture is a case of God choosing me not me choosing Him, John 15:16, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.' It was a case of God loving me first not me loving Him first by some foreseen act, 'In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.' (1 John 4:10). My salvation is of grace based on His initiative not mine. The Scriptures show us that is not those who believe that are appointed to eternal life but those appointed to eternal life that believe, Acts 13:48, 'And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.'

We believe that salvation is a free act by God done in grace to those who have not merited it in any way, that God was not obliged to elect us for any reason in ourselves, foreseen or otherwise. 2 Tim. 1:9, 'who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.' Acts 18:27, 'And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed.' Rom. 11:35-6, "'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.' Did God owe you salvation? Grace says no, foreseen faith says yes.

Exegesis for God's distinguishing love

Another common interpretation for Romans 8:29 is that God foreknows and predestines all to salvation. It is inconceivable to most Christians that God in eternity past would predestine some to salvation and not all, but this is indeed the teaching of these verses that we are considering in Romans 8:29-30. Let's look again at Paul's logic. Paul is saying that you can be certain of glory if you are justified because those whom God foreloves, those He predestines to be called, justified and glorified. We can have assurance because God makes it certain. All those who are foreloved end up being glorified. God is the one who works it from the beginning to the end, this is what makes it certain. The question has to be asked, can any who God foreloves and predestined not be called, justified and glorified? The answer is of course not! There is no one stronger than God, there is none who can snatch us from His hand, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This has one clear implication. God could not have foreknown all because not all get called, justified and glorified. Look closely at the text, 'For those whom He foreknew....' The word 'For' is continuing the argument showing why we can be confident that God is working all things together for the good of those who are called according to His purpose. But who are the ones who are called according to His purpose? Those 'whom' He foreloved and foreordained to be called, justified and glorified. In other words, there is no such thing as a predestined believer who will not finally be called, justified and glorified. Simply put God could not have foreknown all because all will not finally be glorified. The argument of this section rests on the certainty that God can bring His will to pass, it must be His will then that not all but only some are elect to salvation. Paul makes it clear in v33, 'Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.' The 'us' of v28-39, and the 'we' of this section are those who are called according to God's purpose, all who are called are more than conquerors, are justified, cannot be separated from God's love, have God work all things together for the ultimate good, are called and will finally be glorified. This is obviously not all. To say that God foreknows all is to deny that He can fulfil His will. To say that God elects all is to say that we cannot trust God to ensure that all whom He foreknows He predestines, and all who He predestines to salvation he then works out their salvation by calling them to Himself by the power of the Spirit, justifying them by the righteousness of His Son, and finally conforming us to the likeness of His Son in glorification. The conclusion that God does not elect all to salvation is the irresistible conclusion of this text.

Is this view of God electing some to salvation supported by other parts of Scripture or are we just trying to force it from one part? Let's allow Jesus to answer this for us. In John 17 we see Jesus praying His High Priestly prayer, and in this prayer He speaks openly about God's past and future will for His people. In v2 Jesus reveals that He has been given authority to give eternal life 'to all whom you have given me.' V6 makes clear that this is not everyone in the world but a distinct group taken from the world, "'I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.' This group is also described as those who keep God's word and in v8 we are told that these are the ones who hear and believe, 'For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.' Jesus goes on to pray not for everyone in the world but those whom the Father has given to Him, v9, 'I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.' We see in v12 that these are also kept from falling away except for Judas who was prophesied to betray Christ, 'While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.'

This teaching of a particular group of people that God would call, keep and finally glorify is taught in John 10 where Jesus speaks of Himself as the Good Shepherd and the elect people of God as His sheep. He tells us that His intention of dying was for the sheep, v14-15, 'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.' He tells us that it is these who will hear and believe because it is they who hear His voice, v16, 'And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.' He tells those who believe later on that not everyone in the world is one of His sheep, and it is only those who are elect to be His sheep who will hear His voice and believe, v24-27, 'So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.' He then tells them that all those who are His sheep will never perish but will be kept for eternal life, v28-30, 'I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one.'

So we see that Jesus too taught a distinct group of people who are set apart to be called, justified, kept and finally glorified, and that there are none who can be stolen from this number that all of these will be saved and kept. Here is the rub of this teaching, we have one of two options. Either God wants to save all, but can't, and it is even hypothetically possible that no one could be saved. Or, God actually plans to save some and not one of those who He has planned can be lost. As you read the verses we have noted what impression do you get, do we see a picture of a God who really wants all to be saved but His hands are tied by our free wills, or do we see a God whose plans cannot be frustrated

and who will finally save all who He intends to save. Here is Paul's point, your salvation is secure because God finishes what He starts. Paul is painting the picture of a beautiful love story where God set His love upon a sinful people in eternity past, and He decided to love some and leave others to their sins. He decided to love them with an everlasting love that would never fail. He appointed His own Son as their mediator and He gave up His heavenly glory to become a man, a criminal and tortured to death at the hands of sinners. He gave the Spirit to come and dwell within each one to ensure that all that the Son has accomplished by His death will not be in vain. The Spirit blesses the ministry of the word and works powerfully to draw the elect to saving faith in Christ, the Spirit regenerates them, seals them and bears testimony to them of their adoption. The Spirit works in them both to will and do God's good pleasure and keeps them on the road of holiness enabling their perseverance all the way until death or the Second Coming. If we die before that day we are kept protected from the effects of satan and sin in God's direct presence, and when Jesus does come again all our enemies will be overthrown and we will be eternally sinless and safe in God's presence being perpetual beneficiaries of His abundance. Paul addresses you as a believer and he says, 'Dear believer, are you suffering, are you doubting, do you feel overwhelmed? Do you feel that God does not love you or is not strong enough to save you? Worry no more, because all who He calls according to His purpose, all those who He foreknows, He predestines, to be called, justified and glorified. If God be for us who can be against us, who can separate us from the love of God, Romans 8:37-39, 'No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

I know that this teaching raises many questions, I will deal with some of the objections to this teaching tonight.