

Sermon 83: Romans: 8:29: Objections to the doctrine of God's Sovereign Foreknowledge

OUTLINE

'Born to burn'

'Hindrance to praise, prayer and evangelism'

'The once saved always saved teaching results in antinomianism'

'A teaching of God having favourites will lead to pride'

'The teaching of election leads to a lack of assurance'

INTRODUCTION

This morning we looked at the view of God's foreknowledge as it is taught in Romans 8:29. We have established so far that we cannot equate God's foreknowledge with the way man would experience it; we have shown that the meaning of the word 'foreknow' when describing God does not mean a passive learning but an active willing and loving. And we have shown that God has not foreknown everyone for all who He foreknows will be glorified. We have been showing that Paul's argument to bolster our assurance in a fallen world when we suffer and question and doubt God is to point us to God Himself, that He is a God who has a plan, who is in control of all things, and who will ensure by His omnipotent power that all those who He intends to save will be saved. Let me stress again that the teaching is intended to build up our assurance not start a controversy. We are dealing with issue not because we are seeking to be contentious but because the text is speaking about these things. But for all this there is still much disagreement and many questions that arise. Many have been inoculated against the teaching we have shown the bible teaches with certain defences and arguments. I will not be able to cover all the questions that this issue surfaces but I would like to deal with the five most common objections to the teaching of God's sovereign foreknowledge.

Born to burn

Here is the most common argument, the most emotionally charged and historically the place where the Arminians began their disputation against the Reformed view of predestination. Let me lay it out and then respond to it.

'If you say that God elects to save some and exercises His power to ensure their salvation and not others this creates a God who is arbitrary and who creates people just to send them to hell.'

Let it be known that those who are traditionally called Calvinists and Reformed reject with vehemence the notion that God is arbitrary and that He elects anyone to hell. The caricatured impression that those who disagree with these doctrines leaves is this one. That God drags people kicking and screaming into heaven who did not will to be there, and that He drags kicking and screaming to hell those who do not want to go there. Off the bat we

can say that we also disagree with this portrayal of God and find it to be unbiblical. Sadly most disagreements with the doctrine of election are couched in these absurd terms. However, the logic that our opponents employ is one attempting to show how ludicrous the conclusion of these teachings are, the tragedy is that they have not fully understood our case nor sought to listen to hear how we account for the biblical teaching on these things. They argue in a fashion which leaves this absurd conclusion as the only possible conclusion to the biblical view of election and thereby reject it.

Let me say in their defence that there have been extreme elements, what we would call Hyper-Calvinists who have taught view of double election that concludes that God elects people to hell. The assumption is that God's actions in electing the sinner to salvation are mirrored when it comes to those we call, the reprobate, the non-elect. Although the majority of Calvinists believe in a form of double election, for what God's allows He wills, they would also believe in what we will call 'asymmetrical election.' The point that the majority of Calvinists are seeking to uphold is this one, the only reason anyone finally goes to hell is because of God's judgement against their sins. In other words when God opens the books for judgement, the books will not say 'elected to hell.' No, the book will give an account of all the sins of the sinner and hell will be given as sins deserts. The difference between election and reprobation is this, God does not save us on the basis of anything foreseen in us, faith, works, or anything else, His choice to save us was a choice to account us as in Christ and intended to be His bride in eternity past. However, the reprobate were elected to be left in their sin, and not to be saved through Christ. God had mercy in electing some to be saved in Christ, and God's justice determined that others could be rightly left in their sin, so that they would tally up their own sins and finally be judged for them. This means that God's choosing and overlooking were not arbitrary but acts of mercy or justice. The question that I have at this point is, why didn't God choose to have mercy on all? The answer is, I don't know, but I cannot question God, I cannot put Him on trial, I cannot decide to reject the clear teaching of Scripture because it think it might lead to an accusation against God.

God's will in election carries with it the power to perform what God wills. God sends His Son to die for our sins, He sends His Spirit to regenerate, keep and finally glorify us. The willing of reprobation is different not the same. God does not exert His power to make or keep us sinful. No God elects that we will not be saved and being left to our sin we will be kept in unbelief and will finally be judged on account of our sins. We must not think that those who are reprobate are dragged kicking and screaming to hell. God is active in salvation but passive in damnation, so that we finally damn ourselves.

God's will in election and reprobation is not arbitrary. Instead of seeing all men in sin in Adam, God chooses because of His mercy to elect some in Christ to be a bride for Him. God has two principles that He works according to. He is being just when He elects to leave us in our sin so that we sin and are finally condemned on account of our sins. He is being merciful when He does not leave us in our sin but elects us out of Adam into Christ and provides all that we need and actively pursues us in salvation (Eph. 1:4-5). When He says that He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy, this is His active pursuing of us in

salvation. And when He says He will harden whom He will harden, although the language sounds very active, it is in fact God passively allowing the sinner to express their fallen nature, so that it is by our own hands that we are hardened. God is not arbitrary, God is not forcing people into hell, the reprobate is not born to burn.

In the conclusion of the Canons of the Synod of Dort there is a rejection of what the Arminians have wrongly held the Reformed church to teach. The conclusion rejects that, '...in the same manner in which election is the fountain and cause of faith and good works, reprobation is the cause of unbelief and piety....'

I might add here that the Arminian runs into problems in this discussion as well. Although we concede that God wills reprobation by His permissive will and passive activity, God is sovereign and nothing comes to pass apart from His will. We do not want to be scared to own God's sovereignty although we want to qualify how He acts. This teaching can create difficult questions. But the alternative that God looks into the future and based on foreseen faith elects or not carries the same problems. The concern in the Arminian scheme is that God does not seem loving if He elects not to save all, and that God creates humans to go to hell. The trouble is that the Arminian scheme has the same difficulty. If God knew who would and wouldn't believe why didn't He just create those who would believe, for if He created those knowing that they would not believe, are they not then born to burn?

As Christians we should not be resorting to worldly ways of arguing seeking to reduce our opponents view to a caricature in order to keep the public opinion in our favour. This was a tactic the Pharisees used and so blasphemed the Spirit. Instead it should be our goal to be faithful to all of Scripture, to refuse to exalt what I think above what God reveals and have a Christian spirit not a mean spirit when dealing with the views of other parts of Christ's church. My experience has been that those who oppose this teaching do so in ignorance and are content to blast away with the strongest rhetoric but not having a full and fair understanding of our position.

Hindrance to praise, prayer and evangelism

The next most common objection is that the logical implication of the doctrine of free election is that we will lose all motivation in worship, prayer and evangelism. Our worship will be tarnish and soured because we no longer think of God as loving every person without exception. Our prayer is deflated because if God is going to do His will anyway why should we pray? And likewise, if God will save His elect we don't need to evangelize. Each of these objections we will see if another case of applying logic to a misunderstood position not the teaching of Scripture.

Firstly, is worship consistent with the teaching of a God who is sovereign, who freely chooses to elect some and not others to salvation? Can we worship a God who free has mercy on some and not all, and in justice leaves other sin their sins? If we look at Matt. 11:25-27 we see Jesus is able to worship a God who only saves some, 'At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things

from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' And listen to Paul speak about God who elects some to salvation, hear his conclusion at the end of a 3 chapter discussion on election, Romans 11:33-36, 'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.
Amen.'

It is not reprehensible to worship a God of distinguishing love when you understand Him correctly. Is it wrong to worship God because He saves some sinners who deserve hell? Is it wrong to praise God for His justice when He refuses to save others on account of their sin? Is it wrong to praise the God who saves you when there was absolutely nothing in you which merited saving, and if God gave you your just deserts you should have received eternal punishment? No, and No! The doctrine of election teaches us about the God of mercy and justice, the God saves the unworthy. This is the teaching which brings us into true worship, for we are not worshipping a figment of our imagination, a God who we find palatable to reason, who is our love slave and arranges Himself around our free will. No here we learn our true and desperate condition, our total helplessness and how undeserving we are. It is here that we see how loving God actually is, for He loved those who He did not have to, those who deserved the opposite of worship. We cannot complain because we believe in a God who freely chooses to be merciful to the unrighteous and just to the sinners. We cannot say, 'I object to God not saving all, that is just!' No it is when we see that none deserved to be saved that we appreciate and can truly praise God's free grace and mercy. We do not worship a God who had to love us, but who chose to love some of the unworthy and glorify His justice in leaving the others in their sin. This is the teaching that magnifies God and encourages worship; this is the teaching which roots out worship that worships a figment of our own imagination. Let me challenge you, can you worship a God who has mercy on the undeserving and who magnifies His justice by passing over some? If not then you are not worshipping like Christ and like Paul, and there is something seriously wrong with your view of God.

We will continue looking at these objections next week.