

Romans (45) The Planned Purpose of God for His People

Let us return to the paragraph that we have been examining for the past couple of weeks, Romans 8:26-30.

Paul had been setting forth a number of very reasons that the people of God should be encouraged, that they may have hope because of what God had been doing, was currently doing, and had promised to do on their behalf. Today we will begin to examine the rich truths of Romans 8:29-30, two sentences within this paragraph. Here we read of the purpose of God that He has for His people, a purpose that He had planned from eternity and in eternity had decreed would come to pass in history in the lives of His elect--His chosen people. Let us read the entire paragraph once again for context.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Last week we considered the blessed truth of Romans 8:28. Because the Holy Spirit prays for us according to the will of God (vs. 26, 27), we may know that God will bring good to us through all things that happen to us. This is an assurance that only those in Jesus Christ may legitimately possess. They truly love God and God had called them unto Himself, giving them salvation. These are the ones for whom God has an eternal purpose. God had called them--His elect, to salvation according to God's purpose (v. 28).

But having mentioned God's purpose at the end of verse 28, Paul next explains the nature of that purpose in verses 29 and 30. Notice at the beginning of verse 29 we have the conjunction, "For." This signals that an explanation is forthcoming. Verses 29 and 30 explain the purpose that He just identified at the end of verse 28. These two verses identify specifically *the purpose of God that He has for His people*.

We see that God's purpose for His elect involves five acts of God on their behalf that began to be realized before creation and will culminate on that great Last Day, the day of the resurrection, with our glorification. Here they are these five acts of God for us set before us:

- (1) ²⁹For those whom He *foreknew*,
- (2) He also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.
- (3) ³⁰And those whom He predestined He also *called*,
- (4) and those whom He called He also *justified*,
- (5) and those whom he justified he also *glorified*.

We will take each one of these in turn, considering the work of God's grace in some detail. Today we will only have time to address the first act of God, in that He foreknew us who believe in Jesus Christ.

I. God's Foreknowledge of His People

We read, “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.”

First let us understand some historic background to the interpretation of the first words of verse 29. There has existed for many centuries a great debate between those of us who are Reformed (i.e. Calvinists), who understand the Scriptures to teach the sovereignty of God to bring salvation to His elect only--the ones He chose to be saved from eternity-- and those who advocate that all people have the ability to be saved through their own free will (i.e. Arminians). This centuries-old debate between Calvinism and Arminianism has been often played out here, in this subject of God’s foreknowledge of His people in eternity. **Arthur Pink** expressed this in his classic little book, *The Attributes of God*:

There are two things concerning the foreknowledge of God about which many are in ignorance: the meaning of the term, its Scriptural scope. Because this ignorance is so widespread, it is an easy matter for preachers and teachers to palm off perversions of this subject, even upon the people of God. There is only one safeguard against error, and that is to be established in the faith; and for that, there has to be prayerful and diligent study, and a receiving with meekness the engrafted Word of God. Only then are we fortified against the attacks of those who assail us. There are those today who are misusing this very truth in order to discredit and deny the absolute sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners. Just as higher critics are repudiating the Divine inspiration of the Scriptures; evolutionists, the work of God in creation; so some pseudo Bible teachers are perverting His foreknowledge in order to set aside His unconditional election unto eternal life.¹

John Murray also set the argument forward:

“Whom He foreknew” – few questions have provoked more difference of interpretation than that concerned with the meaning of God’s foreknowledge as referred to here... The most common is to suppose that what it is in view is God’s foresight of faith. God foreknew who would believe; he foreknew them as his *by faith*. On this interpretation predestination is conceived of as conditioned upon his prevision of faith. Frequently, though not necessarily in all instances, this view of foreknowledge is considered to obviate the doctrine of unconditional election, and so dogmatic interest is often apparent in those who espouse it.²

And so it is, where Calvinists understand that Paul was declaring that God foreknew (or fore loved) the ones that He would save in history, Arminians claim Paul was simply asserting that God knew ahead of time who would believe the gospel through their own free will.

The first need, then, is to understand the meaning of the word, “foreknow.” Arminians argue that this word means that *God knew beforehand*, because He is omniscient, what man would choose of his own free will whether Jesus Christ would become his Lord and Savior. The reformed understanding of

¹ Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Reiner Publications, n.d.), pp. 19ff. The text of this and all of Arthur Pinks is available online at <http://www.pbministries.org/books/pink/index.htm>

² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 315f. Actually, even if it could be rightly said that “foreknowledge” speaks of God foreseeing faith, that would not in itself negate the idea of God’s sovereignty in His election of sinners unto eternal life. Murray argued: “It needs to be recognized that the rejection of this interpretation is not dictated by a predestinarian interest. Even if it were granted that “foreknow” means the foresight of faith, the biblical doctrine of sovereign election is not thereby eliminated or disproven. For it is certainly true that God foresees faith; he foresees all that comes to pass. The question would then simply be: whence proceeds this faith which God foresees? And the only biblical answer is that the faith which God foresees is the faith he himself creates (cf. John 3:3-8; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:2). Hence his eternal foresight of faith is preconditioned by his decree to generate this faith in those whom he foresees as believing, and we are thrown back upon the differentiation which proceeds from God’s own eternal and sovereign election to faith and its consequents. The interest, therefore, is simply one of interpretation as it should be applied to this passage. (p. 316.)

this word is that God from eternity **knew His people** in a relational sense. There are sound reasons that the reformed understanding is correct. Ultimately the Bible itself defines its terms. Consider Pink's comments about the meaning of the word, "foreknowledge":

Before proceeding further with our discussion of this much misunderstood theme, let us pause and define our terms. What is meant by "foreknowledge?" "To know beforehand," is the ready reply of many. But we must not jump at conclusions, nor must we turn to Webster's dictionary as the final court of appeal, for it is not a matter of the etymology of the term employed. What is needed is to find out how the word is used in Scripture. The Holy Spirit's usage of an expression always defines its meaning and scope. It is failure to apply this simple rule which is responsible for so much confusion and error. So many people assume they already know the signification of a certain word used in Scripture, and then they are too dilatory to test their assumptions by means of a concordance.³

There are several reasons that the Reformed understanding is the correct one. (1) The claim that "foreknow" speaks of God's knowing what men would freely choose to do in the future is a view of knowledge that is more in accordance with Greek thinking than with the Semitic or Hebrew thinking reflected in the Bible. The statement of verse 29 of God foreknowing His elect is one that has to do with God's *relationship* with His people, not of His knowledge of *information* of their future actions. (2) This biblical view of knowledge of His people from eternity is consistent with the language of the verse itself. Romans 9:19 reads, "For **those** whom He **foreknew**. It does not say God knew **about** them, but that God foreknew **them**. (3) Similar to the reason above, it can be shown that the most common use of the word "know" in the Bible, goes beyond the idea of mere cognition; "knowing" in the Bible is not merely intellectual understanding, but it speaks of relational acquaintance, often intimate acquaintance.⁴ The word, "know", is used frequently to depict the following ideas: of special regard for, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action.⁵ In many instances in Scripture to know someone is essentially the same as to love that one. Consider these references: In Genesis 18:19 we read,

"For I have **known** him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him." (NKJV)

Interestingly, both the NIV and the ESV translate it this way:

"For I have **chosen** him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (NIV, ESV)

God said of the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb **I knew you**; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nation" (Jer. 1:5). This clearly speaks of God's foreknowledge of his prophet was not a cognizance of what the prophet would do; rather, it was a statement of God's care and concern for His prophet from eternity and of His intention to use him as His spokesman to Israel.

God spoke of His relationship with Israel in Amos 3:2, "**You only have I known** of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

We find the same ideas of the word group "know" in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 8:3 reads, "But if anyone loves God, he is **known** by God." In Galatians 4 Paul wrote of our knowledge of God and

³ Pink, *Attributes of God*, p. 20f.

⁴ The idea of knowing before, in the word "foreknowledge", simply speaks of when this matter was known, not what was known.

⁵ Murray, *Romans*, p. 317.

of His knowledge of His people. “But now that you have come to know God, or rather *to be known by God*, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” (Gal. 4:9). Paul made this general statement of God’s intimate knowledge of His people in 2 Timothy 2:19, “God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘*The Lord knows those* who are His,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.’”

There is a fourth reason that the word “foreknow” should be understood as God’s intimate and relational knowledge of His elect. (4) The same word, “foreknow” is used later in this epistle, and in that context *relational knowledge* is clearly in view. We read in Romans 11:1ff:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God 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? ³“Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” ⁴But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. (Rom. 11:1-5)

In this passage we have the language of foreknowledge and election of Israel. It is the same relational language of Romans 8:29. Foreknowledge means that God had known them personally and intimately, even covenantally. It is not an expression of God knowing what they would do, but it was an intimate personal knowledge of who they are-- His people.

And so, the best understanding of the word and idea of “foreknowledge” is God’s covenantal and eternal love that He has for His elect. For God to foreknow people is to love them from eternity, even before the foundations of the world. For God to foreknow His people does not speak of God knowing about them from eternity, but of His having known them from eternity.

It is not the foresight of difference but the foreknowledge that makes a difference to exist, not a foresight that recognizes existence but the foreknowledge that determines existence. It is sovereign distinguishing love.⁶

William Hendriksen dismisses understanding “foreknow” as God knowing ahead of time the faith that people would exercise in the future.

Is it possible to interpret Paul’s words in this sense: Before the world created God foresaw who were going to believe in him and who would not. So, on the basis of that foreseen faith, he decided to elect to salvation those good people who were going to exercise it?

Answer: such a construction is entirely impossible, for according to Scripture even faith in God’s gift... See also John 6:44, 65; 1 Cor. 4:7; Phil. 1:29. In fact, even the good works performed by believers are prepared beforehand by God (Eph. 2:20).

On the contrary, the foreknowledge mentioned in Romans 8:29 refers to *divine active delight*. It indicates that, in his own sovereign good pleasure, God set his love on certain individuals, many still to be born, gladly acknowledging them as his own, electing them to everlasting life and glory.⁷

Hendriksen described the idea as involving “divine active delight.” It is important that we see the purposeful action of God toward His people. For God to know His people is not to be seen merely in terms of having *affection* for them; rather, it speaks of God’s *loving action* toward the people on whom He set His love. In verses 29 and 30 all five descriptions of God’s dealings in grace with His people are actions of our sovereign God. The subject is God Himself. The verbs of action are these: God *foreknew*

⁶ Ibid. p. 318.

⁷ William Hendriksen, *Romans*. New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1980, 1981), p. 282.

them, His people. He *predestinated* them. He *called* them. He *justified* them. And He also *glorified* them. It is clear that the last four out of five verbs are active verbs, God doing the action. I would argue that the first verb, foreknew, should also be understood as an active verb. And so, here is the truth that I would like us to take to heart, you the Christian: God had predestinated you. God had called you. God had justified you. God has decreed to glorify you. But it all began with the fact that *God had foreknown you*. If you are a Christian, it is because from eternity God set His heart upon You. He loved you with an everlasting love. In eternity He had you on His heart and He determined then that He would bring you every good thing.

This idea of God's eternal love for His people, that He had foreknown them from eternity, is the reason that we may be assured that His saving grace would be bestowed upon us. He loved us with an everlasting love so He saves us from our sin unto Himself. Paul was declaring in Romans 8:29f that it was because God foreknew us, He therefore predestined us, called us, justified us, and glorified us.

This matter is set forth beautifully in the form of prophecy in Jeremiah 31. Here we have a prophecy with respect to Israel. It is not "Israel" in that God is including all ethnic Jews, but rather it speaks of *a remnant of Jews* that God enabled to survive His judgment that He had brought upon them by Babylon. To them, this elect remnant, God declares that due to His everlasting love for them, He determined that He would save them unto Himself, ultimately through a new covenant. And so, this prophecy speaks of God enabling the Jews to return to the land from the Babylonian exile, and to them He would bring salvation. Jeremiah 31:1ff read:

"At the same time," says the LORD, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be My people." ²Thus says the LORD:

"The people who survived the sword
Found grace in the wilderness—
Israel, when I went to give him rest."

³The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying:

***"Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love;
Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.***

⁴Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt,
O virgin of Israel!
You shall again be adorned with your tambourines,
And shall go forth in the dances of those who rejoice.

⁵You shall yet plant vines on the mountains of Samaria;
The planters shall plant and eat them as ordinary food.

⁶For there shall be a day
When the watchmen will cry on Mount Ephraim,
'Arise, and let us go up to Zion,
To the LORD our God.'"

⁷For thus says the LORD:

"Sing with gladness for Jacob,
And shout among the chief of the nations;
Proclaim, give praise, and say,
'O LORD, save Your people,
The remnant of Israel!'

⁸Behold, I will bring them from the north country,
And gather them from the ends of the earth,
Among them the blind and the lame,

The woman with child
And the one who labors with child, together;
A great throng shall return there.
⁹They shall come with weeping,
And with supplications I will lead them.
I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters,
In a straight way in which they shall not stumble;
For I am a Father to Israel,
And Ephraim is My firstborn.

¹⁰“Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,
And declare it in the isles afar off, and say,
‘He who scattered Israel will gather him,
And keep him as a shepherd does his flock.’

¹¹For the LORD has redeemed Jacob,
And ransomed him from the hand of one stronger than he.

¹²Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion,
Streaming to the goodness of the LORD—
For wheat and new wine and oil,
For the young of the flock and the herd;
Their souls shall be like a well-watered garden,
And they shall sorrow no more at all.

¹³“Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance,
And the young men and the old, together;
For I will turn their mourning to joy,
Will comfort them,
And make them rejoice rather than sorrow.

¹⁴I will satiate the soul of the priests with abundance,
And My people shall be satisfied with My goodness, says the LORD.”

That this is a prophecy fulfilled in all of the elect, both Jews and Gentiles, can be easily shown. It is through the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, that all of these blessings are brought to His people. This can be seen through the very next verse after we had stopped reading, Jeremiah 31:15, in which the prophecy of the grieving Bethlehem after Herod had killed all of the infants of the region, having sought to kill the infant Savior. Jeremiah was prophesying of the salvation that Jesus Christ had brought to His people. But also later in Jeremiah 31:31ff we have the prophecy of the new covenant that Jesus Christ instituted with His people, the entire passage of Jeremiah 31:31-34 being quoted in Hebrews 8 and 10 as applying to all New Testament Christians.

If you are a Christian, or if one day you become a Christian, it is because God foreknew you. He loved you with an everlasting love, therefore He ordained all things that come to pass so as to secure your everlasting blessedness and your everlasting presence with Him and His people.

May the grand discovery of everlasting love be made by many of you for the first time in your lives! Oh, for the surprises of Almighty Grace! As when one in plowing stumbles on treasure hid in a field and rejoices exceedingly, even so may you rejoice in newly discovered love! Or if you know it already, may you feel its drawings for the thousandth time and may it be to you still fresh and new, as though you had never felt it before. The visits of God’s Grace and the discoveries of His love to our hearts never grow stale! We can go over this heavenly ground again and again and always behold

new glories in it! May an overpowering memory of the Lord's love come over us all at this time, by the power of the Holy Spirit!⁸

The love of God for His people is *an everlasting love*. The love of God for His people is eternal. It did not come into being in time. We love God, but it is due to the fact that He first loved us. He first loved us even before the foundation of the world. His love for His people was from eternity. We can say this with certainty because the Scriptures tell us that we enjoy the love of God that was in His Son from eternity. We read of this love in John 17:23 and 24, in which our Lord was speaking to His Father:

I in them, and You in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that You sent Me, and *have loved them as You have loved Me*. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.

Not only is the love of God for His own an everlasting love, but we see also that *the love of God for us is in accordance with His love for His own dear Son*. God loves us with the same love that He loves His Son. The Father loves Christ Jesus, which is the same love that He has toward His people. God's love for His people is an everlasting love. It is a love that moves God to draw effectually and save His chosen people. God's love for His people is of such a nature and to such a degree that He gives all for His own, even His own Son, so as to secure their everlasting well being. Because God loves His people, He saves them from sin and glorifies them before Him.

God's love for His people is seen in *God having elected them or chosen them to receive His salvation*. The ones whom the Father foreknew, had been *chosen* by Him. We may read of this in numbers of places, but let us look at the opening two verses of 1 Peter:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, *elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. (1 Pet. 1:1,2)

Note how Peter describes them. They were *chosen* of God because they were *foreknown* of God. God knew them, and therefore chose them to be recipients of His grace unto salvation. God the Father's choice of them was not due to any foreseen merit in them. The Bible nowhere says that God foresaw something good in us or some good thing that we would do and therefore chose us. That would give His people same basis of boasting of being better than others or of deserving His favor. No, God reveals just the opposite. This is stated quite clearly in **Ephesians 1:3, 4**,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ, just as He *chose* us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love...

God did not love us or choose us because we were holy and without blame. He loved us and therefore chose us to the end that we would become holy and without blame before Him in love.

We must close, but child of God, go forth from here with a renewed knowledge and comfort knowing that God has loved you with and everlasting love—He foreknew you. He loved you from eternity. Let us take to heart Spurgeon's words:

⁸ Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pilgrim's Publications), vol. 36, sermon #2149.

And when Jehovah says to you, a feeble woman, an unknown man, “I have loved you,” He means it. This is no fiction. God means by love what we mean by it—only His love is higher, deeper, fuller, holier than ours can ever be. Looking from His Throne, the insufferable light of which your eye could not endure, Jehovah speaks in accents of fervent affection and He says to you, “I have loved you.” Get hold of this Truth that God really loves you—that you are the object of the intense delight of the Host High—and what more would you have? God’s heart to you is Love! Be amazed. Be enraptured with this!...

Come, come! We must have no more hanging heads. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! If the Lord has loved me with an everlasting love, I will not be cast down though the earth is removed! His love is better than wealth! His love is better than health (great blessing as that is)! His love is better than honor, better than usefulness! Everlasting love—and you have it! Man alive, wipe the tears out of your eyes and lift up your head! “Oh, rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him,” for if He has loved you so, what have you to fear? What is to be done but to love Him in return who has loved us so much? One thing I know—

“All that remains for me
Is but to love and sing,
And wait until the angels come
To bear me to my King.”

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given *us* everlasting consolation and good hope by grace,¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work. (2 Thess. 2:16f)