

Sermon 2: The Doctrines of Grace: Unconditional Election

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.

Rom. 8:29-30, '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. ³⁰ And those

whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.'

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.'

Exegesis against foreseen faith

The argument of this passage goes something like this. God will finish the work He 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 eisogizing, 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.'