

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The Sovereignty of God and the Free Will of Man: Romans 8:28-30 and the Choice of Salvation

Submitted to Dr. Michael Chiavone, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course

THEO 525-B03
Systematic Theology I

by

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October 11, 2014

Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Need For This Study	2
Procedure.....	2
Historical-Cultural Context of Romans.....	2
The Occasion of Paul’s Letter.....	3
Literary Context of Romans 8	4
Meaning and Interpretation of Romans 8:28-30.....	5
Conclusion	10
Bibliography	11

Introduction

The apparent contradiction between predestination and human free will has been an internal debate within Christianity since the days of the early church. In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote one of the “best-known and best-loved”, yet one of the most misunderstood, passages in the New Testament.¹ Romans 8:28-30 states:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.²

Does this passage state that the Christian will live a life free from hardship? Does it show that God chose his elect and believers do not have a role in the choice of salvation? Does Romans 8:28-30 support the views of John Calvin or Jacobus Arminius? “It is well known, that both Calvin and Arminius have founded their respective doctrines on Predestination upon the common interpretation of the 28th, 29th, and 30th verses of the 8th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans.”³ This paper will show that Romans 8:28 actually points to a spiritual “good” and not a material or worldly good, and that verses 29-30 speak to a future state of glorification based on the certainty of the salvific work of Christ in the believer.

¹ Peter R. Rodgers "The Text of Romans 8: 28," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 46, no. 2 (October 1995): 547.

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

³ J. T. Christian, "On Predestination," *The Churchman's Biblical, Ecclesiastical and Literary Miscellany* 12, no. 3 (March 1830): 174.

The Need for The Study

This passage in Romans is one of the more challenging parts of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Some have asserted that verse 28 provides assurances that Christians will have lives that are, in the final analysis, free from trouble or hardship; while others find this passage difficult to accept. "During World War II a prominent preacher designated Romans 8:28 as 'the hardest verse in the Bible to believe'."⁴ Verses 29 and 30 have been used as support for hard determinism that removes individual accountability for the choice to accept Christ. Yet without the ability to chose, it seems humans are not truly free creatures. Clarity is needed here.

The Procedure of the Study

The Apostle Paul is perhaps the most well-known and most prolific New Testament writer. He authored ten of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, with three other books possibly being attributed to him. Paul's authorship of Romans is clearly established (Romans 1:1), thus an interpretation of Romans 8:28-30 will take into the context of Paul's overall style and use of language. This study will review the context and meaning of Romans 8:28-30. Through careful review of key scholarly books and journal articles, it will endeavor to uncover the correct interpretation of the passage. This will be accomplished by reviewing the occasion and historical context of Paul's letter, the context of the verses in question, and an examination and understanding of the original, intended meaning of the text.

Historical-Cultural Context of Romans

The city of Rome was the capital of the Roman Empire. Located on the western side of the Italian Peninsula near the Mediterranean Sea, it was one of the most important cities of the

⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, "Romans 8: 28-29 and the Assurance of the Believer," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148, no. 590 (April 1991): 171.

first century, and a seat of culture and power. Judaism had spread to Rome, and there was a Jewish presence there as early as the second century BC.⁵ By the mid-first century, the Christian church in Rome comprised both Jewish and Gentile believers.⁶ In the opening and closing passages of Paul's letter, he seems to be addressing Gentile believers (1:6, 15:15-15); however, in parts of the body he seems to be addressing a Jewish audience with his comments about the law (2:17, 7:1).⁷ Clearly, Paul was writing to a culturally diverse community of Christian believers. Some came from a Jewish background, while others came from the pagan, polytheistic world of Roman theology.

The Occasion of Paul's Letter

The Apostle Paul “spent the ten years from AD 47 to 57 in the intensive evangelization of the territories east and west of the Aegean Sea.”⁸ It was during this, his third-missionary journey, that Paul penned the text of Romans. He most likely wrote it sometime in the spring of 57 AD while he was in Corinth.⁹ “Romans was Paul's last letter written before his prolonged period of detention, first in Caesarea and then in Rome.”¹⁰ Paul expressed a desire to visit the believers in Rome (1:11-12; 15:23-24), and he seemed to have a personal connection to some of them. Some of these may have been Christians whom Paul had met in other cities during other missionary journeys who were now living in Rome.¹¹ In his closing (chapter 16), Paul greeted many of these believers by name. Some of them “were very early Christians, like Andronicus and

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Romans: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 16.

⁶ Bruce, *Romans*, 17.

⁷ Frank J. Matera, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 7.

⁸ Bruce, *Romans*, 13.

⁹ Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 1705.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Romans*, 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

Junias...who, as Paul says, were ‘in Christ’ before himself and were well known in apostolic circles and may, indeed, been reckoned as apostles themselves (16:7).”¹² In 15:25-28, Paul explains that cannot visit the church because he has to first deliver a contribution from Macedonia and Achaia to the poor in Jerusalem. Thus he sends the letter in advance of a planned visit to Rome in conjunction with his travels to Spain (15:28).

Literary Context of Romans 8

Romans is the longest of Paul’s letters and “the first of the Pauline Letters in the NT...it’s placement is well deserved since it is the most detailed presentation of Paul’s gospel, and since it has influenced the course of Christian theology more than any other writing of the NT.”¹³ The overall context of Romans is Paul’s proclamation of “his gospel of God’s righteousness.”¹⁴ Perhaps because of his unfamiliarity with the church at Rome, Paul spends a great deal of his writing speaking of his own circumstances instead of writing about the circumstances of the believers in Rome. Preceding chapter 8, Paul writes about the sinful, unrighteous nature of humanity; God’s judgment on humanity for sin; and the righteousness believers have through Christ. Overall, “Romans 8 should not be read not as the next step in expounding the ‘inner logic of the gospel’ but as a continuation of the dialogue between the apostle and his critics—or more accurately, between him and a community in which is critics were on one side of a polarizing dispute about him.”¹⁵

¹² Bruce, *Romans*, 18.

¹³ Matera, *Romans*, 3.

¹⁴ Bruce, *Romans*, 24.

¹⁵ Richard J. Dillon, "The Spirit as Taskmaster and Troublemaker in Romans 8," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (October 1998): 690.

Chapter 8 opens with the often quoted passage "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Paul writes of the conflicts between those who "live according to the flesh" and those who "live in accordance with the Spirit" (8:5). The first half of chapter 8 is a great theological discourse on the nature of believers who are "in the Spirit." In verse 18, Paul provides an important clue to interpreting later verses. Here he asserts that believers' "present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that *will be* revealed in us" (emphasis added). This forward-looking view of suffering is important to keep in mind.

Meaning and Interpretation of Romans 8:28-30

These three verses are extremely important in the overall context of chapter 8. "Verses 28-30 form a kind of climax to the teaching in verses 18-27, while verses 31-39 form a concluding paean of praise celebrating the redemption in Christ, delineated in the first eight chapters of Romans, as establishing a bond of love that can never be broken."¹⁶ Verse 28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." The first phrase, "and we know" is the Greek word οἶδα or *eidó*, which can be defined as "to know by perception, to be aware, be sure."¹⁷ Another key phrase is "God works for the good." The New American Standard Bible (NASB) renders verse 28 as, "And we know that God causes all things *to work together* for good..." The phrase "to work together" is from the Greek word *συνεργέω* or *sunergeó*, which means to be a "fellow worker."¹⁸ It is also rendered accurately in the NASB and the New English Translation (NET) as "to work together." Here, Paul is saying that as believers we can have confidence, or be sure,

¹⁶ Hiebert, *Romans*, 172.

¹⁷ James Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible Red Letter Edition, with Greek Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), Greek Dictionary Reference 1492.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Greek Dictionary Reference, 4903.

that God is working within our circumstance (all things). Next, the word “good” is the Greek word *ἀγαθός* or *agathós*, which “as an adjective, describes that which, being ‘good’ in its character or constitution, is beneficial in its effect.”¹⁹ In this context, “good denotes the goal of the divine working, but the verb does not indicate when or how soon that goal is attained.”²⁰ What is important here is that “Paul’s assertion must not be taken to mean that all things automatically work for the good of all people.”²¹ The working of the good is “for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (NET).” Here, “purpose” is from the Greek *πρόθεσις* or *prothesis*.²² By this, we can understand that God’s working for good applies only to those who are called by God (e.g.: Christian believers). God does not work in the lives of those who do not know him or who have rejected him. That being said, it should also be understood that Paul does not mean “all things that come into believers’ lives are in themselves ‘good’. Nor did Paul mean that everything believers experience is God’s will for them.”²³ Certainly, there are a great many unfortunate, even evil, things that happen in the believer’s life. We should not expect to have lives free from calamity or suffering. Christ himself said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit, and “the suffering of believers in the present situation is, accordingly, the result of their possession of the Spirit as first fruits and does not belie it.”²⁴

19 Ibid., Greek Dictionary Reference, 18.

20 Hiebert, *Romans*, 176.

21 Hiebert, *Romans*, 174.

22 Strong, Greek Dictionary Reference, 4286.

23 Hiebert, *Romans*, 174.

24 Dillon, "The Spirit as Taskmaster", 699.

So what are we to make of the word “good?” If this does not mean a worldly, physical good, to what kind of “good” is Paul referring? Recall in verse 18, Paul writes, “that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that *will be revealed* in us.” This future tense statement shows that the sufferings the believer experiences in this life will be eclipsed by the glory experienced in the next life. The “good” of Romans 8:28 is speaking to the ultimate transformation of the believer in the glory that will be found (revealed) in eternal life with Christ in heaven. This is the ultimate “good” that God works in the believer. God, in his infinite wisdom is able to take the circumstances of this life (all things) and use them to help bring about the believer’s transformation into a Christ-like character. In His infinite wisdom He knows what is needed to bring about that transformation.”²⁵

Continuing in verse 29, Paul writes, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” The Greek word for “foreknew” *προγινώσκω* or *proginóskō* used here means, “to know beforehand, to foresee” or often as a “divine foreknowledge.”²⁶ The word for “predestined” is *προορίζω* or *proorizó*. This word also means, “to mark out beforehand” or “predestinate.”²⁷ “The second verb, ‘He also predestined’...records God's activity on behalf of Christians; the action also relates to the eternal past but looks forward to what He wanted to achieve with them.”²⁸ It is important to note that here Paul uses two different words with similar meanings: foreknew and predestined. The word *proorizó* is also used in 1 Corinthians 2:7, where Paul writes, “No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined

25 Hiebert, *Romans*, 182.

26 Strong, Greek Dictionary Reference, 4267.

27 Ibid., 4309.

28 Hiebert, *Romans*, 180.

(*proorizó*) for our glory before time began.” Romans 8:29 is saying that God knew, from before the beginning of time, those who would accept Christ; and for those who did so, it was their destiny that God would confirm them to the image of Christ. “The noun πρόθεσιν [*prothesis*] (literally, "an act of setting forth") here denotes God's pretemporal purpose, which is now working in and through history and moving toward the accomplishment of His intended goal.”²⁹

Verse 30 concludes the passage with, “And those he predestined, he also called those he called, he also justified, those he justified, he also glorified.” Paul again uses *proorizó* (predestined). Recall in verse 29, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son.” Following the calling, God then justifies and then he glorifies. The Greek for “justified” is *δικαιόω* or *dikaioó*, which “as a verb, means primarily ‘to deem to be right’ and signifies, in the NT, ‘to show to be right or righteous’.”³⁰ Thus, verse 30 is an extension of verse 29 and is essentially saying, those God predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, God also called to be believers; and those he called to be believers he counted them to be righteous (through Christ); and those he counted to be righteous, he will glorify in heaven.

The foreknowing and predestination of God raises an important question. Does this “knowing” mean that God “decided” who would accept Christ and who would not? Do humans have free will to choose salvation, or does God do the “choosing” for those he elects? This is the core of the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism, and these are the two broad views on the meaning of “foreknew” as Paul uses it in Romans 8. While a complete examination of this debate is beyond the scope of this study, there are a few points that can be made here.

²⁹ Hiebert, *Romans*, 178.

³⁰ Strong, Greek Dictionary Reference, 1344.

“The doctrine of election is often considered the central dogma of Reformed [Calvinism] theology.”³¹ Calvinists believe that Paul is teaching “that God set His heart upon (i.e., foreknew) certain individuals; these He predestined or marked out to be saved.”³² Thus “predestination” essentially “emphasizes the truth that God has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), which [is also linked] with the teaching that Christ as Lamb of God was slain before the foundation of the world.”³³ In contrast, the Arminian view is that “foreknew” means “that God knew beforehand which sinners would believe, etc., and on the basis of this knowledge He predestined them unto salvation.”³⁴ In other words, God knew (foreknew) who would accept the gift of salvation. Therefore, he ordered the world in such a way, through his perfect knowledge of the innumerable possible combinations of free choices that humans could make, such that those who he knew would accept Christ would have the freedom, or free will, to do so. This idea of free will is “in general human beings who have reached the age of reason, and who are not suffering from severe mental or emotional disturbance, by nature have free will with respect to their attitudes and to actions which are in their power, which they are able to think about.”³⁵ This means that humans truly have freedom to choose for or against a certain action. True free will has to satisfy the “CDO condition—or ‘could have done otherwise’.”³⁶ In order to be free to select one option over another, the person must have been able to freely choose another alternative. Regardless of where one stands on the Calvinism vs. Arminianism debate, it is

31 Myk Habets, "The Doctrine of Election in Evangelical Calvinism: T. F. Torrance as a Case Study," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (October 2008): 334.

32 David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2004), Appendix I.

33 Habets, “The Doctrine of Election”, 336.

34 Steele and Thomas, Appendix I.

35 John Cowburn, *Free Will, Predestination, and Determinism* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 17-18.

36 The author first learned of this concept from Gregory Koukl, of the apologetics ministry Stand to Reason.

important to note that “because election is bound up with Christ, it must not be thought of in any impersonal or deterministic sense.”³⁷ God is a personal being. Humans are created in the image of God, and God loves each and every human being. It seems, therefore, that God does not arbitrarily pick and choose who receives the gift of salvation, but rather God simply knows the decisions humans would have made, and orders the world accordingly to accomplish the greatest possible good (e.g.: greatest number of those who are saved).

Conclusion

Romans 8 is one of the most theologically rich chapters in Paul’s letter. In examining verses 28-30 there are some obvious conclusions. The “good” that God works in the believer’s life relates to God’s purpose for his children, which “is their conformity to the image of His Son.”³⁸ Since this conformity will not have its full realization in the life of the believer until salvation, it should be clear that this “good” is not a temporal or worldly good, but points to the future glory of heaven and eternity with Christ. In Paul’s conclusion in Romans 8:28-30 “and the lyrical *tour-de-force* of 8:31-39, [he] brings his defense of the authenticity of his message of salvation to closure.”³⁹ Herein, Paul provides the believer with the great assurance of the faithfulness of God, who works in all circumstances to bring about the changes necessary for the believer to be confirmed to the likeness of Christ. Whether the circumstances are good or ill, Christians can find trust and assurance in God’s love. “The assurance expressed in Romans 8:28-29 is not a logical deduction of cold reason but rather an inner conviction of the believing heart wrought by the Holy Spirit on the basis of Scripture and verified in personal experience.”⁴⁰

37 Habets, “The Doctrine of Election”, 337.

38 Hiebert, *Romans*, 180.

39 Dillon, “The Spirit as Taskmaster”, 701.

40 Heiber, *Romans*, 170.

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