

PFRS Commentary

Romans 8:28-30

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Romans 8:28-30 NKJV

28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Because Calvinists rely so heavily on this passage as one of their primary proof texts, it deserves our careful analysis. Our approach requires a careful analysis of the context, the grammar, the historical setting, and any precedent available from the earliest Christian writers.

According to Calvinists, from “predestination” to “glorification,” everything related to our salvation is determined and performed by God. Nothing man does can in any way affect his eternal destiny. All those “predestined” will also be “called.” All those “called” will also be “justified.” All those “justified” will also be “glorified.” None of those “predestined” will fail to be “glorified” in the end. Therefore, man’s will and response to God cannot be a determining factor regarding his salvation. To many Calvinists, this passage settles the issue decisively.

While their argument from this passage appears solid on the surface, we will demonstrate that it is not consistent with the grammatical, historical, contextual method of interpreting the Scriptures. It is flawed in its handling of the context as well as the grammar.

To discover Paul’s meaning, it is necessary to understand the purpose of this passage in the overall context. What was Paul’s primary point here? Was it to lay out a theological defense of Calvinism? Was it to offer a glimpse into the secret workings of the will of God? Or was it something much more practical? The

context shows plainly that Paul's point was the encouragement of believers during severe persecution. This passage is about "hope" during the most difficult persecution, and looking past the present difficulty to the assurance of an inheritance in Christ's Kingdom. We therefore would expect verses 28-30 to follow the flow of Paul's logic.

Verse 28. "And we know" (οἰδαμεν δε οτι...) "But we have observed that..."

28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (NKJV)

28 But we have observed that, for those loving God, everything works together unto good, for those who are being called according to His purpose. (my translation)

The verb, rendered "we know" in the NKJV and "we have observed" in my translation is a perfect active indicative form of the verb meaning "to observe and therefore perceive."¹ The perfect tense indicates past completed action with continuous results. Literally, "we have observed" (and therefore we know). The knowledge is the result of past observation. It is not something intuitive.

The word "that" is "οτι," a demonstrative conjunction, usually introducing the answer to the question "what." When we see "οτι" we are prompted to ask "what?" (In this case, "What have we observed?"). The answer is given in the remainder of the verse. Everything works together for the good of those loving God. This is what we have observed by experience.

Verse 29. "For whom..." (οτι ους...) "because those..."

Verse 29 begins with "οτι." In addition to answering the question "what," "οτι" frequently introduces the reason behind what was just stated. Essentially, this answers the question, "why." A good translation would be "because."

But we have observed [knowledge gained by observation] οτι [what have we observed? Answer:] for those loving God, everything works together unto good, for those who are being called according to His purpose, οτι [why or how have we observed this?] because those He knew previously, He also previously ordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.

In verses 29-30, Paul pointed to **historical cases** in support his claim in verse 28 that we have “observed” God’s working everything for the good of those who love Him. Remember, Paul was encouraging his readers during persecution to place their hope in the future resurrection and inheritance, and that God was at work in them even in their present situation. So, it is natural that he would offer some assessment from history to support this fact.

Verses 29-30 do not offer a theological argument, or insight into God’s secret purposes. Rather, they offer historical demonstration of what Paul and his readers had indeed observed. God works for the good of those who love Him. And how did Paul come to this conclusion? Because ...

“For whom He foreknew...” (οὓς προέγνω) **“those He knew previously...”**

Paul was not referring to some kind of mystical “foreknowledge” of God before creation, or predestination of individuals before they were born. He was referring to those, in ages past, whom God knew personally and intimately, like Abraham, Moses, and David. The term “foreknew” does not mean to have knowledge of someone before they were conceived. The verb “προέγνω” is the word for “know” (in the intimate sense) with the preposition “προ” (before) prefixed to it. It refers to knowing and communing with someone in the past. This meaning is confirmed by the use of the same verb in the following passage.

Acts 26:4-5

4 “My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know.

5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Paul meant that they knew him previously as a Pharisee, not that they had mystical foreknowledge of him before he was born! Literally, we could render Rom. 8:29 as follows: “For those God knew intimately previously, He previously determined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” The individual saints of old, with whom God had a personal covenant relationship, were predestined by Him to be conformed to the image of Christ. That is, God predetermined to bring their salvation to completion by the sacrifice of Christ on their behalf. This is precisely what Hebrews 9:15 indicates. “And for this reason He [Jesus] is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that **those who are called** may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

Notice the use of the term “called” in reference to these people who lived under the “first covenant.” And Paul used the same word “called” regarding his historical examples in Romans 8:29.

These people whom God had “called,” with whom He had a personal, intimate, covenant relationship, He predetermined that they should be confirmed to the image of Christ, even though they lived long before Christ was born. God called, justified, and glorified them by providing salvation for them through the work of Christ many centuries later.

In Romans 11:2, Paul used the term “foreknew” again in reference to God’s past interaction and covenant relationship with the faithful remnant of Israel. *“I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of **the seed of Abraham**, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He **foreknew**.”* This “foreknowledge” refers exclusively to God’s intimate relationship with His covenant people in the past. It has nothing to do with a mystical premonition or predetermination before one is born.

Past Tense Verbs προεγνων, προωρισεν, εκαλεσεν, εδικαιωσεν, εδοξασεν

The fatal mistake Calvinists make is failing to notice that these verbs in verse 29 are all in the past tense, including “glorified.” The Greek words translated “foreknew” (προεγνων), “predestinated” (προωρισεν), “called” (εκαλεσεν), “justified” (εδικαιωσεν), and “glorified” (εδοξασεν), are all aorist indicative verbs. They describe **historical events**, not present or future realities.

Some Calvinists might argue that they are past tense grammatically because these things are so certain, it is as though they are all already accomplished. But, this is forcing the grammar. It is a well known device in Greek to use the present tense regarding future events when something is being portrayed as absolutely certain, (cf. Hebrews 12:28). But this does not normally apply to the use of the past tense (aorist indicative).² All of the things Paul mentioned were already past, including the “glorification” of those whom God foreknew, predestined, called, and justified.³

Some might argue that being “glorified” is beyond what Christ has already accomplished for the Old Testament saints, and can therefore only refer to the future resurrection of the saints. Let’s not forget that Matthew’s Gospel records the bodily resurrection of “many” of the saints at Jesus’ own resurrection. These are most likely the “fathers,” Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and perhaps Moses, those

God Himself had appeared to and communed with throughout the Old Testament. In other words, those He “foreknew.” *“Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.”* (Matt 27:51-53).

Even if this resurrection is not what Paul had in mind when he wrote of the past “glorification” of the saints, the New Testament indicates that “glorification” is something that is ongoing now, not limited to the resurrection of the body. Jesus was said to be “glorified” through performing good works (John 11:4), through His crucifixion (John 12:23 & 13:31), and in the fruit He produced in His disciples (John 17:10). Christians are glorified through understanding the mystery of the Gospel (1 Cor. 7-10), and are progressively being glorified by the sanctifying power of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:7-11 esp. v. 18).

2 Cor. 3:18

18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

It is through the sanctification process, produced by the Spirit, that believers are currently being “glorified.” That process will conclude when we have finished the race. Ultimately, glorification will culminate in the resurrection, when we will “appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4).

Paul’s point in Romans 8:28-30 was that God’s history in His dealings with the fathers is adequate proof that He was committed to the Roman believers who were undergoing severe persecution for the cause of Christ. That we will all be glorified together at the return of Christ (Rom. 8:17) in no way implies that we are not now being glorified, nor that the saints of the Old Testament have never been “glorified.” They have been glorified through their own sanctification process, and through the death of Christ on their behalf (applied retroactively – Heb. 9:15). Their sanctification is now complete. Many of them have already been resurrected, perhaps all those with whom God had personally communed face to face. The rest await our sanctification so that we may all be glorified together (Heb. 11:39-40).

Calvinism's "proof text" fails to support its major premise when we are careful to interpret it grammatically, historically, and contextually. It now remains for us to demonstrate a historical link between our interpretation and the early Church.

The Early Church

Exactly how the early Church understood this passage is difficult to say with any certainty, since no Ante Nicene writer seem to have commented on its interpretation. However, there was a definite consensus, from the time of the Apostles until the fourth century, that man had a free will and that his free response to the Gospel ultimately determined his destiny.⁴

John Chrysostom's commentary (AD 400) is the earliest exposition of this passage of which we are aware. His view agrees with ours regarding the emphasis of the context, and the use of Old Testament examples to demonstrate God's working all things to the good of those who love Him. He also viewed the "glorification" as being something already demonstrated in the past.

"Doubt not then about the future. For he showeth even upon other grounds His concern for us by saying, that things were foreordered in this way from the beginning. For men have to derive from things their conceptions about them, but to God these things have been long determined upon, and from of old He bare goodwill toward us, he says. "Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified." Now He justified them [past tense third person] by the regeneration of the laver. "And whom He justified, them He also glorified" by the gift, by the adoption [something already bestowed upon Israel, cf. Rom. 9:4] ... See how really no one is against us! For it was this which gave new luster to Job, the fact that the devil was in arms against him. For the devil moved at once friends against him, his wife against him, and wounds, and servants, and a thousand other machinations. And it turned out that none of them was against him on the whole. And yet this was no great thing to him, though it was great in itself, but what is a far greater thing is, that it turned out that they were all for him. For since God was for him, even things seemingly against him all became for him. And this happened with the Apostles also, inasmuch as both the Jews, and they of the Gentiles, and false brethren, and rulers, and peoples, and famines, and poverty, and ten thousand things were against them; and yet nothing was against them." (Chrysostom, Homily XV).

It is apparent that John Chrysostom believed Paul was referring to past examples when He wrote that God has predestined, called, justified, and glorified, those whom he knew previously. Consistency with the context, the grammatical historical method, and early Church precedent, provides us with considerable confidence in our exposition of this critical passage. Calvinists are not as careful in their exegesis, and their conclusion is not to be trusted.

Notes:

1. Thayer's Greek Lexicon, #1492

2. Wallace (GGBB p. 564) argues for a category he calls "proleptic aorist," in which he claims, "the aorist indicative can be used to describe an event that is not yet past as though it were already completed." He adds, "but this usage is not at all common." He offers Mark 11:24, John 13:31, Rom. 8:30, and Rev. 10:7, as examples. But, his examples do not require this understanding except where the context transports the reader into the future, as in Mark 11:24, and Rev. 10:7. That is certainly not the case in Rom. 8:30. One would have to force a theological construct onto the passage in order to support this usage here.

3. Additionally, Wallace (GGBB p. 562) argues for a category he calls the "gnomic aorist" "...to present a timeless general fact." He adds, "this usage is quite rare in the NT." Even if Rom. 8:29 uses the "gnomic aorist" (something that occurs, rather than something that has occurred), the sense would be no different than what we have stated, because this knowledge is based on observation of consistent past patterns. The perfect tense of the verb "we have observed" already transports the reader into the past to ascertain exactly what has been observed. So, even with a "gnomic aorist," Paul was describing what has always occurred in the past based on past observation. Therefore, even the "glorification" must be something that has been observed previously.

4. Clement of Rome, Epistle to the Corinthians, XI; Epistle of Barnabas, IV; Justin, First Apology, XLIII; Justin Second Apology, VII; Justin, Dialogue with Trypho, 102,141; Justin, On the Sole Government of God, VI; Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. IV, 37; Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. V, XXVII; Tatian, Address to the Greeks, XI; Tertullian, Against Marcion, Bk. II, ch. vi, xxv; Tertullian, On Monogamy, XIV; Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, Bk. I, viii; Origen, De Principis, Preface; Origen, Bk. II ch. I; Hippolytus, Against all Heresies, Bk. X, ch. xxix; Novatian, Trinity, ch. I; Archelaus, The Acts of the Disputation; Alexander, Banquet of the Ten Virgins, Discourse VIII, ch. xii; Lactantius, Divine Institutes, Bk. II, ch. xv.