

XVIII. Inseparable from Christ

May 24/25/26, 2016

Romans 8:28-39

Aim: To have assurance in our salvation unto glorification, which was predestined by God the Father, purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ, and guaranteed by the seal of the Holy Spirit.

A. The Golden Chain (Romans 8:28-30)

1. The Sovereignty of God (8:28)

For Christians, this verse contains perhaps the most glorious promise in Scripture. It is breathtaking in its magnitude, encompassing absolutely *everything* that pertains to a believer's life.

This verse is connected to what precedes it: in this time of suffering and expectation (vv. 18-25), the Spirit helps us by interceding for us (vv. 26-27), *and*, by God's providence, 'all things work together for good.'

Confidence in the sovereignty of God in dire circumstances is one of the fundamentals of the faith. It is one thing –and very necessary – to assent to the great historical facts of the gospel as touching the birth of Christ, His miracles, atoning death, resurrection from the dead, and return in glory. But confidence in God's sovereign goodness in the midst of a baffling and painful providence is equally important, if not more so. Yet as we actively trust Him in those circumstances we share in His kingly rule during the 'not yet' times ahead of the Last Day.

a) *God's Providence (8:28a)*

²⁸*And we know that ... all things work together for good,,,*

(1) 'And We Know That

In the context of the truths that follow in Romans 8, the three words 'and we know' express the Christian's absolute certainty of eternal security in the Holy Spirit. Paul is not expressing his personal intuitions of opinions but is setting forth the inerrant truth of God's Word. As believers in Jesus Christ, 'we know' beyond all doubt that every aspect of our lives is in God's hands and will be divinely used by the Lord not only to manifest His own glory but also to work out or own ultimate blessing.

(2) 'All Things'

'...that God causes all things to work together for God.' Paul emphasizes that God Himself brings about the good that comes to His people. This magnificent promise does not operate through impersonal statements, but requires divine action to fulfill. 'All things' is utterly comprehensive, having no qualifications or limits. Neither this verse nor its context allows for restrictions or conditions. 'All things' is inclusive in the fullest possible sense. Paul is not saying that God prevents His children from experiencing things that can harm them. He is rather attesting that the Lord takes all that He allows to happen to His beloved children, even the worst things, and turns those things ultimately into blessings.

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It is important to insist that ‘all things’ do not tend toward good in and of themselves, as if Paul held to a ‘naively optimistic’ interpretation of history. Rather, it is the sovereign guidance of God that is presumed as the undergirding and directing force behind all the events of life. This being so, it does not finally matter all that much whether we translate ‘all things work together for good’ or ‘God is working in and through all things for good.’

(3) ‘Work Together’

‘To work together’ translates *sunergeō*, from which is derived the English *synergism*, the working together of various elements to produce an effect greater than, and often completely different from, the sum of each element acting separately. Contrary to what the King James rendering seems to suggest, it is not that things in themselves work together to produce good. As Paul has made clear earlier in the verse, it is God’s providential power and will, not a natural synergism of circumstances and events in our lives, that cases them ‘to work together for good.’

Not all things are good. Paul is not an illusionist who says there is no such thing as evil, but he does say that all things are working together for good; that is, the ultimate purpose is a good purpose. In the meantime, even though evil befalls and afflicts us such evil is working for our good. The Greek word Paul uses here is *sunergeō*, from which we get the word *synergy*. A work of synergy, or synergism, is a cooperative venture. When two or more parties work together on a task we say that there is synergy involved in the activity, a working together. That is the word Paul uses to describe the way in which God’s providence works with our afflictions for good.

(4) ‘For Good’

What is the meaning of ‘good’? Many interpreters insist that it has a very specific meaning in this context: eschatological glory. While Paul’s focus is on this completion of our salvation, we should probably include in the word those ‘good’ things in this life that contribute to that final salvation and sustain us on the path to that salvation. Certainly Paul does not mean that the evil experienced by believers in this life will always be reversed, turned into ‘good.’ For many things that we suffer will contribute to our ‘good’ only by refining our faith and strengthening our hope. In any case, we must be careful to define ‘good’ in God’s terms, not ours. The idea that this verse promises material wealth or physical well being, for instance, betrays a typically Western perversion of ‘good’ into an exclusively material interpretation. The promise to us is that there is nothing in this world that is not intended by God to assist us on our earthly pilgrimage and to bring us safely and certainly to the glorious destination of that pilgrimage.

Paul likely has in mind our ‘good’ during this present life as well as ultimately in the life to come. No matter what happens in our lives as His children, the providence of God uses it for our temporal as well as our eternal benefit.

Romans 8:28 does not mean, as is commonly thought, that ‘everything will turn out okay in this life.’ It means, rather, that everything will work out for our ultimate good. These words have our eternal rather than our temporal good in mind. The specific good will be seen when we are glorified as we are conformed to the image of Christ. The Christian should not view present distresses and reversals as ultimately destructive. In some manner they are preparing us for the future revelation of God’s glory.

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b) *God's People (8:28b)*

...for those who love God ,, for those who are called...

Romans 8:28 is one of the Bible verses that everyone seems to know and everyone seems to misquote. People will often just sort of shrug their shoulders with an attitude of fatalism and say, 'Oh, well, all things work together for good,' implying that this applies to all people, no matter who they are or what they believe. This is exactly what this verse does not say. There is a limitation. All things do work together for good, but only for a certain group. The group this principle works for is those who 'love God' and who are 'the called according to His purpose.'

The only qualification in the marvelous promise of this verse has to do with the recipients. It is solely for His children that God promises to work everything for good. There are two parallel descriptions of those for whom 'all things work for good.' 'Those who love God' and 'those who are called' are two of the many titles or descriptions the New Testament uses of Christians. From the human perspective we are 'those who love God,' whereas from God's perspective we are 'those who are called.'

Notice the limitation that Paul gives here: God's working all things together for good is not for the benefit of everybody. Rather, all things are working together for good 'to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.' The drama of concurrence of synergy, whereby God is making all things work together for good, is simply for those who love Him. Obviously that does not include everybody, because the vast majority of mankind lives and dies at enmity with God.

(1) Human Viewpoint

First, Paul describes the recipients of eternal security as 'those who love God.' Nothing more characterizes the true believer than genuine love for God. Redeemed people love the gracious God who has saved them.

First, they are 'those who love God.' Loving God is therefore a qualification for the enjoyment of the promise of this verse, but it is a qualification met by all who belong to Christ. In other words, Paul does not intend to suggest that the promise 'all things work for good' ceases to have validity for a Christian who is not loving God enough. 'Loving God' sums up the basic inner direction of *all* Christians – but *only* of Christians.

This is the call to true faith of those who are already 'children of God' and who live in the painful intermediate time between their baptism into Christ and the arrival of the coming age. Like others in this age, 'those who love God' suffer within the birth-death cycle that enslaves humanity. Unlike others, however, they suffer the additional pain in sharing the rejection of their Lord.

(2) Divine Viewpoint

The second description of those to whom this promise applies looks at our relationship to God from its other, divine, side. While we must not play one of these descriptions off against the other – for both are important – it is nevertheless clear, from vv. 29-30, that this second clause contains the real reason why Christians can know that 'all things work together for good.' 'Those who are called' describes Christians not as the recipients of an invitation that was up to them to accept or reject, but as the objects of God's effectual summoning of them to become the recipients of His grace.

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Second, Paul describes the recipients of eternal security as ‘those who are called.’ Just as our love originates with God, so does our calling into His heavenly family. In every way, the initiative and provision for salvation are God’s. Paul explains the meaning of ‘those who are called’ in the following two verses (29-30), where he speaks of what theologians often refer to as God’s effectual call. In this sense, *all* ‘those who are called’ are chosen and redeemed by God and are ultimately glorified. They are securely predestined by God to be His children and to be conformed to the image of His Son. Believers have never been called on the basis of their works or for their own purposes. Believers are not saved on the basis of who they are or what they have done but solely on the basis of who God is and what He has done.

In this verse, Romans 8:28, assurance is given to those who love God, and those who love God are identified as the ones who are the called according to His purpose. Some say that ‘those who are called’ is referring to those who respond positively to the preaching of the gospel. It is a nice theory, but it is not what the apostle is saying. Paul is defining those who love God as the ones ‘who are the called according to God’s purpose.’

In almost every instance where the Bible speaks of the call of God, it is speaking of what we call the ‘effectual call.’ *Effectual calling* is a term that describes the fact that what God calls forth occurs; what He purposes to effect by His call is effected. It started with creation. When God called the world into existence *ex nihilo*, it was not an invitation. God did not plead with the darkness to produce light. He did not woo the universe to come into being. When God in His omnipotent power said, ‘Let there be light,’ that call was always and everywhere effectual. What God purposes in whatever call He gives, that purpose can never be frustrated because God is God. Nothing—no darkness, emptiness, threat of chaos, or sinful disposition—can ultimately resist the power of His call because His grace in the call is irresistible.

It is not that we lack the capacity to resist. Our whole lives demonstrate that we can and do resist grace. *Irresistible grace* means that even though we resist with all our might, God’s grace trumps our resistance and brings to pass what His eternal plan has been and is. When we talk about ‘the called’ or ‘the elect,’ we mean those who have been summoned not only outwardly but also inwardly by the Spirit, who changes the disposition of their hearts and effects the transformation of their souls—the resurrection from spiritual death to spiritual life. If we are believers today, it is not because we made God’s call effectual in our lives; it is because God did. We were called according to His purpose.

c) *God’s Purpose (8:28c)*

...according to his purpose.

What is a purpose? A purpose is a desired end, a planned consequence. When we set forth our goals and articulate our purposes, our plans are fallible at best. We know the best-laid plans of mice and men can go astray. Fortunately, the poet Robert Burns was talking only about the plans of mice and men; he did not include God in that category, because the best-laid plans of God never come to naught.

This calling takes place ‘in accordance with and on the basis of God’s purpose.’ Paul adds ‘according to [God’s] purpose’ to ‘those who are called’ to indicate that God’s summons of believers was issued with a particular purpose, or plan, in mind – that believers should become like Christ and share in His glory. And it is because this is God’s plan for us who are called and who, thereby, love God, that we can be certain that all things will contribute toward ‘good’ – the realization of this plan in each of our cases.

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At the end of verse 28, Paul states the source of the believer's security in Christ. God causes all things to work together for the good of His children because that is 'according to His [divine] purpose.' Although the Greek text does not contain the term for 'His,' that meaning is clearly implied in the context and is reflected in most translations. Paul expands on and clarifies in verses 29-30 the meaning of God's purpose, namely, His divine plan to save those who He has called and 'predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son' (v. 29). The focus is on God's sovereign plan of redemption, which He ordained before the foundation of the earth.

Tragedies are on our minds every day, but what Romans 8:28 teaches is that ultimately—not proximately but ultimately—there are no tragedies for the Christian. Tragedy now is blessing later. In every tragedy we experience, God is working with it, molding it and shaping it, for our eternal blessedness. The tragic ephemeral and temporary. It is in the world but never permanent. The other side of the coin is this: for the unbeliever who persists in his unbelief, every blessing he receives from the hand of God in this life is ultimately working for his damnation. Every blessing the impenitent person ungratefully receives from the hands of God adds more sin to that depository of sin that Paul mentioned earlier (2:5-6). Every blessing that goes unthanked, unacknowledged, and unappreciated by the pagan will end up as a tragedy for the ungrateful one.

2. The Soteriology of God (8:29-30)

In verses 29-30 Paul spells out the 'purpose,' or 'plan' of God. At the same time, however, he also states the ultimate ground for the promise of v. 29 and for the assurance that has been his theme throughout this chapter. The realization of God's 'purpose' in individual believers is the bedrock of the 'hope of glory.'

Our immense confidence in everything that happens to us working out for every believer's eternal good rests on the certainty of our redemption, which began before time with God's foreknowledge and will end beyond time with our glorification. This certainty is described in verses 29-30 in what commentators have called 'the golden chain.' Notice that the emphasis is on God doing everything.

a) *The Progress of Salvation (8:29ab, 30)*

Paul expositors God's plan in a series of parallel clauses, in which he repeats key verbs as a way of connecting them closely together. He thereby creates what has been called a 'golden chain' and has furnished theologians throughout the history of the church with rich material for the construction of a doctrine of soteriology – particularly for its earliest (predestination) and latest (perseverance) stages.

If you have been called by God (v. 28), if you have believed in Him, you can rest in the assurance that He has predestined you for complete salvation. He has justified you. Right now He is sanctifying you, beginning the process of conforming you to the image of Christ. And one day He will glorify you.

This is called the Golden Chain because several links are bound together. First is foreknowledge, which is followed by predestination. We find calling next, then justification, and finally glorification. In theology, we talk about something called the *ordo salutis*, which is Latin for 'the order of salvation.' There are several aspects to the *ordo salutis*, but Paul does not mention all of the here. He does not mention sanctification, which follows justification.

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Justification, sanctification, and glorification occur in a certain logical order in the plan of salvation.

(1) Foreknew (8:29a)

²⁹*For those whom he foreknew...*

The five points of Calvinism fall under the rubric of the acrostic T-U-L-I-P: T for total depravity; U for unconditional election; L for limited atonement; I for irresistible grace; and P for perseverance of the saints. What we are concerned about here is the U in TULIP, the doctrine of unconditional election. The phrase *unconditional election* simply means that from all eternity God chose, or elected, a fixed number of fallen human beings to be redeemed and to be conformed to the image of His Son. This election was unconditional in the sense that it was not based upon some foreseen conditions of the creature. This doctrine is associated with John Calvin, but it was also taught by Martin Luther, Augustine, the apostle Paul, our Lord Jesus Christ, and Moses in the Old Testament. Philip Melancthon, a brilliant theologian in his own right, modified Luther's view when Luther died. Melancthon's modification became the view that was embraced by later Lutheranism, a doctrine of predestination call the *prescient* view of predestination. We often use the term *foreknowledge* to describe the same idea. Melancthon's view, which has become the majority report in modern evangelical Christianity, is this: God knows in advance which people will render a positive response to the gospel and choose by their free will to come to Jesus Christ. On the basis of that prior knowledge, God chooses them to be saved.

It is important to understand that *predestination* is not a concept or a word invented by Calvin or Luther or Augustine. It is a biblical word, one we find here in Romans and in Ephesians also. The idea of election is found throughout the whole of Scripture. The question is not whether we are going to have a doctrine of predestination; the question is, what is the correct understanding of the doctrine of predestination? The prescient view of predestination that relegates it simply to an act of God's omniscient foreknowledge is not an explanation of the biblical doctrine but is precisely a denial of the biblical doctrine. The mere fact that the word *foreknowledge* comes before the word *predestination* does not necessitate that predestination is based upon a foreknowledge of human action. God cannot predestine someone from all eternity that He does not first know from all eternity. God does not predestine a nameless, faceless group of elect people. Obviously, if he predestines a people from the foundation of the world He has to know what people He is predestinating. In that sense, before He acts in the decree of election with respect to certain people, He has to know what He is doing.

The first of the verbs in the golden chain is the most controversial. 'Foreknow,' as its etymology in both Greek and English suggests, usually means 'to know ahead of time.' However, the NT usage of the verb and its cognate noun does not conform to the general pattern of usage. In the six occurrences of these words in the NT, only two mean 'know beforehand (Acts 2:5; 2 Pe. 3:17); the three others besides the occurrence in this text, all of which have God as their subject, mean not 'know before' – in the sense of intellectual knowledge, or cognition – but 'enter into relationship with before' or 'choose, or determine, before' (Rom. 11:2; 1 Pe. 1:20; Acts 2:23; 1 Pe. 1:2). If the word means 'know intimately,' 'have regard for,' this must be a knowledge or love that is unique to believers and that leads to their being predestined. This being the case, the difference between 'know or love beforehand' and 'choose beforehand' virtually ceases to exist.' What, then, is the meaning of this 'beforehand'? While it is of course true that God's actions, in

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and of themselves, are not bound to created ‘time,’ it is also clear that the ‘before’ can have no other function than to set the divine action in the conceptual framework of what we call ‘time.’ 1 Peter 1:20 and Ephesians 1:4 suggest that Paul would place the choosing of us ‘before the foundation of the world.’ With this first verb, then, Paul highlights the divine initiative in the outworking of God’s purpose. This does not entail any minimizing of the importance of the human response of faith that has received so much attention in chapters 1-4. But this ‘before’ does make it difficult to conceive of faith as the *ground* of this choosing.

Redemption began with God’s foreknowledge. A believer is first of all someone ‘whom He foreknew.’ Salvation is not initiated by a person’s decision to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Because Paul is here depicting the plan of salvation from God’s perspective, faith is not even mentioned in these two verses. In His omniscience God is certainly able to look to the end of history and beyond and to know in advance the minutest detail of the most insignificant occurrences. But it is both unbiblical and illogical to argue from that truth that the Lord simply looked ahead to see who would believe and then chose those particular individuals for salvation. If that were true, salvation not only would begin with man’s faith but also would make God obligated to grant it. In such a scheme, God’s initiative would be eliminated and His grace would be vitiated.

God’s foreknowledge is not a reference to His omniscient foresight but to His foreordination. He not only sees faith in advance for ordains it in advance. In addition to the idea of foreordination, the term *foreknowledge* also connotes fore-love. God has a predetermined divine love for those He plans to save. ‘Foreknew’ is from *proginōskō*, a compound word with meaning beyond that of simply knowing beforehand. In Scripture, ‘to know’ often carries the idea of special intimacy and is frequent used of a love relationship (cp. Gen. 4:17; Mt. 1:25).

The word used here by the apostle Paul, which is translated ‘foreknowledge,’ is the word *proginō*. It comes from a form of the noun *gnosis*, which is the Greek word for knowledge. When we are sick and go to the doctor, he offers a diagnosis. When we ask, ‘Am I going to get better?’ he may offer a prognosis. Both have to do with *gnosis*, or knowledge. There are two aspects, two nuances, of the Greek idea of knowledge. The first has to do with cognition, or intellectual awareness. That is the fundament reference point for the Greek word *gnosis*—a cognitive awareness of some reality. In addition to that cognitive aspect there is a deeper dimension that we might consider in terms of personal, spiritual, or redemptive knowledge. It is a more intimate, personal form of knowledge. When the Bible speaks about a man knowing his wife, it is not an attempt to avoid a description of a sexual relationship; rather it is making use of the full measure of the word *knowledge* or of the verb form *to know*. Now, why labor this when we are talking about a particular text in Romans 8? We do so because it is the root of the term that starts the Golden Chain: ‘For whom He foreknew [*proginō*], He also predestined.’ The full import of the word includes not mere cognition on God’s part but a redemptive knowledge that is spiritual and affective—not *effective*, in this case, but *affective*. Therefore, we could reasonably translate this text, ‘Those whom He fore-loved [those whom He knew in a personal, intimate, redemptive sense from all eternity] He predestined.’

(2) Predestined (8:29b)

...*he also predestined*...

While the first verb generates much of the discussion, it is the second verb in v. 29 that Paul emphasizes. ‘Foreknowing’ is simply the step that leads to what Paul is really concerned to

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stress: God's 'foreordaining,' or 'predestining,' to conformity with the image of His Son. This second verb takes a step beyond the first by focusing attention on the purpose of God's electing grace. And the way in which Paul disrupts his careful parallelism in the last part of v. 29 to develop this idea reveals the importance it had for him.

From foreknowledge, which looks at the beginning of God's purpose in His act of choosing, God's plan of redemption moves to His predestination, which looks at the end of God's purpose in His act of choosing. *Proorizō* ('predestined') means literally to mark out, appoint, or determine beforehand. The Lord has predetermined the destiny of every person who will believe in Him. Much contemporary evangelism gives the impression that salvation is predicated on a person's decision for Christ. But we are not Christians first of all because of what we decided about Christ but because of what God decided about us before the foundation of the world. We were able to choose Him only because He had first chosen us, 'according to the kind intention of His will.'

The word *predestinate* in the Greek is *prooizō*, which means, according to the Greek lexicons, 'a sovereign determination in which a fixed, or definite limit is sovereignly decreed.' So, as the English word suggests, there is a destiny for a certain people that God, from the foundation of the world, has established. He has fixed it. He has determined it according to the sovereign good pleasure of His will. Nowhere in Scripture is a foreseen, conditional, human response ever given as the rationale for the eternal decree by which God fixes for all eternity those who He ordains and chooses for redemption.

Such is the greatness of our infinite God that, while remaining in complete control of all human history, He was able to create humans outside of Himself who would have true significance. Those of us who have freely chosen Christ as our Savior can be assured that God, in His sovereignty, 'chose' us and 'predestined' us 'before the foundation of the world' (cp. Eph. 1:3-6). According to the Bible, there is no ultimate conflict between God's sovereignty and our human free will. After we have accepted Jesus as our Savior, the Word of God shines through and says that, wonder of wonders, God the Father has chosen you? Have you accepted Jesus as your Savior? Then you may be sure of this, that God the Father has chosen you.

(3) Called (8:30a)

³⁰*And those whom he predestined he also called...*

Paul resumes his 'chain of verbs by repeating the one with which the chain was 'broken': 'predestined.' Forming the next link is the verb 'called,' which denotes God's effectual summoning into relationship with Him. The exact correspondence between those who are the objects of predestining and those who experience this calling is emphasized by the demonstrative pronoun 'these'; it was precisely those who were predestined who also were called.

In God's divine plan of redemption, predestination leads to calling. Although God's calling is also completely by His initiative, it is here that His eternal plan directly intersects our lives in time. Those who are 'called' are those in whose hearts the Holy Spirit works to lead them to saving faith in Christ. Paul is speaking in this passage about God's inward call, not the outward call that comes from the proclamation of the gospel. The outward call is essential, because 'How shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard?' (Rom. 10:14), but that outward call cannot be responded to in faith apart from God's already having inward called the person through His Spirit.

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The ones God has predestined are also called, and these same ones are also justified and glorified. Tacit here in the text is the concept *all*. All whom God foreknows, in the way Paul is speaking of here, are predestined, and all those in the category of the predestined are also in the category of the called. From a prescient perspective, an Arminian viewpoint, the predestinated are those whom God foreknew would respond to the gospel. Those who give the right answer to the call are saved; those who give the wrong answer to the call are lost. The fact that God calls all whom He predestines stands the Arminian distortion on its ear. The Golden Chain makes clear that all whom God knows, He predestines. He does not call only some of the predestined; He calls all.

(4) Justified (8:30b)

...and those whom he called he also justified...

The next link in the chain brings us back to the central theme of chapters 1-4: justification. As we recall Paul's repeated stress on faith in those chapters, we do well to remember that Paul's focus in these verses on the divine side of salvation is no way mitigates the importance of human response. It is, indeed, God who 'justifies': but it is the person who believes who is so justified.

The next element of God's saving work is justification of those who believe. After they are called by God, they are 'also justified' by Him. And just as foreknowledge, predestination, and calling are the exclusive work of God, so is justification, which refers to a believer's being made right *with* God by God.

Paul writes that those whom God calls, He justifies. Not all who are called outwardly are justified, because many who receive an outward call say no. All who are called inwardly, effectually, come to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, and they are justified. We see in the Golden Chain a doctrine of predestination that is completely removed from the Arminian view. Paul says that those whom God foreknew, He predestined, and all whom He predestined, He called, and all whom He called, He justified, and all the justified He glorified.

(5) Glorified (8:30c)

...and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Remember the context: are we safe in our salvation? Once we are justified, can we lose our salvation? We cannot if the Golden Chain is true. It tells us that all the justified will be glorified, so if we are saved now, we are saved forever. That is the Golden Chain. It is not a rusty chain, but one made of the precious truth of the gospel.

As with foreknowledge, predestination, calling, and justification, glorification is inseparable from the other elements and is exclusively a work of God. In saying that those 'whom He justified, these He also glorified,' Paul again emphasizes the believer's eternal security. As noted above, no one whom God foreknows will fail to be predestined, called, justified, and ultimately glorified. Ultimately glory has been a recurring theme throughout Paul's epistle to the Romans (e.g., 5:2, 8:21). This promise of final glory was no uncertain hope as far as Paul was concerned. By putting the phrase 'these He also glorified' in the past tense, the apostle demonstrated his own conviction that everyone 'whom He justified' is eternally secure.

With the final verb in the chain, Paul has come back to his starting point in this paragraph and to the paragraph's central theme: glory. This verb is in the same tense as the others in the series. What makes this interesting is that the action denoted by this verb is (from the standpoint of

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believers) in the future, while the other actions are past. Most interpreters conclude, probably rightly, that Paul is looking at the believer's glorification from the standpoint of God, who had already decreed that it should take place. While not yet experienced, the divine decision to glorify those who have been justified has already been made; the issue has been settled. Here Paul touches on the ultimate source of the assurance that Christians enjoy, and with it he brings to a triumphant climax his celebration of the 'no condemnation' that applies to every person in Christ.

If God has chosen you, you're as good as in heaven now! If God has justified you, rest quietly, beloved, you will be in heaven. Too often God's choosing is presented in such a cold theological fashion. It is treated as though it were merely a process of selection and elimination. But when Paul wrote these words, he had only one purpose: to give you assurance. If the idea of predestination is presented in such a way that it decreases your assurance, then it isn't being presented the way the Bible teaches it. The Bible only teaches about God's choosing in order to give you assurance of your salvation. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, your heart can be still. He'll carry you through the gates of glory.

This is the most daring anticipation of faith that the New Testament contains. This is because 'glorified' is in the past tense. Believers are spoken of as already glorified—their glorification is that certain! Here on earth we comprise an incredible array of individuals. But when we get to Heaven, we will all be like Jesus. We will retain our individuality, but we will also have Christ's character—the same self-control, the same perfect love.

b) The Purpose of Salvation (8:29cd)

In the middle of verse 29, Paul states the twofold purpose of God's bringing sinners to eternal salvation. The secondary purpose is stated first: to make believers into the likeness of His Son.

(1) Conformed (8:29c)

...to be conformed to the image of his Son...

The language Paul uses with respect to the goal of predestination is not immediately linked to redemption or salvation. What are people predestined to? They are predestined 'to be conformed to the image of His Son.' The purpose of predestination is that the elect may be brought, by God's grace, into a relationship with the Son of God. When Paul—and all the New Testament—writes about predestination, the focus is always and everywhere related to Christ. Predestination is never discussed in the abstract; it is always related to our relationship with Christ.

From before time began, God chose to save believers from their sins in order that they might 'become conformed to the image of His Son,' Jesus Christ. Consequently, every true believer moves inexorably toward perfection in righteousness, as God makes for Himself a people recreated into the likeness of His own divine Son who will dwell and reign with Him in heaven throughout all eternity. God is redeeming for Himself an eternally holy and Christlike race, to be citizens in His divine kingdom and children in His divine family. There is no allowance for an intermediate state of limbo or purgatory, in which some Christians fall short of being fully 'conformed to the image of [God's] Son,' and must, after death, somehow complete their salvation by their own works or have it completed by others on their behalf.

God created man in His own image (Gen. 1:27). Man has revolted. The image is distorted. Wherever one turns one sees mankind, meant to be the image-bearer of God – but what a

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distorted image! Mankind's morality twisted, mankind's rationality contorted, believing all sorts of strange things. Love, completely twisted. Yet the Father has 'predestinated us to be conformed to the image of His Son,' this Son of God, this marvelous one. By faith we experience this conformity to Christ to some degree even in this present life. That's what sanctification, our present salvation (5:1-8:17) is all about. But the final goal, which we will see only in eternity, is full conformity to the image of His dear Son.

The 'destination' toward which believers have been set in motion is that we might 'be conformed to the image of [God's] Son.' The language Paul uses here reminds us of his central 'with Christ' theology' and suggests a (negative) comparison with Adam. Now it is God's purpose to imprint on all those who belong to Christ the 'image' of the 'second Adam.' When does this 'being conformed' take place? Paul may think of the believer as destined from his conversion onward to 'conform' to Christ's pater of suffering followed by glory. Hodge is representative of those who argue for an even broader reference: conformity to God's will, exemplified by Christ, in this life and glory in the life to come. But the closest parallels, Phil. 3:21 and 1 Cor. 15:49, are both eschatological; and eschatology is Paul's focus in this paragraph. This makes it more likely that Paul thinks here of God's predestining us to future glory, that glory which Christ already enjoys.

The New Testament gives us glimpses of what being 'conformed to the image' of Christ will be like. First of all, we will be like Christ *bodily* (cp. Phil. 3:21). As the term itself denotes glorification (our ultimate conformity to Christ) will be God's gracious adornment of His children with the very glory of His divine Son. Second, and more importantly, although not becoming deity, we will be like Christ *spiritually* (cp. Heb. 2:9-11). Our incorruptible bodies will be infused with the very holiness of Christ, and we will be both outwardly and inwardly perfect, just as our Lord.

(2) Firstborn (8:29d)

...in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Why does God, from all eternity, predestinate certain people to be in conformity to Jesus? We come next to a subjunctive clause, which indicates purpose. The apostle is setting forth very clearly the purpose of predestination: 'that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.' Predestination is for Christ's sake. It is that Christ may see the travail of His sold and be satisfied. It is not, as so many today say, that Christ provided a potential atonement and offered a potential redemption for a potential number of people. The God of Scripture is one who, from all eternity, had a sovereign purpose of salvation in mind, and He sovereignly sent His Son into the world to effect the atonement for His people, that they may be adopted into the family of God. We are heirs of God, joint heirs with Jesus, because God sovereignly decreed that people would come to Christ. The only reason we find anywhere in Scripture as to why anyone is saved is for Christ's sake.

The last clause of v. 29 tends to confirm this eschatological focus. For the idea of Christ as 'firstborn' reminds us of Christ's place as the 'first fruits' of those who are raised (1 Cor. 15:20; cp. vv. 10-11). It is as Christians have their bodies resurrected and transformed that they join Christ in His glory and that the purpose of God, to make Christ the 'firstborn' of many to follow, is accomplished.

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The work of repair occurring in believers does not merely restore what Adam lost. Rather, they are being remade into the greater image of Christ. And the purpose? It is, says Paul, that Christ ‘might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.’ While the unusual word *prōtotokos* literally means ‘firstborn,’ it is better to take it as meaning pre-eminent.’ Thus understood, Christ will be ‘head and shoulders’ above, a prince over His brothers and sisters in His ‘tribe,’ the family of God.

God’s supreme purpose for bringing sinners to salvation is to glorify His Son, Jesus Christ, by making Him pre-eminent in the divine plan of redemption. In the words of this text, it is God’s intent for Christ to ‘be the firstborn among many brethren.’ Because the firstborn male child in a Jewish family had a privileged status, the term was often used figuratively to represent pre-eminence. In the present context that is clearly the meaning. God’s primary purpose in His plan of redemption was to make His beloved Son ‘the firstborn among many brethren’ in the sense of Christ’s being uniquely pre-eminent among the children of God.

B. The Glorious Hymn (Romans 8:31-39)

This beautiful and familiar celebration of the believer’s security in Christ comes in response to Paul’s rehearsal of the blessings that have been granted to the believer through the gospel. The similarity between the language and contents of this passage and Rom. 5 suggested that this paragraph, while responding immediately to what Paul has been saying in chapter 8, and especially in 8:18-30, is intended to cap Paul’s many-sided discussion of Christian assurance in chapters 5-8 as a whole. Thus, we hear again, as in 5:1-11, of the love of God in Christ for us and the assurance that that brings us; of the certainty of final vindication because of the justifying verdict of God; and of how these great forces render ultimately impotent and unimportant the tribulations of this life.

In these verses Paul expands upon the ‘determination of God’ to glorify those He has foreknown, as set out in the previous verses 28-30. He asks, ‘What shall we say about these things?’ – referring to God’s foreknowledge. He then confronts this teaching with three difficult questions, which he then answers. It is likely that Paul’s readers in Rome had become demoralized under persecution. Oppression and rejection bring doubt and spiritual insecurity. Paul’s words here are powerfully reassuring and they point us to Christ as the pledge of God’s goodness and care, and also to His resolute determination to glorify those He foreknew.

The elevated style of this paragraph, with its rhetorical questions, plethora of relative pronouns and unusual vocabulary, has suggested to many that Paul may be quoting from a liturgical tradition. That is, of course, possible, although the way in which the paragraph so naturally picks up themes that are present elsewhere in Romans 5-8 suggests rather that the style reflects Paul’s own emotions as he looks back over the abundance of the Christian’s privileges.

1. What Shall We Say? (8:31a)

³¹*What then shall we say to these things?*

As we have seen, Paul uses the rhetorical question, ‘What, then, shall we say?’ frequently in Romans to advance his argument. Here, however, these words do not stand alone but are part of a substantive question: ‘What shall we say in view of these things?’ ‘These things’ should not be confined to what Paul has just said in vv. 28-30, or even in chapter 8 as a whole, but embrace all the blessings ascribed to Christians in chapters 5-8.

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Judging from what Paul says in the rest of the passage, ‘these things’ doubtless refer to the issues he has already dealt with in the chapter. Much of what he says in verses 31-39 relates to the doctrine of Christ’s substitutionary atonement, but the specific focus is still on the security that His atonement brings to those who believe in Him.

2. Who Can Be Against Us? (8:31b-32)

a) *God Is for Us (8:31b)*

If God is for us, who can be against us?

What should be our response to the Golden Chain? What should our response be that we have been rooted and grounded in the eternal purposes of God? The response is this: ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’ (v. 31b). I will tell you who can be against us; everybody in the world. Paul is not suggesting that if God is for us, nobody will ever stand to oppose us. The import of his declaration is simple: all the human opposition that rises against us is meaningless in the final analysis, because all the opposition in the world cannot overthrow the glory that God has laid up for His saints from the foundation of the world.

Paul knows that there is much ‘against’ the children of God. In the midst of these the believer may easily feel overwhelmed by the forces against him. But Paul assures them that ‘God is for us.’ The opening word, ‘if,’ does not imply doubt but reinforces our confidence, carrying the sense, ‘*Since* God is for us, *who* can be against us?’ In other words, Paul is restating the invincible determination of God to save those He ‘foreknew.’ God is on the side of His children so that nothing can prevail against them.

The word ‘if’ translates the Greek conditional particle *ei*, signifying a fulfilled condition, not a mere possibility. The meaning of the first clause is therefore, ‘*Because* God is for us.’ The obvious implication is that if anyone were able to rob us of salvation they would have to be greater than God Himself, because He is both the giver and the sustainer of salvation. To Christians Paul is asking, in effect, ‘Who could conceivably take away our no-condemnation status?’ (see 8:1). Is there anyone stronger than God, the Creator of everything and everyone who exists?

Obviously, Paul does not mean that nobody will, in fact, oppose us, as Paul knows from his own experience (to which he alludes in v. 35), opposition to believers is both varied and intense. What Paul is suggesting by this rhetorical question is that nobody – and no ‘thing’ – can ultimately harm, or stand in the way of, the one whom God is ‘for.’

Obviously, if God is for us, the whole world can be against us, because man in his revolt against God not only protests against his Creator but against all the redeemed. Implicit in the apostle’s statement is not just who *can* be against us, but who *could possibly* stand against us. This is, of course, a rhetorical question; the answer is obvious. No one can stand against us if God is standing with us. An aphorism that has since become something of a cliché goes like this: one person with God on his side is in a majority against all the rest of the human race.

‘Who can be against us?’ The logic of this text, seriously applied, pushes us to the heights of confidence. It means more than God being graciously disposed toward us. It means He is for us in all that He does. We may be defeated at this moment, but evil will never prevail. We are always being led to victory in Christ.

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In Romans 8:31 Paul does not specify any particular persons who might be successful against us, but it would be helpful to consider some of the possibilities. 1) First of all, we might wonder, ‘Can other people rob us of salvation?’ The Roman Catholic church teaches that salvation can be lost by committing so-called mortal sins and also claims power for itself both to grant and to revoke grace. But such ideas have no foundation in Scripture and are thoroughly heretical. No person or group of persons, regardless of their ecclesiastical status, can bestow or withdraw the smallest part of God’s grace. 2) Second, we might wonder if Christians can put themselves out of God’s grace by committing some unusually heinous sin that nullifies the divine work of redemption that binds them to the Lord. Tragically, some evangelical churches teach that loss of salvation is possible. But if we were not able by our own power or effort to save ourselves—to free ourselves from sin, to bring ourselves to God, and to make ourselves His children—how could it be that by our own efforts we could nullify the work of grace that God Himself has accomplished in us? 3) Third, we might wonder if God the Father would take away our salvation. If anyone could take away salvation, it would have to be the One who gave it. We might argue theoretically that, because God is sovereign and omnipotent, He *could* take away salvation if He wanted to. But the idea that He *would* do that flies in the face of Scripture, including the present text.

b) God Gives Us All Things (8:32)

³²*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

Paul goes on to substantiate this boast of confidence (v. 31) in the remainder of the chapter, giving three arguments. First, he says God will withhold nothing in taking care of us. “He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?” Again we are compelled to take our thinking to its logical conclusion. Since God gave His only Son for us, He will withhold nothing beneficial from us.

In answer to such a suggestion (i.e., take away one’s salvation), Paul asks, ‘How could it possibly be that God would sacrifice His own Son for the sake of those who believe in Him and then cast some of those blood-bought believers out of His family and His kingdom? Would God do less for believers after than are saved than He did for them prior to salvation?’

The infinite Creator God, who sovereignly chose us before the foundations of the world, is the same God who loved each one of us enough to send His Son to die for us. There is the total assurance of God’s sovereign choice, plus the total assurance of His infinite love. Are you afraid that you might be lost again? Don’t be. The Holy Spirit intercedes for you. God the Father has chosen you and has sent His Son to die on Calvary’s cross for you.

The visible demonstration of God’s favor towards those He foreknew is that He ‘did not spare His own Son but handed Him over for us all.’ Here we are reminded of God’s request that Abraham ‘hand over’ his son Isaac for sacrifice (Gen. 22:12, 16). In that case God eventually allowed Abraham to ‘spare’ his son. God provided Abraham with a substitute, a ram. For God Himself no such substitute was at hand. He actually ‘handed over’ His own Son for us.

God being ‘for us’ has its deepest demonstration in His giving His own Son for us, a demonstration that should leave us in no doubt about His commitment to be ‘for us’ right up to, and including, the end. The argument of this verse – God’s giving His Son as a guarantee of His future blessings – is very close to 5:8-9. Calling Christ God’s ‘own’ Son distinguishes Him from those many ‘adopted’ sons that have come into God’s family by faith (8:14-16); but it may also

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suggest a parallel with Abraham's giving of his 'beloved' son Isaac (Gen. 22). Rather than 'sparing' His Son, God 'handed Him over,' a verb that reminds us of the initiative of God in the crucifixion. The addition of 'all' to 'us' stresses that it is for *all* believers ('you' in this context) that God has given His Son.

How can we not understand the posture of God toward His people after He has gone to such lengths to effect our redemption? God spared nothing, not even His Son, so that we might be saved. Therefore, Paul says, 'He delivered Him up for us all.' I don't believe for a moment that God did this for all mankind. God gave His Son to redeem His elect, those who are a part of the Golden Chain. Because of Christ's perfect obedience for us, the Father bestows every conceivable blessing upon Him. His inheritance is the world and everything in it. Paul says that because the Son died for us and the Father did not spare Him, He will also give us everything that He gives His Son. Here Paul adds to the idea of our adoption, which he developed earlier in Romans 8. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ; the Father is pleased to give all things to His Son, whom He did not spare, and not only to His Son but to all those whom He had given to His Son for His Son's glory.

By introducing the second clause with 'how,' Paul suggests how inconceivable it would be for this clause to remain unfulfilled: 'If God has, indeed, given His Son for us, how can anyone doubt that He will not also freely give us all things along with Him?' How broad is the scope of the 'all things' that God so graciously bestows on us. Certainly Paul's focus is on those things necessary for our salvation; but, as with 'the good' in v. 28, we should not restrict the meaning to salvation as such but include all those blessings – spiritual and material – that we require on the path toward that final salvation.

'Freely give' translates *charizomai*, which means to bestow graciously or out of grace. In some of Paul's other letters the same word carries the idea of forgiveness (see 2 Cor. 2:7, 10; 12:13; Col. 2:13; 3:13). It therefore seems reasonable to interpret Paul's use of *charizomai* in Romans 8:32 as including the idea of God's gracious forgiveness as well as His gracious giving. If so, the apostle is also saying that God freely *forgives* us all things (cp. 1 Jn. 1:9).

3. Who Can Accuse/Condemn Us? (8:33-34)

a) God Justifies Us (8:33)

³³*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.*

Because every believer has divine protection, Paul asks his next question in v. 33. The world and Satan are continually bringing charges 'against God's elect,' but those charges amount to nothing before the Lord, because He 'is the one who justifies,' the one who decides who is righteous before Him. They have been declared eternally guiltless and are no longer under the condemnation of God (8:1), the only 'one who condemns' (v. 34a).

Satan works to bring every conceivable slanderous charge against God's elect. Satan never ceases accusing the brethren. He never stops harassing us and getting at our consciences. The principal work of Satan in the life of the believer is not temptation, though he is engaged in that; his chief work is accusation. He accuses us in order to take away our assurance and joy and the consolation that is ours in Christ. He keeps reminding us of our sin. He keeps telling us of our shortcomings. He lays against God's elect every conceivable charge that he can bring; yet, there is no work more futile, which is why Paul mocks Satan with this question. What can be sillier than to bring accusations against those who have been redeemed through the blood of the Lamb?

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The one who justifies is the judge of all, and He has declared us just by the imputation of the perfect righteousness of Christ.

The vestiges of Adam's Sin remain, as the struggle of the Spirit against the flesh within us reminds us (cp. vv. 10-13). Perhaps, then, God will accuse us for our continuing sins? When God justified us, that is, declared His verdict 'acquitted' in our favor based on the death of Christ, it was not only retrospective but also prospective. That great act of justification was in regard to not only our past but also to our future sins. Once more this picks up words from the previous section, 'those He foreknew...these He also justified' (v. 30). Paul asks, 'Who shall accuse?', knowing that God Himself is the great accuser in the final judgment (see 2:16). But since God has justified His chosen ones He will not accuse them.

'Bring a charge' is the first of the explicitly judicial terms in this context. The future tense of the verb focuses attention on the last judgment: Who will stand and accuse us at that time? To be sure, Satan, the 'accusers,' may seek to do so; so may our enemies and, perhaps most persuasively of all, our own sins. But no accusation will be effective because it is against God's 'elect' that the accusation is being made; and, as Paul has shown in vv. 28-30, those who are God's 'elect ones' by virtue of His calling and purpose are assured of glory. In a sense, then, this manner of designating Christians in the question itself is the only answer required. But it is natural to view the following sentence as a further basis for the ultimate failure of any accusations against us: it is *God* who is justifying.

b) Christ Intercedes for Us (8:34)

(1) Who Condemns?

³⁴*Who is to condemn? (8:34a)*

Paul's next rhetorical question, 'Who will condemn?', at first seems unnecessary. In the Last Judgment God the just judge both 'accuses' and 'condemns.' Since He will not accuse, how would He condemn? Nonetheless, Paul does ask that question, perhaps to drive home the point that God neither accuses nor therefore condemns those He has justified in Christ. Once God has justified us, who can condemn us? Condemnation is gone.

Next, we read that God will allow nothing to condemn us (vv. 33-34). If accusations are brought against us, we need not fear, for the charges are silenced by the upraised, pierced hands of our Intercessor. If we are to be condemned, it will have to be over Christ's dead and now resurrected body, which actually is the basis of our salvation! How is that for confidence?

That 'who is the one condemning?' is not a fresh, independent question but a 'follow-up' on the discussion in v. 33, is suggested by the fact that 'condemn' and 'justify' are natural contrasts. This question is, then, to be seen as an additional rhetorical response to the statement in v. 33b that it is God who justifies.

(2) No One Condemns (8:34b)

Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

The next sentence as a whole can be construed as a response to the question 'who will condemn?' – 'no one [implied]; for Christ Jesus ...' – or as a preparation for v. 35 – Christ Jesus has done these things for us; who, then, will separate us from the love of Christ? The continual

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use of judicial images in the sentence – especially Christ’s intercession – favors the former alternative.

Paul’s answer to the question in v. 34a is a creed-like statement about Christ, which stands as one of the most noble in the New Testament. How remarkable that Paul should point so powerfully to Christ – as God’s own Son, whom He did not spare, whom He raised up to His right hand – in order to allay our fears about forces that might be ‘against us.’ Christ Himself is our assurance of God’s goodness and favor ‘for us.’ We cannot but notice the rising crescendo – Christ died, was raised, is at God’s right hand, intercedes for us. The emphasis falls on the peak of the crescendo, that Christ, ‘who is at God’s right hand...also intercedes for us.’ The words ‘at God’s right hand...interceding...’ combine Psalm 110:1 (the Messiah ruling at ‘God’s right hand’) and Isaiah 53:12 (the sin-bearing Servant ‘interceding’ on His behalf ‘for transgressors’). So far from the very possibility that God might condemn us, Paul points out that the Christ who died for us now reigns in authority for us, arguing *His* case on our behalf, as it were in the courts of heaven (cp. 1 Jn. 1:21; Heb. 7:25).

The enumeration of actions accomplished by, and through, Christ occurs in ascending order, with the emphasis falling on the last in the series. Not only has Jesus died to secure our justification – ‘more than that’ He has ‘been raised’ and has also ascended to the right hand of God, so that He may intercede for us, ensuring that the justifying verdict for which He died is applied to us in the judgment. The language of Jesus being at ‘the right hand of God’ is taken from Psalm 110:1, one of the most often quoted OT verses in the NT. The language is, of course, metaphorical, indicating that Jesus has been elevated to the position of ‘vice-regent’ in God’s governance of the universe.

Paul reveals four realities that protect our salvation in Jesus Christ. First, he says that ‘Christ Jesus ... died.’ In His death He took upon Himself the full penalty for our sins. In His death He bore the condemnation that we deserved but from which we are forever freed (8:1). The death of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf is the only condemnation we will ever know. Second, Christ ‘was raised’ from the dead, proving His victory over sin and over its supreme penalty of death. The grave could not hold Jesus, because He had conquered death; and His conquest over death bequeaths eternal life to every person who trusts in Him. Third, Christ ‘is at the right hand of God,’ the place of divine exaltation and honor (cp. Phil. 2:8-9; Ps. 110:1). Fourth, Christ ‘also intercedes for us.’ Although His work of atonement was finished, His continuing ministry of intercession for those saved through His sacrifice will continue without interruption until every redeemed soul is safe in heaven. If we understand what Christ did on the cross to save us from sin, we understand what it means to be secure in His salvation.

We have already learned that the Holy Spirit ‘makes intercession for the saints’ (v. 27). And now we learn that Jesus ‘also makes intercession for us’ (cp. Heb. 7:25). His priestly work of intercession on our behalf continues in heaven, on the basis of His finished work on the cross. He stands for us before the righteous Judge of the universe, before the very one against whom we have sinned. He pleads for us on the basis of His own character and on the basis of His finished work at Calvary. As Jesus pleads our case before this holy God, the very holiness of God now works for us. The holiness of God that must condemn us because we have sinned against Him, now works on our behalf. For Jesus pleads His shed blood, and God the Father, because of His holiness and His perfect justice, cannot ask any second payment for our sins. Jesus pleads for us on the basis of the complete forgiveness He has won for us at Calvary. Jesus pleads our case, and therefore we can know that we will never be lost again.

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Paul is saying that God's determination to save 'those He foreknew' cannot and will not be thwarted. In verses 31-34, Paul is teaching us not to be afraid of the baffling circumstances that touch our lives and which easily produce fear, doubt, and insecurity. This is Paul the pastor bringing words of comfort to his readers then and now. God has not spared but given up His own Son, no less, for us. He is for us and therefore nothing can be against us.

4. Who Can Separate Us? (8:35-39)

a) *What Can Separate Us from God's Love? (8:35-37)*

After establishing that it is impossible for any person to take away our salvation, Paul anticipates a similar question that some will ask: 'Is it possible for circumstances to rob a believer of his salvation?' The apostle now proceeds to show that that, too, is impossible.

(1) The Question (8:35)

³⁵*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*

Finally, God will allow nothing to separate us from His love. In verse 35 Paul is speaking autobiographically, having experienced all that he writes about here, and he affirms that none of this—in fact, absolutely nothing—can separate us from God's love.

The question that begins and sets the tone for the next five verses is formally parallel to those in vv. 33-34; but, materially, it makes a new start. Left behind is the forensic image of 'God for us'; begun is the more personal and relational emphasis on the love of God in Christ for us. Not, of course, that these images are contradictory, or even to be put into separate compartments. As 5:6-10 makes absolutely clear, it is in the 'giving of His Son' 'for us' that God's love is preeminently shown; and God's love for us is not simply an 'emotion' but His gracious action on our behalf.

First of all, it should be noted that 'the love of Christ' does not refer to the believer's love for Him but rather to His love for the believer. In this context, 'the love of Christ' represents salvation. Paul is therefore asking rhetorically if any circumstance is powerful enough to cause a true believer to turn against Christ in a way that would cause Christ to turn His back on the believer. At issue, then, are the power and permanence of 'the love of Christ' for those He has bought with His own blood and brought into the family and the kingdom of His Father.

The interrogative pronoun *tis* ('who') is the same word that begins the previous two verses. But the Greek term also can mean 'what,' and the fact that Paul speaks only of things and not people in verses 35-37, makes clear that he is now referring to impersonal things.

The 'who' in this opening question embraces any conceivable 'opponent,' whether personal or impersonal. Paul explores things that have the potential to drive a wedge between us and our Savior. In these very things we have assurance of Jesus' presence with us. If anything seals His love for us, it is His promise to be with us in the midst of persecution and peril and sword and famine and everything that the world, the flesh, and the Devil can through against us. The things Paul anticipates here are not exhaustive; this list is representative. Paul could go on forever naming things that try to separate us from the love of Christ.

The list of difficulties that follows requires little comment, except to note that all the items except the last are found also in 2 Cor. 11:28-27 and 12:10, where Paul lists some of those

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hazards he himself has encountered in his apostolic labors. All these, then, Paul himself has experienced, and he has been able to prove for himself that they are quite incapable of disrupting his relationship with the love of Christ. And the last – the ‘sword,’ death by execution – Paul was to find overcome for him in the love of Christ at the end of his life.

In verse 35 Paul lists seven sufferings arising from persecution. Each has touched Paul’s own life and echoes the pain of ministry found in earlier letters (1 Cor. 4:9-13; 15:30-32; 16:9; 2 Cor. 1:8-11; 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:23-12:10). Yet the congregations were at one with the apostle in feeling the hot blast of opposition and rejection from that society and culture. So the Romans will know Paul’s meaning in his words: pressure, being trapped, persecution, hunger, nakedness, danger, and sword. Remarkably, his words were prophetic of the fury that Nero would unleash upon Christians in Rome, including Paul, less than a decade later.

The first threatening circumstance Paul mentions is ‘tribulation,’ from *thlipsis*, which carries the idea of being squeezed or placed under pressure. In Scripture the word is perhaps most often used of outward difficulties, but it is also used of emotional stress. The idea here is probably that of severe adversity in general, the kind that is common to all men. The second threatening circumstance is ‘distress,’ which translates the compound Greek word *stenochōria*, which is composed of the terms for narrow and space. The idea is similar to that of tribulation and carries the primary idea of strict confinement, of being helplessly hemmed in. The third threatening circumstance is ‘persecution,’ which refers to affliction suffered for the sake of Christ. ‘Famine’ often results from persecution, when Christians are discriminated against in employment and cannot afford to buy enough food to eat. ‘Nakedness’ does not refer to complete nudity but to destitution in which a person cannot adequately clothe himself. It also suggests the idea of being vulnerable and unprotected. To be in ‘peril’ is simply to be exposed to danger in general, including danger from treachery and mistreatment. The ‘sword’ to which Paul refers was more like a large dagger and was frequently used by assassins, because it was easily concealed. It was a symbol of death and suggests being murdered rather than dying in military battle. Paul was not speaking of these afflictions in theory or second hand. He himself had faced those hardships and many more, as he reports so vividly in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27.

(2) The Quotation (8:36)

³⁶*As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’*

This verse is something of an interruption in the flow of thought, and one that is typical for Paul. For he is constantly concerned to show that the sufferings experienced by Christians should occasion no surprise. Here Paul cites Ps. 44:22 to show, as Calvin puts it, that ‘it is no new thing for the Lord to permit the saints to be undeservedly exposed to the cruelty of the ungodly.’

Paul quotes from the Septuagint version of Psalm 44:22. In other words, Christians should not be surprised when they have to endure suffering for the sake of Christ.

In verse 36, Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 to show that the tribulations believers face are nothing new, but have always been characteristic of God’s people.

Such pain, however, is not new but has always been the lot of God’s people, as Paul reminds them in verse 36, quoting Psalm 44:22.

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(3) The Answer (8:37)

³⁷*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

The ‘but’ connects this verse with v. 35. Paul assumes a negative answer to the question of v. 35 and here proceeds to go even further; not only are such things as enumerated in that verse unable to separate us from Christ’s love, *but*, on the contrary, we are ‘more than conquerors’ with respect to them. ‘More than conquerors’ is a felicitous rendering, going back to the Geneva Bible, of the intensive verb Paul uses here. If more than simple emphasis is intended, perhaps Paul wants to emphasize that believers not only ‘conquer’ such adversities; under the providential hand of God, they even work toward our ‘good’ (v. 28). But the victory is not ours, for it is only ‘through the one who loved us’ that it happens.

Against this, however, in verse 37 Paul utters a defiant ‘but’ (*alla*). Paul coins a word ‘hyper-conquer’ (*hupernikō*) to express the comprehensive victory over ‘all these things,’ that is, the persecutions listed in v. 35 above. It is not at all our strength or inner resources that enable perseverance in the face of these things. This conquering is a further demonstration of the absolute, implacable, and invincible determination of God to glorify those He foreknew before the creation of the cosmos (vv. 28-30).

‘Overwhelmingly conquer’ is from *hupernikaō*, a compound verb that literally means to hyper-conquer, to over-conquer, to conquer, as it were, with success to spare. Those who ‘overwhelmingly conquer’ are supremely victorious in overcoming everyone and everything that threatens their relationship to Jesus Christ. But they do so entirely through His power, the power of ‘Him who loved us’ so much that He gave His life for us that we might have life in Him.

The Greek word Paul uses for ‘conquerors’ comes from the term *hupernikaō*. We are hyper-conquerors. The Latin is even better—*super vincēmus*: in all these things we are supermen through him who loved us. We have a superman, an Übermensch, in Christ. He has conquered the world.

b) *Nothing Can Separate Us from God’s Love (8:38-39)*

This chapter closes with a beautiful summary of what has just been said. The apostle assures his readers that he was not teaching them anything about which he himself was not fully ‘convinced.’ He was convinced first of all because of the nature of salvation, which God had revealed to him and which he presents so clearly in these first eight chapters. His counsel is also a personal testimony. He was convinced because he had experienced most of the things mentioned and they did not separate him from Christ. Both revelation and experience convinced him.

(1) The Options (8:38-39a)

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...*

The assurance expressed in v. 37 is now grounded in a more personal testimony of Paul’s own. Paul stands completely convinced that nothing at all will be able to separate believers from the love of God in Christ. The enumeration of possible threats to this security unfolds mainly in obvious pairs: ‘death and life, ‘angels and rulers,’ things present and things to come,’ ‘height and depth.’ Only the word ‘powers’ disrupts the sequence of pairs.

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(a) *Death and Life*

‘Death probably comes first in the list because it picks up the reference to ‘being put to death’ in the quotation (v. 36). The first pair of terms, death and life, refers in the most general way to the two possible states of existence.

Paul begins his list with ‘death,’ which, in our earthly life, we experience last. Even that supreme enemy cannot separate us from our Lord, because He has changed death’s sting from defeat to victory. The second supposed hindrance does not seem like a hindrance at all. We think of ‘life’ as something positive. But it is in our present earthly life that spiritual dangers lie. Not only does death itself hold no harm for believers, but it will bring the end of all harm. It is while we still have *this* life that we face tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword (8:35) and the many other trials that Paul could have mentioned. But because we have eternal life in Christ, the threats during our present life are empty.

(b) *Angels and Rulers*

The second pair of terms, ‘angels and rulers,’ embraces the spirit world. ‘Rulers’ is never used with ‘angels’ elsewhere in Paul. Paul can use ‘ruler’ to denote a secular authority, but more often he uses it to denote powers or authorities of the spirit world, sometimes those of an evil nature (cp. Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15), but also in a general way that makes it difficult to know whether evil, or evil and good, spirit ‘rulers’ general are meant. If ‘angels’ refers to ‘good’ angels, it is natural to think that ‘rulers’ denotes evil spiritual powers, but the lexical evidence makes it impossible to be sure.

The third supposed threat is ‘angels.’ Because the next danger on the list (‘principalities’) doubtless refers to fallen angels, it seems likely that the ones mentioned here are holy angels. Paul’s reference here to angels presupposed a purely hypothetical and impossible situation, just as did one of his warnings to the Galatians (Gal. 1:8). The fourth supposed threat is not in the least hypothetical. As already noted, ‘principalities’ seems to refer to evil beings, specifically demons. Like the Greek term (*archē*) behind it, ‘principalities’ indicates neither good nor evil. But the obvious negative use of *archē* in such passages as Ephesians 6:12 (‘rulers’), Colossians 2:15 (‘rulers’), and Jude 6 (‘own domain’) – as well as its apparent contrast with the term that precedes it here (‘angels’) – seem to indicate fallen angels, the demons. If so, Paul is saying that no supernatural created being, good or evil, can sever our relationship to Christ.

Nothing in all the universe can separate us from God’s love. It isn’t just the things we see, it’s also the things we don’t see. Supernatural forces, demons, all the forces of hell, the entire hierarchy of evil.

(c) *Present and, Future*

Having touched on the modes of human existence and the spirit world, Paul now includes the temporal dimension in his enumeration of those ‘powers’ that are unable to separate the believer from God’s love. These ‘things present’ and ‘things to come’ are sometimes also taken as reference to spiritual beings, but evidence is lacking for such an identification. Paul’s point is rather that the believer need have no fear that either present or future circumstances and events will call into question his relationship to God in Christ.

‘Things present’ and ‘things to come’ represent everything we are experiencing and will yet experience.

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(d) *Powers*

The occurrence of ‘powers’ with ‘rulers’ to denote spiritual beings suggests that some kind of spiritual forces are denoted by this term ‘powers.’ Why the word occurs on its own is impossible to know.

‘Powers’ translates *dunamis*, the ordinary Greek word for power. But in its plural form, as here, it often refers to miracles or mighty deeds. It was also used figuratively of persons in positions of authority and power. Regardless of the specific meaning Paul has in mind here, ‘powers’ represents another obstacle that Christians need not fear.

(e) *Height and Depth*

The final pair of terms – ‘height’ and ‘depth’ – is the most controversial. There are two main possibilities. First, since these terms, or terms like them, were used in astronomical contexts to denote the celestial space below and above the horizon, and, derivatively, celestial powers, Paul may be referring to spiritual beings. However, neither term occurs elsewhere in the NT with this meaning, and the imagery in some of the texts where the terms occur – especially Eph. 3:18 – suggests that Paul is using the terms in a simple ‘spatial’ sense. According to this, the second main interpretation, the terms are intended to embrace the entire universe; either those things above the heavens and beneath the earth, heaven and earth itself, or perhaps, most likely, heaven and hell.

Paul may have used ‘height’ and ‘depth’ as astrological terms that were familiar in his day, *hupsōma* (‘height’) referring to the high point, or zenith, of a star’s path, and *bathos* (‘depth’) to its lowest point. If so, the idea is that Christ’s love secures a believer from the beginning to the end of life’s path. Or perhaps he uses the terms to signify the infinity of space, which is endless in every direction. In either case, the basic meaning is that of totality.

(f) *Any Created Thing*

Lest a picky reader think that Paul has omitted something that could threaten the believer’s security in Christ, Paul concludes with the comprehensive ‘any created thing.’ Are even the responsible decisions of Christians themselves included in this last phrase? Calvinists usually think so, and conclude that Paul clearly teaches here the eternal security of believers.

To leave no doubt that security is all-encompassing, Paul adds ‘nor any other created thing.’ Since only God Himself is uncreated, everyone else and everything else is excluded.

The keywords here are ‘any other created thing.’ The things listed above are each ‘created,’ that is, created by God. Some are ‘supernatural’ (angels, principalities, powers, heights, depths), while others are identifiably natural (death, life, things present, things to come); yet either way, they are created by God and therefore subject to His rule. These natural and supernatural forces may be marshaled against us in persecution. Yet they will not prevail. God’s ‘rule’ is exercised over these elements in the world and within history for the sake of those who have been marked out as His children.

(2) The Assurance (8:39b)

...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our salvation was secured by God’s decree from eternity past and will be held secure by Christ’s love through all future time and throughout all eternity. Death will not pull me away from God’s

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love. Neither will life and its allurements, nor cosmic spiritual powers—benevolent or malevolent, nor anything in time, nor power nor the height of Heaven or the depth of Hell, nor anything else—disappointment, neurosis, disease, a broken romance, financial crisis, insanity—nothing ‘will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

The subparagraph ends on the note with which it began: the impossibility that the believer can be ‘separated’ from the divine love. The fact that this love is identified specifically as the ‘love of Christ’ in v. 35 and ‘the love of God’ here only shows again how much Paul joined (without equating) God and Christ in the experience of the believer. But even here, this love of God for us is ‘in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ For it is in giving ‘His own Son’ that God’s love is above all made known to us, and only in relation to Christ do we experience the love of God for us.

Remember that these verses, like the rest of these first eight chapters of Romans, are simply an exegesis of Paul’s theme verse: ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation’ (1:16). Here in these final four verses we see just how powerful this salvation is. And the very last phrase of the very last verse of Paul’s exegesis explains, in a way, the whole reason for the gospel, for we would never have had the gospel at all had it not been for ‘the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

Is it safe? That has been the theme of our study of Romans 8. If we have been saved, we are safe from anything this world can put against us because God from all eternity has loved and redeemed us. We are His elect. We have been chosen by God to be conformed to the image of Christ and to be Christ’s possession—not for a day or a week but for eternity. If we do not like the idea of God’s sovereign grace, if we are still kicking against it, why? It is our guarantee that nothing can separate us from the great love wherewith He loves us.

Let demoralized, persecuted believers understand that their sufferings do not speak of God’s rejection or of the greater power of the demons. Rather, even these hostile forces are ultimately under God’s sovereign control for our ‘good’ (v. 28). God will save His people, come what may. His love is greater.

For next time: End of Bible Study. Summer break!