

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?

If any passage of Scripture could be considered a “proof text,” this is the one Calvinists rely on most heavily. It therefore deserves our careful consideration. Our approach requires a careful analysis of the context, the grammar, the historical setting, and any precedent available from the earliest Christian writers.

Calvinists draw the following conclusion from this passage: God has predetermined the fate of every individual. 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.

The Calvinist’s handling of this passage is typical of their thinking and handling of Scripture generally. In this paper, we will demonstrate that it is not consistent with the grammatical, historical, contextual method of interpreting the Scriptures. It is based on faulty presuppositions, and flawed in its handling of both the context and the grammar. It is a classic example of “eisegesis” – reading one’s own ideas into the text.

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 in eternity past? Or was it something much more practical and obvious to his readers? The context shows plainly that Paul's intention was to encourage 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" (οιδαμεν 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. (our translation)

The verb, rendered "we know" in the NKJV and "we have observed" in our 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 or merely taught; rather it requires learning by past experience. "We have observed" is the best translation.

The word "that" is "οτι," a demonstrative conjunction, usually introducing the answer to the question "what" or "why." 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. God works everything 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" also frequently answers the question, "Why?" In such cases, it introduces the reason behind what was just stated. A good translation would be "because."

¹ Thayer's Greek Lexicon, #1492

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 the experiences of the saints of old to 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 of God’s interacting with His people in history to support this fact. God’s intention for his past interacting with these men of faith was to bring them ultimately to the inheritance that was promised to Christ.²

Verses 29-30 do not offer a theological argument, or insight into God’s secret purposes. Verse 29 states God’s plain objective for these saints: “*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 verse 30, Paul offers a brief summary of what God had already done in times past for these men of faith as proof that God will complete His purpose.

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

Paul was not referring to some prior knowledge in the mind of God before creation. Nor was He speaking about predetermining their fate. He was referring to those whom God knew personally and intimately, men like Abraham 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 an intimate sense) with the preposition “προ” (before) prefixed to it. It refers to having an intimate relationship 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.

² Psalm 2

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 his accusers knew him previously as a Pharisee. He did not mean that they had mystical foreknowledge of him before he was born, or that they had predetermined his fate. Literally, we could render Rom. 8:29 as follows: "For those God formerly knew intimately, He previously determined them to be conformed to the image of His Son." The individual saints of old, with whom God had a personal 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, so that those having been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." Notice the words "having been called," which are translated from "κεκλημενοι," a perfect passive participle. It refers to those in times past with whom God had a personal covenant relationship – those whom He "called" to a walk of faith in His promises. Long after their deaths, God brought them to salvation by the retroactive application of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This was God's ultimate intention for His dealings with these men – to complete their salvation so that they could ultimately be Christ's companions (brethren) in His inheritance.

In Romans 11:2, Paul used the term "foreknew" again in reference to God's past interaction and covenant relationships with the faithful men of old. "God has not cast away **His people whom He foreknew**. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, 'LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life?' But what does the divine response say to him? 'I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal'."³ This foreknowledge refers to God's intimate relationship with His covenant people in the past. Notice that "Elijah" and seven thousand more were among those whom God "foreknew." This foreknowledge has nothing to do with a mystical premonition or predetermination in the mind of God in eternity past! Nowhere in Scripture does this term carry that meaning! In every place it occurs in Scripture where it refers to people, the person existed at the time of the "foreknowing."

³ Rom. 11:2-4

Past Tense Verbs προεγνων; προωρισεν; εκαλεσεν; εδικαιωσεν; εδοξασεν
Calvinists make another fatal mistake with the grammar. Calvinists fail to notice that the verbs in verse 29 are 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.

Calvinists insist that being “glorified” is future, and is the final act of our salvation, when we are present with the Lord in glorified bodies. But the grammar argues strongly against this view, because all of these verbs are aorist indicative, which refer to past historical events. Some Calvinists argue that the verbs 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 in order to portray certainty.⁴ But this does not normally occur with past tense (aorist indicative) verbs.⁵ The grammar requires that all of the things Paul mentioned were already past including the “glorification” of those whom God foreknew, predestined, called, and justified.⁶

⁴ Examples: John 20:17 “I am ascending...”; Hebrews 12:28 “we are receiving a Kingdom...”

⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, a Calvinist, (GGBB p. 564) argues for a category he calls “proleptic [futuristic] 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 then offers Mark 11:24, John 13:31, Rom. 8:30, and Rev. 10:7, as examples. But, none of his examples support his claim. Mark 11:24 has the present indicative (not the aorist indicative) in the vast majority of manuscripts. But even if we accept the minority reading, Jesus’ point makes perfect sense taking the aorist as a simple past tense (“believe that you have received it”). In John 13:31, the aorist indicative verb refers to Jesus having been “glorified” by Judas’ recent betrayal. The next verse proves that “glorified” was past by saying, if Jesus has been “glorified” (aorist indicative), He also “shall be glorified quickly” (future indicative), referring to His impending death and resurrection. Finally, in Rev. 10:7, the context has already transported the reader to a future time. In this case, the action is still viewed as “past” within the framework of future events into which the reader has been transported by the context. The relevant clause should be rendered, “whenever the seventh angel may be about to sound, the mystery of God **will have been completed**.” So, even in this case, the event is still viewed as past within the future framework of the seventh angel’s trumpet blast. There is no such futuristic framework in Rom. 8:30. The so-called “proleptic aorist” is yet to be proven, never mind shown to be applicable here.

⁶ Additionally, Wallace (GGBB p. 562) argues for a category he calls the “gnomic aorist” (although he does not place the verbs in Rom. 8:30 in this class) “...to present a timeless general fact.” Again he adds, “this usage is quite rare in the NT.” Indeed! The idea of a timeless general fact is normally conveyed by the (gnomic) present tense, not the aorist tense. Once again, the examples Wallace provides (Matt. 23:2; 1 Pet. 1:24; Luke 7:35; James 1:11) do not support his claim. In Matt. 23:2, Luke 7:35, and James 1:11, taking the aorist indicative verb as a simple past tense makes perfect sense in the context. The gnomic idea is not required. In 1 Pet. 1:24, Peter was quoting Isa. 40:7-8 as it stands in the Septuagint. There the aorist indicative was used because Isaiah was speaking of the calamity that had fallen on Jerusalem (past). Again, all of Wallaces’ examples fail to support his point.

In verse 30, Paul pointed to what God had already done for the great men whom He knew previously, whom He had then predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ. Abraham is the perfect example. Back in chapter 4, Paul had already spoken of both Abraham and David as men whom God had “justified” by faith during their own lifetimes. So, it is only natural for Paul to refer back to these same men in chapter 8 (without specifically naming them), as a reminder to his readers that what God has done for these men He will also do for Christians undergoing suffering and persecution.

Rom. 4:1-8 NKJV

1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. 5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, 6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: 7 “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; 8 Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.”

Having already spoken of God’s justifying Abraham and David in chapter 4, it is apparent why Paul wrote “we have observed” God’s working all things to the good of those who love Him. Notice also in this passage how Paul seems fond of using historical examples to back up a timeless truth.

God “Foreknew” (previously knew) Abraham.

Gen 18:17-20 NKJV

*17 And the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, 18 since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 **For I have known him**, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the*

Yet, even if Rom. 8:29 uses this supposed “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 (“we have observed”). So, even with a “gnomic aorist,” Paul would be describing what has always occurred in the past based on past observation (not what always occurs in the present). Therefore, even the “glorification” must be something that has been observed previously.

LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.”

God “Called” Abraham

Heb 11:8-9 NKJV

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when **he was called** to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise;

God “Justified” Abraham

Rom. 4:1-8 NKJV

1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was **justified** by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

God “Glorified” Abraham

Gen 12:2-3 NKJV

2 I will make you a great nation; **I will bless you And make your name great;** And you shall be a blessing.
3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

The word, “glorify,” simply means to bestow honor on someone, to exalt them in the eyes of others.⁷ The Scriptures speak of God’s having glorified certain Old Testament saints. For example, God “glorified” Joseph among his brothers.⁸ This is consistent with a principle stated plainly in Scripture: “for I will only glorify those who glorify me, and he that dishonors Me shall be despised.”⁹ David wrote that God was constantly glorifying His saints. “In his sight an evil-worker is despised, but

⁷ Thayer’s Greek Lexicon: “δοξάζω doxazo (1) to think, suppose, be of opinion (2) to praise, extol, magnify, celebrate (3) to honor, do honor to, hold in honor (4) to make glorious, adorn with lustre, clothe with splendor (4a) to impart glory to something, render it excellent (4b) to make renowned, render illustrious (4b1) to cause the dignity and worth of some person or thing to become manifest and acknowledged.”

⁸ Deut. 33:6 LXX

⁹ 1 Sam. 2:30 LXX

*He glorifies those who fear the Lord.*¹⁰ The word “glorifies” in this verse is the same word found in Romans 8:30. But, here it is in the present tense – meaning God was at that time glorifying those who glorified Him. Certainly, Abraham and David were among these. And this is precisely what God promised to Abraham when He said, “*I will bless you and make your name great.*” He promised and fulfilled the same with David.

Paul’s point in Romans 8:28-30 was that God’s history in His dealings with the patriarchs was adequate proof that He was also committed to the Roman believers who were undergoing severe persecution for the cause of Christ. Just as He formerly knew the patriarchs intimately, calling them to a walk of faith, justifying them by faith, and glorifying them in the sight of all Israel or the nations, so also God would do for the Roman believers.

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 an 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 writers 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. They did not believe man’s destiny was predetermined by God. In fact, determinism (fatalism) was a Gnostic concept which the early Christians universally condemned.¹¹ Not until the 4th century did the idea that one’s fate was predestined penetrate Christianity, thanks to Augustine.

John Chrysostom’s commentary (AD 400) is the earliest surviving exposition of this passage of which we are aware. His view agrees with ours regarding the use of Old Testament examples to demonstrate Paul’s point. Chrysostom viewed the “glorification” as being something already accomplished in the past.

¹⁰ Psalm 15:4 LXX

¹¹ 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.

“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 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.”¹²

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, giving Job as one example.

There is a pattern of error in Calvinist interpretation that is driven by underlying false presuppositions. Their primary “proof texts,” from which they draw the ideas of “election” and “predestination” (Rom. 8,9,11, & Eph, 1), are all referring to God’s historical dealings with the nation of Israel, her corporate election of God, and His past workings to faithfully bring about His promises. Calvinists wrench these passages from their contexts and apply them generically to individual salvation. The Augustinian framework of amillennialism and replacement theology blinds Calvinists to the real meaning of these passages. It is because of their presupposition – that God is finished with national Israel – that they fail to see the dependence of Paul on a literal understanding of God’s covenants and promises to Israel and His hand in Israel’s history. Augustine viewed these passages through a Greek philosophical lens, and Calvin and his followers walk in Augustine’s footsteps. They then bend the grammar and create new grammatical and semantic categories to accommodate their errors in various passages. Greek lexicons and Greek grammars are corrupted with the theological biases of their authors. This is especially apparent with Calvinistic bias.¹³

¹² Chrysostom, Homily XV

¹³ See: Wallace, GGBB, p. 330, paragraph 3 for an excellent example.