

Exegesis Romans 8:29-39

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Table of Contents

| | |
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| Introduction | 3 |
| Setting up the Context | 4 |
| Setting the Cornerstone | 5 |
| An Argument for Election and Predestination | 6 |
| “What shall we say to these things?” – Building the fortress of hope | 9 |
| Pastoral Reflection | 11 |
| Bibliography | 14 |

Introduction

Romans 8:29-39 is one of the greatest encouragements of truth given to believers through Jesus. In this paper, I will explore this text to discuss Paul's position on election and expose the great "fortress of hope" to first-century Christians in Rome and extending to all Christians to the present day.

Romans 8:29 - 39

²⁹For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; ³⁰and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. ³¹What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? ³³Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; ³⁴who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶Just as it is written, "For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The expanse of the Roman empire and its influence was at its peak at the beginning of the Christian era. Saul of Tarsus was a citizen of Rome and a highly rabbinically educated Jew who, prior to his conversion to Christianity, was a fervent persecutor of the church.¹ Following his conversion, Paul became the greatest proponent of Christian faith and wrote the most powerful statements of Christian doctrine. The book of Romans was written by the Apostle Paul in 56 A.D addressed to the Christians in Rome, but the theological substance of his letter was relevant and necessary for all Christians. The community in the Christian church in Rome was a mixed

¹ *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, eds., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 869.

community, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. There was friction and conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians and Paul needed to clarify the gospel and the implications on how they should live out their faith in community.

Taken on its own, this section of scripture has been a topic of controversy among Christians. Specifically, verse 29 is the subject of debate regarding the doctrine of election and predestination. I will seek to explain the text as the answer to our sure demise in chapter 7 and Paul's answer of good news and great encouragement whereby Christians can savor hope and confidence given in chapter 8.

Setting up the Context

To understand chapter 8, we must read it in the context of chapter 7. Paul frames our dismal reality in chapter 7 by confirming that the law has jurisdiction over us in verse 1: our sinful passions are aroused by the law in verse 5, sin becomes alive and we are dead in verse 9; we wrestle with the conflict of two natures in verse 15; he ends in verse 24 with wretched men are we, "who will set me free from the body of this death?" Paul answers this dismal reality for those who believe in Jesus with the astounding proclamation and great news in Romans 8:1. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."² There is a law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus that triumphs and sets us free from the law of sin resulting in death. Galatians 3:13 explains "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us." Jesus became a mediator, a substitute, and our redeemer. The Son of God came into the world to bear our sin and become our condemnation – something the law and the sheep and goats and bulls and washings could never do. There is now no condemnation for those who

² Rom. 8:1 (NASB)

are in this great condemnation-bearer, Jesus Christ.³ Paul tells us in chapter 8 verse 6, “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.” Paul goes on to illustrate the permanence of this transformation proclaiming in verses 9 – 17, that if the Spirit lives in you, the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead to conquer sin dwells in you. You have been adopted as a child of the almighty God. Verse 16 says, “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.” In verses 18-27, Paul tells Christians that we will suffer, but the Spirit Himself will intercede for us.

Setting the Cornerstone

Romans 8:28 has comforted and sustained God’s people over centuries and is the connecting cornerstone to the remainder of chapter 8, which is the subject of this paper. To fully comprehend the promise and encouragement that Paul delivers to Christians in verses 29 – 39, one must begin with verse 28. “²⁸And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” This is a conditional statement of fact. Paul sets the cornerstone with a statement of truth. “We know that God causes all things to work together for good” but qualifies this statement with the condition “to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” This is not a promise for all people but gives bountiful hope and encouragement to followers of Jesus who are called to His purpose. Christians can be certain that God works all things together for good. The Greek word for good is “agathon” and means good outcomes and not evil.

³ John Piper, “No Condemnation in Christ Jesus, Part 2,” *Desiring God* (Desiring God Foundation, September 30, 2001), <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/no-condemnation-in-christ-jesus-part-2>)

An Argument for Election and Predestination

Verse 29 in the Bible connects to this cornerstone verse with the word “For” and begins to build the foundation to our fortress of hope by unpacking the “who” referenced in verse 28, “those who are called to His purpose.” “²⁹For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren;”⁴ John Piper presents two ways that this text can be understood. First, we could add a phrase like, “*would believe on Jesus*,” so that it reads: “Whom He foreknew *would believe on Jesus*, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His son.” In order to preserve the self-determining power of man in his own salvation, God predestines people only on the basis of faith which He foresees that certain people will produce by their self-determining power. The second way to understand this text is to read it literally and interpret “foreknew” as a special kind of knowing in Scripture which indicates choice or favor. In other words, to foreknow would be the same as God’s choosing or electing those who are called.⁵ The text simply says, “whom He foreknew, He predestined” and the words “know” and “foreknew” commonly mean to “choose” or “set favor upon,” therefore we must be very careful when adding additional words that modify the plain language in the original text. To add the words “would believe on Jesus” would limit who God foreknows and shift the meaning of the plain text. We can look at other texts in the Bible and other texts where Paul used the words “know” to see if there is consistency in the meaning. There are many, but I am providing three examples to support this argument. In choosing Abraham, “The Lord said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth

⁴ Rom. 8:29

⁵ John Piper, “Those Whom He Foreknew He Predestined,” *Desiring God* (Desiring God Foundation, October 14, 1985), <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/those-whom-he-foreknew-he-predestined>

will be blessed? For I have (*known*) chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.”(Genesis 18:17-19) In choosing the nation of Israel, “You only have I (*known*) chosen among all the families of the earth; Therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities.”(Amos 3:1-2) In both of these texts, the Greek equivalent for the word chosen as translated in the New American Standard is *known*. Later, Paul writes in Romans 11:1-2, “I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.” Dr. NT Wright clarifies the use of foreknowing, “Paul does not speak of God foreknowing faith, but of foreknowing persons. Moreover, this view would appear inconsistent with the very clear teaching that salvation is unmerited on our part and is derived entirely from God’s good pleasure.”⁶ The Old Testament demonstrates a common understanding and use of the word “know” or “foreknew” as a synonym to “choose.” And if this were not enough, all we need to do is read verse 30, “and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” If we follow the logic that those who are called are also the justified, and justification is only by faith, then the call must secure faith because it secures the justification. If the undeniable call of God brings man to faith and not the self-determined choice of man, then it is the power of God that brings salvation and not the self-determining power of man that brings him salvation.

⁶ NT Wright, “*Romans 8*,” *Walking With Giants*, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.walkingwithgiants.net/bible-study-notes/new-testament/romans/romans-8-2/>, p.23.

In verse 30, “predestined” does not refer to God’s choice of who will be saved, but refers to the destiny appointed for the chosen. The destiny of those chosen by God is, as it says in verse 29, to be “conformed to the image of His Son that He might be the first-born among many brethren.” As Christ was begotten of God the Father, those predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son will be adopted as *brothers in God’s family*. Tying back to Romans 8:28, God causes all things to work together for good for those who, *brothers in God’s family*, are foreknown, predestined, called by God, and justified by God and will share in the glorification of the risen Lord. Dr. Tom Wright describes in this way: “Although this might well include a moral conformity to Christ’s character in the present life, the emphasis is probably, in context, eschatological. We are predestined to the future glory that Christ himself already enjoys.”⁷

It is also curious to consider the past tense of this progressive series ending up in the believer being glorified in Christ Jesus. For whom He foreknew, He predestined or pre-determined their ending in glorification. For whom He called, He also justified. And whom He justified, He also glorified. All are past tense as if God, not contained by time, has already completed His redeeming work for those He has chosen who are already glorified. With God, there is neither a before nor after.⁸ Douglas Moo writes “Paul is looking at the believer’s glorification from the standpoint of God, who has 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.”⁹

⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

⁸ James Denney, ed. William Robertson Nicoll, *Romans 8 Expositor's Greek Testament* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), accessed April 12, 2020, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/egt/romans/8.htm>

⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) (p. 536). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

“What shall we say to these things?” - Building the Fortress of Hope

In the next five verses, Romans 8:31 – 35, Paul poses six questions to help the reader recognize the amazing privilege available to the Christian and the promise we can find confidence in our fortress of hope.

Verse 31: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”

Verse 32, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”

Verse 33, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?”

Verse 34, “God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?”

Verse 35, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

What shall we say to these things? How shall we respond to this proclamation that God will cause all things for Christians to work for good and the revelation that God has chosen and justified those He called to receive an unmerited gift to join the family of God. If the Almighty God is for us, then take courage that no one can stand against us. In verse 32, Paul provides evidence of how much God would sacrifice for His elect. God did not even spare His own Son for the sake of Christians, but freely delivered Him up to suffer and die on the cross so that Christians could know the love that God has for them. If God loves Christians, would He not also work all things for good for those He has elected? Verse 33 and 34 establish that if God is the only One who justifies, then no one would be able to bring a charge against or condemn the one God has justified. The final question in verse 35, “Who shall separate us from the love of

Christ?” sharply points to the depth of Christ’s love for Christians overcoming any charge and erasing any condemnation.

Paul exclaims the vastness of the circumstances Christians may face in verse 35; “Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” Referring back to verse 28, Paul does not deny that Christians may face many persecutions including starvation, shame, danger or even death. But none of these, even death, is able to cut us away from the love Christ has for us and the resulting good we receive in our salvation. In verse 36, Paul quotes Psalms 44:22 to emphasize his point to Christians that these things can happen. “Just as it is written, ‘For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’”¹⁰ In the context of Psalm 44, Christians have not forgotten God or turned to idols, but even for the sake of God, Christians can be subject to these afflictions. The afflictions listed are “what” things that Christians can experience, but it does not answer Paul’s question of “Who will bring a charge” in verse 33 and “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” in verse 35. Douglas Moo says the future tense of the verb “Bring a charge” in verse 33 focuses attention on the last judgment and to be sure it is Satan, the “accuser,” and so may our enemies and, perhaps most persuasively of all, our own sins.¹¹ John Piper also provides an answer to who is behind the persecution in verse 35, citing Revelation 2:10 as evidence that it is the Devil that is our enemy and behind this persecution.¹²

¹⁰ Rom. 8:36

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) (pp. 541-541). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

¹² John Piper, “We Are More Than Conquerors,” *Desiring God* (Desiring God Foundation, February 19, 2015), <https://www.desiringgod.org/labe/we-are-more-than-conquerors>)

As we come to verse 37, Paul completes the foundation and prepares to place the columns to our fortress of hope with a response to the question: shall any of these many things listed in verse 35 that the devil may afflict on us separate us from the love of Christ? He answers, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”¹³ Christ has overwhelmed the enemy and, although we may experience persecution, God works through all these things for good for Christians.

Paul completes chapter 8 with our hope assured by the love of Jesus. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹⁴ Paul completes the Christian fortress of hope that no enemy or anything can overcome or separate us from the saving love that Christ has for His elect.

Pastoral Reflection

Paul’s writing of Romans chapter 8 is arguably the greatest writing in the Bible and provides certainty to our hope in the midst of depravity of sin, persecution, trials, afflictions and even death that God works through all these things for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose.

The doctrine of election continues to be a controversial subject among Christians. The Apostle Paul was a pharisee trained in the law and the prophets, chosen by Jesus to spread the gospel to the gentiles and sons of Israel, the author of fourteen books of the new testament, and

¹³ Rom. 8:37 NIV

¹⁴ Rom. 8:38

he is consistent in his position that salvation begins with God and begins in eternity.¹⁵ In his letter to the Corinthians he says, “If anyone loves God, he has been known by God. Being “known” precedes “loving” God.¹⁶ Here again, Paul clearly argues that God foreknows those that love Him. But does Paul’s position and logical presentation have authority over all other text that would support a broader inclusion to God’s family and the role of individual choice in the matter of receiving the gift of salvation? One can point to numerous texts in the Bible where an alternative position can be argued. In the context of this paper, I will offer a few verses that could be argued to provide an alternative view and offer a conclusion.

Joshua 24:15 “If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

Mark 8:34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

John 1:12-13 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and will dine with him, and he with Me.

The gospel writers tell the story of Jesus and the beginning of the church, but Paul, supremely qualified, is granted authority by Jesus Himself to clarify doctrine to the church. Although there are many scriptures written by the gospel writers that could be argued to support the position of man’s self-directed salvation, Paul is the authority writing to the churches to direct and clarify doctrinal disputes. Therefore, I conclude that God is the one who calls those He elected, and His

¹⁵ James Denney, ed. William Robertson Nicoll, Romans 8 Expositor's Greek Testament (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), accessed April 12, 2020, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/egt/romans/8.htm>

¹⁶ 1 Cor.8:3

call is irresistible. The called accept His call and are justified by God. Christians, being conformed to the likeness of God's Son, will experience trials, persecutions, afflictions and even death. But Christians can take assurance in the great hope and promise that Paul provides in his concluding verse. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹⁷ Praise be to God.¹⁸

¹⁷ Rom 8:38-39

¹⁸ NT Wright, "Romans 8," *Walking With Giants*, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.walkingwithgiants.net/bible-study-notes/new-testament/romans/romans-8-2/>, p.21-29)

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