



Wesley on Romans: On Predestination

Romans 8:26-39

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*All words printed in *italics* come from Wesley's original publication.

Today we come to the end of our focus on *Wesley on Romans*: during which we have looked at some of John Wesley's sermons based on the book of Romans. We end our series with Wesley's sermon titled, simply, "On Predestination," which was first published in 1773.

There is little doubt that this sermon was Wesley's way of responding to the strict Calvinistic understanding of predestination that came out of the reformation. We have already considered the topic of predestination this year, as we considered why we should stop using the Christian platitude that offers, "Everything happens for a reason." Today, we consider Wesley's take on this theological topic.

May God bless the hearing of the Word, that from Wesley's pen to our ears, we may better understand the work of God and our call to continue that work in the world today.

In Romans 8:29-30, our focus text for the day, Paul writes, "For those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom God predestined, he also called; and those whom God called he also justified; and those whom God justified he also glorified."

The Apostle Peter, in 2 Peter 3:15-16, writes about Paul's writings. Peter says, "Our brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking as he did in all his letters. There are some things in his writings that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and the unstable will twist to their own destruction, as they do all other scriptures."

Perhaps, among those things Peter is referencing that are so hard to understand in Paul's writings, this 8th Chapter of Romans is at the top of the list. What Paul says in Romans 8 is not only hard to understand for the ignorant and unlearned, but it is just as hard to understand for the most educated people.

I hope we can agree that these texts are most difficult to understand. Even among the well educated, who should have the best chance at understanding Paul's writings, there are many different opinions about what these texts imply. Knowing there is so much variance in understanding among men and women of the *greatest learning, sense, and piety*, anyone who takes on these texts should be wary in doing so, and should speak with little self-confidence. Yet, just the opposite seems to be the case among most who write on this text; for some reason, *no writers upon earth appear more positive than those who write on this difficult*

subject. Even those who write with modesty and humility on other subjects, when it comes to predestination, they write as if they are infallible.

I would not dare speak without the modesty I contend is necessary on this text. It is unlikely I could say anything that has not already be said about this subject, for *volumes have been written.* All I would offer at present, are a few shorts hints, which perhaps may cast some light on the [Romans text regarding predestination.]

As I have thought more about what Paul is trying to say, the more I think the apostle is not *describing a chain of causes and effects, but [is instead] simply showing the method in which God works.* Paul is describing the process and method of God's salvation throughout the history of creation.

So, first, let us look forward on the whole work of God in the salvation of [humanity]. The first point focuses in on *the foreknowledge of God.* God foreknew, from the beginning of time, those who would believe from every nation across the world, and in every era throughout time. When we talk about foreknowledge, we are not talking about the nature of God, but rather we are speaking in the manner of humanity. See, if we go deep and consider the true nature of God, we would have to say there's no such thing as foreknowledge or afterknowledge. For God, all eternity is presented at once; time is not a sequential series like it is for humanity. For God, all that was, is, or will be is present at once. Because we think of time as sequential, we assume that because God knew someone to be a believer, they would become a believer, as if it was cause and effect. But no: *[God] knows them [to be a believer] because they are [a believer].*

It's nearly impossible to compare the ways of humanity to the ways of God, but consider it this way: *I know the sun shines.* The sun doesn't shine because I know it shines, but I know it shines because it shines. *My knowledge supposes the sun to shine,* but my knowledge doesn't cause it to shine. In the same way, God knows that we, as humanity, sin, because God knows all things. Yet, we do not sin because God knows our sins; God knows it, because we sin. God is so omniscient, so all-knowing, that God sees all time, from *creation to the consummation, as a moment,* and in seeing all time as one moment, God knows what is in the hearts of each child of humanity. God knows, throughout all time and across all nations, who believes and who does not believe. Yet, *what God knows, whether [a person has] faith or unbelief,* is not caused by God's knowledge. We, humanity, are free to believe or not believe as if God did not know at all.

Indeed, if [humanity] were not free, [no one] could be accountable for [their] thoughts, words, or actions. If humanity were not free to choose faithfulness or unfaithfulness, we would be no different than the sun, the moon, the rocks, or the trees. We would have no will for which reward or punishment were due. We would be wholly unaccountable for any action; such a thought is absurd.

Anyway, moving forward, Paul says, "Whom God did foreknow, he predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son." This is the second step (which we proceed having agreed that there is no before or after for God, the second step is taken on in our limited sequential

understanding of time as humans): God decrees that all who believe in the Son shall be conformed to the image of the Son. That is, all who believe will be conformed, inwardly and outwardly, into all holiness. This is the simple promise of the Biblical text, that all who believe in the name of the Son of God shall be saved, for their lives will be conformed to the great love exemplified in the Son of God.

The third step (remembering that we talk in the limited sequential understanding of humanity) follows, “Who he predestined, he also called.” According to God’s Word, those who believe shall be saved, and those God foreknew to be believers, God calls through the word of his grace and the presence of his Spirit. It implies the calling them children of God; the accepting them into the Son of God; and the justifying them by the grace and redemption in Jesus Christ.

And this is the fourth step, “Who God called, he justified.” God has *made them just or righteous*. God worked in them the image of the Son – leading them toward sanctification, having filled them fully with the power of the Spirit to live and love as the Son lived and loved.

It remains, as Paul says, “Whom God justified, he also glorified.” This is the final step. Having led them to be right in heart, deed, and thought, conforming them to the image of the Son, God gives them *“the kingdom which was prepared for them before the world began.”* We have here the order of God’s will, *the plan [that God] laid down from eternity, [God] saves those whom he foreknew; the true believers in every place and generation.*

This scenario may be better understood if we, instead of looking to the future from the beginning of time, looking from the foreknowledge of God, considered looking backwards from the end of time. Suppose you stood in the realm of glory at the consummation of the world with the multitude of hosts, a number of people too great to count, comprised of people from every nation, and tongue, and kindred, and people. The multitude would be praising God who was seated on the great Throne. In that crowd, you would not find one person who was not a witness to God’s great truth; not one person who was not sanctified before they were glorified; not one person who wasn’t purchased by the blood of Christ; not one person who hadn’t been renewed by the Spirit; not one person who wasn’t holy in heart. This multitude has been glorified, but before they were glorified they were sanctified.

So consider any who is now sanctified on earth. You won’t find one person who has been sanctified who wasn’t first called. Before they were sanctified, they were called outwardly by the word of God and other faithful disciples, and they were called inwardly by the Spirit, affirming that they were a child of God. It is this calling that led them to sanctification. It was by their calling they came to love God, and by loving God they were led to love their neighbor as themselves, and by loving God they received the power to walk blameless according to the commandments of God. This is the manner in which God works – we are called even while yet in sin, and God justifies us, before we are sanctified.

And who are they that are called by God? None other than those who God predestined and conformed to the image of the Son. But in this, we are still talking in the limited understanding

of time that we have as humanity. Every believer was predestined before they were called. *For God calls none, but "according to the counsel of his will," [according to God's plan of acting], which [God] laid down before the foundation of the world.*

Let me restate this so to be sure we are all clear: All who have been called were predestined, just as all who were predestined, God foreknew to be believers. *[God] knew, he saw them as believers, and as such predestined them to salvation, according to his eternal decree, that "[All who] believe shall be saved."* Here is the process then of God, from the end working back to the beginning: There are none glorified in heaven at the end of time who were not first sanctified. There are none who are sanctified who were not first justified. There are none who are justified who were not first called. There are none who are called who were not first predestined. And there are none who are predestined except those who were first known by God as believers. In this way, the purpose and word of God still stands, that "he or she that believes shall be saved; and he or she that does not believe will perish." Humanity perishes at their own decision to stray from God and to refuse belief. As each of the created humanity is invited to have belief, God is justified in saying, that according to the will of God, all will be saved, for they are invited to come to the knowledge and truth of God through the love of Jesus Christ.

One last thing, as I sum this all up: *The almighty, all-wise God sees and knows, from everlasting to everlasting, all that is, that was, and that is to come, through **one eternal now**. With [God] nothing is either past or future, but all things [are] equally present. [God] has, therefore, if we speak according to the truth [of heavenly things], no foreknowledge, [and] no afterknowledge.* What God does, to help us in our limited capacity, is to speak in the Biblical text in a manner according to the *scantiness of our understanding*. God speaks of the eternal purpose, counsel, plan, and foreknowledge in ways that do not fully reflect God's will and ability, but that acquiesce to our limited capability to understand. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, and God's ways are higher than our ways, we can not possibly have the language to comprehend the fullness of God's glory. Our attempt at studying Paul's language, just as it was Paul's attempt in writing these letters, is not to explain God's ways inexhaustibly, but to give us some glimmer of knowledge of God's ways that we might live more faithfully in relationship with God and with one another.

So take heart, and hear the good news; from all that we have said, here is what I hope you take away, this and no more; 1) *God knows all believers;* 2) *[God] wills that [all believers] should be saved from sin;* 3) *to that end, [God] justifies [all believers],* 4) *[God] sanctifies;* and 5) *[God] takes [all believers] to glory.*

Oh that we might be thankful for the Lord and his eternal goodness. May God instill in us his promise of love and life eternal, that we might be satisfied with this understanding of predestination and of God's word, that we might try not to *wade into those mysteries which are too deep for [even] angels to fathom!* For the glory of God, may we give thanks that God calls us, loves us, sanctifies us, and leads us to eternal life! Amen.