

The Sovereign Love of God

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 30, 2022.

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:28–30).¹

When we think of love, we typically think of it as relational and often reciprocating: The love of a husband for his wife and a wife for her husband; the love of a parent for a child and a child for a parent; the love of a grandparent for a grandchild and a grandchild for a grandparent; the love for a friend and of a friend, and even love for our neighbor. Our neighbor is not the unknown world at large but someone we know, even when introduced in a moment of need. Our love for a friend is formed through the bond of friendship. Our love for our family begins relationally, literally, and grows as we do. Even our love for God and one another flows from God’s love for us: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

It is difficult then to fathom the love of God for us individually and personally before creation, before we were, before anyone was. But he did: God the Father “chose us in [God the Son] before the foundation of the world...In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:4-5). Before “In the beginning” (Gen. 1:1), in love for “those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29). He really did love us first.

Therefore, when Paul says, “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:29), we know that our love for God is not a measured degree of devotion but a relational description. Yes, we are “those who love God,” because he first loved us and adopted us as his own. Or as John explains, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us” (1 John 4:10). And as “God is love” (1 John 4:8), he loved us not in response to our love but according to who he is and his sovereign purpose, namely his glory. It is not a general or universal love to be accepted by human will or merit but a sovereign, specific, personal love.

In her forty-third sonnet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning beautifully begins, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”² Perhaps we too may count, not of our love for God but of his love for

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Sonnet from the Portuguese 43: How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,” Poetry Foundation, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43742/sonnets-from-the-portuguese-43-how-do-i-love-thee-let-me-count-the-ways>.

us, as John Stott calls them, five “undeniable affirmations.”³ Let me count the ways: foreknown in love, predestined to love, called by love, justified as love, and glorified for love.

Foreknown in Love

Often misunderstood, the word translated “foreknew” means knowing beforehand. But what kind of knowing is it? Some have defined the word as prior knowledge of actions and events, a knowing by seeing. As the Arminians argued before the Council of Dort, “complete and decisive election occurred because of foreseen perseverance unto the end in faith, conversion, holiness and godliness”⁴ In other words, they argued, as many do today, that God *foresaw* future choices, actions, and behavior leading to God’s election of us. Such an interpretation led the Council of Dort to refer to it as “repugnant to the entire Scripture.” But why? If God is sovereign and unconstrained to time and space, able to see the past, present and future, why does foreknew *not* mean something God foresaw? I think there are three good reasons.

First, arguing *foreknew* means *foresaw* disregards not only the broader context of Romans but the specific context too. Paul tells us not what God *saw* but what he’s *done*: God “foreknew,” God “predestined,” God “called,” God “justified,” God “glorified.” While God certainly is omniscient, Paul is telling us of his omnipresence.

Second, the object of “foreknew” is not our actions, but us, personally. God knows every person he has chosen in Christ. It’s not merely knowing something about us. It is a relational knowing; he knows us intimately.

Third, if “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:10-11), then what God foresees in us is not a worthiness unto salvation but total depravity. If foreknowing is looking down the corridor of time, what God knows is “all have sinned” and fall short of his glory (Rom. 3:23). If foreknew means foresaw then but for the sovereign love of God there is nothing to see in us worth seeing. No, he foreknew us in love according to the purpose of his will, not ours. Before the Fall, before we were, before we sinned, God loved you and loved me personally, setting us apart according to his glorious purpose, predestining us for adoption.

Predestined to Love

Predestination: The word almost defines itself. The word simply means to determine destiny beforehand. Also referred to as election, predestination is God the Father’s ordination of only those he foreknew, the elect, to salvation in Christ. In fact, some scholars believe the Greek verb

³ John Stott quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Reign of Grace: Romans 5-8* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 2:912.

⁴ “*The Canons of Dort*, First Head of Doctrine, Rejection 5,” *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2421.

is better translated “foreordained.”⁵ Those whom God foreknew he foreordained.⁶ Whether foreordained, elected, or predestined, it’s a word rich with meaning (and a topic we will consider in greater depth in the coming weeks).

In the case of those whom God foreknew, predestination tells us what our destiny is, when it was established, and God’s purpose in it. While incomprehensible for mere mortals, our destiny was established “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), a date unknown to our linear experience, an event in eternity past. But what was predestined is linear: our calling, justification, including our adoption as children of God through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:5), the “firstborn” of the family (8:29), and our sanctification, in which the Holy Spirit is conforming us to the image of Christ. He who came first accomplished what God predestined for us, a destiny we experience first in our calling.

Called by Love

The word “called” can be misunderstood. Some hear the word and think of vocation. We are called to do what we do. Others think of it as something we respond to, such as responding to the gospel. Perhaps you heard the gospel preached and responded to the call by believing. Both of these examples are legitimate uses of the word, “called,” but neither is what “called” means in this context. There is a key distinction here: God does it. We were called by love: “those whom he predestined he also called” (8:30).

We refer to this as *effectual calling*, a supernatural work of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. To be clear, effectual calling includes the free offer of the gospel, but it is distinct in several ways, specifically in what the Holy Spirit does. First, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to our sin and depravity, convincing us that we are indeed sinners in need of a savior.

Second, the Holy Spirit reveals not only our need for *a* savior but reveals Christ to us as our *only* Savior. Scripture says that our spiritual eyes are opened (Acts 26:18), and we receive knowledge of Christ (Eph. 1:17-18).

Third, the Holy Spirit brings us spiritually to life. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, we are “born again” (John 3:5). Paul told Titus, “[God] saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of his mercy, through the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5 NET).

And fourth, based on all that the Holy Spirit has done, he helps us to believe the gospel. Or, as the Shorter Catechism puts it, the Holy Spirit “enables us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.”⁷ And so, as God is love, you could say we are effectually called by love, and those called by love are then justified as love.

⁵ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, (New York: T&T Clark Ltd., 1975), 2:431.

⁶ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 534.

⁷ “Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus

Justified as Love

When we hear the word “justified” we may think of it in the sense of being right, but theologically speaking to be justified is to be considered righteous before God, to be counted right in his sight. In the fifth chapter, Paul says, “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1), telling us not only how God’s wrath has been appeased but also the means he uses, faith. Faith, however, is no more the cause of our justification than our good works. Rather, faith is the means through which we receive it, and this by God’s grace. Or as Paul explains it in Ephesians, “by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

If we are justified as righteous before God as an act of his free grace,⁸ how then does he do it? First, he pardons all our sins for Christ’s sake. Our sins were judged upon the cross of Christ and his righteousness imputed to us.

Second, we are accepted as righteous in God’s sight for Christ’s sake. As Christ was perfectly righteous in nature, thought, word, and deed, God looks to his perfect righteousness and accepts it as our own. In the courtroom of God’s justice, we stand not in our own but the righteousness of Christ. In his love, we were justified as love that we might be like him, the firstborn of our family in glory.

Glorified for Love

There should arise from everything up to this point a sense of assurance. We have not looked at a list of our accomplishments nor a list to get things done. We have looked at what God has done. Note that all of the verbs are in the past tense: “foreknew,” “predestined,” “called,” “justified,” “glorified.” In the sovereign ordination of God, what he has decreed is as good as done.

Of course, it doesn’t feel that way to us, because we are in the here and now of our sanctification. What we *already* are in Christ, we have *not yet* finally and completely experienced. This is why it is so important for us to take time to think deeply about what God has done. It’s easy to begin to think of the Christian life as self-help for living, to think of the Bible as a manual for navigating today’s troubles, to think of the church as group therapy.

This is one of a number of reasons to think about what is to come—what we will be. Because as consuming as this life seems to be, there will be an end to your life and this life as we know it. If the Lord tarries, you and I will die, in peace or in pain; God only knows. But to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), and so all who are in Christ will be.

Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.” “The Shorter Catechism Q. 31,” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 374-375.

⁸ “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” “The Shorter Catechism Q. 33,” *Ibid.*, 376.

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But when Scripture describes our glorification, it looks beyond our absence from the body to the final resurrection of it. On that day, we will not only be with the Lord, we will be like him. We who were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) yet fallen in sin shall be restored to the perfect image of the glory of God. We will be glorified. Or, as John describes it, “What we shall be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). And so, as the Shorter Catechism puts it, we shall be “made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.”⁹

Therefore, when Paul says in the fifth chapter, “we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2), he is pointing us to that moment: when “in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet,” when “the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52).

And so, looking back at this “golden chain” of our salvation,¹⁰ we do not look at it as a list of terms to be defined but connecting links of God’s love for us. Though each word is a doctrinal treatise and treasure in itself, Paul links each word to another crafting the grand narrative of our salvation. He who loved you before you were, set you apart to one day be like his only Begotten, to be his child forever. In love, he called you to himself and for his Son’s sake counted you righteous.

But the true story of God’s love for us doesn’t stop there but goes on, not to a happy ending but a happy eternity, where we will indeed be Christlike, enjoying the unfailing love of God forever. Listen to it again; let us look at it once more, through the lens of God’s love, and let us meditate upon the sovereign love of God; let us count the ways: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30). Amen.

⁹ “At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity” “The Shorter Catechism Q. 38,” *Ibid.*, 378.

¹⁰ It is speculated that John Arrowsmith, a Westminster Divine, coined this oft-used term, when he said that “God lets down this golden chain from heaven to draw up all his people.” Geoff Thomas, “The Golden Chain of Salvation (1),” *Evangelical Times*, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.evangelical-times.org/articles/biblicaltheological/the-golden-chain-of-salvation-1/>.