HOW DO WE KNOW?

Romans 8:29-30

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Last week we looked at Romans 8:28 that says that we know that God will work everything together for the good of those who love Him.
2. In 29-30, Paul answers this question: How do we know that God is going to work all things together for our good? Let's look at his answer.

II. TEXT:

1. **Romans 8:29-30** 29 For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.

III. BACKGROUND

1. This is a highly controversial passage between Calvinists and Arminians – two systems of soteriology (the study or doctrine of salvation). I want to say from the start that I am an Arminian[i], although I love my Calvinist brothers, and I have much respect for many Calvinist scholars. But I disagree with their soteriology, and with their interpretation of passages like the one at hand.
2. This morning I want to do three things.
    i. Present the Calvinist interpretation and explain why I reject it.
    ii. Present the traditional Arminian interpretation.
    iii. Present an alternative Arminian interpretation.

IV. THE CALVINIST INTERPRETATION

1. There are three terms in this passage that are at the center of the debate: foreknew, predestined, and called. Let's look at how Calvinism understands these terms.
2. **First, "foreknew":**

i. **Romans 8:29** For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.
ii. Calvinists believe the word "foreknew" means foreloved and for-chose (see the Amplified Bibe's translation of this verse. As much as I enjoy the Amplified Bible, be forewarned that it is highly Calvinistic).
iii. Therefore, Calvinists say that "foreknew" term refers to the doctrine election, and the Calvinist doctrine of election says that before the world was created God chose some for salvation and, and He chose to let the rest of humanity die in their sins.
iv. What are the problems with the Calvinist view? I'll mention two.
    1. The most likely meaning of "foreknow" is prescience – knowing something before it happens.
        a. Other ways of describing prescience are prevision; to know beforehand; know in advance; foresight of what will come to pass; knowledge of something before it happens/exists; knowledge that looks ahead into the future from sometime in the past; eternal advance knowledge; foresight of future things; God's omniscience applied to future events.
        b. **Dr. Steve Lemke** of NOBTS "In any standard lexicon, the root Greek word for 'foreknew' (proginosko) simply means knowing something before it happens (*Calvinism*, Allen and Lemke, 158-159)."
        c. **Dr. William Klein** of Denver seminary "Foreknowledge and to foreknow (noun and verb) refer to God's prescience or prior knowledge, not to God's prior election of some to be saved. The sense of prior knowledge is clear in these words used outside the NT, and it is the best gloss [explanation] of the few uncontroversial instances in the NT (Acts

26:5; Pt 3:17)… Foreknowledge does not mean election (*Calvinism*, Allen and Lemke, 365)."

2. The idea of election, or foreordaining, or choosing in advance, doesn't fit with the context, because the very next word in Rm 8:29 is "predestines." In Calvinism, election and predestination are synonymous; they mean the same things. It doesn't make sense for Paul to say, "For those whom God predestined, or elected, He also predestined."

3. Second, "predestined":

i. The second word in this passage that needs to be examined is the word "predestined."

ii. **Romans 8:29** For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

iii. What do Calvinists believe about predestination? God chooses in advance to unconditionally save some and not others.

iv. Remember, in Calvinism, predestination and election are synonyms. That's why it doesn't make sense to say that "foreknowledge" means election. Otherwise the verse is essentially saying, "For those He elected, He also elected," or, "For those He predestined, He also predestined."

v. It's important that you understand that all Christians believe in election and predestination. You have to. Those words and concepts are in the Bible. But we disagree about what those words mean.

vi. Calvinist author **R.C. Sproul** (*Chosen by God*, 137) "From all eternity, without any prior view of our human behavior, God has chosen some unto election and others unto reprobation."

vii. Arminians can agree that God, before the creation of the world, chose some to go to heaven and some to go to hell. The question is why did God choose some for hell and not others? The key difference is that Calvinists believe in unconditional election or

unconditional predestination. In other words, God didn't choose to save this person because He knew He would believe the gospel, and to not save that person because He knew that He would reject the gospel. Predestination/election is unconditional. It has nothing to do with the person. It was God's choice.

viii. I have several theological problems with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, or unconditional election.

1. Rm 8:29 doesn't say that predestination is unconditional. It doesn't say that anywhere in the Bible. In fact, Rm 8:29 and 1 Pt 1:2 seem to say that election/predestination are based on God's foreknowledge – on something He knew beforehand.
2. God loves everyone (Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:8). If that is true, then why wouldn't God choose to save everyone, since predestination is unconditional.
3. Christ died for everyone (1 Jn 2:2). Why would Christ die for everyone if He didn't intend to save everyone, or at least to make salvation possible for everyone?
4. God wants everyone to be saved and none to perish (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pt 3:9). If that is true, then why would God choose to only save some when He could save all?

4. Third, "called":

i. The third word that needs to be examined in this passage is the word "called."

ii. **Romans 8:30** And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.

iii. The Calvinist interpretation of "called" involves two interpretive decisions, with two theological implications.

iv. The first interpretive decision involves the meaning of the word "called". While "called" can have different meanings, Calvinists have decided that here it means "to invite," or to invite to believe the gospel.

v. The second interpretive decision is that when the text says, “and those he called, he also justified,” it means, “everyone (or all) that he called, he also justified.” As I said, these two interpretive decisions lead to two big theological implications.
vi. The first theological implication is that if everyone who is called/invited to believe the gospel is also justified (saved), and not everyone is saved, then that means that not everyone is called. Calvinists don’t believe that God calls/invites everyone to believe – not sincerely.
vii. The second theological implication is that if everyone who is called/invited is also justified (saved), then the call/invitation must be irresistible. And indeed this is one of the core beliefs of Calvinism – irresistible grace, or the effectual call. If you are one of the elect (unconditionally predetermined for salvation), then at some point in your life God will enable and ensure that put your faith in Jesus. It will be an offer that you cannot refuse. If you are not one of the elect, then God will not enable you to put your faith in Jesus.
viii. There are three reasons why I reject the Calvinist interpretation. The first is textual, and the second and third are theological.
ix. First, as I said, the word “called” can mean different things. It can mean “to invite,” as Calvinists have decided, but it can also mean “to name,” or to give a name to a person or thing. Here are some examples:
x. **Matthew 1:23 (ESV)** Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).
xi. **Matthew 2:23** Then he went and settled in a town called Nazareth to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.
xii. The Bible says that when people put their faith in Jesus, God calls (names) them His people.

xiii. **Romans 9:25-26** 25 As it also says in Hosea, I will call Not my People, My People, and she who is Unloved, Beloved. 26 And it will be in the place where they were told, you are not my people, there they will be called sons of the living God.

xiv. The prophet Hosea foretold of a day when Gentiles would put their faith in God, and though they formerly were not His people, He would call them His people, they were formerly unloved, but He would called them Beloved, and they were not formerly not His children, but He would call them sons of the living God. In other words, when you become a Christian, God calls you and names you His people, His beloved, His child.

xv. So in Romans 8:30, the word "called" doesn't necessarily mean "to invite." It can mean "to name." So instead of meaning, "and those he invited to believe, he also justified," it can mean, "and those he named as his people, he also justified." I think that is the best interpretation of this verse, and if this is correct, then it completely deflates the Calvinist position. If "called" means "named as God's people," and not "to invite," then Romans 8:30 doesn't lead to the Calvinist theological implications that God only invites some, and His invitation is irresistible because the idea of "inviting" is not in the verse.[ii]

xvi. A second reason that I reject the Calvinist interpretation of the word called is on theological grounds. Calvinists believe that God only calls or invites the elect to believe and be saved. But the Bible shows that everyone is invited to believe, not just some. The invitation is universal.

1. **John 3:16** "everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."
2. **John 3:18** "Anyone who believes in him is not condemned."
3. See also Mt 11:28; Rm 10:13; Jn 11:12; Jn 11:26.

xvii. Calvinists actually agree that God calls everyone to believe and be saved. But they believe that there are two calls – the general call

and the effectual call. The general call is God's invitation to everyone to believe and be saved, but it doesn't included God's enabling grace which is necessary to respond to the gospel. God only gives His enabling grace to the elect. This is called the effectual call. But I don't see two calls in Scripture, just one. And if God extends a general call to everyone, but He doesn't intend to save them or give them the ability to believe, then the general call is insincere; disingenuous; it is not truthful; it's not a good-faith offer. And that contradicts the character of God in the Bible who cannot lie (Heb 6:18).

xviii. A third reason I reject the Calvinist interpretation is also on theological grounds. They believe the call is irresistible. They call this irresistible grace, or the effectual call. But I think that it is possible to reject the gospel. God's grace is resistible. We see in Scripture that not everyone who is called/invited accepts the invitation.

xix. One time a wealthy young man approached Jesus and asked Him how to go to heaven (Mk 10:17-22). Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and give it to the poor and follow Him. The young man rejected Christ and went away grieving. Jesus invited the young man to follow Him, but He rejected Christ.

xx. In John 6, in Capernaum, Jesus said "the one who eats my flesh and eats my blood has eternal life (Jn 6:54)." This was difficult to accept, so Jn 6:66 says that many people who been following Him "turned back and no longer accompanied Him."

xxi. Jesus lamented that time and again He offered them salvation, but they were unwilling to accept Him. **Matthew 23:37** "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"

xxii. In Acts, Steven was arrested for preaching about Jesus. At his trial, He rebuked them for "resisting the Holy Spirit." **Acts 7:51**

"You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also."

xxiii. The overwhelming picture in Scripture is that God wants everyone to be saved, invites and enables everyone to believe, but He doesn't force people to be saved. People are responsible to accept or reject God's offer of salvation.

5. So, the Calvinist interpretation of Romans 8:29-30 is this: God unconditionally chose some for salvation and left the rest of humanity to die in their sins, and everyone He chose He also irresistibly invited to believe, and everyone He invited He also justified and glorified.
6. Now let me share with you the classical Arminian interpretation.

V. THE CLASSICAL ARMINIAN INTERPRETATION

1. **Romans 8:29-30** 29 For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.
2. Let's look more closely at each word in this passage: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified.
3. **First, "foreknew":**
   i. "For those he foreknew he also predestined."
   ii. I've already explained that the most likely meaning of "foreknow" is prescience – knowing something before it happens.
   iii. The classic Arminian interpretation of foreknowledge is that since it comes before predestination, then it is the condition of predestination; predestination is founded on foreknowledge. There was something that God foreknew about the individuals that He predestined. What did He foreknow about those He predestined? Obviously God knows everything, but what did God foreknow that led Him to predestine some for salvation? Since the Bible everywhere says that salvation is conditional upon faith,

then it can be concluded that the foreknowledge in this verse refers to God's foreknowledge of who would believe in Jesus.

iv. **Frederic Godet** "There is but one answer: foreknown as sure to fulfil the condition of salvation, viz. [namely] faith… We thus get at the thought of the apostle: Whom God knew beforehand as certain to believe, whose faith He beheld eternally. He designated predestined (προώρισεν), as the objects of a grand decree, to wit [for example], that He will not abandon them till He has brought them to the perfect likeness of His own Son."

4. Second, "predestined":

i. "For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son."

ii. Predestination means that before God created the world, He decided in advance to save those He foreknew would believe. He decided in advance that those He foreknew would believe, He would carry out their salvation to its ultimate completion.

iii. The text says, "those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers." This has two possible meanings.

1. It can refer to the completion or consummation of our salvation when God will give us glorified bodies like Christ's. The word "firstborn" means that Christ was the first one to receive a resurrected body.
2. Or it can refer to God's plan to sanctify believers, i.e., to help them grow to maturity in Christ over time. In this case the word "firstborn" can mean preeminence or supremacy. **Dr. Joseph Benson**, one of the most eminent and influential Methodist scholars in England after the death of John Wesley, in volume 8 of his commentary, wrote that firstborn means "That is, the head and captain of all the adopted children of God, among whom he will forever shine, distinguished from them all in rays of particular glory."

5. **Third, "called":**
    i. "And those he predestined, he also called"
    ii. Remember, Calvinists interpret the word "called" as "to invite," but the word can also mean "to name," and that's how most Arminians interpret it.
    iii. **William Klein** of Denver Seminary "When speaking of salvation, the NT writers, particularly Paul, us "calling" language primarily in a naming sense. Believers in Christ as 'the called' (e.g., Rm 1:6; 8:28; 1 Cor 1:24). This is equivalent to saying they are the saved ones, the people of God, or the elect of God (*Calvinism*, Allen and Lemke, p. 365)."
    iv. Therefore, Romans 8:30 means, "And those he predestined, He also called as His people; He called them His children (see Rm 9:25-26)."
6. **Fourth, "justified":**
    i. "and those he called, he also justified."
    ii. Those who were foreknown, predestined, and called, God also justified. Justification means God saved them. He declared them legally righteous in His sight. He gave them right standing and right status with Himself. They have peace with God. They are no longer God's enemies, but God's beloved children. Their sins, past, present, and future, are forgiven.
7. **Fifth, "glorified":**
    i. "and those he justified, he also glorified."
    ii. Glorification refers to the consummation of our salvation, the redemption of our bodies (Rm 8:23). This is a promise that those whom God foreknew who would believe, He promises to complete their salvation.

VI. AN ALTERNATIVE ARMINIAN INTERPRETATION

1. Now before we close, I want to give you an alternative Arminian interpretation. I don't subscribe to this interpretation, but I think it is intriguing and reasonable. It hinges on three arguments:

2. First, the point of verse 29 is to explain how we know that God will work all things together for our good.
3. Second, the word "foreknew" can be translated "knew before." In other words, foreknew refers to prior knowledge not future knowledge. It's not talking about people that God knew in advance, but people God knew in the past; the Israelites in the Old Testament who loved God. So what Paul is doing here is saying, "The reason we know that God will work all things together for our good is because we can look what He has done for His people in the past."
4. Third, all the verbs in 8:29-30 are in the past tense. Foreknew, predestined, conformed, called, justified, and glorified. In other words, Rm 8:29-30 is not about what God will do for us in the future, it is about what God has done for His people in the past, which serves as proof of what He will do for us in the future. Those He knew in the past, He predestined them to become like Christ – to grow more and more like Christ morally. And those He predestined He called – He invited them into a relationship with Himself. And those He called, He justified – He gave them right standing with Himself. And those He justified, He glorified – this refers not to the final resurrection which is still in future, but to God's bringing the Old Testament saints home to heaven. According to this interpretation, Romans 8:29-30 has nothing to do with the debate between Arminianism and Calvinism.

VII. CONCLUSION

1. But ultimately, I agree with the classical Arminian interpretation: Those whom God foreknew would believe in Jesus, He also predestined for salvation – for ultimate glorification. Those He predestined, He also named as His people. Those He called, He also justified, and those He justified He also glorified. This promise is how we know that God will work all things together for our good.
2. Why the past tense? Let me quote a Calvinist scholar, **William Hendriksen**. "This past tense (cf. Jude 14; also most of Isa. 53) indicates the certainty that a future event will take place and, perhaps, in the

present connection, also the fact that the glory promised for the future has already begun to be realized." In other words, Paul is so sure that God will fulfill the promise of Rm 8:29-30 in our lives that he speaks about it in the past tense, as if it has already happened.

3. You might ask what the debate between Arminianism and Calvinism matters? For two reasons.
    i. First, God wants us to love Him with all of our minds (Mk 12:28). It honors God when we think correctly about Him.
    ii. Second, I think Calvinism diminishes the glory of God.[iii] God loves everyone. But Calvinism says that even though God could save everyone if He wanted to, He chooses to only save some. That God doesn't appear to me to be loving; He appears to be a moral monster. Imagine if all six of my children caught a deadly disease, and I have the cure. I can save all six if I want to, but I only choose to save two and let the other four die. And my decision has nothing to do with their behavior. Would you call me a loving father? No. And I can't see how a God who could save all but only chooses to save some while He lets the rest burn in hell for all eternity is a loving God.

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[i] Many people dislike labels like Arminian or Calvinist. I don't mind them. In fact, I think are a helpful way of summarizing who you are and what you stand for. For example, consider how much you can learn about me just from the following labels: I am an Evangelical Christian, a Southern Baptist, an amillennialist, a partial-preterist, an Arminian, a complementarian, a young-earther, an American, and a conservative Republican. While labels don't tell the whole story, they can be a helpful summary of who you are.

[ii] Even if the word "called" in Rm 8:30 does mean "to invite," that doesn't necessarily lead to the Calvinist conclusions of the effectual call and irresistible grace. First, the text doesn't merely say, "those he called, he also justified." It says that those whom He foreknew, predestined, and called, He also justified. In other words, it is fair to conclude that everyone who is foreknown, predestined, and called is also justified, but it is not fair to isolate one part of the verse from the context and say that everyone who is called is justified. To put it another way, the passage doesn't deny the possibility that some people are called/invited, but they aren't foreknown and predestined, and therefore they aren't justified. Second, the text doesn't say that *everyone* who is called is justified. The word "everyone" (or "all") is not there. Calvinists are reading that into the text. Let me give you an analogy. When Lydia and planned our wedding, we made a guest list; and those who were on the list were also invited; and those who were invited were also given a gift. By that statement alone, does that mean that everyone we invited was given a gift? No. It is common to give wedding guests a gift, but usually on those who attend receive the gift, and not everyone who is invited accepts the invitation. This is what the Bible teaches about salvation. God invites everyone to believe and be saved, but an invitation alone is not enough to be saved; you must accept the invitation by faith, and obviously everyone doesn't accept the invitation to believe in Jesus.

[iii] If you think I am being harsh and divisive, understand that Calvinists believe the same thing about Arminian theology.