

Unpacking Romans 8:28-30

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. (NKJV)

This passage is packed with language and theology that has generated various interpretations. These three verses are most easily understood within the flow of the preceding context of verses 8-27, which speaks of the restoration and return of creation to a glorious end with believers ruling with Christ over all creation, and the following context of verses 31-36 which assures believers that nothing can prevent them from realizing this destiny. Verses 28-30 explain how God's eternal purpose for every believer guarantees their final destiny with the encouragement of verse 28 explained by verses 29-30. The entire context focuses on the divine side of salvation.

Verse 28. The "And" connects this verse to the context of the preceding verses showing that "all things" refers to the sufferings that creation and believers endure until all creation is delivered from its bondage to corruption (vv. 18-27). Therefore, the "good" is God's ultimate restoration of creation under Jesus Christ. The personal sufferings of those who love God are subsumed in His greater purpose of freeing creation from its bondage to sin. The verse speaks of those in harmony with God's purpose to accomplish man's final freedom from the corruption of sin. How God accomplishes this purpose is explained ("Because," *Hoti*) in verses 29-30.

Verse 29. God's calling is preceded by His foreknowledge and predestining purposes and followed by His justifying and glorifying intentions. Some interpret "foreknew" as God knew ahead of time who would believe, which caused Him to choose them as His own. This makes one's choice to believe in Christ the ground of God's action (or reaction). This interpretation does not seem consistent with 2 Timothy 1:9, which says, "[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before time began" (see also Eph. 1:3-6; 11-12). While "foreknew" (from *proginoskō*) often has the simple meaning of "know beforehand or in advance" (as in 2 Peter 3:17), it can also indicate to "choose beforehand" as in Romans 11:2 where we read that God was not expecting Israel to choose Him; He chose them to be His special people (cf. 1 Peter 1:20 of Christ). This kind of knowledge implies a special personal relationship. In the Bible, *knowing* can indicate cognitive knowledge (e.g. Acts 1:7; 2 Cor. 2:4; 2 Peter 2:21) or intimate personal knowledge (e.g. Matt. 1:25; Luke 1:34; John 1:48; 2:24; 10:14, 27). Paul did not say God knew *about* those who are His; rather, he said God knew *them*. In this context, God chose individuals, not Christ or the church.

The word "predestined" (from *proōrizō*) means to determine beforehand. Here, the term does not refer to God's determination of those who would be saved but to the ultimate purpose of those who are saved. He predestined all He knew to be "conformed to the image of Christ." God's design is that all who are His will conform to their rightful position as co-heirs with the preeminent Christ, who is destined to be "firstborn among many brethren." Jesus is central to God's plan for believers and all of creation. Believers who endure suffering now will inherit "all things" with Christ (8:17) in the future liberated creation (see Eph. 1:9-12). Thus, to be conformed to the image of Christ is not simply to be like Him in character but to share His destiny of ruling over all creation.

Verse 30. The word "called" (from *kaleō*) can refer to a simple invitation (e.g. Matt. 22:3, 9; Luke 14:7-8) but here reflects the use in verse 28 of being chosen for a special purpose (see 1 Cor. 7:15, 17, 18, 20; Eph. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:12; 4:7; 2 Tim. 1:9). This calling should not be interpreted as a general invitation to all people to come to Christ because in the context it is only to those who God purposed to share in Jesus' heirship. It suggests God's special destiny for those He knows as His own. That it could not refer to a

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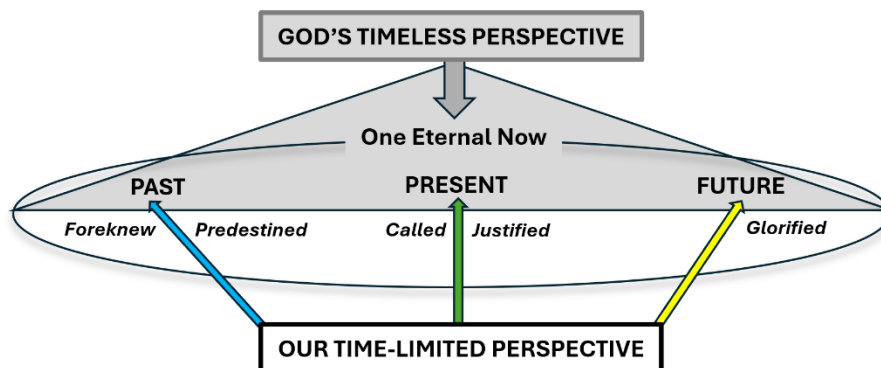
general universal invitation to salvation is also demonstrated by the fact that those called are the same ones who are also justified and glorified.

This verse explains how God’s eternal plan affects our personal experience of eternal salvation. All those called are also “justified” (from *dikaioō*) or declared righteous before God (see *GraceNotes* no. 74 “The Doctrine of Justification”) with the result that they are now in harmony with God and His purpose, which incorporates personal suffering into the hope of their final triumph (Rom. 5:1-4).

To be “glorified” does not refer simply to the believers’ final transformation to Christlikeness but to be like Jesus Christ in that they share His glory in their eternal destiny. This word confirms the discussion of the believer’s destiny when the whole creation “will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (v. 21).

While our time-limited human perspective would assign these activities as past (foreknew, predestined), present (called, justified), and future (glorified), they are expressed here in the past tense because from God’s timeless perspective, they are accomplished facts. The Greek aorist tense may be used simply as a statement of fact, but this context treats these facts as accomplished in the will of God. Thus, the past tense makes sense. The use of the past tense, as seen in “glorified,” assures us of its certainty in the mind and will of God, though from our human perspective, it is future. This use of the past tense to refer to a future event is called a *prolepsis* (the assumption of a future act as if it is presently existing or accomplished). It implies certainty as if it was already accomplished in time because it is a reality in God’s mind.

God is not limited to a linear perspective on time and events, as are humans. He exists in *one eternal now*. He sees the beginning and the end as the same. He has always known, knows now, and will always know those who are His, therefore, for God to know something makes it an eternal reality. This diagram may help show the difference between God’s timeless perspective and our human limited perspective of salvation.



Conclusion

Romans 8:28-30 will continue to stimulate vigorous discussions and differing interpretations. As always, context is key, which makes at least 8:8-27 and 8:31-36 extremely relevant to understanding this passage. Believers living in God’s will find great comfort in Romans 8:28-30 because they have the assurance that God uses their sufferings toward their final destiny of freedom from corruption and ruling with Christ over all of creation. From the human perspective, God’s plan and work began before human history, but from God’s timeless perspective, it has always been an accomplished fact that included man’s free will. In this synergy, God’s sovereign will and man’s free will work in congruence, not in exclusion of one or the other. God has sovereignly purposed in His undeserved grace to accomplish our salvation through our free choice.

