

All Roads Lead Here: The Golden Chain
By Jason Huff
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Ephesians 1:3-12; 1 Peter 1:17-21; Romans 8:28-32

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Romans 8:28-32. May God add His blessings to the reading of His holy Word. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

We’re fascinated with knowing the future. We think of time travel as science fiction, but many time travel stories don’t have that element at all. Think with me of Charles Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*. It’s one of the very first stories in Western literature to have a character travel, in a sense, through time. Over the course of a night, Ebenezer Scrooge is shown the past and present from a clear, truthful view – as well as a sad, scary vision of a possible future.

The question is, can Ebenezer Scrooge be saved? Must the future shown to him by the ghost of Christmas future come to pass, or is it one option among many? After being visited by the three ghosts, Ebenezer is given the opportunity to change. He’s no longer a miser counting every penny but a generous man who blesses pretty much everyone he knows.

But here’s the thing – even in that story, Scrooge didn’t have a change of heart because of his own goodwill buried in his heart. It didn’t happen because Scrooge was a good person who just needed an attitude adjustment. Scrooge is rotten through and through: mean, thoughtless, cruel, heartless. It takes divine intervention for Scrooge to change, and that divine intervention comes in the form of the three ghosts. Scrooge only chooses the path of righteousness because God puts it on his heart to change. As the ghost of Christmas future clearly shows us, without that intervention Tiny Tim and Scrooge himself would both be dead.

There are Christmas in July sales, but I never expected to go over a Christmas story in July. But *A Christmas Carol* highlights the truth that Paul points out to us in today’s passage – God is in control, and He will bring saving faith to all people He has chosen to be His children.

Last week, we learned that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called by God according to His purpose. That gives us hope in the midst of suffering. If everything is working together for our good, then even terrible things in our lives have meaning and purpose in eternity. God uses the awful things, as bad as they are, to train us, to discipline us, and to mold us into people who are more like Him, who know Him better, who live like Him more, and know His profound love for us.

God is working out the salvation of billions of people across the globe all throughout time, knowing exactly who will live and who will die and when and where, not just because it will happen naturally but because God says that this is the way things will happen. In theology, we use a special word for this: foreordination. It means God ordains everything that comes to pass. God does not approve of everything He ordains, like our disobedience, but He works it all together for the good of those who belong to Him.

So let's sort out the details. Paul gives us a chain of events – what theology for centuries has called the golden chain. “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

Here's the first link in the chain: “those God foreknew.” Now some people have tried to say that God simply looked through time and saw everybody throughout history who would choose to follow Him and His Son, and God chooses those people. But we really don't have that option. First, we have the opening from Paul's letter to the Ephesians that we heard in our first reading today. There he says that God chose us – His family, His believers – before the creation of the world. The word “foreknew” is absent there; all we have is that God chose us.

Second, God is not dependent on us. God exists independently of us; God still exists even if we don't. There is never a moment at which God must rely on us. God's choices cannot be dependent on our choices. Could you imagine God giving us His Son Jesus on the *possibility* that somebody might follow Him? Can you imagine God making all these plans hoping that somebody might take Him up on His offer? If God looks down the corridors of time and sees who would believe, He is still dependent on what we do. That's simply not God.

And moreover, we want God to be involved. What happens when we love God? We ask God to save our family and friends and neighbors and co-workers. We ask God to change their hearts and minds so that they follow Him. If God intervenes, who has made the choice? God has. We come to believe; we have faith; we are absolutely involved. But God chooses us. Those He chooses come to Him.

God choosing what happens in history is a central theme in Scripture. God says in First Kings 11, “I chose David to be King of Israel” and also, “I chose Jerusalem as my city to put my name.” Ezekiel 20, God says, “I chose Israel.” Jesus said to His disciples in John 15:16 – “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit.” And perhaps most important is Deuteronomy 7:7-8, where God explains why Israel became His people. It says, “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

When we understand that God chooses us out of love for us, we can start to understand what that word “foreknew” means. The verb “to know” has huge weight in the Hebrew language and Jewish culture. To truly know someone in the biblical sense is to have a personal, intimate, loving relationship with them.

Genesis 4 says Adam “knew” his wife Eve, and that’s how they came to have their children. That’s how intimate the biblical concept of knowing can go. In Jeremiah 31, God says, “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” In Matthew 25 and Luke 13, Jesus tells parables where the greatest calamity, the most awful thing in the world, is not to be known by God when He returns.

That’s precisely what Paul is getting at when he says that God foreknew us. It’s not that God looked through time and spotted our belief. It’s that before the creation of the world, long before we were born, before anything we had done had occurred, God loved us. To be foreknown is to be foreloved. He knew us intimately as His children. He chose us. He adopted us. He put His plans in motion that His chosen ones would be saved from the curse of sin. This golden chain of redemption applies to all those He foreloved before there was even time.

What happens to those God foreknew and foreloved? “He predestined” us “to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” God has staked out a path for those of us who love and follow and trust in Him. We are going to be like Jesus. There’s no getting around it; that is our destiny. And that’s good.

Predestination is all about us becoming like Jesus, who loved us and gave His life for us. Predestination is not about fate or fatalism; it’s not that we have no free will. It is that God has made it our destiny to be molded in the image of Jesus. And we who are chosen, we who are believers, we should want that. It’s wonderful news: our transformation is going to happen. It is not a maybe, sorta, if you try hard enough or choose hard enough or believe hard enough. If you are one of God’s people, you will become like Jesus – in part in this life, but thoroughly and completely when we finally meet Him face to face.

We are predestined because we are meant to be God’s children. We will not be gods ourselves; we will not be like Jesus in that way. But because Jesus took on our humanity and perfected it, we will be like Him completely in that perfected humanity. We will be like Him in His complete obedience to the Father, we will be fully loved and in love with the Father, and we will be in perfect relationship to one another. And the language refers to everyone – Jesus will have brothers and sisters both who are remade perfectly so we can be together with God forever.

But the golden chain doesn’t end there. It continues: “Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” Let’s touch on each of those for a minute. Those God predestined, He called. In a nutshell, this means God’s calling is on your life. If you believe, it’s because God has called you to believe. You have heard God’s still small voice somewhere in your life – through your time in church, through your study of the Bible, through the words of a pastor or a friend or a relative, through time in prayer. God has called you to faith.

And this is not a phone call where you can just press the red button and say, “no thanks.” It’s not a call you can ignore. It’s a call that’s so persuasive, so overwhelming, so awesome, that you *have* to respond. God’s call woos you and commands you at the same time. When you are called by God, you realize God has taken hold of your life and will not let go. Parts of God’s call are more specific – God may call you into pastoral ministry or into service or into leading as an elder. But God’s call that Paul speaks about here is God’s drawing you to Himself in a way that can’t be explained, but you know it. Because of that call on your life as a son or daughter of the Most High God, you believe.

Those He called, He justified. Through the blood of Christ, everyone who has been called, who has the indelible, undeniable fingerprint of God on their souls, is no longer seen as a sinner in the Father’s sight. If you are called, it’s a given that you believe and your sins are washed away. You are clothed in Jesus’ righteousness and His blood makes you clean. There is no doubt that if God has called you, in His eyes it’s as if you’d never disobeyed Him even once.

And those who are justified, God glorified. Now the past tense here is kind of weird. None of us here is glorified yet, right? To be glorified, we have to be sanctified – genuinely cleaned up by God – and then raised into the presence of God. And since nobody here’s dead yet, no one here has been glorified. Yet the verb is in the past tense. The golden chain is so perfect, so unbreakable, that your glorification is already a given, already a done deal. Even though you haven’t experienced it, it’s like a past event. It’s kind of like when I buy something at Amazon – I’ve purchased it, it’s paid for, and it’s mine; I just don’t have it in my hands yet.

Even though it hasn’t happened yet, if you are God’s chosen, every last part of the chain applies to you, and you have been, you are, you will be glorified with Christ. You will see Him as He is and celebrate His awe and wonder and share in His glory itself. You will experience His love and joy for all eternity. You will be both perfect and perfectly yourself, as God intended.

Now we may complain about being chosen and predestination. It may not seem fair; it might lead us down bad paths of self-importance. Paul will address some of that in a couple of weeks, so we’ll get to those questions then. But I want to spend our final couple of moments talking about why Paul writes about this golden chain of events that guarantees salvation for those God has chosen.

Paul ends this section saying, “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

Friends, here’s the point of understanding God’s foreknowledge and predestination: we don’t need to be afraid of anything in this whole world because God’s got us in the palm of His hand. We worry that somehow we’ll slip through God’s fingers, or worse, we’ll commit some unpardonable sin or do something that will make God say, “You’re not mine; I don’t want you.” We know the sting of rejection from people we’ve loved and cared about, from job applications, from folks we thought we knew. God promises us – if He chose us, He isn’t going to let us go.

If God is for us, who can be against us? The world is against us; it hates God. It hates people that act righteously. But as Psalm 56 repeats twice, “In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” The point is, nothing can stop God’s plans. Not only is God all powerful and almighty, His plan to save us was formed long before He created the universe. Nothing on earth can break the golden chain of redemption.

And God, who gave up His own son for us, gives us all things – He predestines us, He calls us, He justifies us, He sanctifies us, He glorifies us. He gives us peace on earth and joy in heaven. When we properly understand the golden chain, we respond with joy and love and gratefulness that God chooses His people and causes them to believe and trust in His Son.

When we go to work at the food pantry at Military Avenue, when we treat that miserable person at work with kindness, when we act with patience rather than anger when we have to wait in line, when we are self-controlled rather than self-indulgent, we don’t do those things hoping that they’ll make us worthy of heaven or make us better people. Because of Jesus, we *are* better people; we *are* chosen people; we *are* destined for glory. We live righteous lives because this is who we are now. We are simply living out what Christ has already done for us and said about us and is steering us into through His Holy Spirit.

And if you’ve never committed to following Jesus, if you aren’t sure of the salvation He offers, don’t hesitate. Come to Him. Choose to follow His ways and ask Him to forgive your sins, and He will. In His unique and perfect plan, if God chose us in eternity past, at some point in our lives, we also choose Him. He touches our hearts and minds that we want to be His. In the beautiful mystery of faith, God works everything out. Believe today and know that you are part of His chosen people that He wants to be in His presence.

And those of you who are Jesus’ followers – know that nothing in all the universe is going to hold God back from saving you. Your redemption is complete, your resurrection secure, your place in God’s Kingdom reserved with your name on it. Rejoice and be glad, and leave here today encouraged to love and serve your Lord.