

**Testamentum Imperium**  
An International Theological Journal

[www.PreciousHeart.net/ti](http://www.PreciousHeart.net/ti)

Volume 2 – 2009

---

**The Meaning of “Foreknowledge” in Romans 8:29-30**

Dr. Lovemore Togarasei  
Professor of New Testament,  
University of Botswana.

**Introduction**

This article discusses the meaning of foreknowledge in Romans 8:29-30. These verses have been used to discuss the doctrine of predestination or election, that is, the teaching that God arbitrarily chooses who to save. Also elaborated in Ephesians 1, the doctrine assumes, in ordinary understanding, that humanity has no role to play in salvation. For that reason, very few people want to engage these verses. Those who do so and argue for the doctrine of election are sometimes looked at by those who do not uphold the doctrine, as crazy or teaching heresy. It is for these reasons that a close look at the meaning of foreknowledge in this text is important as it sheds some light on this doctrine.

Romans 8:29-30 falls within the wider framework of chapters 5 to 8.<sup>1</sup> Scholars find these chapters to be bound together by their literary structure, homogeneity and distinctive character. C. E. B. Cranfield, for example, finds them bound together by the theme, “Life promised for those who are righteous by faith.”<sup>2</sup> This article is interested specifically in the meaning of the term ‘foreknowledge’ in Romans 8:29-30. These two verses appear in the context of Paul’s discussion of the present suffering and future glory of believers (8:18-30). To understand what Paul meant by foreknowledge, we therefore

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrzej Gieniusz, *Romans 8:18-30: suffering does not thwart future glory*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>2</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: a shorter commentary*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985).

need to understand these two verses not only within the context of Romans 8:18-30, but also within the whole wider framework of the text (Romans 5-8). Thus in this article, first, I shall consider the context of the text. Having established the context, this will be followed by a discussion of the use of the term ‘foreknowledge’ elsewhere in the Bible both within the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In light of the use of the term in other texts of the Bible, the article will then discuss the meaning of the term in Romans 8:29-30.

### **The context of the text**

Generally, scholars<sup>3</sup> agree that Romans can be divided into two principal parts, chapters 1-11, which is more theological and chapters 12-15, which is more occasional and practical. Differences, however, come when they consider the sub-divisions of the first part of the letter. There are those, especially in old Protestant scholarship, who sub-divide this section into chapters 1-5, 6-8 and 9-11.<sup>4</sup> This position has since lost popularity as many scholars now take 5-8 to be a unified section where Paul makes what Moo (1996:32) calls a, “two-age presentation of Christian existence and hope.”<sup>5</sup> This is a position I also follow in this article. I place 8:29-30 in the larger context of 5-8. There are a number of reasons to argue for the unity of chapters 5-8 but foremost is what M. J. Gorman calls “the cruciform character of justification by faith.”<sup>6</sup> The chapters spell out the meaning of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. He discusses justification as reconciliation through the cross (5:1-11), how through grace humanity has been freed from sin (5:12-21), how humanity has died to sin but is alive in God (6:1-7:6) and the spiritual life of those who have been saved (7:-8:39). Our text (8:29-30) falls within Paul’s discussion of life in the spirit (8:1-39) and specifically where he discusses the reality of suffering in the life of the Christian (8:18-39). He describes the life of a Christian as characterized by suffering. Like Christ who suffered and only attained glory after death, Christians must walk the

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Black, *Romans*, (London: Oliphants, 1973), 24-26.

<sup>5</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: a theological introduction to Paul and his letters*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 363.

same way (8:17). Even nature suffers and like birth pangs, the suffering is an indication of the joy awaiting Christians. Paul reminds Christians of the love of God even in the midst of this suffering and sees the suffering as preparing believers to the final glorification, “all things work together for those who love God” (8:28). It is in this context that Paul uttered the text we are focusing on in this article:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (8:29-30).

What did Paul then mean by ‘foreknowing’ in the light of the context of this text? To be able to answer this question we need to also consider the meaning of other related terms that Paul used in this text: predestined, called, justified and glorified. Because they are linked together by Paul to bring about his teaching on salvation, they have often been called the “golden chain.”<sup>7</sup> But before doing so, it is also necessary to find out how the term ‘foreknowledge’ is used in other biblical texts and what its meaning is in such uses. Let me turn to this.

#### **The meaning of ‘foreknowledge’ in other biblical texts outside Romans 8:29-30**

The term ‘foreknowledge’ is not only found in Romans 8:29-30. It is also found in other biblical passages both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, however, the term does not appear as ‘foreknowledge’ but there are frequent occurrences of ‘know’. Some examples of texts are Genesis 18:19 (where God talks about knowing Abraham), Exodus 33:17, Deuteronomy 9:24 and Amos 3:2 (where God talks about knowing the nation of Israel) and Jeremiah 1:5 (where God talks about knowing Jeremiah even before he was conceived in his mother’s womb). In all these texts ‘knowing’ is not simply cognitive but elective. God ‘knows’ by loving and appointing, in other words by showing favour to those he ‘knows’ as opposed to those he ‘does not know’.

---

<sup>7</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 531

When we come to the New Testament, the word ‘know’ continues to carry the same meaning as in the Old Testament. Jesus talks about ‘not knowing’ the false prophets at the end of the time (Matthew 7:23) and of himself as the good shepherd who ‘knows’ his sheep and is ‘known’ by them (John 10:14). 1 Corinthians 8:3 and 2 Timothy 2:19 also carry the same tone of ‘knowing’ as relational not simply cognitive. The New Testament also has other texts apart from Rom. 8:29-30 that have ‘foreknowledge.’ The word first occurs in Acts 2:23 where Peter talks of the crucifixion of Jesus as having been foreknown by God, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” Foreknow also appears in Rom. 11:2, “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew,” and in 1 Peter 1:2 where the author speaks of God’s foreknowledge of the Jews in Dispersion. In all the texts ‘foreknowledge’ has to do with God’s appointment of persons. It has more to do with persons than with actions or events. With this awareness of the meaning of foreknowledge in other biblical texts, let us now turn to our text (Rom. 8:29-30) and find out what Paul meant here by ‘foreknowledge.’

#### **The meaning of foreknowledge in Romans 8:29-30**

I have already mentioned above that the meaning of ‘foreknowledge’ as used by Paul in this text should be found in the issue that he was addressing. This was the issue of Christian suffering. Paul is here reminding Christians of the love of God even as they experience suffering. Suffering should not be seen as a setback in the process of their salvation. Thus for D. E. H. Whiteley, in Rom 8:29-30, Paul is concerned with the doctrine of Assurance.<sup>8</sup> He wants to assure believers that, “since our salvation is due to God, none can challenge it.”<sup>9</sup> Suffering indeed we will experience as Christ did, but our salvation is assured. To underline this assurance, Paul then gives the ‘golden chain’ describing God’s process of bringing salvation to humanity. In this chain appears the term in question, ‘foreknowledge.’ The other four ‘pieces’ of the chain are predestined, called, justified and glorified. It is important to look at the meaning of each term for us to get the meaning of ‘foreknowledge.’

---

<sup>8</sup> D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St Paul*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 93.

<sup>9</sup> Whiteley, *The Theology of St Paul*, 93.

Although many scholars<sup>10</sup> take ‘foreknew’ and ‘predestined’ as used synonymously here, I agree with G. R. Osborne<sup>11</sup> that the two terms are not synonymous. Predestined means ‘set apart’ and as R. Bowen correctly says, Paul here meant that, “in his own purpose, God set apart his people before they loved him, before they started to look for him, before Jesus came to die for them, even before he created the world.”<sup>12</sup> Foreknowing was therefore meant for believers to be predestined to Christ likeness,<sup>13</sup> that is, so that believers may be like Christ in suffering and obedience. The third word in the chain is ‘called,’ “those he predestined he also called.” Among the Israelite prophets, calling had to do with special election. It is in this sense that Paul uses the word ‘call.’ Those whom God foreknew and predestined, he then called, that is, effectual summoning into a relationship with God.<sup>14</sup> There is therefore a close link in the way Paul uses the terms. They form a process of salvation initiated and completed by God himself. The next word is ‘justified’. This was one of Paul’s most favourite words. Justification by faith is believed by many scholars to be the centre of Paul’s gospel, the *Paulinum centrinum*. Indeed most of his letters, e.g. Galatians, Romans and Philippians address the theme at length. Although the word has a judicial dimension in which case it means declaring someone guilty not guilty, the sum total of Paul’s use of the word and especially the way it is used in the golden chain, is relational. As M. J. Gorman puts it, to justify is to restore to right relations now, with hope of acquittal on the future day of judgement.<sup>15</sup> This becomes clearer in the way Paul connects the last two pieces of the chain, “those whom he *justified* he also *glorified*.” The whole purpose of God’s plan is the glorification of the believers. But as Paul is assuring those suffering of God’s salvation plan, he does not talk of glorification as a future event. God’s word, even though not yet fulfilled, is as good as already fulfilled. In the language of the prophets of the Old Testament, Paul

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) and Moo, *Romans*.

<sup>11</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 221.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Bowen, *A Guide to Romans*, (London: SPCK, 1975), 117.

<sup>13</sup> This is a term used by Osborne, *Romans*, 222.

<sup>14</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 535.

<sup>15</sup> Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 201.

uses the past tense to show how certain it is that God will glorify his people.

Having defined the other terms of the chain, it becomes clear what Paul meant by ‘foreknowledge’ in this text. He surely did not mean knowledge of facts about the future. Like in all the other scriptural passages where it is used, ‘foreknowledge’ here is relational. It means election and bringing into a relationship with him. As Marshall says, in line with other passages of the New Testament (e.g. Acts 15:14), God’s foreknowledge means he is the one who takes the initiative and calls people to him.<sup>16</sup> Thus ‘foreknowledge’ here does not mean “know before- in the sense of intellectual knowledge or cognition- but ‘enter into relationship with before’ or choose or determine before.”<sup>17</sup> There have been debates among scholars<sup>18</sup> as to whether this foreknowledge included knowledge of who would believe and do what actions. Some scholars have interpreted the foreknowledge as God’s knowledge of who would positively respond to his call. Surely such questions were not in the purview of what Paul was addressing in Romans 8:29-30. As I have underlined, Paul was giving his readers the assurance that despite their suffering God had already finalized their salvation. Thus he was also not addressing non-believers here and so questions of whether God chose some and left others, what criteria he used and what he will do with those not predestined cannot be answered using Rom. 8:29-30. Paul simply wanted to let his followers know that, “since everything that is final cannot be a matter of chance, .....the love story between God and the believers is something which God had in mind long before his call reached them through the Gospel.”<sup>19</sup> Also God cannot be surprised by events that will happen at the end. He knows how they will happen as if they have already happened.

---

<sup>16</sup> I. Howard Marshall, ‘Predestination in the New Testament.’ In Clark Pinnock (ed.), *Grace Unlimited*, (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 127-143.

<sup>17</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 532.

<sup>18</sup> See for example, Whiteley, *Theology of St Paul*, 89-98.

<sup>19</sup> Klaus Hacker, *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 76.

### Concluding remarks

Let me end this article by going back to where I started, that is, the fact that Romans 8:29-30 is often used to discuss the doctrine of predestination. In this article I did not dwell much on predestination as my focus was the meaning of ‘foreknowledge’. However, it is true that discussion of foreknowledge even with the conclusion we have reached (God’s election of believers), brings about questions of predestination. My concluding remarks are based on the analysis of the golden chain we have made above. From this analysis I want to highlight R. Bowen’s <sup>20</sup> summary as it fits very well into what has been raised by our discussion. First, Rom. 8:29-30 shows that salvation is not a matter of chance or does it depend on human effort. Human experience falls into a plan also instituted by God, “Thus when a Christian looks back over his (sic) experience, he knows and sees that God was really doing all the work in him.”<sup>21</sup> This, however, does not mean that believers have no role to play in salvation. Taking this position would be doing injustice to Paul. Throughout his letters Paul shows that human beings have to respond to the call of God. At least they should have faith. Second, human salvation involves becoming like Christ. It is important to quote Bowen at length here; “No one can be confident about being loved, set apart and called by God without also being challenged about what he (sic) is like in his own life. God did not simply set us apart, he set us apart to be like his Son. If we are not beginning to be like him now, no confidence about our predestination nor hopes for the future glory are of any value. Our predestination is to be like Christ, only those who are like him will share his glory.”<sup>22</sup> Third, verse 29 begins with “For..” indicating that in order to understand it, we need to go back and find out what it qualifies. Verse 28 says, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” Therefore the “for” that begins verse 29 explains the purpose for God’s working of good in believers. The salvation of believers is thus the ‘good’ for which God works implying that everything in the lives of believers works towards that salvation.

---

<sup>20</sup> Bowen, *A Guide to Romans*, 118.

<sup>21</sup> Bowen, *A Guide to Romans*, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Bowen, *A Guide to Romans*, 118

Lastly, as we found out in our discussion of the context of the text, Paul wanted to give the believers assurance of their salvation despite the suffering they were experiencing. He therefore talked about the foreknowledge, predestination, call, justification and glorification in their aorist forms to underline that salvation is a certainty. The text assures and reminds the believer that God began laying the plan for believers before the world began. Although he/she is suffering, the plan will finally be fulfilled and therefore the believer's confidence should be anchored on what God has already done.