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**The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation as a Basis for Worship
and Surrender of the Soul to God**

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Introduction: Why do we worship God?

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.¹

The congregation I serve sang Fanny Crosby's hymn recently at the funeral of a long-time member, one who had trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for more than eighty years and who had served our church faithfully for more than fifty. She had seen her share of troubles, celebrated her share of victories, loved and been loved, and had a sense of what was happening to her as dementia robbed her of her mind, a bit at a time. My last visit to her was but hours before she died; I did what I knew she could hold onto: I sang to her hymns of the Faith.

Why do we sing? Why do Christian people gather on the Lord's Day week after week to sing praises, pray our needs, and offer our hearts to God? In some churches where I have worshiped, the call to

¹ Fanny Jane Crosby, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine!" (1873), verse 1 and refrain, #341 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) © 1990 Westminster John Knox Press.

worship begins with the leader asking the question, “Why are you here?” and the people replying with a programmed response, usually along the lines of “We are looking for something to hold onto.” No, not at my church, where we begin with the leader stating, “Our help is in the name of the Lord” and the people’s reply, “The maker of heaven and earth.” It is, nevertheless, a fair question: Why are you here? As a pastor, I pause to ask myself from time to time why we gather for worship. I also ask why we trust in God, the Unseen, whose hand is invisible to all but the eyes of faith.

There are, of course, multiple reasons, as there are multiple motivations for anything human beings do. A colleague tells me he started going to church because of his interest in a grey-eyed girl; by the time he lost interest in her, his soul was captive to God. A powerful reason for praise and for surrender is confidence in the promise of God: I will not abandon whom I have saved.

In discussing this promise and its consequent assurance I will begin with a brief consideration of three texts of Scripture: I Thessalonians 4:14, I Thessalonians 5:9-10 and Romans 8:28-39. That will be followed by reflection on two attitudes in the believer that flow from awareness of the unconditional nature of election: confidence and gratitude. Confidence is, of course, the prerequisite for surrender of the self to another and gratitude is fundamental to Christian worship.

Review of Texts: I Thessalonians 4:14

Paul wrote his first epistle to the Church in Thessalonica fairly early in his writing career. A distinctive feature of this letter is his discussion of the coming of the Lord and its consequences for the living and the dying. That is, it appears that the Thessalonians were troubled at what appeared to be the Lord’s delay in his coming again, perhaps afraid that the dead would miss it, and so he wrote to them, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (I Thessalonians 4:13)² Therefore he writes of the assurance of salvation for both the living and the dead and the

² All Scripture citations in English are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, ©1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

anticipation that the two groups will be reunited at the coming of the Lord.

After that introductory statement, Paul writes, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” (4:14) Thus, Paul assures his readers, when the Lord comes, the living will not be separated from the dead. The living will not be welcomed into the glory of the Lord without the faithful dead, but all will be raised together.

A critical translation issue in the text turns on εἰ, which can be translated “if” or “since.” The Authorized (“King James”) Version translates it as “if,” as do the New International Version and the 1960 edition of the Reina/Valera translation into Spanish, for some examples. The New Revised Standard Version and the Revised English Bible translate it as “since,” as noted in the quotation above. The question is whether the assurance that God will “bring with him” the dead depends upon the death and resurrection of Jesus (“since”) or upon our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus (“if”). Given Paul’s emphasis throughout his writing on faith as a gift of divine grace, rather than as a human work, it seems to me that “since” is the more logical translation. That God, through Jesus, will bring with him those who have died is the work of Christ’s death and resurrection; by faith, we are assured of that work of God. God’s work does not, however, depend upon our faith; only our assurance of it does.

The death and resurrection of Christ creates a family of God, a family of salvation. When Christians gather for worship around the Table of the Lord, we remind ourselves that we are the family of salvation. That familial reality is enacted around the dinner table, the Table of Christ, so the Thessalonians naturally wondered what would become of those family members who had died. Paul, therefore, assured them that even the power of death does not cancel membership in the family (Villiers 2005, 318). Salvation – participation in the death and resurrection of Christ – is irrevocable even by death.

Review of Texts: I Thessalonians 5:9-10

A bit later in the letter, Paul writes “For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.” (5:9-10) This is within another section in which Paul urges

the Thessalonians to “encourage one another” and to remain alert for the Lord’s coming. The encouragement they are to give is that “whether awake or asleep” (i.e. alive or dead) all will live in him.

In considering the irrevocable nature of salvation, much depends on the phrase “For God has destined...” The verb εθετο comes from τιθημι, the usual literal meaning of which is “to place.” Figuratively, the verb thus means to “appoint” or “destine.” In other words, God’s “placement” for us is to gain salvation through Jesus Christ. As the work of God’s placement or appointment, rather than a work of our faith, salvation depends on the reliability of God, not the fickleness of human belief.

Review of Texts: Romans 8:28-39

Third, we should consider Romans 8:28-39:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, 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 within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Several questions present themselves here. What is the “good” that Paul refers to? What is it that all things work together for? Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich says that the word can refer to the morally good, the intrinsically valuable, or that which is to one’s advantage. Context suggests that we should understand it in the last sense, so that everything in the lives of those who love God and “are called according to his purpose” serve the purpose of their salvation. Clearly Paul does not intend for readers to think that everything that happens is in itself good (valuable), or that all that is done to believers is good (moral), but that those who love God and who are called by God will in the end realize that events conspired to serve their salvation.

The sense of the believer’s having being “destined” is here again, as in I Thessalonians, but with a different verb and a slightly different content to the destiny. First, Paul comments that those who are predestined are those whom God foreknew; this verb is *προεγνω*, which in its most literal sense means “to know ahead of time.” The pairing of “foreknew” with “predestined” leads to the conversation noted below. Then the verb translated “predestine” is not derived from *τιθημι* but rather is *προοριζω*, which is “predestine” in the sense of a decree; that is, a decision made and declared ahead of time. The destiny, in this case, is to be conformed to Christ’s image (*εικονος*, which gives the English word “icon”). The believer’s assurance is in the work of the Holy Spirit for sanctification – to remake the believer into the image of Christ. Thus, the sequence of the text suggests that God’s decree of election is to conform those he calls into the image of Christ and that God uses the experiences of life to that purpose. Salvation is to be conformed to the image of Christ.

This sanctifying work is not done in isolation, however, in that its purpose is so that Christ will be the firstborn of many *αδελφοις*, brothers; the NRSV translates the phrase as “firstborn within a large family.” God’s irrevocable decree is to include the called in the family of God; as in I Thessalonians, our assurance is our belonging to the family. Therefore, although worship and surrender of the soul are done by individuals, these individuals do so as members of a family.

Paul’s reflections on these points lead to the rhapsody that follows. To provide his readers with the assurance expressed in the succeeding verses is apparently the purpose of his reflections upon

election. Because God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of Christ, and all things conspire toward that end:

- No one can stand against us. (v. 31)
- No one can condemn us. (v. 34)
- Nothing can come between us and the love of God in Christ.

(vv. 38-39)

The language of verses 31 to 39 themselves are expression of worship and are frequently used in worship and as assurance to Christians in the surrender of our souls to God.

Owen, the editor of Calvin's commentary on Romans, notes the controversy over "foreknew" in verse 29. He points out that it is used only here and in Romans 11:2, Acts 26:5, I Peter 1:20 and II Peter 3:17. When it refers to human beings, it means "foreknow," as translated in the New Revised Standard Version. Thus, the usual understanding of election would be reversed: that God knew who would receive divine grace, and therefore called those who would be receptive. Some of the Fathers thought the same, that the emphasis should be on God's foreknowledge, not foreordination (Calvin 1989, 317).

Calvin, of course, disagrees. He emphasizes that it is not a matter of God foreseeing who would be worthy of grace; rather, to be called is entirely from God's good pleasure. (Ibid. 318) God decrees; God calls; the faithful respond in love (Ibid. 315). The Christian's confidence rests not on his or her own love for God or response to the call of God, but rather on God's decree of justification. The work of sanctification – to be conformed to the image of Christ – is the outgrowth of that decree, which is inviolable and unalterable, no matter what power attempts to shake it. If even the Devil try to accuse us, Calvin writes, still God has justified us; "Therefore no adversary can shake or endanger our salvation." (Ibid. 324)

The question of double predestination (that God elects some to salvation and elects others to damnation) is not at issue in this paper, but it is worth noting that Barclay claims that vv. 29-30 do not mean that God chose some but not others; rather, Paul "meant it to be the almost lyrical expression of Christian experience." (Barclay 1975, 114) He continues, "It is the deep experience of the Christian that all is of God; that [the believer] did nothing and that God did everything." (Ibid. 115) In other words, Barclay's reading of the text

underscores this writer's observation that the purpose of Paul's observations on God's decree of election is to provide foundation for the poetic expressions of confidence in verses 31 to 39.

Believers Respond with Confidence

In summary, the believer's knowledge of salvation is awareness that God has called the believer to salvation, that God's decree is irrevocable, and that the believer's destiny as one called by God is to be conformed to the image of Christ. Consequently, it cannot be stated too strongly that this knowledge leads to an attitude of confidence in the God who decrees, who calls, who saves and who conforms the believer to Christ's image. Although others may have a different take on the meaning of "surrender of the soul," this writer's experience as a pastor convinces him that, in practice, to surrender the soul to God is to place one's entire confidence in God. Those who have not known themselves called continue to seek a God that conforms to their image, looking for assurances of love and of life. The called, however uncertain they may be of many of the Church's affirmations, are confident of their salvation in God.

But how can the called be confident in their calling? Calvin writes in his *Institutes* that to look for assurance of one's election through experience, faith, or anything other than the plain teaching of the Word of God leads to an unsettled conscience and emotional turmoil. But "those who rightly and daily examine [God's eternal plan] as it is contained in his Word reap the inestimable fruit of comfort." (Calvin 1960, III, xxiv, 4)³ Here Calvin not only encourages believers to a proper use of the Scriptures, but also daily reading of them. In turning to the Word of God daily, Christians are reminded of God's grace and the election that is the outworking of divine grace; we are likewise reassured of God's calling and urged to confidence in God.

The Bible is not the only reminder of our calling in God. Calvin urges believers also to turn to the reminder of our Baptism for assurance. Baptism, as a cleansing from sin, is effective not only for our past but for all of life. "Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with

³ In citing Calvin's *Institutes* I will follow the tradition of listing volume, chapter and section, rather than page numbers of the particular edition I use.

it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins.” (Ibid. IV, xv, 3)

Returning to the Scriptures and to the Sacraments have a common purpose: communion with Christ. As the Elder writes, “And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (I John 5:11-13) Reformed Christians do well to remember that Calvin wrote his *Institutes* not as a systematic theology but as instruction for a life of piety; his own personal motto was “My heart I offer thee, freely and promptly.” The heart – the self – surrendered to God disciplines itself in turning to the Bible, in prayer and in the Sacraments, with the goal of the knowledge of God through the Redeemer.

As Paul wrote in Romans, the purpose of the believer’s election is to be conformed to the image of Christ, and so Calvin writes that the assurance of our election is in Christ, and by our communion with him we know we are inscribed in the Book of Life. “Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election.” (Calvin 1960, III, xxiv, 5) Believers may reinforce our confidence in God’s decree of election by turning to Christ, communing with Christ in Scripture, prayer and Sacrament.

As Christ is the assurance that we have been called, so Christ is also the assurance that we persevere in our election (Ibid. III, xxiv, 6). Christ says, “Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). Further in III, xxiv, 6, Calvin wonders, “What did Christ wish to have us learn from this but to trust that we shall ever remain safe because we have been made his once for all?” The logic of confidence is clear: look to Christ for assurance of election, and to Christ for assurance that election is irrevocable; confirmation of these is to be found in the Word of God. Thus, those who trust in Christ and are assured by the Word of God remain confident before God and before the world.

From time to time in his epistles, Paul is critical of the human tendency to boast. Believers are certainly tempted to boast and to use their election as a ground for arrogance toward others. Boasting and confidence are not the same thing, however; Calvin points out that in

his writing about boasting Paul discourages us not from confidence but from arrogance and contempt for others: “sheer confidence of the flesh” which “snuffs out humility and reverence for God.” (III, xxiv, 7) The proper attitude of the believer is confidence in God and in the call of God, in reverent surrender to God and grace toward others.

Let us follow this thought about believers’ relationship toward others for a moment. My parishioners have often asked me about the salvation of those who are not part of the Christian Church, objecting that it would be difficult to worship a God who appears to them capricious about who is “in” and who is “out.” Calvin frequently urges his readers not to waste energy speculating about questions that simply cannot be answered, but such urging rarely satisfies those whose friends and neighbors may resist Church participation. It should help to remember that Calvin’s writing, in particular the *Institutes*, are not intended to answer all questions but to educate believers in how to live in relationship with God. Humility and reverence before God and grace to one’s neighbors are the attitude Reformed Christianity commends, confident that election to salvation is in the gracious decree of God and not in outward show of piety.

In that light, Reinhold Niebuhr remarks that Christians do not exhibit confidence in God when thinking of themselves as the “righteous” doing battle against the unrighteous. When the righteous stand against the unrighteous they are impressed by their own righteousness. Yet in sincere hours of prayer they know themselves to be sinners; only those who know themselves to be sinners can truly forgive (Niebuhr, in Arndt 1950, 260-261). Confidence in God is not license to pride and arrogance before others; in particular, societies that think of themselves as righteous have no grounds for pride and arrogance toward other societies. As noted above, salvation of individuals is always in a social context; we are saved as a people. Yet that “people” does not necessarily mean particular nations or societies, but rather the Church of Christ.

This is of concern to me since I live in a society – the United States – which has too often been convinced of our own rightness and righteousness and has believed that we are called by God to “improve” other societies, by force of arms if necessary. Pastors in our nation find it difficult to balance a healthy gratitude for living in this society with an appropriate critique of our society’s spiritual

arrogance. This arrogance is endemic; when a preacher argues that Christians should not place unreflective confidence in any human society frequently the hearers simply attack the preacher as unpatriotic. They are convinced of their own and their nation's righteousness, not hearing the call for confidence in God, rather than in the nation.

Niebuhr urges that Christians in the United States and other, similar societies learn humility from our religious traditions, and become spiritually more worthy of respect by others. "A genuine leaven of religious humility would, in fact, make the liberal society more capable of spiritual self-defense. For it would destroy the self-delusions, the exaggerated emphases on freedom, the indifference toward problems of justice and community which tend to make the society unworthy and incapable of defense against its competitors." (Niebuhr 261-262)

Awareness of the calling of God and confidence in that calling, therefore, leads individuals and peoples to humility before God and grace toward others. Arrogance and conceit, it is clear, are not signs of confidence but of lack of confidence; they are so much bravado in the winds of doubt. Those who do not doubt, who are truly confident in the unalterable calling of God, have no need to reinforce themselves with slogans and to proclaim their place in the world against others, but confidently surrender themselves to

God in humility and praise. The practice of the Sacraments is intended to reinforce confidence in God and grace toward others. Calvin writes that the fundamental purpose of Baptism is to be "a token and proof of our cleansing; or (the better to explain what I mean) it is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us." (Calvin 1960, IV, xv, 1) Although we are baptized only once, we ought regularly to remind ourselves of our baptism, particularly when we question our calling or are troubled by sin or doubt. The *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) calls upon the congregation to remind themselves of their own baptism when they witness the baptism of another: "Let us remember with joy our own baptism, as we celebrate this sacrament." (Theology and Worship Ministry Unit 1993, 405)

Occasionally believers have remarked to me, “I was a baby; I can’t remember it.” Then I suggest that the word “remember” does not mean only to call to mind what one has experienced, but to call to mind what one knows. Recall that you have been baptized, and in that remembrance of our baptism be assured that God has called you and the calling of God is irrevocable.

Further, Calvin urges frequent use of the Lord’s Supper to feed believers in the Spirit and to assure believers before God. He interprets Paul’s admonition to self-examination before receiving the bread and cup to mean many things, including to ponder whether one rests with assurance upon the salvation purchased by Christ and whether one is willing to count all the people of the Church as members of one’s own body and so treat them as one’s own (Calvin 1960, IV, xvii, 40). That is, as believers approach the Table of the Lord we are to perceive that our salvation is the gift of God, a gift that is not revoked, and to be confident in that gift. At the same time, we are to be aware of the presence of believers around us, aware that we are not merely sharing the same religious celebration but are in fact members of each other, parts of a single organism, the Body of Christ.

Before concluding this section, I wish to ponder one further implication of the awareness that our salvation and surrender to God are not merely as individuals but as a people. When God called Abraham (Genesis 12), the promise was not merely to Abraham but to his descendants, a promise that Paul claims is made to the entire Body of Christ (See, for example, Galatians 3:6-9). This calling has its instantiation in Israel, the people God has elected to be His. Karl Barth sees in the calling of Israel the grandeur of divine grace in election. The story of Israel shows what God has taken upon himself in choosing to have fellowship with humanity. “It is not an obedient but an obdurate people that He chooses. He does not choose a people which has something to give Him but one which has everything to receive from Him.” (Barth 1957, 206)

Likewise, the Body of Christ in the Church reveals the grace of God, rather than the righteousness of people. When God elects Israel, God elects a people that will show the grace of God. When God elects the Church, God again reveals divine grace:

The Church form of the community reveals what God chooses for man when He elects him for communion with

Himself in His eternal election of grace. He chooses for man His whole selflessly self-giving love. He chooses out of the treasures of His own nature righteousness and holiness, peace and joy, life and blessedness. He chooses for man His own self as Brother but also as Leader, as Servant but also as Master, as Physician but also as King. He therefore chooses for man the reflection of His own glory. (Barth 1957, 210-211)

Our calling reveals the grace and glory of God, before which believers cannot boast nor live in arrogance toward others, but which rather brings us to our knees before God.

Believers receive the gift of salvation by faith; our confidence in the permanence of God's call comes by faith. Believers are bound into the Church of Christ by faith and become a visible part of the Church by profession of faith. Lest we be tempted to boast of our faith, as though it were a work of our own intelligence or will, Barth adds, "Faith means putting one's confidence in God's mercy as it is attested to man – both Jew and Gentile – by God Himself in His promise. It is a question of the essential, absolute and total confidence which no one assumes on his own but which is founded for everyone on the fact that in the awakening of Christ from the dead God has revealed and turned to man His own glory." (Barth 1957, 237)

As a concluding comment before turning to the final section of these thoughts, I return to John Calvin. He puts to rest any question of our own righteousness or God's calling being dependent on our piety. God calls us to be holy, he writes, not because we are holy or that God foresaw that we would become holy. From Ephesians 1:6 Calvin concludes that "the whole intent of our election is that we should be to the praise of divine grace." If God considers our works, then it is not grace and not worthy of praise (Calvin 1960, III, xxii, 3). God graciously calls people – Israel and the Church – to belong to God, to belong to God irrevocably, and by grace gives the people of God confidence in their calling. The people's response is to surrender our souls and worship.

Believers Respond with Gratitude

I have frequently observed that grace and gratitude are related in more than etymology. The root of both is the Latin *gratia*; further, the two are reciprocal attitudes of the same transaction. That is, the giver is *gracious* and the recipient is *grateful*. That dynamic is expressed in

the lives of believers who grasp the grace of God to them and respond to it with gratitude. In the case of the present discussion, awareness of the persistence of God's decree of election as an act of divine grace awakens in the believer sincere gratitude, expressed in worship and in obedience. Thus, in considering the irrevocable nature of salvation as a basis for worship and surrender of the soul to God, the second important theme is gratitude.

In 1543, John Calvin wrote an apologetic directed to Emperor Charles V and the Diet of Spire. Entitled "Necessity of Reforming the Church," it emphasizes among other things that the Reformed doctrine of salvation provides sure foundation for divine worship. He writes:

All our controversies concerning doctrine relate either to the legitimate worship of God, or to the ground of salvation... We proclaim the glory of God in terms far loftier than it was wont to be proclaimed before; and we earnestly labour to make the perfections in which his glory shines better and better known. His benefits towards ourselves we extol as eloquently as we can. Thus men are incited to reverence his majesty, render due homage to his greatness, feel due gratitude for his mercies, and unite in showing forth his praise. In this way too each one is trained to genuine self-denial, so that his will being brought into obedience to God, he bids farewell to his own desires. (Calvin 1954, 187)

We worship God, not to curry favor, not to seek reward, but grateful to God for the calling to salvation. The believer, grateful to God for salvation by grace and for perseverance in salvation by divine grace, surrenders herself or himself to God and worships God.

Purd E. Deitz takes up the theme of gratitude as an expression of the Protestant understanding of *sola fide*; that is "faith alone." Salvation is not something earned by works, or achieved by striving, but is a gift of grace received by faith. Parallel to that principle, he writes, Protestant worship has no sense in it of trying to appease or gain favor with God (Deitz, in Arndt 1950, 152-153). Rather, it is an expression "of the heart's response by faith to the gracious acts of God." (Ibid. 153) Consequently, "Worship is the outpouring of the soul filled to overflowing by the grace of the Eternal." (Deitz 154)

Are there other signs of God's grace? Are there other motivations for worship and gratitude to God? Of course there are: the glory, abundance and variety of creation; the joy of human relationships; spiritual gifts; opportunities for meaningful and rewarding activity in life and many other experiences of divine grace motivate gratitude in the believer. Yet, the Reformer says that nothing but the doctrine of election will suffice "to make us humble as we ought to be nor shall we otherwise sincerely feel how much we are obliged to God." (Calvin 1960, III, xxi, 1) Every other gift we could take as our due, as the result of our own work, good attitude or even good fortune. The doctrine of election teaches, however, that to be called by God and to persist in that calling is entirely due to the grace of God, without respect for works, standing, or piety. When we fully grasp that doctrine we cannot help but know ourselves obliged to God.

To believe in God, then, is to become obedient to election, a doer of the word of promise, writes Karl Barth (Barth 1957, 239). Faith, rightly understood, is also not a work of human effort, but a response to the call of God. Although for the sake of theological discussion we separate notions such as grace, gratitude, and faith, in the actual economy of human life in the sight of God, these are different aspects of a single reality: God has called his people to be his own.

Conclusion

If we were to review the stories of divine calling throughout the Bible we would inevitably come to the conclusion that those who are called have not chosen nor sought their calling, and certainly not earned it. It is natural for human beings to seek reasonable explanations for God's choices; I am often asked questions such as, "Why did God prefer Abel's sacrifice to Esau's?" "Why did God prefer Jacob to Esau?" "Why did God call David?" "Why did God choose Mary?" Pastors and Sunday School teachers often seek explanations, usually grounded in a sense of divine foreknowledge. "God knew that he would be more obedient; God knew he would make a better king; God knew..." Often these explanations include a sense of moral judgment, the expectation that the chosen one is inherently more moral than the alternatives. Yet such explanations deny the grace of God; such explanations fail to grasp that God calls *without respect to* any merely human quality such as obedience, worth, wisdom, or moral goodness. Thus Paul, in Romans 9, refers to

the Jacob-Esau story and God speaking to Moses (Exodus 33:19) to show that our belonging to God “depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.” (v. 16) Our salvation is the work of God’s grace, calling us to belong to the family of God. When we belong to God, such belonging is not annulled by death or by anything less than death. From the believer’s awareness of the unbreakable nature of this bond flow confidence and gratitude, the attitudes of worship and surrender of the soul.

“My heart I offer thee, freely and promptly.” The call of God to his people is eternal and irrevocable. Those who grasp the glory and grace of divine calling surrender themselves to God in confidence and gratitude. Let us worship God.

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

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