

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 2 – 2009

ROMANS 8:29-34 AND THE SECURITY OF THE BELIEVER.

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“We shall now have a full definition of faith if we say that it is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit” John Calvin, Inst. III.2.7 (C.R. 30, 403).

1. Introduction.

The letter to the Romans could not have been delivered at a more appropriate time. It was probably written in the year 58 AD. At that time Nero was the emperor of Rome. This insane tyrant is not only known for the many murders he committed on relatives, even his own wife, but he is especially known for the most inhuman persecution of the Christians. Everything that is mentioned in Romans 8:35 (trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword) was a grim reality. Many believers were painted with pitch and then set alight (alive) to give light at Nero’s orgies. Others had to fight with hungry lions in the Colosseum. When a devastating fire broke out (there is a rumor that Nero himself started it) which demolished a great part of the city of Rome, he accused the Christians and the persecution reached a climax.

We can therefore imagine for ourselves how welcome this letter was, when the postman delivered it to the Church of Christ in Rome – the Word of God at a time when it was so urgently needed. We have in this letter a summary and conclusion of the preaching of the apostle Paul. Well-considered he brings the Gospel to this young church. And the main theme of his preaching is the certainty and unassailability of the Divine redemption. And this unassailability is founded on the fact that the congregation belongs to Christ from before the creation. In chapter 8 Paul gives a very clear exposition of the completed work of salvation, through which the believers became children of God, heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ (verse 17). Paul wants the congregation to live in the security (assurance, certainty) of the redeeming work of Christ, and especially in the security of their own election (predestination). They have become partakers in the salvation of Christ. They belong to Him.

The very same truth applies to every true believer today, because the letter to the Romans was not only meant for one congregation almost two thousand years ago. On the contrary, it is part of the infallible and authoritative Word of God. And its contents is the Gospel of salvation for everyone who believes in Jesus Christ as the only Mediator and Savior. Thus the words of Paul in this portion of Romans 8 express

a ringing Christian assurance to the believing heart. They have brought comfort and encouragement to many troubled and afflicted believers down through the centuries. The opening word of verse 28, “we know”, introduce a crucial assertion for victorious Christian living that is apprehended by faith. The verb “we know” (oidamen) denotes “the knowledge of faith and not mere intellectual investigation” (Lenski as quoted by Hiebert: 170).

2. Context.

The resounding affirmation of chapter 8 is that in the present age of reconciliation, the Christian lives “not according to the flesh” but according to the power of God’s Spirit – a power whose victory is assured. It is the Spirit who marks those who belong to Christ (v. 9), and it is by the power of the Spirit that raised Jesus that believers are promised new life in the age to come (v.11). Through the Spirit we are no longer considered “slaves” and enemies of God, but our relationship becomes that of beloved “children” of God and heirs with our brother Christ of all God’s promises (vs. 12-17).

Paul then asserts in verse 18 his evaluation of the believer’s present sufferings as “not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us”. In verses 19-25 he supported his evaluation from creation’s yearning for deliverance from corruption by pointing to the believer’s present yearning for full redemption. It is through the Spirit that we experience the first glimpses of the rebirth to come. In verses 26-27 he pointed to the present intercession of the Holy Spirit (Hiebert: 172). When we do not even know how to voice our deepest longings before God, it is the Spirit Who intercedes for us. Verses 28-30 then form a kind of climax to the teaching in verses 18-27. Paul asserts that through the Spirit’s power our ultimate destiny is certain. The future does not rest upon our faithfulness but upon God, who has ordained that redemption, not rebellion, will have the last word (Tisdale: 69). Verses 31-39 form a concluding paean of praise celebrating the redemption in Christ, delineated in the first eight chapters of Romans, as establishing a bond of love that can never be broken (Hiebert: 172). Through a series of questions whose answers are implied, followed by a series of declarations, Paul speaks words of assurance and hope to those who ask, “How can we believe in a loving God in a world where.....” (Tisdale:70).

In the broader context, the closing verses of Romans 8 culminate a section of Paul’s letter which begins with the announcement in Chapter 5: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Having spent the first four chapters of Romans talking about the past age – a time of futility and helplessness under sin – Paul proceeds in these chapters to explore the present age – time of reconciliation through God’s justification of sinners in Jesus Christ. In chapter 9-11 Paul turns his attention to the future and the final consummation to come. Thus, the concluding verses of chapter 8 serve as both the culmination of his reflection on life in the present age and the anticipation of his discussion of the future (Tisdale:69). In these verses the certainty of the future glory is guaranteed. Paul gives the ground of believer’s certainty of final salvation (Peterson, 1991:46).

3. Romans 8:29-34 and the security of the believer.

Let us now proceed with a more detailed exposition of verses 29 – 34 as it is indicated in the title of this article.

3.1 Verse 29: “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”

There is a close connection between verse 28 and 29, as the word “for” indicates. Paul states here the cause of the preceding. We know God works all things for our good (verse 28), because he has done the greatest good for us – he has saved us from beginning to end. The apostle uses five aorist verbs in verses 29 and 30 to describe salvation past, present and future. It is like a chain from which the first and the last shackle is mentioned in verse 29 and the shackles in between, in verse 30. Verse 29 mentions the eternal cause and the eternal destiny of the salvation of God’s children. Verse 30 lays the bridge between both (Sillevis Smit:194). God is the subject and the people of God are the object of each of the five verbs (Peterson:46). It is on the basis of this passage inter alia that the doctrine of eternal security is built in Reformed theology by reasoning from the doctrine of election to the doctrine of security (Peterson:46). Paul shows, by the very order of election, that the afflictions of the faithful are nothing else than the manner by which they are conformed to the image of Christ (Calvin, Commentaries on the epistle to the Romans, 316/7). “There is therefore no reason for us to be grieved, or to think it hard and grievous, that we are afflicted, unless we disapprove of the Lord’s election, by which we have been foreordained to life, and unless we are unwilling to bear the image of the Son of God, by which we are to be prepared for celestial glory” (Ibid).

God’s foreknowing his people means his setting his love upon them before creation (Peterson:46). It is not a bare prescience, but the adoption by which he had always distinguished his children from the reprobate (Calvin: 317). It hence follows, that this knowledge is connected with God’s good pleasure. For he foreknew nothing out of himself, in adopting those whom he was pleased to adopt; but only marked out those whom he had purposes to elect (Calvin: 318).

God’s predestining his people means his deciding upon them beforehand for salvation (cf. Eph.1:4). God’s goal in predestining them was their eventual conformity to the image of the glorified Christ. Christ is first in rank an Inaugurator of a new race of humanity, the race of the redeemed (Peterson:46). No one can be an heir of heaven without being conformed to the image of the only-begotten Son of God (Calvin, Commentaries:318).

3.2 Verse 30: “And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

Paul continues the verbs of salvation. “Whom he predestined, he also called.” God not only planned his people’s salvation before creation; he also effectively summons them to take hold of that salvation in time.

“Those he also justified”, means that he declared them righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Christ.

“Those he also glorified”. God made them beholders and partakers of the glory of Christ. It is very important to take note of the aorist tense of the verbs in verse 30.

This is a priceless certainty of faith. Paul expresses the future aspect of salvation in the verb glorified in the same aorist tense as the other four verbs. In God's plan his people are glorified. God expresses our future glorification as an accomplished fact. Surely we are safe in his sovereign plan of salvation (Peterson:47). "He used verbs of past tense, even concerning things future, as if God has already arranged from eternity that they should come to pass" (Augustine, On rebuke and grace: 481, as quoted by Peterson: 47). "Those whom God now, consistently with his purpose, exercises under the cross, are called and justified, that they may have a hope of salvation, so that nothing of their glory decays during their humiliation; for though their present miseries deform it before the world, yet before God and angels it always shines forth as perfect" (Calvin, commentaries:320). Thus God is the one who begins, continues and completes the work of salvation.

3.3. Verse 31: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

There is a clear transition from verse 30 to verse 31. The subject discussed having been sufficiently proved, he now breaks out into exclamations, by which he sets forth the magnanimity with which the faithful ought to be furnished when adversities urge them to despond. And he teaches us in these words that with the paternal favor of God is connected that invisible courage which overcomes all temptations (Calvin, commentaries:321). "Paul bids the saints to lay hold, above all things, on the paternal love of God, that relying on this shield they may boldly triumph over all evils; for this is a brazen wall to us, so that while God is propitious to us we shall be safe against all dangers. He does not, however, mean, that nothing shall oppose us; but he promises a victory over all kinds of enemies" (Ibid). Paul asks a rhetorical question: "What, then, shall we say in response to this?" A good answer might be, "Hallelujah" (Peterson:47). There is no answer however (or the answer is absolutely clear), for our words are insufficient to render God the thanks he is due.

He then asks a second rhetorical question: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" To a certain extent, this is also the very clear answer to the first rhetorical question. A rhetorical question is only a question in form. In force, it is often an emphatic statement. So it is here. Paul means "if we are convinced that God is on our side, then no one will ever successfully oppose him" (Peterson:47).

This is the chief and the only support which can sustain us in every temptation. After all that was said, there is only one conclusion: "God is for us". His favor alone is a sufficient solace in every sorrow, a protection sufficiently strong against all the storms of adversities (Calvin, commentaries:322). Thus, when the saints rely on the power of God alone, they dare to despise whatever is opposed to them in the world (Ibid). For there is no power either under or above the heavens, which can resist the arm of God. We must therefore rely on this inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, and not depend on outward things.

3.4. Verse 32: "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?"

Paul gives the greatest proof (in the form of a third rhetorical question) that God is on our side. The Father gave his Son to die for us. Here is the supreme demonstration

that God is for us (Peterson:47). “How will he not also...” God did the harder thing – he gave Christ for us when we were his enemies. Now he will do the easier – give us all of his spiritual blessings along with his Son (Ibid). Paul brings forward the price of our redemption in order to prove that God favors us. And doubtless it is a remarkable and clear evidence of inappreciable love, that the Father refused not to bestow his Son for our salvation. This gift of God’s only-begotten Son was voluntary, precious, the substitution immensely rich and all-fulfilling.

3.5. Verse 33: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.”

In this verse it is all about the unassailability of the elect. Paul employs a judicial argument. He asks: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?” And he answers this question by saying: “It is God who justifies”. God, the supreme judge of all the earth, has declared his people righteous; who will possibly bring a charge against them and make it stick? No one, for the highest judge has already given his verdict or acquittal (Peterson:47/8). There is indeed but one God, at whose tribunal we must stand. Then there is no room for accusation when he justifies us (Calvin, commentaries:323). The children of God are not subject to an accusation, because God justifies (Ibid).

To be justified, according to Paul, is to be absolved by the sentence of God, and to be counted just. Hence God will allow no accusation against us, because he has absolved us from all sins.

3.6. Verse 34: “Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us”.

As no one by accusing can prevail when the judge absolves, so there remains no condemnation when satisfaction is given to the laws, and the penalty is already paid. It is Christ who, having once for all suffered the punishment due to us, thereby declared that he undertook our cause, in order to deliver us. Anyone who now seeks to condemn us, must bring back Christ himself to death again (Calvin, commentaries:324). Scripture teaches that Jesus, the Son of God, will perform the role of judge on the last day. And will he condemn believers? The answer is an emphatic “no”. Christ is not the judge of believers; He is their Savior.

Because he has not only died. He also came forth, by a resurrection, as the conqueror of death, and triumphed over all its power.

And then Paul adds even more. Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father, by which is meant that he possesses dominion over heaven and earth, and full power and rule over all things, according to what is said in Ephesians 1:20. “He teaches us also, that he thus sits, that he may be a perpetual advocate and intercessor in securing our salvation. It hence follows, that when anyone seeks to condemn us, he not only seeks to render void the death of Christ, but also contends with that unequalled power with which the Father has honored him, and who with that power conferred on him supreme authority. This so great an assurance, which dares to triumph over the devil, death and sin, and the gates of hell, ought to lodge deep in the hearts of all the godly.

For our faith is nothing, except we feel assured that Christ is ours, and that the Father is in him propitious to us” (Calvin, commentaries:325).

Thus, from his elevated throne he not only holds all things in heaven and on earth in subjection under his feet, yet Paul proclaims him as our Mediator and as intercessor for us before the Father. Is this not the most assuring and comforting proclamation of the Gospel?

4. Romans 8:29-34 and the Reformed creeds.

It is therefore not strange that this proclamation of Romans 8:29-34 is also reflected in the Creeds of the Protestant churches. The creeds are confessions of faith in which true believers state their sure knowledge and firm confidence, that “not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits” (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day VII, answer 21).

In the following paragraphs we only refer to some of the most obvious portions from the Reformed creeds.

Romans 8:29 is thus used as one of the Scriptural proofs for our confession concerning the holy catholic Church, in Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 21, answer 54: “That the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by his Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a Church chosen to everlasting life; and that I am, and forever shall remain, a living member thereof”.

In article 22 of the Belgic Confession we confess our faith concerning our justification through faith in Jesus Christ in the following words:” We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits, appropriates Him and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.

Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we are *justified by faith* alone, or by *faith apart from works*. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.” And once again our confession refers inter alia to Romans 8:29 as well as Romans 8:33.

Our confession concerning our election, in the Canons of Dordt, Chapter 1, par. 7, reads as follows: “ Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, He has out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his own will, chosen from the whole human race, which had fallen

through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, who He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect and the foundation of salvation. This elect number, though by nature neither better nor more deserving than others, but with them involved in one common misery, God has decreed to give to Christ to be saved by Him, and effectually to call and draw them to His communion by His Word and Spirit; to bestow upon them true faith, justification and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of his Son, finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy and for the praise of the riches of His glorious grace: as it is written: *Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love: having foreordained us into adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved* (Eph. 1:4,5,6). And elsewhere: *whom He foreordained, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified* (Rom. 8:30).

In Chapter 5 of the Canons of Dordt (2.1), Romans 8:32-35 is quoted to contradict the heresy that the perseverance of the true believers is not a fruit of election, or a gift of God gained by the death of Christ, but a condition of the new covenant, which (as the heretics declare) man before his decisive election and justification must fulfill through his free will.

In chapter 1 of the Canons of Dordt (2.7), Romans 8:33 is quoted to contradict the error (heresy) that there is in this life no fruit and no consciousness of the unchangeable election to glory, nor any certainty, except that which depends on a changeable and uncertain condition.

The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day XVIII, answer 46, "That Christ, in the sight of His disciples, was taken up from earth into heaven, and there continues for our interest, until He comes again to judge the living and the dead", is partly based on what we read in Romans 8:34. This same verse serves as Scriptural proof for our confession in Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day XVIII, answer 49, that Christ "is our Advocate in the presence of his Father in heaven..."

Finally, our faith concerning Christ's intercession, is based on the Scriptural truth of Romans 8:34, in the light of which we confess "that we have no access unto God but alone through the only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous.... Who will sooner be heard than the own well beloved Son of God?....Therefore...we call upon the heavenly Father through Jesus Christ our only Mediator....being assured that whatever we ask of the Father in His Name will be granted us" (cf. Belgic Confession, art. 26).

5. Conclusion.

We have seen in the above interpretation of Romans 8:29-34 and from the reflection of its contents in the Reformed Christian Confessions that the purpose of this passage is to assure believers of God's preservation. They can handle present sufferings with the knowledge that God's promise of future glory is secure. In this passage, Paul uses three arguments for preservation:

- An argument from God's sovereignty in verses 28-30. God has sovereignly planned our salvation from beginning to end. As surely as God has foreknown, predestined, called, and justified us, so he will glorify us.
- An argument from God's power in verses 31 and 32. God, the most powerful being in the universe, is on our side – we know this, since he gave his Son to die for us – no one will defeat him or us.
- An argument from God's justice in verses 33 and 34. God the supreme judge of the universe has declared us righteous. No one will condemn. The Lord Jesus will condemn the wicked, but not us. He died, rose, ascended and intercedes for us. Jesus does not condemn the true believers. He saves us.

In light of the marvelous statement of assurance in this portion of Scripture, believers rejoice in knowing that all God is now doing and will yet do in bringing many sons to glory, will ever redound to the praise and honor of the blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as the Firstborn of the Father. May this ringing message grip each believer's heart and mind, stimulate his/her devotion and service, be proclaimed to the millions of unbelievers in order to bring every child of God to faith, and bring unceasing glory and honor to the matchless Savior and Lord. To Him be the glory for ever and ever more.