

God's Call Within His Providence

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Introduction

It is a striking fact worth repeating often that Romans 8:28 is not promise that can be claimed by everyone. The subjects of providence, those for whom all things work together for good, are specifically identified as those who *love* God and who are *called* of God.

Last week we considered some things about those who love God under the title: our love within God's providential love. Our goal was to preserve the full meaning of providence as an action of God that does not depend on man. We have a human element cited in the text, love for God, so we wondered if providence might be a cooperative venture between God and man. It is not a cooperative venture for two decisive reasons. 1) First, our love for God is *brought into being* by God's determined love for us (we love because He loved us, 1 Jn. 4:19; His loving determination to save in fact saves, Jn. 3:16-17; the grip of our love for darkness coupled with hatred of Christ is broken by the new birth without any cooperation on our part. We "operate" in faith, repentance, and loving obedience because of the new birth, Jn. 3:19-20; 1:1-5, 10-11, 12-13). God's providential care in general works all things for the good of those that love Him and this very love for Him is due to His providential care for them in particular. 2) Second, our love for God is *upheld* by His providential love. If this were not the case then Roman 8:28 would not give further support to us in our present sufferings. But giving that support is precisely why providence is presented at this point in the chapter. It is the third support given by Paul in the unit that stretches from 8:18 to 8:39. Thus we have the following impact: all things work together for good to those who love God *even though this love is weak*. The scope of God's providential love is such that *it takes into account the weakness of our love and works that too for our good*. His love is faithful though ours is frail. His love not only originates but also sustains our love.

This week we will consider the other phrase that identifies the people to whom providence applies: those called of God. The title for today is "God's call within His providence."

What I propose to do today can be summarized around three words: survey, definition, and analysis. My goal is to survey the general notion in the Bible of a call or calling, formulate this material into some definitions, and analyze calling in Romans 8:28.

1A. Survey of the general notion of a call or calling

Such a survey will give us some of the flavor of this Biblical morsel. Although often neglected from preaching diets, the taste is good. As we do this overview, you will begin to appreciate how these things relate to us as God's people.

1) It may mean to name. You wish to identify something so you call it by some name (town of David is called Bethlehem, Lk. 2:4). To call is to give a name. To be called is to be named.

2) You can easily see another related sense of call: to call out to someone *by name*. And it is often more than simply saying their name, but you call them *to something*. You say, "Joe, come over here out of the rain." The Lord called out to Adam in the garden (Gen 3:9) and to Moses from the bush (Ex. 3:4) to draw their attention and to converse with them. To call is *to make yourself known* to someone and by that *to establish a line of communication*. If I am intent on speaking to you, but you do not notice me, I will call out to you, *get your attention*, make myself known, and thus open up a conversation.

3) King Herod called the teachers of the law (publicly) and the wise men (secretly, Matt. 2:7); this is obviously a little stronger than invite. It is more like a summons to court. When a king calls you to his court it is really not a voluntary matter; instead, he says "jump" and you say "how high?" Of course, foolish men might disobey the king unless they disobey out of reverence for Christ.

4) In Ephesians 5:1, Paul combines three different uses of the term. He "calls" them to walk worthy of the "calling" to which they "have been called" ("I urge you," NIV, is literally "I call you"; "you have received," NIV, is literally "to which you have been called"). Paul calls out to them, gets their attention, focuses their attention, and encourages appropriate action (walk worthy). He mentions God's call that gave them a calling. Their calling is their station in life, their vocation. Our English word "vocation" is rooted in the biblical notion of a calling; it is that to which you have been "vocal" (to be overly literal, it is that to which you have been called by the use of someone's *vocal* cords). In reformed theology, activity in the world, in one's everyday walk, is encouraged by the recognition that your work is assigned to you by the Lord. It therefore has sanctity and a dignity. The reformers often referred to the fact that Jesus blessed all occupations and arts by working as a carpenter (cf. *Spirituality: rediscovering the spirit of the reformers*, McGrath, 143-151 for a great little chapter on the reformed view of work). Your calling is the work God has assigned you in your walk on earth and this *includes* your employment.

5) It has the meaning of invite, or an offer of a privilege to someone as when someone is invited to a wedding celebration (Matt. 22:3; 14). This call may be refused.

6) How about the call to the wedding in Revelation 19:9 (NIV, translates "called" by using the word invited)? Is it conceivable that some who are called to *this* supper might refuse to come? Those called to this supper make up the bride of Christ. To be called to this supper is to be blessed not simply offered a blessing that may be received or refused.

A call may be an invitation, but it also may have the additional flavor of bring as in the case of those the Lord brings to the final supper.

And what is the nature of "called" when Jesus calls James and John and they follow him (Matt. 4:21)? Could *they* have refused this call? Could this call have resulted in a different twelve apostles? Do we thank them that they so responded because otherwise Jesus would never have had twelve apostles and we would never have received the New Testament in its present form? The immediacy (vs. 20, 22) suggests a call that instilled in them the irresistible urge to follow Christ like God's call of things into existence that did not before exist (Rom 4.17).

Now in the way of general recap, how does the Bible use the term "call"? To call is to name something, to get someone's attention, to introduce oneself, to cause people to assemble (as in Herod's court), to give someone a job to do, and to place someone's feet on a particular pathway on which to walk (to give a vocation). This variety applies whether God or man is the speaker or active agent. Finally, there are degrees of strength regarding the efficacy of a call: one type of call may be refused and another type brings into being that which does not exist.

2A. A definition of the distinct notion of effectual calling

As to its efficacy, there is a call that may be refused, and there is a call that is always obeyed. Regarding God's relation to sinners, calling has two outstanding uses: God's general and God's special call. His general call is an invitation that He extends to sinners, an offer of privilege that may be rejected. His special call is an invitation that is always accepted. Special calling is also referred to as effectual calling, efficacious grace, or irresistible grace.

There is a general call from God to sinners that goes out to them in the creation and through the preaching of the gospel (cf. the call to the wedding in Mat 22:14). And there is also a special, direct, and personal call from God to the sinner that is effectual (cf. the call to the wedding supper in Rev 19:9). The general call invites one to a privilege, and the special/effectual call *brings* one to it.

Here is a summary definition that reflects some of the variety in the term and its flavor: God's effectual call is His immediate and direct action *overcoming* our resistance (cf. the side of reconciliation that deals with the enmity we have toward God; propitiation deals with God's wrath toward us) and *bringing* us to faith and thus to the salvation that is received by faith. God's effectual call is His making Himself known to someone and by that establishing a line of communication. When God is intent on fellowshiping with someone who does not notice Him, He will call out to that person, get his or her attention, *make Himself known*, and thus *establish* conversation and fellowship.

Try to imagine a king or president like Gerald Ford making himself known to you. You have never met him and one day you are walking along and President Ford calls out your name (he knows you but you do not know him). He gets your attention and introduces

himself. That is what happens to us in our coming to faith in Christ. A great king that you did not know called out your name and made Himself known to you. By this action on His part your life will never be the same again. The King, the Sovereign, has called you. What a warm and welcome doctrine. This is a warm and welcome experience!

The term for this action of God is effectual calling. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q 31) gives this definition: "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel."

This means that God gives *a call that is always obeyed*. It means that the one who is thus called will hear the word of Christ and follow Him; he will see the glory of Christ and entrust himself to Him. Though he is at enmity with God, upon the action of God's effectual call; he is turned to love and gratitude to God (WCF: "made willing by his grace," chap. X, sec. 1). Once you meet someone, you can never unmeet him. It is a historical event. Calling is an introduction, a meeting; a coming to know that establishes a life-long conversation with the living God.

3A. An analysis of calling in Romans 8:28

I want to support the claim that it is effectual calling that is spoken of in Romans 8:28.

1) The tie of calling with justification and glorification.

We begin with the basic truth of Romans 8:30 that all who are called *will be* justified and glorified. This shows that a general call or invitation is not in view since that call is rejected far and wide: many people who are confronted with God's general call in nature and in gospel preaching will not be justified or glorified.

This is a special call *because everyone who is confronted with this call will be saved*. It is a saving call. The relation of this to the point of efficacy is obvious. This is an invitation, a summons, a call that is obeyed by each to whom the call is directed. It is an effectual call from God, hence, "God's effectual call."

This is a very special call because no one who receives this call will fail to be justified and glorified (again, cf. Rev. 19:9; all the called are blessed but this is not the case with all who are invited).

2) God's purpose.

God has the purpose of establishing fellowship with people who do not notice Him, who view Him with enmity, and who wander in darkness and unbelief.

That this call is rooted in His purpose is clear by comparing Romans 8:28 (all is worked for good to those *called according to His purpose*) with 2 Timothy 1:9 (saved and *called because of his purpose* and grace given us before time).

He has a purpose, an intention, a goal that He applies Himself to accomplish; He does so through His almighty word, voice, and call. His plans never fail; His plans cannot be thwarted. His call is the means by which He accomplishes His purpose. In general, this is based on passages that deal with God's intentions and purposes like Job 42:6 ("I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted") and Psalm 33:11 ("But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever; the purpose of his heart through all generations"; context shows the efficacy of his speaking, commanding, foiling, and thwarting with regard to the plans of men).

A particular connection of God's purpose and the spread of His word is given in Isaiah 55:10-13. God has *a purpose in redemption* that is tied to the giving of the gospel to the nations. *It will be accomplished.* It is God's purpose that will be realized. It is a desire He will satisfy. Also, from Isaiah 55, the richness of this call becomes evident. His call will make the heart of the called "bud and flourish" (Isa. 55:10). He will call *those who do not know God and they will hasten to the true King David* (Isa. 55:5). The thirsty *will* come to the satisfying waters; they *will* give ear, come and find life for the soul. They will obey; they will *listen and come* (vs. 1-3). They will *seek and call* (v. 6). In the effectual call, God leads a horse to water and makes him drink as in Joel 3:28-32.

His call, His voice, His word saves. All to whom it is given will hear His word and *will* obey it. As it is put in the hymn "Jesus never fails," "Heaven and earth may pass away, but Jesus never fails."

3) The Voice of the Shepherd

The effectual nature of this call is supported by the parallel with the *voice* of the Shepherd in John 10. Jesus *calls* his own by name (v. 3). The relevance of this to Romans 8 is easily seen in the parallel of His "own" and His "sheep" in John 10 (v. 4) with His "brethren" and His elect in Romans 8 (vs. 29, 33).

The sheep follow "because they know his voice" (v. 4). But Jesus said that his own received him not, even though they had His light given to them (Jn. 1:9, 5, the general call in creation). He also said that men love darkness rather than light and *will not* come to Him (Jn 3:19-20), and that sinners cannot hear and understand his word (Jn. 8:43-44) nor can they believe in Him (Jn. 6:44).

Still, He will give His voice and His sheep *will* hear and follow. How so? It is so because this is His way of *bringing* them (Jn. 10:16). He will call them to Himself. There is a divine "must" at work here. They *must* be brought. Both these sheep (of Israel) and the other sheep (of the Gentiles) must be brought. Brought where? God brings them to the flock, to listening (10:16). *This is a call that will be obeyed.* This is a call that brings them through the gate (Christ) and into salvation (v. 9).

When a shepherd calls his sheep by name, his sheep know his voice and follow. Likewise, the Great Shepherd calls His sheep by name, and they will come (not "may come" or "some will and some won't" but "they *will* come"; cf. Jn. 6:37).

4) The Great Transition

Calling is a mighty word from God that transitions us from darkness to light, from alienation to fellowship from not noticing God to knowing Him when He makes Himself known to us. Like John 10 it is "into salvation", and like Romans 8 it is into a justified status, a status of being declared righteous, accepted, with access/fellowship with God (cf. Rom. 8:30 with 5:1-2). In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul says that God "called you into fellowship with His son Jesus Christ our Lord" (God's call "ushers into the fellowship of Christ," Murray). Peter says God "called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

This transition is from unbelief, blindness, ignorance, and darkness and is effected by God's call. We are transitioned from unbelief to belief, from blindness to sight, from ignorance to knowledge, and from darkness to light by God's effectual call.

2 Corinthians 4:1-6 shows us that God's call is a remarkable blessing. In our fallen state we are in darkness and doubly blind (v. 4; cf. Jn. 3:3, 19; 9:39; and thus unable to believe, 6:44). But God's saving call, His almighty saving word, goes forth like the command on creation morning (v. 6). He said, "Let there be light" and there was light. He commands the light of the gospel to shine in our hearts that we may know the glory of God in the face of Christ. This is what makes believers out of us. It is to have our eyes opened to see the glory of God in the face of Christ.

As unbelievers we cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (v. 4). But *God's command, by parallel His call, enlightens us so we know Him*, and to know Him is to have eternal life. *Seeing His glory we willingly embrace Him, we choose Him above all others*, we run to Him, we cling to Him, we believe in Him, and we entrust ourselves to Him (cf. Isa. 55:5 and "long my imprisoned spirit...").

Why is it important to have effectual calling cited in Romans 8:28?

a) Effectual calling is essential to providence. Without it this famous passage is reduced to wishful thinking. If God's call can fail depending on how man responds to it, then God's providence can fail for the same reason. Effectual calling shows us, as part to whole, that *providence is rooted in the power of God that does not depend on us* (cf. Rom. 4:17 where calling is used with reference to the things in His plan that do not exist but are called into being).

b) Thus, we have the greatest comfort that good is being worked out for us. How God has begun *tokens how He shall finish*-powerfully, surely, and certainly (cf. 1 Cor. 1:8 with 1:9).

c) Effectual calling here in Romans 8:28 reminds us of that to which we have been called: *the life of holiness*. It is a reminder again of the duty to the Spirit and not to the flesh, which remains in the backdrop throughout this context.

We are called saints, holy ones, or separated ones. This means that some things surrounding the notion of being separated ones identify us. a) We are named by that which made us who we are. We are Christians by a separating work of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13). So we are named saints (separated ones) because God's call separated us out from the world and made us saints. Thus the idea is that we are called *to be* saints (Rom. 1:7), our sainthood is called into being from non-existence, from the void of being sinful and unholy. b) Closely associated with this is the interesting fact that we are called "the called ones." The word "church" is literally "the called out ones" combining the idea of separation with calling. We are named saints and we are named the called ones because His call was efficacious through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. c) The goal of this separation is that we live separated or holy lives. So *we are called saints in terms of the goal God had in bringing us to Christ: holiness of life. Our name tells us what we are to be, holy as our God is holy. Thus we are called, sainted, or "holized."* We are separated out from the world and assembled to God for holiness.

d) Effectual calling in this context reminds us that our *sufferings certainly serve our good* especially in terms of holiness. Sufferings are worked for our good, for our development in holiness. *We are comforted in suffering and prompted to do battle with sin at the same time* by knowing God's call of us in this context of His providential care.

We are now in a life long conversation with God and He has many things to say to us like: all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.