

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Whom Are Called”
Isaiah 55:1-5
Romans 8:26-30**

**Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 6, 2017**

Isaiah 55:1-5

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.”

Romans 8:26-30

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those 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 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.

“Whom Are Called”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When in the course of a sermon series, sooner or later, one comes across a text that sparks the intellect and stokes the hearth of debate. Today includes one such passage. Truthfully, there’s a lot of theology in these five verses and I could easily craft at least three thirty-minute sermons. Alas, I did not do that and so I have about fifteen minutes to dive into some hotly debated material. This means today’s sermon is going to be a basic exposition of traditional Reformed theology. For a more detailed analysis I invite you to one of our upcoming Bible studies starting in September. So let’s begin!

Last Sunday we ended on Paul’s urging us to wait patiently. The Apostle is fully aware that in our waiting and enduring, we are susceptible to weakness. We are surely encouraged to wait in active anticipation with the hope of our adoption. We are encouraged to wait in active sanctification of ourselves and in active witness of the Gospel. Nevertheless, in our waiting, we will all succumb to weakness. Paul says elsewhere that in our weakness we boast not of ourselves but of God.¹ God uses our weakness to direct our gaze to his power. When calamity strikes and we are beaten low, we see that our strongest human strength is worth nothing. For even the strongest man on earth has a weakness, but in God there is no weakness at all. In that moment of calamity, the Christian looks to God and for God’s strength. Knowing full well that God’s power lifts up the downtrodden and the weak.

Here arises a simple question: How? Paul answers this by way of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent who acts within human beings bringing about God's purposes. The Apostle's logical progression is this: We are adopted heirs with Christ, but adoption does not preclude suffering, so when we suffer we turn to God, and we turn to God in prayer. This is why Paul says the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us" because perplexity as to how to pray for oneself is a universal Christian experience. Our inarticulate longings to pray, however, are an indication that the indwelling Spirit is already helping us by interceding for us in our hearts, making requests that the Father will certainly hear. This is a terrible simile, but the Spirit is like a middleman of sorts. He both brings God's power and comfort to us, and lifts our prayers and longings to God. Now, the Spirit does not intercede wantonly nor does he intercede according to our wishes or desires. Rather, the Holy Ghost intercedes according to God's will.

And then Paul says, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good." I don't want to speak for God, so I cannot deny 100% that God does not bless some Christians with prosperity. So I can't say that some folks won't be blessed with health, wealth, and leisure in this life, but I don't believe this is what Paul was talking about. The context of chapter eight dictates that Paul is talking about the adoption of God's people and the *eternal* good that comes with that. The Apostle is very realistic, he and others do not shy away from the very real persecutions of the earliest Christians. And while our persecutions pale in comparison to theirs, nonetheless, we, too, will experience suffering and hardship.

This is where we're transitioning into some heavy theology. What Paul is talking about falls under the heading of God's sovereignty. Paul says that *all* things work together for good for those who love God. Let me give you a biblical example. Back in Genesis 37, we hear of the young boy Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, whose dreams and his father's favoritism, put him at enmity with his other brothers. The other brothers hated Joseph so much that they planned to kill him. Their own brother! Thankfully, one of the them convinced the others not to commit outright fratricide, but they, nevertheless, premeditated an elaborate plan to make his death look like a tragic accident. Not only did they premeditate manslaughter, they also conspired to sell their brother into slavery. Truly evil actions! But fast forward in the story, after Joseph has been made prime minister of Egypt, and after a famine has swept throughout the Middle East. Joseph's brothers come to Egypt for food because of Joseph's economic planning. And in the very last chapter of the Book of Genesis, Joseph says to his brothers, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."² God is perfectly good. He cannot commit evil. But God is also perfectly sovereign. Which means He can use the evil that men and women do, the harm that humans inflict on others, God can, and does use them for his very good purpose.

And that purpose is the preservation and the perseverance of his adopted children. Whatever God ordains is ultimately for good. And not all things on earth are good. But all things, as Paul says, are working for good for God's children. Those who love God need not fear calamity. While I am sure Joseph was terrified when he was enslaved and imprisoned, his love for God never waned. And God's protection and blessing never left Joseph, even if it seem from Joseph's perspective that God was far away. God's plans are perfectly good, but because God is dealing with humans, broken and sinful, some of the things that God allows to happen are not good in the present, but may even be quite evil. But because of God's sovereignty over all of the created order, tragedy is only temporary and ephemeral for believers.

This brief exposition on God's sovereignty naturally leads the Apostle Paul into verses twenty-nine and thirty, where we get what some theologians call the Plan of Salvation and what others, like myself, call the Golden Chain. If you remember, at the beginning of this sermon I said I'll be teaching from a traditional Reformed perspective. And that remains the case. So if you were raised in the modern Lutheran tradition, a Methodist, or Catholic, or any branch of Christianity that subscribes to Arminianism, then the following may sound strange, or even offensive. I promise I mean no offense as we skim the surface of predestination.

The first link in the Golden Chain is foreknowledge. The Greek word Paul uses is *proegno*, which comes from the word *gnosis* with the prefix *pro-*. We get the medical term prognosis from this word. *Gnosis* means to know and the prefix means before. In Greek thought there are two main types of knowing. There's cognitive knowing, meaning I know the time, or you know my name, or so-and-so knows rocket science. Speaking theologically, this knowledge is a cognitive awareness, or a simple awareness of God. The second kind of knowing is personal knowing. For instance, whenever you read in the Old Testament "and Jacob knew his wife and she bore a son," that type of knowledge is intimate and personal. Speaking theologically, this knowledge is redemptive and made personal by the Holy Spirit. Because of his sovereignty, God foreknows every single person intimately, not just cognitively. From before the foundation of the earth, God knows you and me intimately and personally. God knows whom he has called. This is important to know because foreknowledge is the starting point of predestination. If God is sovereign and knows everything, and if everything works according to his good pleasure, then predestination is how God interacts with the world.

Now this isn't something that only Calvin came up with. This isn't even unique to other Reformers like Luther. St. Augustine wrote prolifically on predestination and election. But it's not even unique to him, either. It's not unique to Paul or Jesus. Predestination is not some doctrine created out of nothing, it is deeply rooted in the oldest traditions of the Old Testament. The original destiny for humanity was the one-on-one relationship between God and his people established in the Garden of Eden. Sin got in the way of that relationship, but the destiny has never changed. It's only been pushed ahead to a time we cannot yet fathom. But the destiny has remained the same. The way we get to that destination is chronicled in the Bible. Jesus says he is the way, the truth, and the life. The goal, then, of predestination is that God's elect be conformed by and to Christ. Everything points back to Christ because he is God's incarnate Word. This is why Paul says in verse twenty-nine, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the image of his Son.*"

We receive our adoption as sons and daughters by way of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are to be conformed to Jesus Christ. Those who are called by God are to imitate Christ in everything that we say and do. Predestination and our election are not free licenses to do whatever we want. Nor are we guaranteed prosperity and safety in this life. Predestination means the elect must conform their lives to Christ, which is no easy task when compared to the frivolity of the world. Christ demands a lot of his disciples. Remember the Double Love Rule. Christ wants us to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It would be so much easier if we only had to do one of those, or if he said we could partially love. But he didn't. God requires of us that we love him fully, that we dedicate our lives to his Word and in everything give all glory and

honor to him. God requires of us that we love all of our neighbors, not just the ones we like or are related to, but all of them, even our enemies. Now, I cannot say to you or on your behalf whether or not you are part of the elect. Calvin says only you know if the Holy Spirit is working in you. I cannot nor do I want to cast that judgment. But my question to you today is how are you responding to your calling? Do you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and do you love your neighbor as you love yourself?

Let us pray. Sovereign God, you established your Church from before the foundations of this world. You know each of us by name, and you call us each by name. Teach us to pray in the midst of the groans and pains of this world. O Holy Spirit, intercede for us and with us, that we may be conformed to the image of Christ, our Head and Brother. We are a chosen people, called for God's service. Help us in this endeavor. Amen.

¹ II Corinthians 12:9-10

² Genesis 50:20