

"THE GOLDEN CHAIN OF SALVATION"

I. Introduction

- A. The key theme in Romans 8 is the assurance that Christians have of our salvation in Jesus Christ.
1. This is seen in the chapter's opening assertion that "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (v. 1)
 2. And it is just as evident in the chapter's closing declaration that nothing in all creation "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (v. 39)
 3. Paul does not say these things in a triumphalist manner.
 4. He does not ignore the harsh realities of life in a fallen world in this chapter.
 5. On the contrary, he acknowledges that the creation has been subjected to futility and that we ourselves groan inwardly as we await the completion of our redemption.
 6. Yet in verse 28 Paul assures us that all of the things that take place in this life, even the most difficult things, work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.
- B. The verses that we are studying today tell us why we can be so certain of that great truth.
1. The reason why we know that all things work for our good is because our salvation is rooted in the eternal decree of God.
 2. Before time began, God decreed that he would bring his elect to glory, and everything that God decrees he brings to pass.

3. God's decree is what lies behind Paul's description of Christians as "those who are called *according to [God's] purpose.*"
4. The Holy Spirit's work of effectually calling individuals to Christ is done in execution of the eternal purpose of God.
5. In Romans 8:29-30, Paul sets forth some of the distinct elements of the outworking of this purpose in what some have referred to as 'the golden chain of salvation.'
6. It is likened to a chain because each part is linked to the others — all of those who were foreknown were predestined, all who were predestined were called, all who were called were justified, and all who were justified were glorified.
7. It is called a golden chain because it gives us precious assurance that God's saving work in our lives will be brought to completion.
8. In the words of Charles Hodge, "the salvation of believers is secure because the plan on which God acts is connected in all its parts." [283]

II. Foreknown

- A. The first link in this golden chain is foreknowledge.
 1. Paul describes Christians as those whom God "foreknew."
 2. The basic meaning of this word is 'to know ahead of time.'
 3. The question is, who or what is it that God knew ahead of time?
 4. Some answer by saying that God foresaw which people would respond to the offer of the gospel in faith and then predestined them to be saved.
 5. In other words, God chooses the elect based on their foreseen faith.

6. This is sometimes referred to as the prescient view of predestination because it makes predestination dependent on God's prescience or foresight of what we would do.
 7. It can also be described as the doctrine of conditional election because it makes election contingent on man's decision.
- B. There are two fatal problems with this way of interpreting this passage.
1. First of all, it is not what the text says.
 2. It does not say "foresaw."
 3. It does not say "*that which* he foreknew."
 4. It does not say "those whom he foreknew *would believe*"
 5. It simply says "those whom he foreknew."
 6. Second, the prescient interpretation makes God's election of individuals to salvation based on their response to the gospel.
 7. That is, it makes God's choosing of us contingent on our choosing of him.
 8. It says that God loves us because we first loved him, even though the Bible says the exact opposite. (see 1 Jn. 4:9)
 9. This also flies in the face of everything that Paul has said in Romans about salvation being by grace alone.
 10. If the prescient view is correct, then we do have something to boast about before God.
 11. We have something to boast about because our salvation does not ultimately hinge on God's decision but on our decision.
 12. This is why Martin Luther said that without the doctrine of unconditional election, "I cannot worship, praise, give thanks or

serve [God], for I do not know how much I should attribute to myself and how much to Him." [*The Bondage of the Will*, 78]

- C. Romans 8:29 does not teach that God chose the elect on the basis of his foreknowledge of what they would do.
1. Instead, it tells us that God predestined his elect on the basis of his personal foreknowledge of them.
 2. In the Bible, knowing another person is not just a matter of having information about that person.
 3. It is about loving that person and having a special commitment to them.
 4. We read in Genesis that "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain." (Gen. 4:1)
 5. God told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." (Jer. 1:5)
 6. God told Israel through the prophet Amos, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." (Amos 3:2)
 7. Romans 8:29 is about God's personal love for his people, a love that he had for them in eternity past.
 8. The word "foreknew" means God knew his elect and set his affection upon them before they came to exist.
 9. Notice how this emphasizes God's free and gracious initiative in salvation.
 10. When God looked into history before the world began, he foresaw that every single human being (with the sole exception of Christ) deserved nothing but his wrath and curse.

11. Yet instead of condemning all to eternal perdition, he was pleased to set his love upon some.

III. Predestined to Be Conformed to the Image of the Son

- A. This brings us to the second link in the golden chain: predestination.
 1. The word 'predestine' simply means 'to destine beforehand.'
 2. Paul is speaking of a decision that existed in the mind of God before time.
 3. God determined that certain individuals, though just as deserving of his wrath as the rest of humanity, would be the recipients of his free grace.
 4. Predestination is a matter of unconditional election to eternal life.
 5. This is made abundantly clear in the next few chapters of this letter.
 6. Romans 9 says, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." (Rom. 9:14-16)
 7. And Romans 11 says, "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." (Rom. 11:5-6)
 8. Election has to be unconditional because of total depravity.
 9. If election were contingent on our response to the gospel then no one could be saved because no one is able to believe in Christ apart from God's work of bringing them to faith.
 10. As Jesus said in John 6, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him... no one can come to me unless it is

granted him by the Father.” (Jn. 6:44, 65)

11. If you trust in Christ for your salvation, the only explanation for your faith is that God predestined you for salvation.
- B. Paul says that the purpose of God’s electing grace is that we would be conformed to image of his Son.
1. God created mankind in his image, but that image was distorted in human beings at the fall.
 2. We do not reflect God as we ought.
 3. Yet Jesus came into the world as the perfect image of the invisible God. (Col. 1:15)
 4. Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. (Heb. 1:3)
 5. And when we come to Christ we put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col. 3:10)
 6. God’s purpose in electing us unto salvation was that we would be conformed to Christ in both character and destiny.
 7. Salvation is about being made like Christ and having a share in his kingdom.
 8. This is why Paul refers to Christ as “the firstborn among many brothers.”
 9. The purpose of God in the salvation of men is to exalt Christ by showing him to be the head and source of the multitudes who will be brought to glory.

IV. Called

- A. We turn now to the third link in the golden chain: calling.
1. Those who were predestined were also called.
 2. This is not merely the general call to believe in Christ.
 3. It is certainly God's intention for the call of the gospel to go forth to all people indiscriminately, but that is not what this verse is talking about.
 4. In this context, "called" is a link in the golden chain of salvation.
 5. Only those who were foreknown and predestined are called in the sense that Paul is speaking of here.
 6. And all of those who are thus called are also justified and glorified.
 7. This tells us that Paul is referring to the effectual call by which we are brought into union with Christ.
 8. He uses the term in the same sense in 1 Corinthians 1 when he says, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Cor. 1:9)
- B. We refer to this as 'effectual calling' because it is about how the Holy Spirit works through the hearing of the gospel to convince us of our sinfulness, to enlighten our minds, to cause us to see the goodness and beauty of Christ, and to persuade and enable us to lay hold of Christ.
1. As you can see by that description, effectual calling and regeneration go hand in hand.
 2. They are essentially two different ways of describing the same thing.
 3. And it is important to understand that a person has to be effectually called and renewed by the power of the Spirit before he or she can lay hold of Christ by faith.

4. You were not born again by exercising your faith in Christ.
5. It is the other way around.
6. You have faith in Christ because of the Spirit's regenerating work in your heart.
7. Effectual calling and regeneration precede faith because they are the means by which faith is given.
8. This helps us to see that faith is not something that we contribute to make the gospel effective for us.
9. Faith is a divine gift that the Spirit works in the hearts of the elect in God's appointed time.

V. Justified

- A. The next link in the golden chain is justification, a doctrine that we have studied in considerable detail in this series on Romans.
 1. We have seen that justification is God's judicial declaration that we are righteous, a declaration that he makes because Christ's righteousness is imputed to us through faith.
 2. In the words of our Shorter Catechism, "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." (WSC 33)
 3. Justification is not about righteousness being infused into the believer.
 4. It is not based upon anything that is wrought within us.
 5. It is not about any righteousness that we have through our performance of what God requires in his law.

6. This is why Paul says in his letter to the Philippians that he does not want a righteousness of his "own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." (Phil. 3:9)
- B. The declaratory nature of justification is made clear when we remember that it is the opposite of condemnation.
1. Condemnation is not a matter of making a person guilty but of declaring them guilty.
 2. In the same way, justification is about righteousness being imputed or counted to the believer on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience and atoning death, received by faith alone.
 3. Justification involves both the forgiveness of sin and God's pronouncement that the sinner is righteous.
 4. Though we continue to sin after we are justified, this sin does not undo our justification.
 5. Justification is a one time act, and it is an act that happens to everyone who is effectually called into communion with Christ.
 6. Because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, the pardon that we receive when we are united to him can never be revoked.

VI. Glorified

- A. This brings us to the final link in the golden chain, which is glorification.
1. All who have been justified through faith in Christ will be glorified.
 2. Notice, however, that that is not exactly what Paul says here.
 3. He does not say that we *will be* glorified.

4. He says that we *were* glorified.
 5. As with all of the other links in the chain, this one is stated in the past tense.
 6. Even though we are still waiting to be glorified with Christ, Paul can speak of our glorification as a completed act because it is part of God's eternal decree.
 7. God always carries out his decrees, and he always finishes what he begins.
 8. As Paul tells the Christians in Philippi, "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:6)
- B. Glorification is the final realization of God's decree.
1. When we are glorified, we will be fully and perfectly conformed to the image of Christ.
 2. John describes this in his first epistle by saying, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." (1 Jn. 3:2)
 3. John also says that this hope of glory motivates us to pursue holiness now.
 4. He says in the very next verse, "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." (1 Jn. 3:3)
 5. You were saved so that you could look like Christ.
 6. This is why you must put on Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Rom. 13:14)
 7. As one writer puts it, "Presumptuous and delusive is that hope of seeing Christ hereafter, which does not produce an ardent desire

and earnest endeavor to be conformed to him here." [Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, 197]

VII. Conclusion

- A. The longing of every Christian's heart is to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.
- B. We strive to reflect our precious Lord and Savior.
- C. We are grieved that we do not reflect his likeness better than we do.
- D. Yet we can rejoice in the fact that we will one day be perfectly conformed to the image of Christ.
- E. And the thing that makes this certain is that our salvation, from beginning to end, is rooted in God's eternal decree.
- F. Martin Luther put it so well when he said, "I frankly confess that... I should not want... anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation... If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleased God, or whether He required something more... But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me." [Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 314]