**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**SOVEREIGN GRACE**

**“The Unbreakable, Golden Chain of Salvation”**

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There are a lot of issues that can get Christians in trouble with other Christians. For example,

what about the role of women in church leadership; should they or should they not be ordained as elders? What about the timing of the rapture; does it occur before or after “the great tribulation”? What about the ordinance of water baptism? Is it for infants of believing parents, or only for believers? What about the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit; do they continue to the present day, or did they cease with the end of the apostolic age?

Those are all potentially divisive issues, of course. But none of them stirs more controversy among Christians than the doctrine of election or predestination. In the thinking of many today, this teaching is a fundamental reason why men and women are excluded from heaven. For others, like me, it’s the *only* reason men and women are *in* heaven. J.I. Packer explains why:

“The biblical doctrine of election is that before Creation God selected out of the human race, foreseen as fallen, those whom he would redeem, bring to faith, justify, and glorify in and through Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9-10). This divine choice is an expression of ***free and sovereign grace***, for it is unconstrained and unconditional, not merited by anything in those who are its subjects. God owes sinners no mercy of any kind, only condemnation; so it is a wonder, and matter for endless praise, that he should choose to save any of us; and doubly so when his choice involved the giving of his own Son to suffer as sin-bearer for the elect (Rom. 8:32).”**1**

The Arminians, however, strongly disagree. They believe in what is called “conditional election.” They insist that despite our fallen sinful nature, everyone has a free will; everyone, therefore, has the ability to come to Christ. This means that God chooses to save individuals based on His passive foresight, without predetermining their action. For example, He looks down the corridor of time and “foresees” how Mike and Ike will respond to the gospel message. Since He knows in advance that Mike will believe and Ike will not, God chooses to save Mike, and not Ike. Thus, God’s choice to save Mike is conditioned on Mike’s choice to believe in Christ.

But in the words of James Boice, “This destroys the very meaning of the word, of course, for such election is really not election at all. It actually means that men and women elect themselves, and God is reduced to a bystander who responds to their free choice. Logically and causally, even if not chronologically, God’s choice follows man’s choice.”**2**

Like every truth about God, the doctrine of God’s electing grace *does* involve mystery, and it *does* stir controversy. But as we shall see, when rightly understood, it is a *pastoral* doctrine. It “lifts the sagging soul and directs it to focus on what God is doing and how He is going about His purposes.”**3**

Our starting point is one of the best-known verses in all of the Bible. It contains what is perhaps the most precious and powerful promise ever given to the people of God: “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28, NIV).

As I mentioned in last week’s message on “Divine Providence,” this glorious promise has been likened to a pillow upon which we can rest our weary heads. It brings us comfort in times of sorrow and bereavement. It’s been likened to a steel girder that sustains and upholds us through the most difficult times of our lives. It functions like a huge boulder on which we can place the full weight of our confident trust in God.

But how can we know with confidence that God truly will work in all things for our ultimate good? The answer is found in the next two verses. They explain what is meant by God’s “purpose,” according to which He has called us and is working everything together for our good. There are five stages in this divine purpose, and they are all the sovereign works of God’s grace. They have been likened to five unbreakable links in “the golden chain of salvation.”**4** It’s a chain which spans eternity past (God’s foreknowledge) into eternity future (our ultimate glorification): “*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. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified*” (Rom. 8:29-30, NIV).

**The First Link: Foreknowledge**

“*For those God foreknew . . .*” (Rom. 8:29a). Everyone agrees that God knows everything. But the “foreknowledge” that’s in view here cannot merely refer to God’s knowledge in advance of what people would do. Based upon the Biblical usage of the verb “to know,” and “to foreknow,” it means something much more.

When we read, for example, *“And Adam* *knew Eve his wife*” (Gen. 4:1 KJV), it means far more than he knew *about* her. In Genesis 18:19, when the Lord said of Abraham, “*For I have known him”* (KJV), He meant, “*For I have chosen him*” (ESV, NIV, NASB). The same is also true in Amos 3:2, when the Lord said of Israel: “*You only have I known of all the families of the earth*” (KJV). But no one could argue that God did not know *about* all the families of the earth. He meant “You only have I *chosen* of all the families of the earth” (NIV, NASB). Finally, when Paul later writes in Romans that “*God did not reject His people, whom He foreknew*” (11:2), he meant that God had *fore-loved and chosen* Israel to be His covenant people, apart from any intrinsic value or goodness in the people of His choice (see Deut. 7:7-8).

Consequently, when God “foreknew” us, He chose to enter into an intimate, loving relationship with us; it was a choice made “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4; Cf. 1 Peter 1:2), based solely on His sovereign, distinguishing love for us, and *not* on anything that He foresaw in us. “I’m so glad He chose me before He saw me,” Spurgeon once wrote, “because if He had waited until He saw me, He might not have wanted me.”**5**

**The Second Link:** **Predestination**

Those whom He foreknew“*He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son .* . .” (8:29b). Just as the word “foreknowledge” stresses the *basis* of God’s choice to save us, the word “predestination” stresses His *goal*; those whom He chooses He changes into the likeness of Christ. This transformation process begins with the new birth, and it continues in our present experience of sanctification by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, which involves *all* of the circumstances and events that God providentially brings into our lives. It will not be complete until Christ returns, and our physical bodies become like His (our glorification). As a result of this ongoing transformation, Christ becomes “the firstborn” (or the first in rank and importance) among His many brothers, who share in His likeness. They are the one and the same whom He has foreknown.

**The Third Link:** **Calling**

“*And those He predestined, He also called* . . .” (8:30a). This next step in the divine plan is the one in which He actually brings lost sinners to saving faith. It is just as sure and certain as the previous two. This call is the “effectual call” of the Holy Spirit, enabling the elect to be born again (1 Peter 1:3) through faith in the preached gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 2:13-14). This call is “effectual” because it cannot be resisted by those whom God has chosen to save (Cf. John 6:37-39). It always results in the justification of the one who is so called.

 **The Fourth Link:** **Justification**

“*Those He called, He also justified* . . .” (8:30b). To be justified means “to be declared righteous.” This takes place at the moment of our salvation, when God the Father imputes the righteousness of Christ “to all who believe” in Him (Rom. 3:21-22). In the words of one author, “Christ’s perfect life of obedience is credited to the life of the sinner, while simultaneously the sinner’s sin is credited by divine reckoning to Jesus, the sin-bearing substitute (2 Cor. 5:21). God treats Jesus as if He sinned . . . .God treats the sinner as if he or she actually obeyed with perfect obedience . . . .”**5** It’s also important to emphasize that we can never earn righteousness by doing good works. Rather, it is only through faith that Christ’s righteousness is reckoned to our account; “*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Rom. 5:1).

**The Fifth Link: Glorification**

“*Those He justified, He also glorified*” (8:30c). This is the grand finale of God’s redemptive program, when we will be given new bodies in a new world. Both will be transformed by the glory of God. This glory is the *future* hope of our final salvation, and yet Paul uses the past tense of the verb “glorified,” indicating that from God’s viewpoint this final step is *as good as done*. It is guaranteed from the moment God foreknew us and predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of His Son. Not one link in the chain of salvation can be broken. Those whom He foreknew, He predestined; those He predestined, He called; those He called, He justified; and those He justified, He will glorify. No one is lost in the process.

The same eternal plan can be seen with even greater clarity if we start with the last link and work back to the first. **Q** Who is finally and fully glorified when Christ returns? **A.** All those who are justified. **Q.** But who are those who are justified? **A.** All those who were called. **Q.** Who are those who were called? **A.** All those whom Godpredestined. **Q.** Who has been predestined?

**A.** All those whom He foreknew. Ok, so one last question: How many did God lose in the process? **A.** Not one! No one who is foreknown in eternity past ever fails to be glorified in eternity future!

There is an immense practical benefit in understanding and embracing these glorious doctrines of Sovereign Grace. There is *nothing* that will ever hinder or interfere with God’s promise to work in all things for our ultimate good. Why? Because those whom He calls according to His purpose will most assuredly be glorified as well. Once we realize that suffering and pain and affliction and loss are part of God’s plan to conform us more to Christ, the sting of pain will fade in light of eternity and our future glorification. Why? Because the suffering of this present time is not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

For many, the sufferings of this world are only alleviated when they end. But Paul counsels weary and burdened saints to focus on the eternal plan of a sovereign God. As we do, the sovereign God of eternity becomes the God of every hour of our lives. If we will be *ultimately* glorified by being made conformable to the image of His Son, then we can be assured that in *all* things God will work for the good of those who have been called to His saving purpose. We can be assured that He will sustain every Christian in the midst of every trial. We can be assured that He will hold us up and support us, as we lean on these tremendous truths of God’s sovereign grace.

Samuel Rutherford was a Scottish Presbyterian minister who played a major role in the writing of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-1646). He used to say, “Whenever I find myself in the cellar of affliction, I always look about for the wine.”**6** The unbreakable golden chain of salvation *is* the wine – the truly great wine – of the Christian faith. Sovereign Grace comforts and encourages every *true* Christian!

Amazing Grace! – how sweet the sound – that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;

How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

Thro’ many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;

‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me, his Word my hope secures;

He will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures.

(John Newton, 1779)

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**1** Concise Theology, J. I. Packer. Tyndall House Publishers, 1993. P. 149

**2** The Doctrines of Grace, James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken. Crossway Books, 2002. P. 99.

**3** Discovering Romans, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. Zondervan Publishers, 2014. P. 136

**4** Ibid., P. 138

**5** Ibid., P. 140

**6** Ibid., P. 141