

The Unbreakable Chain

Blessed Assurance – Part I

Romans 8:29-30

Introduction

As we continue in our study through Romans, I am going to be preaching from a text today, that has produced more controversy between believers in the church than any other one text in the New Testament. The text is Romans 8:29.

Look at Romans, chapter 8, verses 29 and 30.

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He might be the firstborn [preeminent] among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

I am about to preach on one of the most volatile, explosive topics known to believers in the church. The topic is divine predestination or divine election.

This topic is where many pastors fear to tread! It is one of the reasons so few preach verse by verse – verses like these are in the way!

At just the mention of the words “predestination” and “election,” I can hear the guns loading with ammunition and the murmuring of insurrection. Last night I dreamed of guillotines and firing squads! I have left my pickup truck running, with the gas tank full!

You do not preach on election and predestination and survive – especially in America. Without a doubt, this doctrine has created controversy and division like no other!

So, I expect to create a little controversy today; I expect to receive a flurry of questions and reactions. And I encourage you to send all of your e-mails to another pastor!

No, send them to me. In fact, today is really a warm-up for discussions we will have at greater length when we plow through Romans, chapter 9. I will address your questions in further detail then.

However, I can assure you, if you break into a sweat over Romans 8:29-30, and you dance all around the simple meaning of the text, then you are really going to have trouble with chapter 9.

Look at verse 11 of Romans, chapter 9. Rebekah is about to have twins and Paul writes,

for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls,

Skip to verse 13b. God is speaking and saying,
... Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.

Did you get that? Before they were born; before they had done anything good or bad, God is saying, “I loved Jacob and I hated Esau.”

How do you handle that? Is God unjust? Paul anticipates the reader asking that, as he writes in verse 14,

... There is no injustice in God, is there? . . .

.

Imagine the implications of verse 17.

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.”

In other words, Pharaoh’s unbelief was God’s doing!

Paul goes on to apply this truth in verse 18,
So then He [God] has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

Every fiber in your body says, “That can’t be right! If that’s the way it is, I want to have a word with God!”

Paul anticipated that too, so he wrote in verse 20,

. . . who are you, O man, who answers back to God? . . .

In other words, “Who are you to tell God what He ought to do and what He can’t do?”

So, if you are thinking, “I’m gonna just hang on today, because I think I’m already hearing that Stephen believes in things like election and predestination, but, it’s only one sermon . . .”

I am telling you ahead of time, there will be more than one, so you might as well start shopping around . . . No, I want you to stay and wrestle through this with me.

Do you want to know something? I don’t understand it either!

This subject is what theologians call “inscrutable”. That means, it is too deep; it is unfathomable – you cannot touch the bottom; you are without the ability to reconcile. It is inscrutable.

One theologian said, “Our problem is, we try to unscrew the inscrutable.”

That is exactly what we are going to do today. So, I hope you are ready to dive into the deep end, where your feet cannot touch the bottom!

Five Fold Chain Regarding Salvation

In Romans, chapter 8, verses 29 through 30, there is a five fold chain regarding our salvation. The five key words link to one another, forging an inseparable chain, securing us eternally as God’s elect.

What I want to do today, is simply give each of the five words, define them, illustrate them in scripture and then, run for my truck. I suggest you circle these five key words in your text.

The apostle Paul writes, in verses 29 and 30,

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He might be the firstborn [preeminent] among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

The first word in the chain - foreknew

1. The first word in the chain is “foreknew” or foreknowledge. It means that the believer’s salvation has its beginning in the mind and counsel of God.

Now some would say that the word means God simply knows beforehand who will believe and He elects on the basis of that foreknowledge. Since God knows everything, He just looks into the future, sees who will believe and trust His Son, and says, “Okay, that one will be one of My elect.”

Problems with the belief that God simply has foreknowledge of who will believe the gospel

There are a number of problems with that belief. Let me point out a couple of them.

The origin of salvation

- The first problem involves the origin of salvation.

If this belief is true, salvation would only begin with man’s faith. God would not have chosen man, man will have simply chosen God.

However, John wrote, in I John, chapter 4, verse 19,

We loved [God], because He [God] first loved us.

Fallen man cannot reach out his hand to receive the gift of eternal life because there is no power in his hand. God must act first; God must take the initiative toward the one He has chosen.

The depravity of man

- Another similar problem is that the church no longer accepts or understands the nature of man's depravity; man's fallenness. So, the second problem with this belief involves the depravity of man.

The Bible describes the unbeliever as blind and dead to the things of God. He has no source of saving faith within his spiritually dead corpse.

By the way, if all the word "foreknowledge" means is that God knows beforehand who will respond to Him or to the preaching of the gospel and then He determines their destiny on that basis, what would God possibly see or foreknow as He looked down the corridor of time? The only thing He would see in all of humanity, apart from His intervention, is unbelief.¹

In other words, the only thing God would see ahead of time, is rejection of the gospel and opposition to His grace.

- Paul wrote, in Romans 3:10-11,
. . . There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God
- Paul also wrote, in I Corinthians 2:14, that the unbeliever,
. . . does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him . . .
- Jesus Christ Himself said, as recorded in John 3:19,
. . . the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.
- Again, Paul wrote, in II Corinthians 4:4,
. . . the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ . . .

In other words, without the initiating work of God on behalf of His chosen people, they would never believe the gospel nor even want to accept the light of Christ.

God's foreknowledge not only means God sees in advance, but that He ordains in advance. His foreknowledge includes His intention.

That is exactly how that word is used throughout the Bible.

God said to Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 1:5a,

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you . . .

What did God mean? Did He mean that He knew there was a baby in the womb? God knows that of every baby. But He tells Jeremiah He knew him. In other words, God is implying that a relationship with Jeremiah is part of His sovereign plan, even before Jeremiah is born.

The prophet Amos records, in Amos 3:2, God saying,

You [Israel] only have I chosen [known] . . .

Does that mean that God only knows about Israel? He does not know about the Philistines and the Amorites and the Egyptians? Are the Israelites the only ones God has been watching?

No! Israel is the only nation predetermined by God in His knowledge and counsel, to have an intimate relationship with Himself.

Jesus said in John 10:14,

I am the good Shepherd, and I know My own . . .

That is, I have a bond with them that is intimate.

Then, He also says those terrifying words in Matthew 7:22-23, to a host of religious people who actually served God, but were not true believers,

Many shall say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you . . ."

Was He saying, "Sorry, I never met you . . . I didn't know who you were"?

No. God is saying, "I don't have any relationship with you."

An even more specific text regarding God's foreknowledge is Acts 2:23, when Peter is preaching the very first sermon and says,

This Man [Jesus], delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

Was Jesus a puppet? No. Was Jesus able to choose to follow the will of the Father? Yes. We heard Him pray in the garden, as recorded in Luke 22:42,

... not My will, but Yours be done.

However, Peter says that Jesus was handed over by God's foreknowledge, that it was exactly what God had planned and purposed.

In his epistle, Peter was writing about God's determination to send Jesus Christ to earth. The text in I Peter 1:20, literally says that by God,

... He was foreknown before the foundation of the world...

That does not mean that the Father looked down through time and saw Jesus come to earth and die for the sins of the world and say, "Well, that's great... since Christ is coming to earth, I'll just work it out so that He dies on a cross for the sins of the world."

No, it means God the Father, along with the Spirit and Son, determined ahead of time that this would occur.

The second word in the chain - predestined

2. Paul uses a second word that strengthens the chain of God's sovereign work – it is the word "predestined" or predestination.

Look at the first part of verse 29 of Romans, chapter 8, again,

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined...

The word, means that God marks out, appoints, and determines eternal destiny beforehand. Predestined, or "proorizo" in the Greek, means that beforehand, the destination is marked out.

One author wrote,

It almost seems unpatriotic to the American mind especially. We find ourselves immediately wanting to guard the tree of human liberty with more zeal than Patrick Henry ever dreamed of. The thought of an all-powerful God making choices for us, and perhaps even against us, makes us shout, "Give me free will or give me death."ⁱⁱ

The very word "predestination" makes us think of fatalism, or that we are meaningless puppets, or that God is playing games with humanity. We may naturally feel those things as we tread water out in

the deep end, but let us not exegete our feelings. Let us hold them captive to the word of God.

Jesus Christ said in John 15:16,

You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain...

You did not choose Me but I chose you?

Wait a second, I remember choosing God! Yes, I remember too!

However, on closer inspection, we discover the truth that we were able to choose God because God had already chosen us.

You have been chosen by God – before time began! Can you imagine?

Peter wrote to you, in I Peter 2:9,

... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God's own possession...

In II Thessalonians 2:13, we are told,

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

The third word in the chain - called

3. Paul adds a third link to this strong chain of our salvation and it is the word "called" or calling.

Look at verse 30 of Romans, chapter 8, again, ***and these whom He predestined, He also called...***

"Calling" can be defined as, "the inward drawing of God toward salvation."

Jesus said something that many would like to ignore, in John 6:44,

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him...

In other words, no one can presume to march into the throne room of God and say, "Okay, I'm here, I'm ready!"

Even the timing of our coming is defined and determined by God.

Now you need to understand that the New Testament alternates, depending on the context, between an open calling – an open invitation, and an effective calling – the invitation to the one who will believe.

For instance, Christ said, in Matthew 11:28,

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.

In other words, “Here’s the invitation, ‘Come to Me,’ Jesus said.”

What did the people do? They refused Him; they rejected Him.

Did that mean Jesus was insincere; just playing games? No. The general, open invitation is necessary because within that general calling, is God’s effective calling. We scatter the seed broadly, and God brings some to life.

Charles Spurgeon once said that if God had painted a white stripe down the backs of His elect, He would spend all His time in London going around lifting shirt-tails . . . but because God did not do that, He preaches to everyone the gospel.

Paul said, in Romans 10:17,

. . . faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

If it is true then, that people must hear the gospel in order to believe; that upon that gospel, the Father draws His chosen ones to believe, Paul asks, in verse 14,

. . . How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?

In the audience hearing this sermon today, there is no doubt in my mind that there are people who will die in their sin and go to a Christless eternity. You heard the invitation. You heard the gospel. You heard that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. You heard, but you did not respond.

However, as you heard it, someone else heard and responded. What they heard began to trouble them; concern them; cause them to ask questions. It was God Himself drawing them to His Son.

You both heard the invitation of the gospel – the truth of God’s word – but for you, it is a general invitation that you refuse. For another, it becomes the specific inward call that leads to their redemption.

This happened to a couple who came to my office a few weeks ago. They had been coming to our church for a very short time. Their first visit ever to a Protestant church was the Sunday they came here. After a few Sundays, they made an appointment. During our conversation, they said, “We just seem to be missing something. We don’t know what it is, but we want to know more about God. We’ve heard what you’ve said . . . we really like it here, but we just seem troubled that we’re missing a piece of the puzzle.”

It was the effectual calling of God. And I had the privilege of being the messenger; telling them of Christ’s finished work on their behalf and that all they needed was to receive the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. We held hands and prayed. They were called, drawn not by me, but by God.

The fourth word in the chain - justified

4. The final two words in the chain of salvation are words we have already studied in detail. The fourth of these words in “justified” or justification.

Look at Romans, chapter 8, verse 30 again.

. . . and these whom He called, He also justified . . .

“Justification” is that legal declaration that we are right before God (based upon Christ’s payment for sin on our behalf).

The fifth word in the chain - glorified

5. The final word in the chain is “glorified” or glorification.

Notice the end of verse 30.

. . . and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

You could define this word as, “the future fact of uncorrupted bodies, minds, and hearts.”

I love the fact that this word is in the past tense. It is a word that refers to our glorification as if it has already happened. The future is regarded as if it is in the past.

Again, this is God’s perspective. If you have been foreknown, you are already secure in your glorification. You can no more work your way out of salvation than you could work your way in.

Conclusion

If you have not picked up on it yet, salvation is the work of God.

This text is all about God! That:

- God foreknew;
- God predestined;
- God called;
- God justified;
- God glorified.

Romans 8:28 says that God has chosen everything that happens to work out for your spiritual good.

Romans 8:29-30 say that God has chosen you!

What happens without the belief in Sovereign election

Why is it important to take this text at face value – and all the other texts I quoted or read? What happens if you do not believe in the sovereign election of God? What happens to a church that refuses to acknowledge the sovereignty of God? Let me give five things that occur without the belief in Sovereign election.

Emotionalism becomes more important than spiritual examination

1. Emotionalism becomes more important than spiritual examination.

The church today has diluted the gospel and made it nothing more than some quick prayer to make or some card to sign. Profession of faith becomes the issue, not possession of true faith. I have met few people who did not claim to profess faith in God.

The typical evangelistic movement focuses on decisions, not disciples. We build everything toward an invitation where whatever is going to be decided is decided.

We have come a long way from Spurgeon's day, when those who wanted to pursue the calling of God to salvation made an appointment. It was generally on Tuesdays that Spurgeon would meet with, what he called, inquirers.

I remember reading about the testimony of D. L. Moody who applied for membership in the church.

He was interviewed by the deacons and refused, on the grounds that he was not converted. Instead of discarding him, however, the deacons prescribed a year long study on the nature and theology of the gospel and then, at the end of one year, they interviewed him again. The record stated that they received him into membership, with some reservation.

That kind of examination has been replaced by emotional appeals. We are building congregations today, but we are not building the body of Christ.

Mankind becomes sovereign and God becomes the servant

2. Secondly, mankind becomes sovereign and God becomes the servant.

God just waits to see what man will do – this perspective makes God the victim of man's choices.

Isaiah 46:9b-10 declares,

. . . I am God, and there is no other; I am God, there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ". . . I will accomplish all My good pleasure"

The messenger becomes partially responsible for salvation and must then take either the blame or the credit for the salvation of souls

3. Without sovereign election, the messenger becomes partially responsible for salvation and must then take either the blame or the credit for the salvation of souls.

I read of one evangelist who boasted, "Give me any man alone for fifteen minutes and I will get a decision for Christ."

He was convinced that the power of conversion rested with his powers of persuasion. May I remind you that our passion and obedience is not to see decisions made but disciples made.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sovereign election reminds us that producing decisions is not our objective – our objective is producing disciples.

The majority opinion is more valued than the sole declaration of scripture

4. Fourthly, the majority opinion is more valued than the sole declaration of scripture.

I can assure you that the evangelical church at-large no longer believes most of what I have taught today. That is because the scriptures no longer determine what we believe.

A recent poll conducted by the Barna Research Group, found that 90% of all the people they interviewed believed in God. Yet, nearly 75% of the same people did not believe the Bible was God's word, doubted the existence of moral absolutes, and did not believe that salvation was through Christ alone.

Arthur Pink wrote it this way,

The only reason anybody would believe in election is because he finds it taught in God's Word. No man or number of men ever originated this doctrine. Like the doctrine of eternal punishment, it conflicts with the dictates of the carnal mind and is repugnant to the sentiments of the unregenerate heart. Like the doctrine of the trinity and the miraculous birth of our Savior, the truth of election must be received with simple unquestioning faith.^{iv}

How far can the church go from believing the plain and difficult truth of God's word?

Let me give you a bizarre example, yet one that recently aired on the news. One of the sixty bishops who voted to ordain Gene Robinson as the Episcopal church's first openly active homosexual bishop, at the annual meeting of his diocese was trying to encourage the denomination not to splinter and divide. He said, in his speech, "If the church must make a choice between heresy and schism, we must always choose heresy."^v

In other words, if following the word of God brings division, abandon the word of God and stay unified.

What a quote for our relativistic, non-absolute, independent, man-is-sovereign religious culture – "If you've gotta choose between God's word and your friends, choose your friends!"

The ability of man to pursue God is more appealing than the truth that depraved man never chooses God

5. The denial of sovereign election simply means that the ability of man to pursue God is more appealing than the truth that depraved man never chooses God.

John MacArthur called sovereign election the most pride-crushing doctrine in the Bible. He said it removes any of the pride of man. It elevates God and diminishes mankind.

How do I know if I am one of the elect?

Perhaps at the end of this sermon, you are wondering, "How do I know if I am one of the elect?"

The Bible says, in Acts 16:31,

. . . Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved . . .

Have you believed? If you have truly believed, that belief is the work of God in your heart – bringing you to trust in Jesus Christ.

To truly believe in Christ is to say "Yes," to Jesus Christ regarding His claims and His character and His commands. So if you have truly said "Yes," to Him – you have accepted His claim on your life; you have adopted His character as your holy pursuit; you desire to follow His commands. These are not prerequisites to salvation, but are evidences of salvation and true faith.

Thus, the question is not, "Are you one of the elect?" The question is, "Have you said 'Yes,' to Jesus Christ?"

My invitation to all who are listening today is simply, "Say, 'Yes!'"

When you walked into this church, you can imagine over the doorway, the verse written, "Whosoever will may come."

If you have said "Yes," to Jesus Christ, placing your faith in Him alone, then when you leave, you can imagine, written over the doorway, "Elect before the foundation of the world."

That is our message to the world. To those who have not said "Yes," it is, "Call upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved."

And the stunning, unimaginable, inscrutable truth to the ones who have believed is, God was behind it all! So praise God!

Paul did not intend for this text to start a fight, but to encourage true fellowship! He did not write

this to split a church, but to strengthen the church as it faced the challenges of life and endeavored by God's grace, to be the messengers to deliver the call to the whole world.

I close with the rejoicing of Paul, who wrote to the Ephesian church, in chapter 1, verses 3 through 6,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

God foreknew us . . . God predestined us . . . God called us . . . God justified us . . . and God has glorified us! Blessed be the name of God!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/15/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Volume 2* (Baker Book House, 1992), p. 913.

ⁱⁱ R. C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), p. 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

^{iv} <http://www.gty.org/transcripts/60-2.htm>.

^v Chuck Colson, <http://www.townhall.com>.