

The Golden Chain

Scripture: Romans 8:29-30

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Evening Service

People of God: Have you ever seen a magician's act? A magician seems to have a number of common tricks of the trade, from turning a cane into a bunch of flowers to a variety of card tricks.

One standard trick is the use of five rings, which are all linked together to form a chain. The magician pulls on the rings and the chain seems solid. There is no way a ring can get loose. They are all firmly linked together. Yet what does the magician do? Somehow, he is able to unlink the rings so that they no longer form a chain, but are all independent from each other. And you wonder: How did he get those solid looking rings apart?

In our text for this evening there are five key words that form a chain: foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. These five words all deal with the progress of our salvation, from its very beginning to its ultimate end. These five words are like rings that are linked together to form a chain. But what kind of a chain is it?

Is it like a magician's chain, which appears to be solid and unbreakable but instead is an illusion? The rings can easily separate. For some believers, salvation is viewed and experienced that way. The goal of salvation is placed before them--everlasting life with God. The steps to get there are described. But there is no assurance the goal will be achieved. It could fall apart. It's like the magician's chain. Its solid state is an illusion. With this kind of thinking about salvation, doubt and uncertainty dominates.

But Paul, in these two tightly knit verses, expresses the certainty of our salvation. This chain is solid. It will hold together. It's not an illusion like the magician chain. Instead, it is firmly grounded. Why can Paul be so confident of this? Because God is the actor in this drama of salvation. He is the one who is busy securing our salvation. It is God who guarantees his plan of redemption will be complete. Because the bottom line is that salvation is a work of God, not a work of man. As a result, we can be certain about our future in Jesus Christ. That is why these five words, linked

together by the action of God, have been called the golden chain.

Paul provides this golden chain as a support to the claim that he makes in verse 28. Last week we examined that familiar verse: *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.* What is this good that God is working towards? It is the liberation of the creation from its bondage to decay so that it can once show forth the glory of God as brightly and clearly as it once did. It is the redemption of bodies, on that glorious day of resurrection. In the midst of the groaning of the present time, this ultimate good is what we can count on. This golden chain provides the proof. God guarantees the end result, because he is at work every step of the way.

When we hear these words of the golden chain, we are aware that we are dealing with some heavy theological terms. Foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, glorification. Each one of them is worthy of their own sermon, but here we have them altogether, lined up one after the other. Some of these words we are familiar with, while others are a little more blurry. Some are easy to accept, while others are mired in controversy. It is predestination, in particular, which can lead to the most discussion. It is the one which some would like to get rid of. But if you remove that ring--or any ring for that matter, the whole chain falls apart.

Five key words linked together by the action of God. Now these are not words made up by a seminary professor to make life difficult for his students. No, they are words used by the Apostle Paul to describe the message of the gospel. He is writing to this newly formed church of Rome, a church that included many recent converts who previously had never heard of the OT and the name of Jesus. To those new to the faith, he gave this golden chain of the steps of salvation. Knowing, believing what these difficult theological words mean can give us the certainty we need about our own personal salvation.

The golden chain begins with God's foreknowledge. Now when you look at this word you can see that it is made up of two words: fore, which means beforehand, and knowledge. Simply put, God knows all things beforehand. This definition is sometimes used to explain away the hard teaching concerning predestination.

The argument goes like this: God knows everything beforehand. As a result, he knows who will have faith in him and those who won't. It is because of what God knows about our response in the future that he chooses us in the past. God predestines people because he knew beforehand they were going to believe.

While this argument sounds appealing, it doesn't hold water. Because

it makes our act of faith the basis of salvation. But doesn't Scripture say: faith is also a gift from God. We are able to believe because God first of all worked in our hearts to accept him. After all, aren't we saved by grace?

But even if we say foreknowledge is simply God knowing ahead of time that he will give us faith, we have not gotten to the heart of this word. Knowledge in the Bible is more than just simple intellectual understanding. To know someone is an intimate act, as in Adam knew his wife Eve. To know someone is to love someone. God's foreknowledge, then, points to the love he has for his people.

For example, in a key OT passage concerning the election of his people, we read: *The Lord did not set his affection on you and chose you because you were more numerous, but it was because the Lord loved you.* Or as we read in John 3:16 *God so loved that world that he gave his only Son.* In other words, you can say that God's foreknowledge is God's forelove. It is the unconditional love of God that he has for his people. This is the foundation of our salvation. This love is undeserved. We are not worthy of receiving God's love since we are by nature sinful and rebellious creatures. But God's love transcends that. It is the basis of the whole project of redemption.

Those God foreknew, he also predestined. Those who are the object of God's love are also the ones God decided to save from their sin and misery. That's what predestination is all about. It means to determine beforehand the destiny of a person. Those whom God loves, he chooses to be his children and heirs of the eternal kingdom. In Ephesians 1:4 Paul puts it this way: *For he (God) chose us in him (that is, Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.* In other words, it is God who decides for us, before we can ever decide for him.

This biblical teaching raises a host of questions. Those who have difficulty with this teaching come up with a host of objections. There are those who say predestination fosters an attitude of arrogance and pride, as God's elect boast of their special status, saying: see how good I must be if God decided to save me. But really the opposite is true. Because God saves us despite our sinful condition, there is no room for boasting in ourselves. Instead of pride, we should be filled with humility. Humble that we should receive this mercy of the Lord.

It is objected that predestination fosters uncertainty, as believers wonder whether they are elect or not. But that can only be the case when you separate predestination from the work of Christ in whom we are predestined;

only when you separate this one act from the whole chain. If you have faith in Jesus Christ, then you can have the assurance of being part of God's elect. Remember these words are linked together. As a result, if you say you are justified, you can also say you are elect.

Many believers have problems with predestination. Many would say they reject this teaching. Yet in practice they believe in God's sovereignty in salvation, which is what predestination is all about. After all, they will acknowledge, they did not save themselves, God did. We're saved by grace. That's predestination at work. In addition, when they pray for the conversion of others, they recognize that only the Spirit of God can work in the hearts of unbelievers so that they will turn to the Lord. That's predestination at work. Our prayers to God are the proof of the truth of this doctrine.

It is at this point in the golden chain that Paul provides some details concerning the purpose of God's plan of redemption. There is a two-fold purpose of God's electing love. The first is that we should be conformed to the likeness of God's Son. In other words, we should become like Jesus. After all he is the perfect human being. He is our model of what it means to be created in the image of God. As a result, right now we begin the process of being like him through the power of the Spirit. This process will be complete when the final link of the chain is in place; namely, our glorification.

The second purpose of God's electing love is that Christ might become the firstborn among many brothers. In other words, through this process of salvation Christ is exalted. He is the one to whom glory and honor is given. Through his work, God re-establishes a faithful community in his creation. And so we are reminded that the ultimate goal of our salvation is really the glory of God.

With these two purposes in place, Paul continues to make the links in this golden chain. *Those he predestined, he also called.* The call of God is the historic application of foreknowledge and predestination. God's election takes place before the creation of the world. But it is made real in time and history. God calls upon all of humanity to come in repentance before him. It is a call that reaches to all people. It is a call that is effective in those whom God has chosen to save.

This call comes to us through God's revelation of himself. The creation calls us to worship the Creator. But it is especially the Word of God, the Bible, through which God calls his children to himself. In particular, it is in the preaching of the gospel that God calls people to respond in faith. That's why the spread of gospel or evangelism is not made irrelevant by predestination. Rather the opposite is true. Predestination

demands the preaching of the Word, because through this means God's calls people to faith.

Those he called, he also justified. Here we come across a word that by now should be very familiar to us. Because justification has been the focus of a number of previous chapters in this book of Romans. As a result, we don't need to say too much more about this. Justification is the declaration that we are made right with God.

By being placed in this golden chain, we are reminded that justification is part of a bigger process of salvation. It is not the beginning step. Nor is it the end point. Justification is meant to achieve a greater goal.

That goal can be summarized by the final link in this golden chain. *Those he justified, he also glorified.* We will be glorified when we will experience the full glory of God when Christ returns. We will be glorified when we receive our new bodies and enjoy the blessing of the new creation. It is to finally achieve the good described in verse 28. It is to have our hope completely fulfilled, when the groaning of creation and ourselves have ended and we have complete harmony with God, each other, and with creation.

Our glorification is a future event. It still awaits us. As a result, we might have expected Paul to use the future tense when it comes to this final link. *Those he justified, he will also glorify.* But he doesn't. He uses the past tense. *Those he justified, he also glorified.* That's because Paul is so confident that this final stage will take place. It will happen. Of that we should have no doubt.

Because this golden chain will not be broken. It is not like a magician's trick, which fools us. God will do what he has promised. Because salvation is a work of God, from the beginning to its end. That's the great assurance we can hold on to in the midst of the troubles and sorrows of this life. Amen.