

Herald

ANTIPAS

"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)

No 1

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN MUST KNOW

A Discussion of Romans 8:28-30

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FUNDAMENTALS OF THE FAITH

It is significant that whenever the apostle Paul prays for the churches, he invariably prays for Spirit-illuminated knowledge and insight (Eph 1:17-18; Phil 1:9-10; Col 1:9-10). Also, when after the first eleven chapters of fundamental teaching in Romans he proceeds to instruct on the practical implications thereof, he starts off by emphasising that a clear grasp of truth is essential for a God-pleasing life (Rom 12:2). 'True truth' is not a mere side issue, but of vital importance, both for a life of godliness and the survival of the true church. That is why, next to sin, the apostles fought nothing as fiercely as false doctrine.

No wonder then that Romans 8:28 starts with the words: '*And we know...*'. Paul assumes that every Christian knows and understands what he is talking about. And indeed the truths which are condensed into these three verses, form part of the fundamental ABC of the Christian faith. The man in whose heart these truths are engraved, has an understanding of the essential aspects of God's revelation about salvation. He has the master-key which unlocks the true meaning of text after text in God's Word. He has a compass which time and time

again fixes a true course through the confusion of the many modern day teachings. He has an inexhaustible source of inner security, peace and happiness to carry him through a thousand storms.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says of these verses: 'We are considering here one of the most remarkable statements that even this apostle ever made. It is also one of the most comforting statements in the whole range of Scripture. We are surely entitled to say that in respect of the statement of exalted doctrine there is really nothing higher than this. Here is ultimate doctrine.' (The Final Perseverance of the Saints, p.159). He then devotes 208 pages to a discussion of verses 28-30 (17 sermons in writing).

THE CONTEXT

In this chapter the aim of the apostle is to assure those who have been justified by faith, of their ultimate salvation. They must understand that the almighty and sovereign God himself is already working salvation in them unfailingly, in spite of their ongoing struggle with sin (7:7 ff.) and suffering (8:17 ff.). Nothing in all eternity therefore can separate them from his love. Herein lies their

ultimate assurance - not in their own capabilities.

That is why Paul only mentions those elements of the process of salvation in which the Lord alone is active.

There are, of course, elements in this process in which man is actively involved (such as faith, repentance, sanctification and perseverance), but this in itself holds no basis for assurance: by the very nature of man his involvement will of necessity be defective and fallible. The apostle accordingly does not mention these elements here but deals with them at some length from Chapter 12 onwards, after fully clarifying the question of the 'mercy of God'.

STEP BY STEP THROUGH THE VERSES

- Everything in the believer's life ('*all things*') should be seen in the light of what the apostle says in these verses. This includes the suffering and imperfection (17 ff.) which now characterises his life.
- The Greek verb translated as '*works for the good*' carries the meaning of movement 'towards that which is good'. According to verse 29 the good is *conformity to the likeness of the Son* (cf. 2Cor 3:18; Heb 2:10 ff.). God is creating a

family for himself, a people like His Son - and He uses every circumstance and every event in the Christian's life to this end. There is, therefore, method and direction and purpose in the life of every participant in this process! And from the context (v. 31 ff.) it is clear that the Lord Himself will ensure that this aim will be realised ultimately.

- However, the foregoing does not apply to everybody, but only to those '*who love him*'. What does this mean and how is this love expressed? The answer lies in 1John 5:3: to love God is to obey His commands. And to love Jesus means exactly the same (John 14:21, 23-24; 15:9-10).

- Why do only certain people love God? Because they '*have been called according to his purpose*'. There is no question here of human initiative, choice or merit. Behind those lives characterised by heartfelt longing, effort, tears and struggling to express obedient love towards the Lord, the predestinating and re-creating grace of a sovereign God is at work.

- Verse 29 (starting with '*For*'), supplies the motivation for the statement in the preceding verse. Why is verse 28 true for these people? Because they have been included in God's eternal plan for

salvation! The apostle then proceeds to say wonderful things about this plan in vv. 29-30.

- The people referred to are those '*God foreknew*', by which is meant that God not merely knew about them, but loved them and therefore elected them, having set his heart on them.

The term 'to know' is used in the Bible to indicate love for, rather than mere intellectual awareness of a person, as in Gen 4:1: 'Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived...'(NKJV). Other portions of Scripture which illustrate this clearly are Amos 3:2 (NKJV); Jer 1:5; Matt 7:22-23; 1Cor 8:3; 2Tim 2:19; cf. Joh 17:3.

In four places elsewhere in the New Testament we read of God's 'foreknowledge': with regard to Jesus in Acts 2:23 and 1Pet 1:20 (Gr); the Jews (Rom 11:2) and the elect (1Pet 1:2). The term clearly means more than just to be known to God - it has the connotation of being loved, being chosen.

- God not only loves these people, he has also '*predestined*' them. He has a plan for them, a 'destination', which is clearly spelt out in the same verse: 'to be conformed to the likeness of his Son'.
- During their lifetime the

moment comes when the chosen are '*called*'. This is more than the general invitation extended to all through the preaching of the Gospel (cf. Mat 22:14). It is God's effective calling, creative and life-giving, leading to the rebirth of the sinner and raising him from a spiritual death to eternal life in Christ. This is the way in which God creates - through the authority of his spoken word. The expression, 'God said', is for instance repeated nine times in the first chapter of Genesis (cf. Rom 4:17).

'Calling' and 'called' also have this meaning, inter alia in: Rom 1:6-7; 1Cor 1:9, 26; Gal 1:15; Eph 1:18; Phil 3:14; 2Tim 1:8-9; Heb 3:1; 2Pet 1:10.

This life-giving work of God is effected, as and when it pleases Him, through the preaching of the Gospel (Rom 1:16; 10:13-15; 1Cor 1:21; 2Thess 2:14). The 'effectual calling' is therefore brought about through the 'general calling' or invitation - through the living (1Pet 1:23) word of truth (James 1:18).

- Those who have been brought to life spiritually, now place their faith and trust in Christ and are '*justified*' by God. An important aspect of justification is that fallen man has a dual problem before God, for which a 'dual remedy' is required: not only must the curse of his guilt before

God be eradicated, but his inability to please God must be addressed.

Justification is therefore a *dual legal verdict by God* concerning all who truly believe in Christ as their Saviour. (Saving faith, although practised by the believer, is of course a gift from God - Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:29; 2Pet 1:1.) Behind this verdict lie the principles of *substitution* and *imputation* (cf. Rom 4 and 5). The Son of God, as Head of God's new humanity, came as substitute for God's elect. In the negative sense, their sin was imputed to Him. He was, therefore, 'debited' with their guilt.

But that is not all! In the positive sense his infinite riches (his perfect righteousness and obedience to the Father) are imputed to them ('placed on their account'). They are 'credited' with his obedience. Justification is therefore something that takes place in 'God's books', independent of any action on their part!

When God's wrath at the accumulated guilt came down on His Son, Christ died under the burden - but in the process He obtained the acquittal of sinners, so that they now stand blameless before God (Mat 20:28; Rom 3:25; 2Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Col 2:13-15; 1Tim 2:5-6; 1Pet 2:24). This, however, is only half of the wonder of justification. Christ's imputed righteousness also has the effect of giving them in God's books

the status of people who have fully kept His law (Rom 1:16-17; 3:21-28; 8:33-34; 10:3-4; Phil 3:9) - and who therefore qualify to receive life eternal.

The passive obedience of Christ, therefore, saves sinners from eternal damnation; his active obedience merits for them eternal salvation. Man not only needs a clean slate; he needs a full slate. And that he has abundantly in Christ!

- Ultimately these people are '**glorified**' by God, which happens on the day of their resurrection from the grave, when body and soul are finally united again. The long process of salvation in Christ reaches its culmination in their total conformity to the likeness of the Son (cf. 1Joh 3:2-3).

The use of the 'prophetic past tense' here serves to stress that, although resurrection is still to come, it will happen as assuredly as if it has already taken place.

T H E O L O G I C A L I M P L I C A T I O N S

It is clear from the syntax of Paul's writing that the five elements of salvation are like the links in a chain: those whom God foreknew (only they, but indeed all of them) are predestined; and those who are

predestined (only they, but indeed all of them) are called, etc. From this follows a few truths of immeasurable theological importance, truths taught throughout Scripture:

- When the triune God saves a person, it is something *He alone initiates and concludes sovereignly*. There are indeed certain elements of redemption in which man is fully involved, but the apostle deliberately do not mention them here - as already explained. He concentrates on those actions of God which form the framework within which everything else takes place.

- God's salvation concerns itself with *specific persons*.

- The salvation of the elect is something *eternal*: it stretches from eternity in the past to eternity in the future.

- The process of salvation is *unbreakably integrated*. It means that all the elements of salvation, not only some, are true for every man and woman who is saved. What are these elements? Foreknowledge and predestination, calling and regeneration, faith and conversion, justification and adoption, sanctification and perseverance, and, ultimately, glorification.

It is therefore a 'package deal' -

if you have it at all, you have it all!

TWO KINDS OF TRUTH

Certainly, my *experience and perceptions* of my salvation and discipleship very often differ completely from what is described above. True believers are only too aware of the imperfection of their lives and the struggle to persevere in their commitment to Christ and His calling. And when we see so many 'converted' people falling back into worldliness after a period of initial zeal, the parable of the sower makes much more sense than the doctrinal conclusions reached above.

It is important to understand that the truths of Scripture are given to us on two levels: firstly *phenomenological or experiential truth* (the facts as we experience them); and secondly, *ontological or essential or real truth*. And although it often happens that the latter does not correspond to the Christian's perception of things, he accepts it in faith as being God's revelation.

An everyday example may be helpful: We say that 'the sun sets'. This is phenomenological or experiential truth. However, we all know 'the story behind the story', the ontological or essential truth, which is that the sun disappears from my view as the earth rotates.

The parable of the sower communicates phenomenological truth - and that is indeed how we experience things. Rom 8:28-30, on the other hand, reveals the truth behind the scenes. In fact, the first eleven chapters of Romans, as indeed the first parts of most of Paul's letters, largely constitute ontological truth, or, if you will, doctrinal truth. These are the wondrous revelations concerning God's great works of salvation - how He, the sovereign God, brings it about. And these 'mysteries', as the New Testament calls them (Rom 15:25-26; 1Cor 2:7-10; Eph 3:7-11; Col 1:25-27; 1Tim 3:16; Rev 10:7), must be accepted in childlike faith (Mark 10:15). Once this happens in a Christian's life, it launches him on the way of worship, loving devotion and grateful obedience!

Why do Christians find it so difficult to accept the doctrine of election? Other doctrinal truths, equally to be taken by faith, are accepted without a problem. Take for instance the doctrine of justification through faith, that God declares believing sinners justified on the grounds of His Son's redemptive work. But then, certain doctrines suit us; others cut man down to size!

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

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When a Christian embraces God's eternal and integrated plan of salvation, it brings about a sense of inner security, happiness and gratitude beyond comprehension. He knows that the course and development of his life are safely in God's omnipotent hands. Romans 8:31-39 is now no longer only objective truth, but an experiential reality. He knows that nothing can separate him from God's love!

This comforting truth sets one free to serve the Lord in the only way acceptable to Him: in gratitude, covenant-security and loving trust.

So many Christians are constantly and frantically searching for 'God's will for their lives' (often everywhere except in the only place it can be found, namely in God's Word). They are afraid of 'missing God's will' and in so doing, provoking His disapproval. They are nervous about straying from the 'centre of God's will', the so-called 'safest place for a Christian to be'.

How Romans 8:28-30 liberates those who embrace God's Word in childlike faith!

But, some might ask, will this not result in a lackadaisical approach towards obedience and perseverance? Will Christians not become passive, sitting back and waiting on the Lord to do everything for them? Does it not dump us into a swamp of fatalism?

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The experience of millions over centuries have been exactly the opposite. Truths such as these have been revealed by the Holy Spirit, not to lull Christians, but to launch them! Does not the apostle base his call for holy devotion to God specifically on 'God's mercy'? Is the 'renewing of the mind' not the very key to a life in accordance with God's will? (Rom 12:1-2)

Dear reader, do you really love the Lord? Is it confirmed by an ongoing, intentional obedience? Are you continuing to 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling'? Know then, it is because God 'works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose' (Phil 2:12-13). And this He does because He has loved you from all eternity! And He Himself will ensure that you will spend the coming eternity as a member of his family and in final conformity to the image of his Son.

Therefore, serve the Lord with an undivided heart!



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