

Sermon 88: Romans 8:30: God Enabled Perseverance

OUTLINE

Where it is taught
How it works
What can't break it

INTRODUCTION

In response to the truth we have been establishing from Romans, that God will guarantee our glorification, we often hear these objections. 'But I have known many people who claimed to be Christian who fell away from Christ.' 'What about the examples of those who were once believer and fell away like Judas or Saul?' 'What about those verses which teach that we can fall away and lose our salvation?' This brings us around to the issue of perseverance in the faith and backsliding.

We see in Romans 8:29-30 that God perfectly foreloves, predestines, calls and justifies however it seems that we insert into God's unbreakable chain of redemption the weak link after justification which can guarantee that God cannot perfectly glorify. Many Christians wrongly believe that there can be those who God will justify but who will never be glorified but fall from grace, backslide, commit a mortal sin and die in a state of unrepentance. In order that we do not inject our doubts and ideas into the silence between justification and glorification let me talk today about the biblical teaching of perseverance. The point we are going to prove is this: All those whom God has elected, He will finally call them to faith in Christ and justify them, and those whom He justifies He will by His grace preserve them and glorify them. This act of God preserving them is grace enabled, it does not exclude the path of suffering and temptation, and it includes many responsibilities and effort on our part.

To continue to kill our doubts we will explore the scriptures that reveal this gracious act of God on our behalf; we will look at the mechanics of how it works; and we will see why a true believer can fall but not fall away.

Where it is taught

When God saves us He does not just leave us on our own to fend for ourselves but finishes the work that He started. Paul says to the Philippians, 1:6, 'And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.' God keeps us and ensures our survival and final glorification. Here are some clear verses which teach this:

John 10:28-9: "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

1 Pet 1:3-5, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Here we see that heaven is kept for us and we are kept for heaven.

1 Tim 4:18, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen." Here Paul expresses his confidence in God bringing him home to glory.

Romans 8:28-39, "28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died---more than that, who was raised---who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And we all know the famous benediction from Jude v24-25, 'Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, 25 to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.'

Logically we would expect that if God would go to all the effort of sending His Son and His Spirit that God would finish what He had planned from eternity and ensure our homecoming by enabling us to persevere.

How it works

Now I can hear the main objections that would be raised. I am anticipating that many would be saying something along these lines: 'Nick you have emphasized God's keeping but where does that leave my holiness, my responsibility, and my persevering?' And the other

objection would be, 'Are you saying that a person can just say a sinner's prayer, or walk the aisle in an altar call, then they can go and live anyway they want and it doesn't matter?' If you are thinking these questions, they are good questions and highlight the main abuses that this biblical teaching has suffered.

Firstly, regarding the issue of the sinner's prayer and live anyway you like situation. The bible does not teach that every person who makes a confession of faith, says a sinner's prayer or answers an altar call is necessarily born again. The new birth is not a reward for our decision but an inward miracle which results in faith and repentance. The bible is full of examples of people who for selfish reasons followed Christ but who were never truly born again though they identified themselves as disciples. The parable of the sower makes this clear. In the parable of the sower we see that the hard path rejects the seed, but the thorny and stony ground both give an initial acceptance and confession. They appear to be Christian but then the persecutions and temptations came and their false confession was exposed by them not enduring in holiness and faith. We believe the biblical teaching to be that all those who are truly born again, they are the ones who will endure, they are the ones who will pursue holiness, they are the ones who will bear fruit. Those people who we have all known who made apparently convincing confessions of faith who were baptised and involved in ministry, if they do not endure, bear fruit and pursue holiness they were never truly born again. Or as John puts it in 1 John 2:19, 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.'

This means that we take the various verses that call for endurance seriously:

Matthew 24:13 "But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

John 8:31 "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples."

1 Cor 15:1-2 "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you---unless you believed in vain."

Those who do not endure, they are the ones who are not born again, their lack of endurance is a winnowing process that reveals that they are not truly saved. This brings us then to the concern about someone saying a prayer and then living any way they please not producing the fruit of the Spirit but indifferently continuing to live for self. Based on what the Bible teaches we can see that those who once said a sinners prayer attended church for a few months and then lost all interest in Christ. These people are not nor ever were Christians, they are the seeds that fell among thorny ground or the stony ground in the parable of the sower.

Now lest we get the wrong idea about our sanctification and perseverance we must point out that any effort on the part of a true Christian is the result of God's grace in our lives and not something we can boast about. Paul gives us insight into this reality in 1 Corinthians

15:9-10. He is speaking about his efforts as an apostle and how he works harder than the other apostles however he attributes that to God's grace not himself giving the glory to God. 'For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.' We do not see the presence of God's grace as cancelling out our responsibility but enabling it, it does not cancel out our work but upholds it, it does not usurp our persevering but empowers it. Paul says it this way in Phil. 2:12-13, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Some get the wrong idea and think that we so stress God's grace that we negate human responsibility, this is not true. Rather along with the Scripture we see that all human obedience to God is an enabled obedience and He will finally get the glory for our progress not us. God keeps us but not apart from our efforts of holiness, and endurance. And when we apply ourselves and feel able to be holy and endure we glorify God for His enabling. A common scripture used to show that God works through our working and not apart from it is Acts 27:22, 31. We all know the story of Paul and the shipwreck. Paul was given insight by God that the ship was going to sink, so Paul prayed for the salvation of all on board so God granted it, he makes this clear in v22-24, 'Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23 For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, 24 and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' However, God chose to use the means of them remaining with the ship in order to accomplish this listen to verse 31, 'Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." The promise of saving was given but it was not to be brought to pass by each man trying to save himself by but the particular way that God chose. In the same way, we can happily emphasize that God will save us, He will keep us, He will ensure our holiness, fruit, perseverance and faith. However, we also need to stress that this does not imply a free ride or a throwing off of our responsibility, but rather a great effort on our part knowing that He is the strength behind our efforts.

There has been some debate whether we should call it, the perseverance of the saints, or the preservation of the saints. Each description has merit. If we say the preservation of the saints we are emphasizing God's part in preserving us. If we say the perseverance of the saints who draw into focus our efforts in holiness and perseverance. Both are true, and depending on which issue you are addressing you would want to choose your designation. If you are wanting to emphasize that we are preserved by grace not works, that our final arrival in glory is because of God then preservation brings this into focus. However, we want to counter hyper-Calvinism which downplays human responsibility, or if we want to reject the view that you can say a sinner's prayer and then do whatever you like, then we would want to use perseverance to emphasize our obedience in response to God's grace.

What cannot break it

Many might get the wrong idea at this point and think that this teaching about God keeping us means that we will never face difficulty and we will never sin. We have made the point several times that suffering is the road God has called us to walk on it is a road that produces holiness, and Paul tells us in Romans 8:16-17 ends in glory, 'The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs--- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.' Suffering is not an indication of God having rejected you but of Him disciplining and refining you. But what about backsliding? The 1689 says the following about backsliding.

"And although they may, through the temptations of satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins, and for a time continue therein." Where do the sources of our temptation lie? Three things, satan, the world and indwelling sin. God does not tempt us, the ideas of denying God and going against his law do not come from Him, but from the enemy satan, our environment of sinful people, and from our own hearts as well. When we become Christians none of these enemies is finally removed until death or glory. Due to our becoming Christians we will find that in every case the devil will hate us more, the world will reject us more, and we will struggle within ourselves more, so that becoming a Christian is not easy but warfare.

The confession also stresses that the source of our sin and backsliding can also be blamed on our neglect of God's provisions for our perseverance in neglecting the means of grace. What are these? A means of grace are those things that the Lord has appointed to be instruments of His grace to us. Therefore, in the first place we cannot randomly decide that Christmas trees or Easter eggs are going to be a means of grace, it must be God appointed. So we would think of things like sitting under the preaching of the word of God; fellowshiping with God's people, praying as a church body, the Lord's Supper and Baptism, in our singing to one another in psalms hymns and spiritual songs. I am burdened for the many people in NZ who have fallen away from going to church because they are not receiving the appointed blessing that God intended for when the brethren dwell together in unity. They are cut off from the teaching offices which are one of the primary means of God building up His church, Eph 4:11-16, they are cut off from accountability and discipline, they are not supported by the gifts of others in the congregations, and are not growing in serving others. God has also called Christian families to pray and read the Bible together, where Christian parents instruct their children in the truth of God's word. And then we also need to stress the importance of personal bible reading and prayer. But notice that I have started my list with those things that relate to church life, not the life of the individual. I stress this because there are those who think that having their quiet time is more important than partaking in the Lord's Supper, it is not. Now as when a person stops eating and drinking they become weak and fall over and injure themselves, likewise the believer who does not regularly avail themselves of God's promised provision of grace through these various means will find themselves weakened, governed by the flesh and not the Spirit.

Peter's denial is given as a proof text, (Matt 26:41, 69-75). This was when Christ urged him to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane because the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. The results of neglect being grievous sin, possibly for an extended time. The confession is not referring to losing your temper, but something stronger when it talks about grievous sin.

The effects of our backsliding can be very serious. We can provoke our Father's discipline; we grieve the Spirit and lose the joy of our salvation. We can impair our graces and comforts robbing ourselves of assurance; we can become hardened and callous; we can do damage to others. And these effects should not be minimized; however, although they are serious they are not fatal to the Christian. Ultimately, if someone is truly born again, they will feel like aliens in sin, they will constantly chaff under it, all their pleasures will be tainted and unsatisfying. Not simply because they have seen the lie of sin and have chased addiction to its unsatisfying end, but because the Spirit is in them, and they have a new nature. 1 Jn 3:8-10, "8 Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. 9 No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. 10 By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother." John makes his argument for perseverance on the basis of us being a new creature in Christ. So then they will finally return to God in faith and repentance.

I would qualify that it is possible for someone to be born again and fall into sin, and it happens to be a sin that kills them, so that they are unable to repent. Our salvation rests finally upon the cross work of Christ, not the last thing we do before we die. Christians cannot commit mortal sins. Our salvation rests on God's eternal covenant, the fact that He cannot lie, His unbreakable plan that can never be overturned, the perfection of Christ's satisfaction of sin and righteousness that is imputed to us, the indwelling Spirit, the influence of the new birth, and ineradicable nature of the new life we have been given and more. Sin is big and serious, but where sin has abounded grace has abounded all the more. God has not left us on our own to flounder but will ensure we will persevere. We investigate these truths not to look for ways to sin and stay saved, but to see that our salvation does not ultimately rest upon ourselves but God. And we want to remind ourselves that we are to be seeking to make our calling and election sure/stable, as well as in fear and trembling work out the salvation that we already have.