

We have spent the last five weeks considering God's sovereign plan of redemption found in Romans 8:29-30. We learned that God foreknew and then predestined His elect or chosen people before the foundation of the world. God effectually called each of those people to faith in Christ and then justified them. Last week we looked at the last link in this golden chain which was glorification. Those whom God foreknew he also predestined, and those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

It is God's plan from before the beginning to after the end. God purposes and performs these things for His own good pleasure and He has every right to do so. He is the Creator. We are His creation. He is God. We are not.

I take tremendous comfort from the knowledge that my eternity is completely in God's hands because I know that if it were left up to me, I would only screw it up. If there was any way for people who have been made righteous in Christ to mess it up, we would. So I am eternally grateful that God holds my future in His hands.

Nevertheless, one cannot read these verses in Romans 8 without wondering, "what about faith?" Folks, fasten your seatbelts because what you hear today is likely to challenge what you think about faith.

Most of us have been taught that the way it works is that first people believe the gospel and then God gives them eternal life. But I say that faith is something we gain during the process and not before. Read Hebrews 11, the hall of faith. You will see that it is all about the works of obedience of saved people. In the Bible, believers and saints are synonymous. You don't believe and then subsequently get saved, you believe because you are saved. And as soon as you start to get this, all sorts of apparent conflicts will disappear.

What we have been taught about the role of faith in the salvation process gets us into trouble because it encourages us to believe that we merit God's grace on account of our faith. We want to be partners with God in the salvation process. And truth be told, we want to be the senior partner. We want to say, because I believed, God gave me life.

But as we have learned in Romans 8:29-30, that is not how it works at

all. It is God who does the choosing, the predestining, the calling, the justifying and the glorifying. There is nothing we can possibly contribute to our own salvation, yet we insist on thinking that we do contribute to it. And most people conclude that the way we contribute is by believing, by having faith. But as we have seen in our little study over the last several weeks, even our faith is a gift from God.

Php 1:29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.

Belief is granted to us by God as part of the salvation process. So is repentance. When Peter reported to the church in Jerusalem that the Holy Spirit had regenerated Cornelius, a gentile, Acts 11:18 says,

Act 11:18 When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

God even grants repentance.

No matter how plain God makes it that salvation is not earned, we insist on finding a way to earn it. No matter how many ways God says that boasting is excluded, we boast. We look at the unbelieving world and think, well, they don't believe what God says about Jesus so they deserve to go to hell, while we are smart enough to believe God, so we deserve to go to heaven. The fact is that we all deserve to go to hell, but God sovereignly chooses to save some of us. And we just don't want to accept that. We need to change our point of view if we are to understand what faith is really about.

It is not easy to change your point of view, especially when it involves eating a big old slice of humble pie, so to help us get started I propose that we turn to that master theologian, Dr. Seuss.

In 1954 Dr. Seuss wrote a story called, "Horton Hears a Who." The book tells of Horton the Elephant who, on the fifteenth of May in the Jungle of Nool, hears a plea for help from a small speck of dust floating by in the air. It turns out the speck of dust is home to an entire city called "Whoville", inhabited by microscopic critters known as Whos. The Whos ask Horton, who cannot see them although he can hear them, to protect them from harm. Horton agrees, proclaiming that "a

person's a person, no matter how small".

Now imagine if you will, that Horton represents God and the little bitty Whos in Whoville represent us. Imagine what it must be like to be that tiny and helpless and completely at the mercy of Horton the Elephant.

Then consider that our entire planet compared to the universe is even smaller than a speck of dust compared to an elephant, and when you consider that God created the entire universe simply by speaking it into existence, you begin to get the idea. God is bigger than big. And the universe He made is amazingly huge. Even with our telescopes and our space probes and our scientists and our high opinion of ourselves, we have barely begun to explore it. And God created all of it with a word. He spoke and it came to be.

The Psalmist wrote,

Psa 8:3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

Psa 8:4 what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

Imagine being one of those little bitty Whos depending on Horton to protect them. If he drops their dust speck in the water they drown. If he shakes it they have earthquakes. If Horton was to get angry with the Whos they would be done for. They are completely at his mercy.

Jer 10:10 But the LORD is the true God;
he is the living God and the everlasting King.
At his wrath the earth quakes,
and the nations cannot endure his indignation.

If Horton drops a drop of water on Whoville the Whos will have a global flood. If the other animals, who are annoyed with Horton, get their way and throw the speck of dust into the boiling beezlenut juice, Whoville will burn up and the Whos will be toast.

Peter wrote,

2Pe 3:5 ... the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God,

2Pe 3:6 and ... by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.

2Pe 3:7 But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist

are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

On that day

2Pe 3:10 ... the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

2Pe 3:11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness.

If you imagine the power that Horton the Elephant, by virtue of his size, has over the Whos in Whoville, and then multiply it by infinity, you might begin to see the power of God over His creation. You might begin to see how small we are and how great God is.

So now, if you are feeling sufficiently small we can begin to consider God's greatest work - the justification of sinners by grace through faith in the redemptive Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We talked a little bit about regeneration when we talked about being called. We must be born again. God makes us alive in Christ. If there is an actual single point in time when we become Christians, when we change from being lost to being saved, it is that point in time when God gives us new life.

The Bible is not a cookbook and salvation is not the result of following a recipe. We cannot make a list and tell someone, follow these twelve steps and you will be a Christian. You don't become a Christian by going to church. You sure don't become a Christian by having a member of the clergy dunk you in water. And you don't become a Christian by repeating a prayer.

A man asked Jesus what he must do to be saved and Jesus said, Mar 10:25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

Mar 10:26 And the disciples were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?"

Mar 10:27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

What we need to do is stop saying, here is what you do, and start

saying, here is what God has done. Our point of view needs to change.

Modern evangelicals have coined a phrase that captures our man-centered point of view. They say you must make a decision for Jesus. Think about that. This phrase implies that lost, spiritually dead people simply decide to be a Christian. It sounds like choosing lunch from a menu. Hmm, hamburger, cheeseburger, steak, fish, chicken, oh I guess I'll have the fish.

Hmmm, Islam, Christianity, Mormon, Hindu, Buddhist, oh I guess I'll try the Christianity, please, but with no guilt on the side. OK, would you like that in Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, or Methodist? hmmm, so many choices...., ummm, which one lets me play golf on Sunday?

People act as if salvation is a matter of being given some information and making a decision. And I think that what is so appealing about that idea is that it implies there is nothing wrong with us - that we do not have sin natures that have corrupted our minds and hearts and souls and wills. It implies that a person who is spiritually dead is somehow capable of making a spiritual decision.

It also implies that we are in control; captains of our own destinies. We can choose something today and change our minds tomorrow. It implies that making a decision about religion is the same as making that decision about lunch. Oh today I think I'll try the chicken. Oh today I think I'll try out that new mosque down the street. In the end, it turns salvation into an act of man and God's help is not required, thank you. But Jesus said, with man it is impossible.

Until you are changed by God you will treat your religion as simply that - your religion. But when the awesome, all powerful, living God gets a hold of you and changes you completely and makes you spiritually alive when you didn't even know you were dead - when that happens you won't be looking at a menu and making a decision. You will be on your knees crying out in repentance.

This is why the Muslims cannot understand how Muslims who become Christians are willing to be tortured and killed rather than renounce Christ. Because being a Muslim is simply a choice. It is like picking a menu item for lunch. But to become a Christian is to be changed permanently by God. And someone who is permanently changed by God cannot become unchanged, even if they wanted to - which they

won't. It is a God thing, not a man thing. It is a matter of the heart. It is not a matter of our will or our effort or our work or our desires. God speaks to our hearts and makes in us a new creation, just like He spoke into the great void and made the universe.

Faith comes from the changed heart. It is not an intellectual exercise.

Rom 10:10 For with the heart one believes and is justified.

Rom 9:16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

So what is this faith anyway? Here is my definition. Faith is the total awareness that everything God says is true. And I think we receive that awareness at the moment that God brings us to life in Christ. And the mechanism that God uses to create that awareness is the power in the hearing of the gospel.

Now those of you have not slept through the last five sermons know that God chooses His own before the foundation of the world. So here is a radical thought that I believe will help you understand this whole thing. God does not use the gospel to decide who is in Christ and who is not. God uses the gospel to bring His elect to awareness of His truth so that THEY will know they are in Christ. GOD ALREADY KNOWS!!!

Why do we evangelize? Not to persuade people to believe, but to be there to instruct the newborns who respond to the gospel! When the elect hear the gospel the Holy Spirit awakens them from the dead. He quickens their spirits. He gives them faith in their hearts. And we who are already changed need to be there to explain what God just did for them.

Paul wrote to Timothy,

2Ti 2:8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, ... as preached in my gospel,

2Ti 2:9 for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!

2Ti 2:10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. Jesus said, "As you go, disciple." The gospel brings the elect to life and our job is to be there to disciple them.

Do you see what is wrong with the model we have been taught? You

don't work up faith and present it to God like a coupon to be redeemed. Having faith does not save you. Having faith means that God has saved you. We don't examine ourselves to see if we believe! We believe because we examine ourselves and find Jesus inside us.

What is faith? Faith is the certainty that God is true no matter what the whole world says about Him, and then living accordingly and that faith is a gift that we receive at our new birth.

The Bible separates people into two groups. Believers and unbelievers. Tell me, what is the difference? Well, duh, believers believe and unbelievers do not. So, if faith is a prerequisite to being saved then there is a time when unbelievers have to have faith without being a believer. Does that make sense? Obviously not. It is our point of view that creates all of these conflicts.

Our faith is not what we use to convince God to save us. Our faith is there to convince US that God has saved us.

Joh 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me HAS eternal life.

and in

Joh 8:47 Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.

So you have to be from God to hear and believe the words of Christ.

So faith is not something we work up on our own power and then get saved because of it. God grants us belief so that WE know we have life in His Son.

Eph 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

Eph 2:9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.