

Linked

By Elder Carol Reagan

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I'd like to take a poll. I'm going to say a word, and then ask you to raise your hand when I say what you thought of when I said the word. There's no right or wrong answer. Ready? The word is links. When you heard the word "links", how many of you thought of a golf course? How many thought sausage? How many of you thought of a hyperlink, a way of moving quickly around a webpage or site? How many of you thought of connected cells in an Excel spreadsheet? Lastly, how many of you thought of a chain? All of these examples represent connections. Golf links are a series of holes connected to form a golf course. Sausages are made linked and usually separated for sale. Hyperlinks make moving around the Internet easier. Excel spreadsheets with connected cells make work easier by not having to repeat information in additional spreadsheets. And chains can be used to keep people or animals in or out; as jewelry; or as a lifeline, such as a tow chain.

This morning's reading from Romans is a message of hope for all Christians, and describes the eternal lifeline God has created for us, the various links in the chain of God's love for us. In chapter seven, Paul described the dilemma of all people – that we are human, and therefore sin, regardless of God's law and our good intentions. In the last few verses of chapter seven, Paul thanks God for the freedom made possible through Jesus Christ.

In Chapter 8, Paul amplifies on the freedom from sin found in Christ, part of which was read in worship last Sunday. First, for those in Christ who are walking according to the Spirit, there is no condemnation for sin, for the death of Christ has set

us free from the law of sin and death. Second, by setting our minds on the things of the Spirit and not of the flesh, we are able to enjoy life and peace, pleasing God. And third, we now enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit, by whom we can put to death the sins of the body and enjoy both present and future blessings as the children of God.

The blessings of being God's children are enlarged upon in the rest of the chapter. Our present sufferings mean nothing in view of our ultimate redemption. We have the privilege of the Holy Spirit and Jesus interceding for us when we pray, which assures that all things will work together for good for those who are called according to God's purpose.

And then we get to a passage that contains words that we don't hear in worship often, or hear in another context, or which may be unfamiliar. Listen to verses 29-30 again: "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 within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. Foreknew. Predestined. Called – we've heard the term "called" before, but what does it mean in this context? Justified. Glorified. We give glory to God. How can we be glorified? What do these words mean?

Let's take them one at a time. The first link in the chain of God's love is foreknowledge. To foreknow something is simply to know beforehand. God is not limited to our sense of time and space. He sees the past, present and future, not because he has decreed it – he has given us free will - but because there are no limitations on his knowledge. Whom does God foreknow? Those who love God.

The second link is predestination, a word that scares many people, Presbyterians and non-Presbyterians alike. There are many interpretations of what predestination means, both within and outside the Presbyterian Church. Calvin argued that God has “predestined” or “elected” some people to be saved in Jesus Christ and others not to be. But he did not intend for the focus to be on predestination itself, but the grace of God offering us salvation through Jesus Christ. If we believe, it is because God has worked within us by the Spirit to believe in Jesus Christ so that, as Paul said to the church in Corinth, we are a “new creation”. Calvin insisted that Christians should not take pride in having been chosen, as though God had made the choice on the basis of human virtue, or what good deeds had been done. This was in response to those in Calvin’s time who devoted their energies to pious acts intended to improve their status in God’s eyes. Our salvation comes from the work of God in our lives, by the Spirit who gives us faith in Jesus Christ, not by anything that we do on our own. Remember Paul’s words to the church at Ephesus, “For by grace are you saved through faith, and not of yourselves; it is the gift of God – not of works, so that no one may boast.”

The third link is “called”. Who is called? In the truest sense, all are called by God to salvation. We have options with God’s call, just as we do with calls on our cell phones – to answer or decline - but to be among the “called”, we have to answer God in the affirmative, or as in the cell phone analogy, we have to pick up the call. We have to hear and obey. The evidence that we are “called” is that we love God.

The fourth link is “justification”. The called, accepting the call, are justified. Every person who believes in Jesus Christ is justified, declared righteous in Christ. Their sins are blotted out.

The fifth and last link in the chain is glorification. We are heirs of eternal glory. God will complete our salvation and in the mind and plan of God, it's as good as done.

These are the five links in the chain of God's love: his foreknowledge of those who love Him; his predestination – our salvation through God's grace; his calling of us to be his children; his justification – the blotting out of our sins through Jesus Christ; and our future glorification as heirs of God's kingdom. And just like a chain, it's not just one link, but all the links together that truly express God's plan for us. What an awesome legacy we have as children of God!

Paul then summarizes by saying "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" Christians in Paul's time faced very real trials and tribulations, and some of them were put to death for their faith. Paul provides words of comfort and encouragement. At the end of Chapter 8, he summarizes everything that could possibly happen – "hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword", and concludes that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. What reassurance for God's people in Paul's time! What reassurance for us! This is the good news of Jesus Christ! Alleluia! Amen.