

“GRACE: How Long Does It Last?”

Daniel 3:8-28 • Romans 8:22-39

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Is it possible for a person to live without faith? Think about it. The answer is clearly NO! Just think about all the things you trust every day without thinking about them, things maybe you take for granted. For example, you trust your bank with your money. You deposit money in the bank trusting that you will be able to get it when you need it. You trust that when you turn on the light switch the lights will come on. You don't stand there at the switch every day, thinking, “I wonder what will happen today if I flip this switch.” You can't see the electricity but you trust that it is there. You trust your car's brakes. Some of you probably trust them too much. And when you apply your brakes you even trust the brakes of the person behind you. So let me ask you – can God be trusted? DO you trust God?

This is really the heart of the Christian faith. The Bible contains lots of promises from God and we are faced with the decision whether to trust Him or not. In our Old Testament reading from Daniel, that's the decision that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to make. Would they give in to the king's demands to worship the idol in order to save their lives, or would they trust God to save them? You and I will probably never have to make that decision but there are lots of similar choices we face that can be just as important. Will you “bend the truth” to save your reputation or get that big client? Will you tithe from your income, trusting that God will meet your needs, or will you trust yourself and hold your money tightly?

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego decided to trust God fully. Listen to what they told the most powerful ruler in the world: “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But *if not*, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” In other words, they said, “We trust that God is

able to save us from the furnace and even if He chooses not to, we trust Him enough that we will not bow down to the golden statue.” Do you have that kind of trust?

This morning we are finishing our series on grace. We have been looking at what are called the “doctrines of grace” in Reformed theology and we use the acronym TULIP to help us remember them. T stands for *total depravity* or *total inability*. That simply means that there is no part of your life that is unstained by sin. You and I are totally unable to come to God on our own. We asked the question, “who needs grace?” And the answer is that we all need grace because we are spiritually dead without it. God desires that at least some people are saved and so He chooses, or elects, to give grace to some, redeeming them. We asked the question, “Who deserves grace?” The answer is that none of us deserve God's grace. His choice is not based on anything you have done or will do. God's election is *unconditional*, which is where the U in TULIP comes from. The L stands for *limited atonement*, which reminds us that God's grace toward us is accomplished by Christ's death on the cross, paying the debt for our sin. Fourth, the I stands for *irresistible grace*. Who gets grace? The Holy Spirit applies the atoning death of Jesus to everyone that God has chosen. He works in you to give you a desire to commit your life to Christ.

Now we come to the P, which traditionally stands for *perseverance of the saints*. We want to know how long God's grace lasts. What happens if we have questions or doubts? What happens if we sin again? And again? And again? The concept of the perseverance of the saints answers that question by pointing us to the Bible. The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it this way: “They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved (meaning Jesus), effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can never totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall

certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” The easy way of saying this is “once saved, always saved.” That’s why this is sometimes called *eternal security*.

To persevere means to “continue in a course of action even in the face of difficulty.” Scripture indeed instructs us to persevere in our faith. Hebrews 3:12 says, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” Mark 13:13 says, “The one who endures to the end will be saved.” And in 1 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul says, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.” Persevere.

But I’m sure you are painfully aware that if your salvation depends on your own effort to sustain it, you are in trouble. Thankfully it doesn’t depend on you. It depends on God. That’s why a better name would be the *preservation* of the saints. It is God who determined to save you and it is God who will make sure it happens. In Philippians 1 Paul says, “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.” Romans 6 puts it this way: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall *certainly* be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Jesus himself promised in John 14: “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I *will* come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

I think our reading from Romans 8 is one of the clearest passages showing that God perfectly and completely preserves those he has chosen. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor

things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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.” Not even your own questions or doubts or sins. What God has decreed concerning you will *certainly* take place. “For we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

The secret to understanding this idea of predestination is toothpaste. When my children were young, if I told them to go brush their teeth you could say they were predestined to have brushed teeth. Did they have free will? Absolutely. They could choose to go brush their teeth or they could choose to do something else. Were their teeth going to be brushed? Yes. It was predestined. Why did I decide that their teeth would be brushed? Because I love them. God does the same thing. Those he chooses he also predestines to be saved and He does everything necessary to bring you to Him. The 23rd Psalm, which is one of the most cherished passages in the Bible, ends, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Except the word translated as “follow” literally means “pursue.” It’s the same word used when Pharaoh comes after the Israelites on the bank of the Red Sea. Surely God pursues me all the days of my life so that I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The issue for you and me is not whether God accomplishes what He decrees. Of course He does. The issue is really whether you trust His promises and believe that He is working in your life. The issue is what we call *assurance*, which is really our *experience* of God’s preserving grace. Assurance is your confidence that God can be trusted. Our passage calls this hope. “We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons...For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what

he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

Hebrews 11 says, “Now faith is the *assurance* of things *hoped* for, the conviction of things not seen.” This is what Paul means in the famous passage in Romans 8:28: “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Even your problems and setbacks and failures will not stop God from loving you and accomplishing his purpose in your life. This is important because it’s still possible for the elect to fall into sin. In fact it’s more than possible, it’s certain. When we do we don’t experience God’s presence for a time. For some people it may be a long time. You may even experience what some call “the dark night of the soul,” a time when God seems far away or even nonexistent. You question everything. The only way to get through those difficult times is to have the assurance that you belong to Christ, no matter

what. Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. That’s when you need hope the most. The way you know is by the Holy Spirit working in your life, what verse 23 calls having the “firstfruits of the Spirit,” or as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1, “God has given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee,” literally a down payment.

So perseverance, the ability to continue and even grow in your faith even in difficult circumstances, comes from your assurance of your salvation, especially the assurance of God’s preserving you, which is the work of the Holy Spirit. That assurance is strengthened every time you experience God’s grace and are aware of it. That’s why it’s so important to pay attention to the grace you receive, even the little things. So your homework this week is to spend some time every day thinking about God’s grace, remembering even the smallest blessings. And see if your faith isn’t stronger because of it.

Amen.