

### Sermon Summary #6

#### God Will Sustain You to the End! 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; 11:27-32; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 (Eph. 1:13-14)

As we draw ever closer to the conclusion of this short series on eternal security, we come next to Paul's Corinthian correspondence. As you know, Paul's relationship to the Corinthian church was a rocky one. This wasn't because of his lack of love for them or their lack of love for him. It was due to the presence in Corinth of an influential group of false apostles, false teachers, who promoted themselves by undermining Paul. Sadly, some of the Corinthians had begun to believe their lies. In addition, some of those in Corinth, again, under the influence of these false teachers, had not fully cut their ties with their pagan and idolatrous background. They were attempting to walk with a foot in both worlds: one in the church and the other in the secular and immoral world of ancient Greece.

But one thing is clear in both letters: Paul loved these people with a deep and abiding passion. He had led most of them to the Lord, and he longs for his children in the faith to walk in the joy and peace that comes with faith in Jesus.

#### *1 Corinthians 1:4-9*

This is one of the clearest and most striking declarations of God's commitment to preserve and protect his children all the way through to the end when Jesus returns. It is one of those texts that is **rich and thick**, so let me unpack it for you. As I do, chew on it carefully. Chew on it long and hard. Savor the flavor of so sweet a promise of God's love for his people. And then swallow it and let it nourish and enrich and strengthen your soul.

**First**, this is unmistakably *a promise, not a wish, not a "let's-hope-it-all-turns-out-ok" sort of affirmation*. Paul says that Jesus Christ "will" sustain you: not might sustain you, not may sustain you, not "he'll-give-it-his-best-shot-but-who-knows-if-he-can-pull-it-off" sort of expectation.

Notice **secondly** what he "will" do: he will *"sustain"* you or establish you or strengthen you. When you feel weak and don't think you can hold on for another second, when you are convinced that eternal doom awaits you around the corner, when you fear that God has had it up to his eye-balls with your failures and faults, Christ promises his people that he "will sustain" them.

Something you should know is that the verb translated "sustain" here in v. 8 is the same Greek verb that is translated "confirmed" in v. 6. In v. 6 Paul declared that "the testimony about Christ was *confirmed* among" them. That is to say, the gospel was made known and its truth was ratified in their presence. Now, in v. 8, he returns to this verb and declares that God will ratify and confirm and sustain and guarantee that all those who embraced that gospel will stand guiltless before God on the final day. Paul is telling us that *our security in God's love is as solid and sure and unwavering as is the truth and power of the gospel itself!*

**Third**, *for how long or to what extent in time will he do this? It is "to the end."* This is clearly a reference to the second coming of Christ at the close of history. Note that in v. 7 he referred to the end as "the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ," an unmistakable reference to his return. Again, in v. 8 the "end" is identical with "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ," which all acknowledge has in view the coming of Christ to consummate his kingdom. The point is that Jesus isn't committed to strengthening and sustaining you only for a short season, only so long as you earn your keep, so to speak. He is committed to keeping and preserving you "to the (very) end!"

**Fourth**, sustain us in *what*? The answer is that he will sustain us *"guiltless," "blameless," without reproach, without moral stain*. On the day when Jesus returns he will present all of his people utterly guilt free in the presence of his Father.

This is virtually identical to the promise made in **Jude 24-25**. There we hear this marvelous doxology of praise to the preserving power of God:

*“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, 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” (Jude 1:24-25).*

He is able to do this not because you and I live sinless lives between now and then, not because you and I merit or earn a verdict of innocence. He has imputed his righteousness to us through faith and in that righteousness of Christ we will stand at the final judgment day. Paul is saying here what he said in Romans 8:31-34, that no one can bring a successful accusation against God’s people because Christ has died and has been raised and that is the basis on which God justifies us. So who is it that condemns? If you trust in Jesus as your treasure, in God’s sight, right now, you are “guiltless”! And you will remain “guiltless” in his sight right up to, through, and eternally beyond the “end” because the verdict passed on your behalf will never be reversed or overturned. How do I know that? Because Paul just said it: he “will sustain you to the end, guiltless!”

**Fifth**, and finally, *how can we be sure of this?* Who or what seals the deal, so to speak? The answer is quickly forthcoming in v. 9 – **“God is faithful!”** It is the faithfulness of God that guarantees you will be sustained and established guiltless both now and forever. God has made promises to us. He has declared that no one can separate us from the love of Christ. He has made it clear that no one can snatch us out of his hand. If God were a liar or unreliable or unworthy of our trust or if he had a track record of breaking his promises, we’d have a problem. But listen to Paul: “God is faithful!” This God who called you into fellowship with Jesus, his Son, is the same God who through Jesus will sustain you to the end.

We are eternally secure in our salvation, not because we are faithful but because God is. He is reliable. He is trustworthy. He is true to himself and will never fail to fulfill what he has promised.

But wait. What if Paul actually means to say that God will sustain us until the coming of Christ Jesus **“only if”** we continue in faith and love and obedience to him. I have two responses.

First, that’s not what he says. Don’t read into the text something not there simply because you are afraid or perhaps even because you don’t like what is there. Second, and more important still, you’re obviously worried about whether or not you will persevere in faith and holiness unto the end. But Paul’s assertion is that this is precisely what the faithful God has committed to do on your behalf. God’s commitment is to do everything necessary to ensure that we will, in point of fact, continue in faith and love and obedience to him. That’s what it means when it says he “will sustain” us to the end.

In other words, **Paul is asserting the very thing you are denying**. You are denying that God’s people will persevere. Some of them may well apostatize. But that is precisely what Paul says can never happen. Why can it never happen? Because God is faithful to “sustain” and “establish” you in your relationship with Jesus all the way up to the time that Jesus comes back. What does it mean for God to “sustain” us if not that God will keep us in our faith, preserve us in obedience, and do whatever is necessary to ensure that we will not apostatize or be cut off from his love?

Is this not also what he said yet again in **Philippians 1:6**? There he spoke with just as much energy and confidence when he said:

*“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.”*

If any of you continue to wonder how and why I can be so passionate and energetic about this truth of eternal security, it’s because of biblical passages like these.

One more thought before we move on. Let’s not forget that Paul’s original audience or focus for this statement was the Corinthians! That’s right, those stumbling, bumbling Christians in Corinth! He makes this unwavering declaration regarding a people whose behavior is anything but blameless and guiltless. Notwithstanding their struggles and setbacks and sins, notwithstanding the often severe rebukes that Paul points in their direction, he

reassures them: God will sustain you all the way to the end so that you will stand in his presence, on the day Jesus returns, utterly and eternally guiltless!

### *1 Corinthians 11:27-32*

“But Sam, how can Paul make such a statement in chapter one of 1 Corinthians and then turn around and say what he does in chapter eleven of the same letter?” Well, let’s look at what he says in 11:27-32 . . .

We must understand the background to this passage. The problem Paul is addressing here was due to the fact that some in Corinth were partaking of the Lord’s Table in **“an unworthy manner.”** Let’s begin by noting what it does **not** mean. Ernest Kevan writes:

“So many true-hearted believers have been disturbed by a misunderstanding of this. It is said that if you feel ashamed, and crestfallen and depressed because of your failure and sin that therefore you must not come [to the Lord’s Table]. Oh no! That is the right way to come. To take the Lord’s Supper unworthily is to take it without regard to its true worth [not yours]. To do it unworthily is to come complacently, to come light-heartedly, to come without a care about your own sin and your shame. But to be burdened with your sin, even to be weighed down with a sense of your guilt and utter unworthiness – that is to take the Lord’s Supper unworthily. Only in this spirit do you truly reckon it at its worth” (*The Lord’s Supper* [London: Evangelical Press, 1973], 23).

The Eucharist in the early church was held **in conjunction with a general meal**. The problem arose due to the social and economic differences among the many members. The church was composed of both wealthy and poor, slaves and ex-slaves. Typically people would eat and drink what they brought to the gathering, rather than sharing it with others in the way that we do in a “pot luck dinner.” The wealthy, notes I. H. Marshall, “brought so much food and drink that they could indulge in gluttony and even in *drunkenness*. The poor, however, had little or nothing to bring with the result that some of them went hungry and could not enjoy a decent meal. Paul further says that some people, presumably those who had more to eat, began eating before the others” (50; emphasis mine).

Paul was clearly disturbed by this abuse of the Lord’s Table and the way in which **it violated the unity and love in the body of Christ which the supper itself was designed to display** (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17). This lack of concern and disregard for their poorer brethren, coupled with their riotous and even drunken behavior, constituted their sin. Selfishness and lack of love were the essence of their transgression, a fact that must be kept in mind as we seek to make contemporary application of Paul’s words.

We must also pay close attention to how closely the conclusion of v. 27 is related to the premise established in vv. 23-26. These latter verses state that the sacrament is designed to cultivate in us loving remembrance of all Christ accomplished on our behalf. At the table we reflect on the nature and sufficiency of his death and thereby proclaim it to the world until he comes. “Therefore . . .” (v. 27). That is, **to partake in an unworthy manner is to do so without giving full consideration to the nature of the supper as it is explained in vv. 23-26**. It is to partake with motives incompatible with the intent of Christ when he instituted the sacrament. It is to come to the table with thoughts other than of his person and work. It is to come thinking of tomorrow’s worries rather than Christ’s return. It is to come remembering yesterday’s disappointments rather than Christ’s death. **To partake in an unworthy manner is to partake either in ignorance of or conscious disregard for the instruction found in vv. 23-26**.

This is what sets the stage for Paul’s statement concerning the **consequences** of unworthy participation: “will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.” By this he means that guilt is incurred when one profanes what is sacred by treating it as something that is common. To despise the symbol is to despise that to which it points. By abusing the Eucharist we are acting with the calloused indifference and even malicious enmity of those who crucified him. Proper regard for the Lord’s Supper is no small matter!

So how do we avoid partaking in an unworthy manner? In v. 28 Paul says we should “examine” ourselves. The word “examine” (*dokimadzo*) most often assumes the success of the test. It refers to the act of proving or testing something with a view to its emerging approved. The implication is that the self-examination will have a positive outcome. Either the individual will discover that he/she is already in a proper spiritual condition to receive the

elements or, if not, will take the required steps to become so. ***Thus the point of self-examination is not to hinder participation but to make it possible and meaningful.***

Also, to “examine” oneself entails analyzing one’s understanding of the true meaning of the Eucharist as set forth in vv. 23-26. Why are we partaking? What do we hope to gain? Are we doing so in accordance with the purpose and spirit in which our Lord instituted the supper? Is our partaking reverent? Is it a reflection of that unity in the body of Christ which Paul mentioned in 1 Cor. 10:17? To examine oneself is to ask these questions in preparation for approaching the table in a spiritually appropriate frame of mind.

According to v. 29, the believer is to be careful about “discerning the body” or should “judge the body rightly.” The word “body” may be a reference to the church, the “body” of believers. Indeed, in vv. 17-22 the problem in Corinth was a failure to show consideration to other members of the church. However, inasmuch as v. 29 is strikingly parallel to v. 27, I take “body” to be a shorthand form of the “body and blood” of the Lord himself. Therefore, ***not to “discern” or “judge” the “body” rightly means not to perceive and reverence the Lord’s Supper as a unique and sacred meal, thereby underestimating and de-valuing its true character.***

Note closely that Paul speaks of ***three distinct kinds of “judgment”*** here.

There is first the “judgment” that we apply to ourselves when we examine our hearts and test our motives to ensure that we are partaking in a way that honors Christ and the people of God.

Second, if we fail to “judge” ourselves in this way but persist in abusing the Lord’s Table and profaning what is sacred, God will “judge” us physically, in the sense that he will bring divine and fatherly *discipline* to bear upon us. ***This is not the loss of salvation. This is what God lovingly and graciously does to prevent the loss of salvation!*** This is precisely what had happened at Corinth. ***Those who in varying degrees had persisted in treating the Eucharist with contempt had, in varying degrees, come under divine discipline: some were “weak” physically, some were “sick,” and some had “fallen asleep” or had died physically.***

**Let’s be careful here.** Paul is not telling us that every time we become physically weak or exhausted and can’t function well in life, it is because of some unrepentant sin in our lives. Nor is he saying that when the situation is even worse and we become “sick” or “ill” or fall under the influence of a virus or disease or affliction of some sort that it is always because of sin in our lives. Don’t interpret every head cold or arthritic knee or diagnosis of cancer as the discipline of God! Far less should we conclude that every time a Christian appears to die prematurely, at an early age, it is divine discipline for unrepentant sin. No.

On the other hand, *on occasion* God *does* use physical affliction as a means to discipline us, to awaken us to our sin, and to draw us back to himself. And in the case of the Corinthians he is declaring it as a fact. He is speaking with apostolic authority based on what God had revealed to him: many in Corinth were under divine discipline for this particular sin; some even had died because of it. But we must be careful before we draw a direct, one-to-one, cause and effect connection between physical sickness and sin.

All this was to spare them the third kind of “judgment,” eternal and spiritual judgment. In v. 32 Paul speaks of this as being “***condemned*** along with the world,” that is to say, being subjected to that eternal judgment or condemnation which the non-Christian world will experience.

When I was in Minneapolis a month or so ago John Piper and I sat down in his living room and experienced what I can only describe as a *providential moment*. Our conversation turned to the issue of eternal security. I told him I was preaching a series on the subject and he told me that the very next Sunday he was preaching on it as well. Our discussion turned to this passage in 1 Corinthians 11 and he said a few things that I considered quite profound. I took good mental notes!

He said, there’s no way to avoid the fact that here we see that ***sometimes God will take the physical life of his own children in order to preserve and protect their spiritual life.***

“Sam,” he said to me, “think about the implications of this. It seems to be that God foresees the natural trajectory of a person’s life heading toward a pattern of sin that is incompatible with regeneration. He cuts them off before they get there, and thus secures their eternal salvation.”

In other words, going back to 1 Corinthians 1, *one of the ways God “sustains” some of his people is by removing them from this life before they have opportunity to persist in their sin to such an extent that they apostatize.*

But why would God do it this way? After all, God can turn or incline our hearts towards good (see Prov. 21:1; 2 Thess. 3:5). So why doesn’t he simply protect his people from such future sin by putting the fear of God in their hearts, so that they will not turn from him (Jeremiah 32:40)? *Why kill them to protect them?*

The answer is: he doesn’t tell us! Perhaps God allows this to happen in the lives of some of his children in order to show the rest of us how serious our sin and disobedience can be. Perhaps he wants to demonstrate how utterly dependent we are on him for life and holiness.

The other question, obviously, is this: “If those who are born again are disciplined with physical death to keep them from being condemned with the world, does this mean the elect really can lose their salvation?”

The answer that both John and I gave, of course, was “No.” Then he said this: *“It does confirm that there are patterns of sin which are finally incompatible with salvation. And God will take our lives rather than let us succumb to those patterns.”*

The point, then, is that when our lives begin to move in a trajectory or on a pathway that is incompatible with who we are as born-again children of God, a trajectory or pathway whose end is eternal condemnation, on occasion God will intervene and turn us back. He will act upon our hearts by his Spirit to bring conviction of sin and eventually will turn us from this pathway to walk once again in righteousness. Praise God when he does it this way!

*But on occasion God intervenes and takes the believer’s life physically precisely in order to preserve his life spiritually. That is what v. 32 is saying, as shocking as it may seem.*

Of course, Paul is concerned with only one particular expression of unrepentant sin here in 1 Corinthians 11. Calloused disregard of the Lord’s Table is only one example of the kinds of sin that call forth the loving discipline of our heavenly Father. And yes, it is **loving** because, though painful, it is designed to restore us to the vibrancy of fellowship with Christ and even, if necessary, to preserve us eternally safe in our salvation.

We could easily turn to **Acts 5** and take note of yet another similar case, where Ananias and Sapphira are *disciplined into heaven through premature physical death* because of their lying to the Holy Spirit concerning the money they had pledged to the church in Jerusalem.

*Now let me bring 1 Corinthians 1:8-9 into conjunction with 1 Corinthians 11:27-32.* God has promised to sustain his people and preserve his people so that they **will** stand in his presence on the day when Jesus returns, and be found “guiltless.” When we wander away from him and walk in disobedience, the more common way that he does it is by bringing conviction of sin to our hearts and working in us so that we will repent and turn back to him and gradually walk yet again in the way of holiness and obedience and love and purity. He preserves us in the security of our salvation by sustaining within us the faith that is absolutely essential to eternal life.

Another, less common, way in which God sustains one of his wayward and wandering children is by taking drastic steps to prevent him/her from walking down a path that leads to spiritual death. Physical death or temporal discipline thus on occasion becomes the means by which God ensures spiritual life in those who have been born again. That assuredly is what had occurred in the case of some in the church at Corinth in the first century.

### ***2 Corinthians 1:20-21***

Yet another reason why I am so passionate about the reality of eternal security is because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Here in 2 Corinthians 1 we are told that God has “sealed” us with his Spirit. As Paul said in

**Ephesians 1:13**, “in him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (cf. also Eph. 4:30).

The term "seal", when used literally, referred to a stamped impression in wax pointing to ownership and protection. When used metaphorically, it meant (1) *to authenticate* (John 3:33; 6:27; 1 Cor. 9:2) or confirm as genuine and true (not unlike what happens when you take a document to be notarized), including the idea that what is sealed is stamped with the character of its owner; (2) *to designate or mark out as one's property; to declare and signify ownership* (see Rev. 7:3-8; 9:4; again, not unlike the embossed “seal” in my books); or (3) *to render secure or to establish* (i.e., *protect*; cf. Eph. 4:30; Matt. 27:66; Rev. 20:3).

With what, precisely, are we sealed? All these texts (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:21-22) appear to suggest that *the seal is the Spirit himself*, “by whom God has marked believers and claimed them for his own” (Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 807). In other words, it isn't so much that the Spirit does the sealing as the Spirit is the seal (although it certainly could be both). Hence, *sealing is nothing less than the reception and consequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit*.

But Paul goes even farther and declares that God has also “given us his Spirit in our hearts as a *guarantee*.”

On three occasions Paul describes the Spirit as the *down payment, the pledge*, or as the ESV renders it here in 2 Corinthians 1:22, the *guarantee*. The term (*arrabon*) itself was used in commercial transactions to refer to the first installment of the total amount due. The down payment effectively guaranteed the fulfillment of whatever contractual obligations were assumed. "The Spirit, therefore," says Fee, "serves as God's down payment in our present lives, the certain evidence that the future has come into the present, the sure guarantee that the future will be realized in full measure” (807).

In giving the Holy Spirit to us, writes Peter O'Brien, “God is not simply promising us our final inheritance but actually providing us with a foretaste of it, even if it ‘is only a small fraction of the future endowment’” (121).

In other words, when you become consciously and experientially aware of the presence within of transcendent deity, of a joy that is inexpressible and full of glory, of a power that triumphs over the allure of fleshly lusts, of a delight that is sweeter than the passing pleasures of sin, of a satisfaction that puts earthly success to shame, you are sensing, if only in small measure, what will be yours in infinite and unending degree in the age to come!

It is nothing less than the precious Spirit of God quickening your soul to the reality of what awaits us on the other side, assuring you that he is here, “in our hearts” (2 Cor. 1:22b), to guarantee that all God has promised will come to pass. We have it on no less authority than the Holy Spirit himself that what we sense in our spirit now is a divine guarantee and foretaste of what we will see and hear and feel and taste and enjoy throughout the ages to come in all the fullness of God himself.

But what about **Psalm 51:11** where David cries out: “Cast me not away from your presence, and *take not your Holy Spirit from me*”? Doesn't this suggest that the possibility exists that the Holy Spirit can be taken from us and that we can lose our salvation? No!

Aside from the saving activity of the Holy Spirit in the OT and the empowering ministry by which believers are sanctified and enabled to live holy lives, the Holy Spirit was poured out on select individuals *to equip them to perform important tasks* in the covenant community of Israel. For example:

- (1) Craftsmen who worked on the tabernacle/temple (Exod. 31:1-6)
- (2) Civil administrators (such as Moses and the 70 elders in Num. 11:16-17,25-26)
- (3) Military commanders (such as Joshua; Num. 27:18)
- (4) Judges (appointed and empowered to rule over Israel as in Judges 3:10; 6:34)
- (5) Samson (Judges 14:5-6,19; 15:14; 16:20)
- (6) Prophets (1 Chron. 12:18; Micah 3:8)
- (7) Kings over Israel (Saul in 1 Sam. 10:1,6,10; 16:14; and David in 1 Sam. 16:12-13)

Thus there was a ministry of the Holy Spirit in the OT, *unrelated to personal salvation*, designed solely *to empower, enable and equip* someone for a task to which God had appointed him/her. This, I believe, is what David has in mind in Ps. 51:11. His prayer is that God would not withdraw the enabling anointing of the Spirit that empowers and equips him to lead Israel as King. Indeed, he may well have had in mind that disturbing scene where “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul” (1 Sam. 16:14) and prays that such would never befall him.

Conclusion:

There will be times in the experience of every born-again Christian man or woman when God seems distant and uninvolved. There will be times when we struggle with doubt and fear and anxiety, times when we think our sin has put us beyond the reach of his forgiveness and grace. But if Jesus is our ultimate treasure, if our trust is in him alone, if we look to his life, death, and resurrection as our only hope, of this we may be certain: God **will** sustain us until the time of the end and present us guiltless in his presence. His Spirit has set a seal on our hearts declaring loudly and clearly: **you belong to God!** His Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, declaring loudly and clearly: **your eternal inheritance is guaranteed!**

Praise be to God for his glorious, preserving grace in our lives!