

Sermon for Sunday, May 9, 2010
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WHAT IS PREDESTINATION?
Romans 8:28-30

1. The question of predestination is irresistible

Sometime I look at our children and think, "Humanly speaking, our beloved children should not exist." It's not that Debbie and I met on a train to Marrakesh. No, my children shouldn't exist because I shouldn't exist. And I shouldn't exist because my father's family should never have escaped Stalinist Russia.

Briefly, I'm a Russian Jew on my father's side contra my name. My grandparents fled the anti-Semitic riots and arrived in America as newlyweds in 1909. After gaining citizenship then in five years, they moved to Italy where my grandfather completed his training as an operatic tenor. He was touring Europe, doing well. Then civil war broke out in Russia. He decided to go to Moscow to visit his father (my great grandfather) who had been in serious trouble with the Reds for being on the other side. But when my grandfather tried to leave, the communists seized their passports: "Sing for us, comrades!" There were no diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. at the time, so they were helpless.

My grandfather was barely famous enough that some Germans and Frenchmen agitated for his release. For years, barely 100 people got out of Russia per year. But when the U.S. recognized the Soviets, over 1,000 people emigrated over the next year. My family was in that group. The man who signed their papers was Vladimir Myakovsky. Shortly after my family got out, Stalin executed him for "excessive leniency" in emigration.

Statistically speaking, they shouldn't have gotten out. Therefore, I shouldn't exist, my wife and I shouldn't be married and our children shouldn't exist. But we look at our children. They do exist; we feel they must exist. Someone said: when we hear the best music it seems that we heard it before. You must have heard it, because it has a certain perfection. Think of Mozart. The piece starts with a clear melody, then note follows note because it must, with inexorable certainty.

Some music has to be. Some people have to be. This world has a space that's their size. Thoughts like this lead to belief in God and predestination.

Someone will object, "I also knew someone who had a logic, a perfection to them. The world had a place for them. But then he died, she died, at age of nineteen or thirty-one by a freak accident, by a terrible disease. A good God couldn't create that person, then let them perish. I can't believe in predestination."

Experience raises the question, but it points both ways. If you met your beloved on a train to Marrakesh, you may believe in predestination. Disasters make us think the opposite.

Our confession of faith says: From all eternity God wisely and freely ordained all that comes to pass, yet God is not the author of sin, nor is violence done to the will of his creatures [that is, human freedom]. Further the freedom and contingency of second causes [our abilities, agency, choices] is not taken away, but rather established. (Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1). Is this biblical? [yes]

Ephesians 1:5 says God the Father "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will." Later he says that in Christ we have "been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will." (1:11-12). That is, God destines and appoints whatever comes to pass.

But God respects our will – no "violence is done to the will." How so? Take the death of Jesus. Jesus died "by God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). But as we know, as Scripture says, those who took his life acted freely. The priests were furious that Jesus challenged their authority. They worried that his disciples might spark a rebellion. Pilate made cold calculations about his career.

This is what it means: God respects secondary causes. God created us with a mind that draws conclusions, with emotions that feel things, with a will that follows desires and convictions. God respects that by accomplishing His will gently, through our mind and will, so there is concord between God's will and ours.

So if God ordains that a student shall earn an A, he also ordains the means. The child will have parents and teachers that encourage learning. And the student will have discipline in study. And if God plans to bring someone to himself, he does it gently, through means: spiritually beautiful friends, a book perhaps. There is no violation of human freedom.

This is not fatalism! A tiny minority of Christians are fatalistic. Example: Duns Scotus stressed the pure will of God to do whatever He pleases. Fatalists say God views humans dispassionately and chooses to bless one, curse another, redeem one, damn another, simply because He so chooses. But that's not biblical.

If God chooses to call a girl to come to Him in faith, he will also ordain the means. The mother tells her Bible stories and brings her to church so that she learns the content of the faith. She also prays, loves and generally shows the beauty of the faith, so her daughter is attracted to it.

Still the Bible does teach that God is sovereign. Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." We flip coins, God makes them land. The Bible speaks of election and predestination often, so we must take it seriously: Predestine six times, election six times, chosen over twenty times, just in the New Testament.

So we need a concept of election. But time is limited, so let's lay aside global predestination and the problem of evil and focus on election to salvation today, after one more note: Scripture says God doesn't ordain everything the same way. Some things, like His choice of Abraham, Israel, and the church are direct and active. Other things He permits. Romans 1:24-28 says that sometimes God determines to "give men over" to their desires, to let them do what they wish. That explains much of the worst evil, World War 2.

But today, we'll speak of election. Views of election vary. To state the obvious: You may not agree with everything I say. That's OK, I'm not the pope. But let's search Scripture together, engage the issue together, in dialogue.

2. Predestination is viewed various ways

The branches of Christendom see predestination and election in different ways. These are sketches to label options. Each tradition has nuances and minority reports.

#1 God predestines the means of salvation which we must choose to use.

The Roman Catholic Church, some Episcopalians and Lutherans: God predestines all to salvation, but does so conditionally. He desires the salvation of all and has provided for their salvation in the church, especially the sacraments. God wills that all be saved if they receive grace through the sacraments. Thus God elects everyone conditionally. God does not work directly with us, but through the church and its sacraments.

The Roman Catholic Church theologian, William Humphrey, said it is the will of God that all "should be saved." But this will is not certain. It's "under condition that men, on their part, should second the

divine will as they can and ought to do." Men second God's will and fulfill the conditions He left in our hands if they receive the sacraments: infant baptism, communion, and penance. Ultimately, God leaves the question of salvation to the church and individuals who do or do not choose to persevere in faith and so to find salvation.

A "classic" Lutheran variant says God predestines all children of the church to election. Salvation ordinarily follows baptism, although people have the power to resist his will. God has chosen the family of God for eternal life. If we simply don't resist, we will be saved.

#2 God predestines what he sees and knows we will do.

This is classic Arminianism, after theologian Arminius not the nation of Armenia. John Wesley, most Baptists, and perhaps a slight majority of Protestants hold this view: God permitted mankind to sin and to fall. With the fall, humans became guilty and corrupt and lacked ability to restore or redeem themselves. Then God sent Jesus to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Then – here their view is distinct – God removed original sin and gave everyone enough grace and light, a sufficient testimony of the Spirit that they have freedom to choose Jesus or not, as they wish. God has made salvation possible for all but certain for none. Everyone has enough truth that they can choose God if they wish.

God then predestines all who make use of this grace and freedom. Most Arminians say: God knows all things. He foresees all our decisions, but doesn't determine what anyone will do. He does not force Himself on anyone. We have free will, free choice. God predestines those whom He knows will choose Him.

Radical form: God is waiting to see what we will do next. He is as blind to the future, as likely to be surprised, as anyone. God can say, "Wow, I didn't expect that to happen." On this view, predestination is known only after the fact: those who choose to believe and choose to persevere to the end are the elect. On the other hand, if, after decades of faithfulness, someone commits a major, deliberate sin, or curses God in a moment of despair, He will perish if He does not repent.

We see election differently. Evangelical Presbyterians are, by history and conviction, Reformed or Calvinistic. That means we stress the interest and sovereignty of God over all things. That helps explain certain things you see here. We're on the edge of the city with no parking because we decided not to relocate out west. We stayed by the city to engage the city. Why? Because God is Lord of all, even the culture, the city. We have a beautiful old building because we think God cares about beauty and aesthetics and we should too. We have music concerts for the same reason.

We have a prison ministry because we're close to a prison. We believe that's no accident but a providence from God. So we got involved and gained skills locally. Then we heard God's summons to serve in more distant prisons.

These things express a core conviction that God is Lord of all. His chief name in the Bible, used over 4,000 times, is "Lord." He is Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of souls and cultures. That's why we engage our culture. And we believe salvation is from the LORD – the Lord saves. Calvinists (us) dig into that.

The Bible doesn't say "the LORD makes it possible for us to be restored, reconciled, saved." Not "He does his part and hopes we see the need/value to do ours." It says, "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (Jonah 2:9). This leads to the concept of predestination found in Romans 8, which says God calls, persuades, justifies, and certainly brings all His people to life and glory. This is our theme: God predestines a redemption what will certainly occur. It's very clear in Romans 8:28-30.

3. The work of God, from his call to our glory (Romans 8:28-30)

In Romans 8:30, Paul says that those whom God "predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified." Whatever else he means, Paul is promising that if God starts with you, He will not quit, give up on you, or abandon you.

In context, that's an essential point. Earlier, Romans 8 said we are children of God and co-heirs with Christ "if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (8:17). Then, as we saw, Romans 8 explores suffering, hardship, groaning, and persecution. The doctrine of predestination fits there. Paul assures believers that the Lord will care for us in all this travail. Nothing can, nothing will, separate us from the love of Christ (8:25, 39). The groaning will stop. The Lord will redeem our bodies (8:24).

We can be sure of this because those whom God "predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified." Notice the repeated phrase "those who". The same group that is predestined is called. The called are then justified and the justified are glorified.

Notice that "glorified" is past tense. Glorification occurs in the future, when Jesus returns, judges all flesh and call his people to himself. Glory begins when we enter the new heaven and new earth. Yet Paul speaks of it in the past tense, as if it were already accomplished. The message: From God's perspective, it is accomplished. He will complete what He has started. This is so certain it can be described in the past tense. Let's illustrate:

Suppose two football teams have a long rivalry. Then one team dominates, winning twenty years in a row. At last the underdog rises up. They lead 42-17 with two minutes to go in the game. The fans: "We won! We won!" Why? The game isn't over. But victory is so certain that fans speak in the past tense. So it is with our glorification. It's so certain that Paul speaks in past tense.

We can see the same principle in Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose."

First, notice that Paul does not say, "Everything works out for everyone all the time." Rather God works for the good for those who love him.

Second, this doesn't mean everything works out the way we like. In the last two years many have lost a great deal financially. Some businesses failed; others survived after stunning losses. But the Lord never promises we will be rich, healthy, or trouble-free. He promises something better: We will be conformed to the image of Christ. Again, this is too much for one message, but ask yourself this: Have you grown closer to the Lord through your struggle? Have you learned to love wealth less, to admire yourself, to be certain of self less, to love him more?

A woman told me, "My divorce was horrible, and I'd never want to go through it again. But I'm thankful for the things the Lord taught me, for the person I became through that loss."

The Lord wants to bless us. When you read the word "blessed" in the Bible, happiness is the most basic meaning. But there are two kinds of happiness. Superficial happiness comes and goes with external events. Deep happiness is character based. God works all things so that we become more like Christ.

Think of the incarnation: Jesus saw the tension, the dissolution of relationship between God and man. He saw the difference, the alienation and did not move away from us, away from the pain, but toward it. In the Incarnation, Jesus moved toward the alienation. Surely suffering can move us to become more like

Christ. This is part of God's purpose in our suffering. He always ordains that we become more like Christ.
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God's goal is not abstract salvation or election. He predestined us "to be conformed to... his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

Third, we see that God makes good use of bad things. That is how we must see tragedies - wars, floods, oil spills. None of these is good. But they can teach us things about humanity, about nature.

Fourth, Paul says, "we know" all this. We may not always feel it. Recall that Paul himself was a Jew. He saw Rome persecute his people, Israel, then the church. He felt it when he was beaten, tossed in jail. He admits his anguish - he was full of fear and trembling; hard pressed, perplexed, struck down (1 Corinthians 2:3, 2 Corinthians 4:8-9). But he knew God was doing great things through him .

Quick summary: First, Everything works out for those who love God. Ssecond, this doesn't mean everything works out the way we would like. It means everything brings us closer to the character of Christ. Third and fourth, we may not feel that God makes good use of bad thing, but we should know it.

To restate, Romans 8:28 affirms truths that give great comfort to disciples: God is at work in our lives. He works in all things, not just parts. In all things He works for the good of those love God. Finally, He does all this according to His good purpose. Not superficial happiness, but deep blessedness and eternal life. We should believe life works this way and look for it.

Paul also affirms that God does five things in and for his people (8:29-30)

First, He foreknew us. Yes, God knows the future, but this means more. In the Old Testament when it says God "knows" us, it means He directs us (Psalm 1:6). When it says God knows us, it means He sees our weakness and rescues us (Psalm 144:3-11). If God knows us, He watches us, cares for us. (Hosea 13:5). God says, "I cared for you in the desert" is literally "I knew you: in the desert, the burning heat. To say "those whom God foreknew" is to say "those whom God loved." God's foreknowledge is His affectionate, sovereign, distinguishing love ²

Second, those whom God foreknew He predestined. The verb "predestine" means to determine beforehand. This means that decisions are involved when anyone becomes a Christian. We feel that it is our decision and rightly so. Truly, we do decide. But God decides first. In grace, He sovereignly calls us to himself.

- Jeremiah 31:3: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with loving-kindness."
- Ephesians 1:4 says He does this "before the foundation of the world."

So God accomplishes His purposes without violating or disregarding our will, our mind, our emotions. Secondary causes.

Third, those whom God predestined, He also called. Let me describe several people I know who have come to faith in Jesus in the last few years. This man is cruising through life, happy or sad, with few thoughts of God or Jesus. Then there is a catalyst, a crisis, a loss, even a rare blessing. He starts thinking about great issues. While he thinks, he notices believers in his life. He starts to talk to them about the great issues. He knows they're not perfect, but he see a virtue, a beauty there. He reads the Bible, then a

¹ James D Hunter, *To Change the World*, pages 242-3

² Murray, *Romans*, pages 317-18.

book, then goes to church. He hears the gospel several times. His friends incarnate it, adorn it, as the Bible says.

Over time, a shift occurs. He realizes he is no longer entertaining ideas. He says, "God is drawing me to Himself. I have to make a decision, and I say yes." This is our man's choice as surely as he chose his job, his marriage. Yet when he looks back, he sees that God orchestrated events to raise questions and establish influences, so the truth was heavy, yet sweet. He comes to faith and is justified by faith. And those whom God justified, he also glorified – so certain.

What then? We thank God for our salvation, for our hearts knowing it's His gift. We don't congratulate ourselves for our wise choice. Predestination strikes down pride and boasting! We are humble, grateful.

In time we think of friends and begin to pray for them. We ask God to orchestrate their salvation, as he did ours.³ This shapes our character. If God is sovereign, we can be resilient. We don't despair – If God is for us, who is against us? We are full of hope.

Some say that belief in God's sovereignty leads to complacency. That is, God will do what He will do, no matter what. Why should I tell my friend about Jesus? But no, God works through us. He plans to use us to present the faith. What an honor. How liberating. We tell the truth and leave the results to God.

In genera, trust in God's sovereignty leads to fearlessness. Pursue our goals and trust the results to Him. How liberating!

Brothers and sisters, I implore you to see your lives this way. Rest in the Lord, who works all for your good, that you might be more like our Lord Jesus. Yes, terms like happiness and sadness, plans and accidents still hold. But we believe, we trust, we rest knowing God has an everlasting love and a firm purpose for us.

³ Packer, *Evangelism, Sovereignty of God*, IVP, page 12