

“Predestination”

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
January 16, 2011

Introduction:

This morning I would like for us to consider a request that has been made by several of our members over the past few years. It does not come in the form of a question about a specific Scripture, but it comes in the form of a question about a rather deep and complex denominational doctrine. As you might have already guessed (based on the cartoon that was up here during the announcements), I am referring to the doctrine of PREDESTINATION. Most of us are probably at least a little bit familiar with it, perhaps you have studied it before, but our goal this morning will be to give an overview so that we can come to at least a basic understanding of what the Bible teaches on this issue.

As most of us can probably figure out, the word “predestination” (at least the way many people today look at it) comes from two words referring to the idea that a person’s destiny is determined beforehand. I am reminded of a story that was told by Senator Sam Ervin in the book *Humor of a Country Lawyer*. In the book, he tells of Major Lewis Dabney, the Presbyterian minister who served as the chief chaplain under Stonewall Jackson. There is certainly a chance that the story may have “evolved” over time, but as it has been passed down through the years, Major Dabney was always preaching that the Almighty had planned and predestined everything that would ever happen. Holding to this doctrine, Major Dabney assured his fellow soldiers that if they were predestined to be killed by a Yankee bullet, they could not possibly escape the bullet; and then on the other hand, if they were not predestined to be killed by a Yankee bullet, then it would be impossible for them to ever be harmed by a Yankee bullet, and so there was no need to be afraid even during the most intense battles. Well, that was the theory. One day as Major Dabney was visiting the front lines, a firefright broke out, and the story says that as the Yankee bullets began to kick up dust around the major, he ran as fast as he could and jumped behind a tree. A Confederate private who was already hiding behind the tree confronted the man and said, “Major Dabney, don’t you practice what you preach?” The major said, “What do you mean, my good man?” The Confederate soldier responded and said, “I noticed that when the Yankee bullets began to kick up dust spots around you, you forgot about predestination, resorted to free will, undertook to save yourself, and ran and jumped behind this tree.” And at that point, the major explained, “My good man, you do not fully understand the doctrine of predestination. You overlook two significant factors. The tree was predestined to be here, and I was predestined to run and jump behind it.” Well, that is an interesting explanation of predestination!

And yet as interesting as that story might be, the doctrine of predestination is actually quite serious. Again, this morning's lesson will not be based on one paragraph of Scripture (as we normally do), but I would like for us to consider, first of all, just a brief summary of the denominational Calvinistic concept of predestination. I'd like for us to then consider several of the most popular texts that are normally used to support the Calvinistic concept. And then I would like for us to close by looking together at what the Bible really teaches about the fact that we as human beings have actually been given free will. As we study, we will look at a number of Scriptures, and I would encourage you to keep up with me as best you can! There is a handout in the bulletin, so if you want to write down the references to look up later as well, that would be great also.

I. **First of all, though, let us please consider at least A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION (at least as it is commonly taught in the denominational world these days).**

And here at the beginning, we need to admit that the word "*predestined*" can be found six times in the Bible (NASB). My understanding is that the word literally refers to a boundary being marked off or decided ahead of time. And so the word does, in fact, refer to something being decided beforehand; however, as with many false ideas, people have taken a single word that is found perhaps just a handful of times and have built up a complex and misleading doctrine around it.

Probably the most well-known promoter of the modern idea of predestination is a reformer from the 1500's by the name of John Calvin. I have put an article about John Calvin in the cubbyholes this morning. Calvin is one of those reformers who broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. He was a lawyer and a politician and a prolific writer. Sometime after Calvin's death, some of his followers summarized his teachings with the acrostic T.U.L.I.P. The five points are all tied very closely together.

- **T – Total Depravity** This is the idea of original sin, the idea that babies are born with the guilt of Adam's sin and are unable to do anything good.
- **U – Unconditional Election** This is the idea that we are discussing this morning, the idea that God has already chosen certain people to be saved and has already decided that others will be lost, and that this decision has nothing to do with us or our behavior.
- **L – Limited Atonement** This is the idea that Jesus died only for the sins of those who have already been chosen. He did not die for the sins of the whole world, but He died only for those who had already been pre-selected for salvation.
- **I – Irresistible Grace** This is the idea that since God chose you to be saved, there is nothing you can do about it—His grace is "irresistible."
- **P – Perseverance of the Saints** This is the idea that once a person is saved, that person is always saved, and there is nothing we can do to lose our salvation.

I know this has been just a brief overview, but for the purpose of our study this morning, I should focus in on exactly what Calvin himself said about predestination. In Calvin's most famous work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, this is what he said, "No one who wishes to be thought religious dares outright to deny predestination, by which God chooses some for the hope of life, and condemns others to eternal death." Less than a hundred years after his death, Calvin's followers brought the idea into the Westminster Confession of Faith (a creed developed for the Church of England that would eventually become the foundation of the creeds for the Church of Scotland, the Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Church, and many other Protestant denominations), but in this document, they incorporated many of Calvin's ideas. This is from the Westminster Confession of Faith,

God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.... By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestined and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it can not be either increased nor diminished.

So, the denominational view of predestination is that God chose some people to be saved even before the earth was made, and if you are not in that number, then that is really too bad. And if you are in that number, then there is nothing you can really do about that either.

II. **At this point, let us move on to consider SEVERAL OF THE PASSAGES THAT ARE MOST OFTEN USED TO SUPPORT THE CALVINISTIC THEORY OF PREDESTINATION.**

And the first set of passages concern the situation with Judas. Many of those who believe in predestination look to what happened with Judas as proof that his actions were predestined beforehand and that Judas had no other choice but to betray the Lord. And we do remember what the Lord said in John 17:12. As He prayed to the Father the Lord referred to His disciples and said, ***"While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled."*** Later on, as the apostles moved to replace Judas, Peter said in Acts 1:16, ***"Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus."*** Some, therefore, have taken these verses to mean that Judas had no choice. However, we should point out that there is a difference between God making something happen and God knowing what will happen. That passage in Acts refers to this situation being ***"foretold."*** That word is not the same as something being "predestined." In other words, God knew that Judas would betray the Lord, but God did not make it happen. Perhaps we could compare it to watching a movie twice. The second time I know what will happen, but that does not mean that I make it happen. Or maybe in a similar way, if we go to Culver's this afternoon, I know what my daughter will order. I do not make her order something, but as her father, I pretty much know what she will order. And we know that Judas had a choice in what he did because of how he reacted. After Judas betrayed the Lord, he did not say, "Well, you can't blame me, because I couldn't help it," but Judas said (in Matthew 27:4), ***"I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."*** The lesson here is that foreknowledge is not the same as predestination.

There is a second passage (a second line of reasoning) that many people use to support the idea that God pre-selected certain people to be saved and certain people to be lost, and it is found in Acts 13. The verse is Acts 13:48, but as with many false doctrines, the confusion can be cleared up by looking at the surrounding verses, so let's look together at Acts 13:44-49, a passage where Paul and Barnabas were preaching on their First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:44-49)...

⁴⁴ The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. ⁴⁶ Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ "For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.' " ⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they began

rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ ***And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region.***

The controversy, of course, comes in verse 48, as we find that ***“as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”*** Some will look at this verse and will say that the only reason certain people believed is because they had been pre-selected by God to believe, and that the others had not been selected. However, here again, the word “predestine” is not found. Notice: We have not even gotten to the word “predestination” yet. But instead, the word ***“appointed”*** is used. Some scholars translate the word as being “disposed” to eternal life, that is, they were “receptive” to eternal life, they wanted it, they were determined to have it, they were heading in that direction. And when we look at the context, that is exactly what happened. In verse 46, Paul and Barnabas spoke up and said to the Jews, ***“...you judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life.”*** And so we have a contrast. Concerning eternal life, the Jews had judged themselves unworthy of it (that is, they did not want it), but the Gentiles had accepted it—not that God had forced them to accept it, not that God had pre-selected them as being worthy of it, but rather, the Gentiles had made a decision to believe the words that were being spoken by Paul and Barnabas. And notice, Paul did not say, “Hey, you guys, I know I’ve been preaching here to you Jews and you are not accepting it, but God is really the one to blame. After all, since you have not been pre-selected, you guys couldn’t be saved even if you wanted to be saved!” Paul did not say that, but he pointed out that one group had accepted the gospel and another group had rejected the gospel. The Jews were filled with jealousy, they contradicted whatever Paul said, they were blaspheming, and they judged themselves unworthy of eternal life. But in contrast, the Gentiles were rejoicing when they heard the word of God, they were glorifying the word of God, and they believed the word of God. In other words, both groups made a choice.

There is a third line of reasoning that is based on several verses in Romans 8. And here again, if you go into it with the denominational idea of predestination, you can understand why someone would come away with the idea that these verses support their doctrine. However, there is a better way of looking at it. Let’s look together at Romans 8:28-30 where Paul says,

²⁸ And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

The key to this passage (as far as predestination is concerned) is that we are talking here about those who ***“love God”*** and those who are ***“called according to His purpose.”*** And it is not as if God just picked a few people at random here and there, but there are other passages that refer to this idea of being ***“called.”*** I am thinking of 2 Thessalonians 2:14, where Paul said, ***“It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** We have been called through the gospel! In fact, this comes right after another verse that is sometimes used to defend the Calvinistic idea of predestination. 2 Thessalonians 2:13 says, ***“But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.”*** Well, we do have the idea there that we have been chosen from the beginning, but we were chosen ***“through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.”***

And so we are not talking about just a few lucky people who have had their names drawn out of a hat by God, but we are talking about those who have heard the gospel and have responded to it. We are talking about

those who have been sanctified by **“faith in the truth.”** As I see it, then, when Paul talks in Romans 8 about those who have been **“predestined,”** he is not talking about just a few individuals, but he is talking more about a class of people—those people who have responded to the gospel message. And yes, God might have known beforehand that certain people would obey the gospel, but God did not cause some to obey and God did not prohibit others from doing so (simply because they were not chosen). And so if we think of this in terms of a group, we start to understand that God was not picking individuals, but God was saying that those who are Christians have been predestined to conform to the image of His Son. In other words, there is more to being a Christian than simply winning the eternal lottery, but those of us in this group have an appointment (it is our destiny) to grow closer to God’s Son. Please remember the literal definition of the word as we briefly discussed it earlier, the idea that predestination refers to “a boundary being marked off ahead of time.” In this passage, then, the idea is: Here is the boundary—it is up to you whether you are in it or not.

A similar passage is found in Ephesians 1. Let us then look together at Ephesians 1:3-14, and as we look at these verses, I would encourage you to notice the many references to being **“in Christ”** or **“in Him.”** In fact, it might even help to underline those words. The words of Paul from Ephesians 1:3-14,

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace⁸ which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight⁹ He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him¹⁰ with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him¹¹ also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,¹² to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.¹³ In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise,¹⁴ who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

As we think about this paragraph, it is important to remember that it was written to Christians, to members of the Lord’s church in the city of Ephesus. Back up in verse 1, Paul addresses the letter, **“To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus.”** And so instead of thinking about the predestination here in terms of individuals being randomly selected for salvation, let’s think about this in terms of the church, or in terms of Christians as a whole. And so where Paul refers to **“us”** or **“we,”** let’s try thinking about that in terms not of individuals who have had their names picked out of a hat, but let’s think of it in terms of Christians as a group. Look at verse 4, for example, **“...He chose [Christians] in Him before the foundation of the world, that [Christians] would be holy and blameless.”** In verse 5, **“He predestined [Christians] to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.”** And we could do the same thing all through this paragraph—God predestined that Christians would be **“in Him,”** that Christians would **“obtain an inheritance,”** and so on. The passage does not teach that God randomly pre-selected some people to be saved and caused the vast majority of others to be lost.

III. This morning we have looked at the Calvinistic concept of predestination, and we have considered the main passages that are normally used to teach Calvin's doctrine, but as we come to a close, we need to look again at **WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF FREE WILL AND PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY.**

There are several passages to consider here, the first of which is Mark 16:15-16. Right before He left this earth, the Lord said to His disciples, ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."*** If God had already pre-selected those who are saved, there would be no reason for preaching the good news of salvation, and there would certainly be no need for anyone to be baptized into Christ.

We could also consider John 3:16, perhaps the most-loved verse in the New Testament, ***"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."*** This verse makes no sense (and is actually quite cruel) if God has pre-selected certain people to be lost and certain people to be saved.

But in reality, the Bible teaches that each of us will give an account and will be held responsible based on the deeds that we have done. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:10, ***"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."*** We are not judged based on whether we've been picked, but we will be judged based on what we have done, whether good or evil.

In reality (according to 1 Timothy 2:4), God wants ***"...all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."*** He wants all people to accept the sacrifice of His Son. He wants all people to obey. As the Bible says about Jesus in Hebrews 5:8-9, ***"Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation."*** Again, if the saved have already been pre-selected, this passage would actually be a sick and twisted lie. But as it is, God has given all of us freedom of choice. We as individuals have not been pre-selected for salvation or eternal death, but the Lord has given us an invitation.

Can you imagine going to court and facing a judge who has already decided your case? I hope nobody here has been in that situation. But imagine facing the judge knowing that the facts of the case have nothing to do with the decision that the judge has already made. Imagine that the judge has already flipped a coin, and imagine that what you actually did was to have no bearing whatsoever on the outcome of the trial. Let us be thankful that God is not that kind of judge! But according to Romans 2:5-11, all of us will face,

...the righteous judgment of God, who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

Conclusion:

As we close, I would like for us to consider one final passage: Revelation 22:14-17. As we consider this Scripture, let us please ask ourselves: Does this sound like it came from a God who decided everything beforehand?

¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying. ¹⁶ "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." ¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

My understanding of predestination is that God (before He created the world) put a system in place so that all of us could have free will. It has nothing to do with dodging bullets on a battlefield; but rather, God predetermined that all of those who accept the offer of His Son's sacrifice on His terms would be welcome to join Him for eternity. The Bible teaches that we accept God's offer by turning away from our sins, by allowing ourselves to be dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and by living the rest of our lives as His children. If you would like to accept that offer, the choice is yours. You can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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