

THE PREDESTINATION OF GOD'S ELECT

Everything that God does for us here in time, our conversion, justification, and salvation, is a result of His gracious choice laid on us in Jesus Christ before He founded the world. His gracious election is the reason why we have become believers. Paul wrote, "He also called those whom He had predestined. He also justified those whom He had called, and He also glorified those whom He had justified" (Rm 8:30). The same people, out of the mass of sinful humanity whom God called, justified, and glorified are the people whom He has chosen in eternity.

It should not surprise anyone that God knows things in advance. However, election is more than this. When God "knows" someone in the special Scriptural sense of the word "know", He knows that person with affection and with effect. He claims that person in love and makes that person His own. In this sense, there is little difference in meaning between God's foreknowledge and His predestination.

In predestination we meet the same affront to human reason that we see in conversion, preservation in the faith, and salvation. If a person has been predestined, converted, preserved, and saved, it is entirely due to God's grace in Christ. If a person is not predestined, converted, preserved, and saved, it is entirely that person's own fault. We have to avoid two errors, blaming God if particular persons are not predestined, converted, preserved, and saved, or wrongly assuming that persons are elected and saved because of better conduct, less resistance to God's grace, or even that God saw in advance that they would believe. Predestination "in view of future faith" is either meaningless, or leaves the door open to human merit as a reason. We must trace everything back to the good pleasure of God's will (Eph 1:4-5).

Human reason would make us conclude that, if certain people do not belong to the elect, God had chosen in eternity to damn those people. However, Scripture nowhere teaches such an election by God to damnation. We find that the Scriptures teach three things, which do not square with human reason. 1) God earnestly desires the salvation of all people; 2) Salvation is entirely by His grace in Christ, who died for the sin of the whole world; 3) God has in eternity, in grace and in Christ, chosen some people to salvation. The terms that we use are 1) universal grace, 2) grace alone; and 3) particular grace. Our human reason cannot harmonise 1 and 3. We are tempted to explain the difference by modifying 2. Predestination applies only to those who will be saved, and it is the reason why those people become believers in Jesus Christ here in time. In His providence, God shapes and governs people's lives. Because of His gracious choice made in eternity, God shapes people's lives so that the Gospel leads them to faith in Christ, the only Saviour.

The wrong ways to view the teaching of predestination are either to have a false sense of security, saying, "I am one of the elect; I cannot fall away and lose salvation, no matter how wicked I am or how much I despise God's grace; or to despair, thinking, "If I am not one of the elect, nothing can alter my omission from God's grace." If a person thinks in either of these ways, he either forgets the tremendous grace of God or ignores the fact that Scripture uses this teaching to reassure and comfort trembling sinners. The teaching of predestination usually either comes at the beginning in Scriptural passages, as in Ephesians 1, or as the closing reassurance after an exposition of the Gospel, as in Romans 8:29-30.

God has made His gracious choice of the elect in eternity (Eph 1:4; 2 Thess 2:13; 2 Tm 1:9). His motive to save was entirely His gracious purpose (2 Tm 1:9; Rm 9:11; 11:15). He did not choose arbitrarily, but because of the saving obedience of Jesus Christ, whom He had also chosen in eternity to be the Saviour (2 Tm 1:9; Eph 1:4; Eph 3:11). The result of His gracious purpose in Christ is that His elect will have eternal life (Acts 13:48; 2 Tm 1:9; 2:10). He carried out His choice through Christ's work of atonement, offering salvation to all people through the Gospel and Baptism (1 Pt 1:2; Rm 8:29-30). God has chosen a certain number of certain people to salvation (Acts 13:48; Mt 20:16; 22:14; 2 Tm 2:19; Jn 13:18). When we contemplate the wonderful fact that we now believe in Christ, we understand that it is due to God's working out in us His gracious eternal choice to save us (Rm 8:30; Eph 1:11; 3:10-11; Mk 13:20-22). Jesus wants us to rest our assurance of salvation on His promises. "My sheep listen to My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me, and I give them eternal life, and they will certainly not be lost, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand" (Jn 10:27-29).

This teaching should comfort us when we lament that there is so much spiritual apostasy. No one can snatch Jesus' sheep from His hand. The gates of hell will not overcome Christ's church.

God has not revealed the names of His elect. The hidden God is a God of the Law, who terrifies us. Therefore we should not speculate about what God has not revealed to us. We should keep our focus on God's revealed Word and will in the Gospel, and firmly believe that no believers in God's only Son will perish, but

they will have eternal life (Jn 3:15-16). God's revealed will, that He desires the salvation of all, the truth that God's call is serious and effective, and that Jesus has achieved redemption for all sinners ought to be the ground of our assurance when we are tempted to speculate or despair over God's hidden will. Although our reason cannot reconcile God's universal grace, universal atonement, and His particular grace, we trust that there are no contradictions in God, and that His thoughts and ways are higher than ours. He wants us to trust that, when we finally stand on the sea of glass before God's throne in glory, and His secret purposes are transparent to us, we shall acknowledge that the reason why we are there is His gracious choice laid on us in eternity, carried out through Jesus' redemption, and applied to us through the means of grace here in time.

In some passages of Scripture there has been a mistaken bias in some translations towards election to damnation. Careful translation of Romans 9:22-24 observes the difference in the use of the word "prepared." "What if God, although He wanted to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with great patience the vessels of wrath, who had prepared themselves for destruction? What if He also did this to make known His rich glory on the vessels of mercy, whom He had prepared in advance for glory, even us, whom He has called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" In 1 Peter 2:8 is it important to understand that there is a great difference between God's decision to consign to wrath that is consequent on people's unbelief and His eternal will in eternity to save His elect. Peter wrote that Jesus Christ is "a Stone over which they stumble, and a Rock over which they fall." and "They stumble because they disobey the Word. That is also the end appointed for them." The end of unbelievers is the punishment that God determines for unbelievers, who will be damned. It is not an end to which God had predestined them from eternity. Their lamentable damnation is not the consequence of God's unwillingness to save them, but the consequence of their unbelief. "He who has not believed will be condemned" (Mk 16:16). When Jesus called Judas, literally, "the son of destruction" (Jn 17:12), His meaning was not that Judas had been predestined to destruction, but that Judas would be lost, as Scripture had also foretold.

At the end of this world, the books will be opened. What will finally matter will not be the record of our sins, for Jesus' sacrificial blood has blotted them out. What will matter is God's book of life, in which the names of His elect in Christ has been indelibly recorded (Plp 4:2; Rv 3:5; 20:12; 21:27). The book of life contains the names of God's elect, and it belongs to the Lamb, who has been "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rv 13:8). The remedy against foolish and terrifying speculation is therefore to fix our minds on Jesus Christ, our Saviour.