

## The Question of Predestination

Another common and very vexing problem associated with the character of God is the matter of predestination. Since God is both omniscient and omnipotent according to Scripture, when He knows everything that will ever happen, including, in particular the names of those men who will reject Him and therefore be eternally lost. He knew this, in fact, before they were ever born - indeed, before the first man was ever created!

The problem is, since God knew that, why didn't He refrain from creating those, whom He knew would reject Him? It seems as though, when we look at it this way, those who, God knew would eventually reject Him in this life were predestined to hell before they were born. Wouldn't it have been more merciful and loving for God not to bring those whom He knew would reject Him into existence at all?

Doesn't it seem strange that Christians are commanded to "*preach the Gospel to every creature,*" when all the time, God already knows who will refuse the Gospel and for whom, therefore, such preaching is bound to be fruitless? And, doesn't it seem rather strange that God's Word teaches that He is "*not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*" [2 Peter 3:9] and, yet, He knows those that will reject Him and perish? If God doesn't want them to perish then why did He create them? If He really didn't know that they would reject Him and His Gospel before He created them, then He is not omniscient. In any case, God's character is involved in a contradiction, and there are those who use this argument to say that because of this reasoning, God doesn't really exist.

There are those who carry the teaching of *predestination* to the extreme of what is referred to as "*determinism.*" "*Determinism*" means that everything that ever happens has been previously determined. Some, who do believe in God, believe that these things were pre-determined by God, while others, rejecting God, believe that these things are determined, not by God, but by the unyielding laws of nature.

Modern thinking goes something like this: "*Freedom of mind or will is only an illusion; man's brain, like all the rest of his physiology, is only a complex aggregation of chemicals, and what takes place there can in principle be altogether explained in terms of electric circuitry and chemical reactions. This being so, he is not responsible for his actions. The criminal steals because his genetic background and the interplay of forces in his environment make it inevitable. The good man deserves no praise, the wicked no blame, since both alike were predestined to be what they are by the inescapable sequence of cause and effect in all natural relationships.*"

And, yet, though all such reasoning seem rigidly logical, everyone of rational mind is certainly aware that he *does* make decisions of his own. He may not have completely free will, of course - he cannot will himself to fly to Jupiter, for example - but he *is* free to decide whether to go to the other side of the room or not. In fact, most of our activities all day long involve a continuous decision-making sequence, from deciding to get up in the morning to deciding to go to bed at night.

All such things are such an integral part of our experience that, if they were not *real*, then it would seem nothing is real. In fact, our very brains, whether they are merely complicated electric circuitry or actually house an eternal intelligence, are the instruments by which we both make decisions and also devise reasoning which deny that we make decisions! How can we be sure that our thought processes are any more reliable when we are thinking "*deterministically*" than when we seem to be making free choices? Rigid logic seems to lead to determinism or predestination, whereas subjective experience assures us that we do really choose and decide things ourselves, at least within limits.

So which is right? It is obviously far easier to raise such questions than to answer them. It certainly doesn't help to use this problem as an argument against God, since the same problem is still there and, in fact, is even more insoluble if there is no God. Besides, we have already seen that the evidence for God's existence is overwhelmingly strong and it is not dissipated merely by raising questions about His fairness.

The solution to the paradox must, therefore, be in God Himself. Since He is the source of all meaning and all reality, He is sovereign not only over all that ever happens but also over all that we ever experience. That is, the very consciousness we have of choosing and deciding is a reality, and not a delusion, because God made us and gave us this consciousness. At the same time, the choices and decisions we make are also part of God's creation and find their ultimate cause in Him.

The reason we cannot really comprehend this paradox is because we are finite and God is infinite. It is like the two sides of the door, both of them real, but which can be viewed only on one side at a time. Or perhaps it is like the two parallel lines, which meet only at infinity. It is the scientist's "*principle of complementarity*," in the theological realm.

We cannot resolve the paradox by logical reasoning. Historically, the Calvinist-Armenian controversy seems always to founder on the rock of logic, even when carried out in terms of Biblical texts. The one will emphasize the ultimacy of divine sovereignty and those Scriptures that teach God's omnipotence; the other will stress the reality of man's experience of choosing and those Scriptures that emphasize human responsibility. Some Calvinists . . . (especially ultra-Calvinists, who believe in predestination to the extent of "*what will be, will be*") . . . will contend that the "*whosoever*" Scriptures apply only to the "*world*" of the elect. Armenians will interpret the "*predestination*" Scriptures in terms of God's foreknowledge of man's free choice.

It would seem that the only way of resolving the conflict is to recognize that both doctrines - that is, God's sovereignty in election and man's responsibility in decision - are true. It is significant that there is a wealth of Scriptures supporting each doctrine and, yet, somehow the writers of Scripture never seem aware that this poses a difficulty. The "*predestination - free will question*" as such is never discussed in the Bible, even though both concepts are frequently presented. Both doctrines are taught forcefully in Scripture, yet with no intimation that they contradict each other!

For example, the Lord Jesus in Matthew 11:27 said, "*All things are delivered unto Me of My Father, and no man knoweth the son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him.*" This statement stresses God's divine prerogative in choosing man. Yet, in the next breath, the Lord said, "*Come unto Me, all ye*

*that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" [Matthew 11:28]. Here apparently is a blanket invitation to one and all.

The classic predestination passage in Romans 9 says, "*Therefore hath He mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardeneth*" [Romans 9:18]. However, Paul in the next chapter says, "*For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*" [Romans 10:12-13].

In Ephesians 1:11, the Apostle Paul says we have been "*predestinate according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will.*" He says that God "*hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world*" [Ephesians 1:4]. Yet the same Apostle said that God "*now commandeth all men everywhere to repent*" [Acts 17:30]. Also, he said, "*Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men...Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God*" [2 Corinthians 5:11,20].

A sticking example of the juxtaposition (that is, "*placing two facts, or ideas, side by side, for comparison or contrast.*") of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in the very same act is found in Peter's Pentecostal sermon: "*Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain*" [Acts 2:23]. And also, "*The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ . . . for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done*" [Acts 4:26, 28].

What man's logical reasoning would seem to view as contradictory, Scripture thus treats as perfectly normal and natural. This, therefore, is the way we should approach this otherwise difficult and even inflammatory subject.

That is, both doctrines are completely true and highly practical in terms of spiritual understanding and motivation. The paradoxical aspects we can safely leave to God and eternity for solution.

From our human point of view, in this present world, we are fully capable of making decisions and responsible for the consequences of those decisions. "*The soul that sinneth, it shall die . . . the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him*" [Ezekiel 18:20]. Paul says that God "*will render to every man according to his deeds . . . For there is no respect of persons with God*" [Romans 2:6, 20].

Furthermore, the death of Christ, as the infinite Word made flesh, was adequate price for the redemption of all men, even though it is ultimately effective only for the elect. He "*tasted death for every man*" [Hebrews 2:9], even for those who "*deny the Lord that bought them*" [2 Peter 2:1].

The Scriptures are clear in their teaching that any man who wills may come to Christ to receive salvation. "*Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely*" [Revelation 22:17].

Each man also is completely responsible for the effects of his decision to accept or reject Christ. *"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the son shall not see life: but the wrath of God abideth on him"* [John 3:36].

Christians believers, furthermore, are command to *"be witnesses . . . unto the uttermost part of the earth"* [Acts 1:8]. This witness is not to be a cold, matter-of-fact, take-it-or-leave-it, presentation of the Gospel, but rather a prayerful, sincere, urgent message which is *lived out* before others, in word and deed, inviting them to Christ. The Apostle Paul, from whom we have received the strongest teachings on election, preached in such a way. *"For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more . . . I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some"* [1 Corinthians 9:19, 22]. He reminded the Ephesians, *"that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears"* [Acts 20:31].

From man's point of view, therefore, we must see reality in terms of human freedom and responsibility. God has made us thus and therefore this universal human experience is quite real and not an illusion. God is omnipotent and therefore can grant such responsibility to man without in any way compromising His own sovereignty.

Nonetheless, from God's point of view, all things are foreknown and therefore foreordained. *"Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world"* [Acts 15:18].

With respect in particular to the greatest of all decisions - that of accepting or rejecting Christ - we are told that Satan *"deceiveth the whole world"* [Revelation 12:9] and that he has *"blinded the minds of them which believe not"* [2 Corinthians 4:4]. Therefore, although an unsaved man may think and feel that he has complete freedom to choose as he wishes, he is really instead *"the bondservant of sin"* [John 8:34] and is not free at all. Before a man is free to choose, God Himself must open his understanding. *"If the son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed"* [John 8:36].

Therefore, not only must the price be paid for man's salvation and then the Gospel offer made to him, but he must also be prepared in heart and mind by God before he is free to respond to Him in faith. Jesus said, *"No man can come to Me except the Father which hath send Me draw him"* [John 6:44]. Who are those, then, who choose to come to Him? Jesus answers, *"All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me"* [John 6:37]. What happens to those who come to Him? Again, Jesus says to His heavenly Father, *"Those that Thou gavest Me I have kept, and none of them is lost"* [John 17:12]. But suppose that some whom the Father *"draws"* to Christ choose not to come? The Apostle Paul states, *"Moreover, whom He did predestinate, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified"* [Romans 8:30], and, Jesus said, *"Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chose you"* [John 15:16].

The believer, after he has freely accepted Christ by his own decision, invariably can recall many events and circumstances which led him inexorably to that decision. From his viewpoint as an unsaved man, he voluntarily and freely trusted Christ as Savior and was born again. But from the divine viewpoint, he was one whom *"God had saved and called with a holy calling . . . according to his own purpose and grace, given us in Christ Jesus before the world began"* [2 Timothy 1:9]. His name had been *"written from the foundation of the world in the book of live"* [Revelation 13:8]. He had been *"chosen in Him before the foundation of the world"* and therefore one day he *"chose that day the One whom he would serve"* [Joshua 24:15].

The doctrine of election may, if misunderstood, lead both to lethargy in missions and evangelism and to indifference in Christian living. If the elect are bound to be saved anyway, some may think, "*Why bother to evangelize them?*" *Furthermore, what difference does it make how I live, since my election was settled long ago?*"

Anyone who would reason in such a way as this, however, it is very likely that they were not saved in the first place. That is why Peter, writing to professing Christians said, "*Give diligence to make your calling and election sure*" [2 Peter 1:10].

We were "*chosen before the world began to be holy and without blame before Him in love*" [Ephesians 1:4]. Our "*predestination*" is that we might be "*conformed to the image of His Son*" [Romans 8:29].

Rather than a warrant for laxity, therefore, the truth of election is the strongest inducement to zeal and holiness. It stimulates patience in suffering, courage in danger, and thanksgiving in all things. "*We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to His purpose*" [Romans 8:28].

Furthermore, it is a strong incentive to true evangelism. We should "*preach the Gospel to every creature*" [Mark 16:15] not only because Christ commanded it, but also because we know that God will always use it for His own purposes [Isaiah 55:11] and that it will "*prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.*" It is the highest of all privileges to be "*ambassadors for Christ, beseeching men in Christ's stead to be reconciled to God.*" As the Lord told Paul when he entered Corinth, "*Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace . . . For I have much people in this city*" [Acts 18:9-10]. This was while those people were yet unsaved. Similarly, when Paul preached in Antioch, the Scriptures say that "*as many as were ordained to eternal life believed*" [Acts 13:48].

Thus both doctrines, God's sovereign election and man's moral responsibility, are true. Though we cannot in our finite minds understand and reconcile them logical, we can sense their truth in our hearts, confident in faith that what God does, by definition, is right in the context of eternity.