

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION

A Brief Analysis of Ephesians 1:3-12 and Romans 8:29-30

By Sean Zimmerman

What does the Bible teach about the doctrine of predestination? Does the Bible teach the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election, namely that: By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it can not be either increased or diminished. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace. (Phillip Schaff. *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990, p. 608-609.)

In other words does the Bible teach that God from all eternity has chosen who will be saved and receive faith and who will be damned simply for His own good pleasure without reference to anything in human beings or anything He foresees them doing? Are our eternal destinies fixed before we are ever born? Do we have any say whatsoever in the matter? To answer these questions I think it would be pertinent to go to the only two passages in scripture where the term predestination is applied to human beings: Ephesians 1:3-12 and Romans 8:29-30. While I realize that many other passages are frequently brought up in the predestination debate, I believe that a correct understanding of these two passages will help to safeguard against error in interpreting other passages where the term predestination is not being used and where the concept is not clearly in view. If it can be proven from Ephesians 1:3-12 and Romans 8:29-30 that the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election is true, then the Calvinists are indeed correct in their understanding of predestination. On the other hand, if neither the passage in Ephesians or Romans teaches the idea that “God elects a specific people unto Him self without reference to anything they do” (James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), p.39.) then it should seriously jeopardize the doctrine of unconditional election and the whole of the Calvinistic system as well.

Let's begin with Ephesians 1:3-12:

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, just as He chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which he has made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to his good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth-in Him, in whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.

First, let's look at the time frame of the passage. It is said to be “before the foundation of the world”. In other words God's predestination takes place before anyone ever existed. Secondly, we need to realize to whom Paul is writing. He is writing to Christians. What he has to say is applicable only to Christians. Who are the ones that God the Father has chosen before the foundation of the world? Paul writes in verse four that He “chose us [Christians to whom Paul is writing] in Him [in Christ, i.e. those who believe in Christ]”. What has God predestined and chosen Christians for? Is it to receive faith and salvation? Not at all. Paul writes that God has

predestined all Christians to be “adopted as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself” (ver. 5) and to be “holy and without blame before Him” (ver. 4).

As many have pointed out, observe, first, the subjects of the choice, “us,” believers, not people of the world (the apostle includes himself); and secondly, the object or goal of predestination, “unto the adoption of children.” W.B. Riley said on this passage: “The term ‘predestination’ which has alarmed many, is only another expression of the eternal compassion, the eternal plan, the eternal purpose, the eternal project-redemption! The believer’s position, however, is by the exercise of man’s will. He has ‘predestinated us unto the adoption of children...’ but He will never foreclose on that which He has purchased without our personal consent. The day one is willing to be adopted, that day he becomes God’s child... Our adoption is done the moment we consent to it; but the joy of it all, to the praise and glory of His grace-comes to us in ever-increasing measure.” (The Bible of the Expositor and the Evangelist, “New Testament,” Vol XII, pp. 13-15). Another Baptist pastor and teacher, Dr. A.J. Wall, said on this, “One must first conclude that he is talking about saved persons and not the means of their salvation. Then in verses four and five as he talks about choosing and predestinating, he is talking about saved people, for Paul includes himself by saying ‘us’... It did not say ‘according as He has chosen some to be saved before the foundation of the world,’ but ‘according as He has chosen us’ (we who are believers)... ‘that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.’ Not that some should be saved or that some shall be lost, for the subject of the salvation of the soul is not mentioned. Before the foundation of the world God chose that the believers in Christ should be, or stand, before Christ in love, holy and without blame. It must be some future time when the believer will be conformed to the image of His Son... Ephesians 1:11, the believer is predestinated to receive an inheritance that has already been purchased, obtained, or paid for.” (The Truth About Election, pp. 12-14). (Samuel Fisk, Election and Predestination (Bicester, England: Penfold Book & Bible House, 1997), p. 134-135.)

The authors quoted above are absolutely correct. God has predestined that all believers will receive an inheritance and be conformed to the image of His son. No where does the passage teach the concept that God has chosen who will be saved and who will be lost without reference to anything in the creature. “The mystery of His will” is that God has worked out a plan from all eternity to give an inheritance to all who believe in His Son Jesus Christ. All of God’s predestining is done for those who are in Christ (i.e. only for believers).

What then of verse 11 which states that God “works all things according to the counsel of His will”? Does this mean that all things happen irresistibly? We need to keep in mind that God’s counsel can indeed be resisted: “But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him” (Luke 7:30). So while God is in control of everything and works everything according to His own plans and desires, His plans and desires for certain individuals can be resisted. However, even when people rebel against God and His desires for them, He is able to use their rebellion and rejection of His counsel to further His own purposes. An example of this are the vessels of wrath who have prepared themselves for destruction by resisting His will in Romans 9:22. Even though He bears with them in great patience allowing them every opportunity to repent, God can justly display his wrath against them when they ultimately fail to do so. God wills that all should repent and believe (Isaiah 55:6-7, Ezekiel 18:28-32). He also desires to demonstrate His wrath and His power (Romans 9:22). Thus whether they receive or reject Him, His will is still accomplished!

Let us now proceed with Romans 8:29-30:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom he justified, these He also glorified.

We should start by asking ourselves who are the persons in Romans 8:29 that are foreknown? Verse 28 states that it is those who love God, i.e. Christians. To what then are these people predestined to? Salvation? Faith? No, they are predestined to be “conformed to the image of His Son.” In other words, everyone that loves God has been predestined to be made like Jesus: “So what is God saying about predestination? All those who love

God are predestined. God has a previously thought-out plan for them. And that plan is to make them like Jesus.” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.; Peter H. Davids; F.F. Bruce; Manfred T. Brauch; Hard Sayings of the Bible (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 559.) This only confirms our interpretation of Ephesians 1:3-12.

In short, the Biblical doctrine of predestination can be summed up as this: God has predestined that all who believe in Jesus Christ and accept Him as their Lord and Savior will be adopted as God’s children, receive an eternal inheritance and be made like Jesus. Neither Ephesians 1:3-12 nor Roman 8:29-30 teach that God has chosen unconditionally who will be saved and who will be damned. That is a concept that has been read into the scriptures, not taken out of it. Predestination has nothing to do with salvation, it has to do with the rewards that God has eternally planned to give all those who are saved.

Since the only two passages which use the word predestination in reference to persons do not teach the doctrine of unconditional election, then it is extremely doubtful that other passages where the word is absent are teaching it. Indeed this doctrine completely contradicts the whole tenor of the scriptures. The Bible is quite clear that God truly desires that all would repent and be saved (Acts 17:30, I Timothy 2:4, II Peter 3:9). God does not desire that the wicked should perish but that he should repent and live (Ezekiel 33:11). God continually stretches out His hands to rebellious people (Isaiah 65:2) and whosoever wills may freely partake of the water of life (Revelation 22:17). Praise God!

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We have one of the most complete book lists on this subject of man's free will and God's sovereignty there is. I personally reject all five points of Calvinism as do all the authors. However some authors believe it is "impossible" for a person once saved to fall from grace. Other authors accept the Wesleyan doctrine that it is possible, however if a person repents before death, they can return to "a saved position". At any rate, Calvinism on all 5 points is not biblical.

For complete harmonizing of all scriptures about salvation and a refutation of all 5 points of Calvinism these two books should be sufficient. 1.) Elect in the Son by Robert Shank (suggested donation \$12.95) and 2.) Life in the Son by Robert Shank (\$15.95) Order from Jesus People, 4338 3rd Ave. Sacramento, CA 95817