

PREDESTINATION

Another View of What Scripture Teaches

by David L. Miner

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Introduction

One of the more misunderstood doctrines of Scripture concerns predestination and the ultimate end of each person. While this is a topic of some importance, especially for those who feel called to a public ministry, I must state that this issue is not of significance importance in my eyes. Nor, I believe, is it of importance in the eyes of Jesus, Paul, John, or any other biblical writer. I state this because I believe all the Biblical writers explain fully, and usually more than once, each doctrine that each particular writer feels is important. There is little or no ambiguity concerning the necessity of the death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. There is little or no ambiguity concerning the truth of the hereafter, or that there are two places to spend that hereafter. There is little or no ambiguity concerning the resurrection of Jesus after three days in the grave, nor concerning the fact that this same Jesus now sits at the right hand of God the Father interceding for his adopted brothers and sisters. There is little or no ambiguity concerning the importance of Believers living a holy life after salvation, a life where we are representing and emulating the life that Christ lived during his short life and even shorter ministry while here on earth. All doctrinal beliefs that the biblical writers felt were essential for those of us who follow Jesus to fully understand in order to effectively live a holy life, or lead others into that holy life, were presented in a thorough manner, more or less completely explained to the extent that they thought we need to understand the issue.

For an example of this ambiguity, let us take baptism. Scripture is clear about the importance of baptism as a symbolic statement of the believer's death to sin and new life in Christ. No mainstream Christian church, Catholic or Protestant, hesitates to underline the importance of baptism to the spiritual life of a believer. But what is not clearly stated in Scripture is how wet we should get. So each denomination has a different methodology of applying the truth with which we all agree.

On the other hand, while I believe the doctrine of predestination is not essential to entering the Kingdom of Heaven or to living a holy life, I do feel it is important enough to examine carefully and resolve its relevance to our own personal belief system. This issue is the foundation of Calvinism and demands a limited atonement, which is a serious doctrinal disagreement between most major denominations.

I see doctrinal beliefs as falling into five different categories, with this particular doctrinal belief being included in the fourth category. The categories are simplified into:

- 1) truth essential to entering into a saving relationship with Jesus, resulting in eternal life for the believer;
- 2) truth essential to entering into a life of spiritual growth and power after salvation, and to maintaining that growth in the power of the Holy Spirit;
- 3) truth important to those called to some position of spiritual leadership for the purpose of leading and teaching followers (usually perceived as leading to greater understanding or maturity in that leader);
- 4) truth that is good to understand because of the sense of confidence and maturity it gives to the believer, resulting in a greater and more effective understanding of the things of God, but not necessarily resulting in a greater degree of holiness or spiritual power in the individual's life; and
- 5) truth that may never be fully understood this side of heaven, and therefore not of great importance to understand this side of heaven.

This last category is not to be considered unimportant as in worthless or useless, but unimportant to the extent that it is not necessary to understand in order to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven or to fully experience God's grace and blessing offered to the believer. This last category of doctrinal belief is also, in my opinion, totally unimportant to the non-believer, inasmuch as it is a teaching that will, at best, cloud the essential issues necessary for a non-believer to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Specifically, if predestination is true, there is little or nothing the non-believer who is destined for heaven can do to avoid heaven, and there is little or nothing the non-believer destined for hell can do to enter heaven.

Discussion

Any discussion of predestination usually involves two sides, both fairly well-defined and both fairly well-researched. The stereo-typical proponent of the belief in predestination is a Presbyterian, holding to the traditional view of what is represented as the Calvinist perspective: that God fore-ordains before the foundations of time which individuals will be drawn by the Holy Spirit into a saving relationship with Jesus, and which individuals will be left alone by the Holy Spirit to spend an eternity separated from God. The stereo-typical proponent of the other side is a Methodist arguing that all people have a free will, and that each person determines his/her individual destiny by whether or not he/she responds positively to the drawing of the Holy Spirit. The degree to which the individual or group stretches the doctrine to its logical extreme is usually the deciding factor in how easily he/she can discuss this issue peacefully. The extreme Calvinist believes that every action and activity of each person is orchestrated by a sovereign God, down to the choice of clothing and even the route taken to work on any given morning. An example of this would be the person commenting on the outfit being worn, resulting in an opportunity to share Christ with that person. "God wanted me to wear this so I could share with that person," is often the claim made after the fateful

conversation. The other extreme believes the individual is so much in control of his/her eternal destiny that an individual is perceived to be able to lose his/her salvation on a moment by moment basis. I have heard it taught that if a Christian man were to see an attractive woman and lust after her and then die immediately without repenting, he would go to hell for an eternity.

But however close to either extreme an individual finds himself/herself, the debate is usually seen to have two basic perspectives. This article will not go into any more detail as to the two main beliefs. It will instead present a third perspective that is not a consolidation of both beliefs into a doctrine that could be used to draw both extremes closer to a middle ground, but is, instead, a totally new doctrine, showing both sides to be an incomplete understanding of Biblical writings on the issue.

The primary verses used in almost every discussion of this issue come from the first chapter of Ephesians. Here, beginning with verse 4, Paul teaches on this concept of predestination.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will -- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment -- to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession -- to the praise of his glory. [Ephesians 1: 3-14, NIV]

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without

blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath 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; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. [Ephesians 1:3-14, KJV]

Here Paul begins a long passage which extends far beyond the quote above, where he presents the preeminence of Christ. Paul teaches that Jesus is the central point of all of creation. It is a difficult concept to grasp, that God is to get all the praise and glory for making Jesus the central figure of everything that exists. I will not attempt to plumb the depths of this concept, but merely present it as Paul's thesis. In truth, the entire letter to the Ephesians is a presentation of the central importance of Jesus. This is the context of the letter, and must be understood as such before we pull two short paragraphs out of context to study them for themselves. Jesus is the central figure in all of creation, and he is the central figure in this letter. All the concepts that Paul presents and/or teaches here must be considered in light of the centrality of Jesus and Paul's presentation of that centrality.

Paul says, in verse 4, *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world."* Or is that really what he says? The verse actually states, *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."* This completed sentence is made clear in both the NIV and the KJV, along with the half dozen other translations I regularly use. If we extract a partial sentence, we can perhaps see the choosing as being the message of the verse. But if we look at the entire verse, we see that the issue being presented is not the choosing, but the holy and blameless. Paul continues with that line of reasoning in the next verse. *"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons."* Again, this is where the typical quoting stops, missing what I believe to be the key issue being presented here. *"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ..."* What Paul is teaching here is not the predestined adoption as sons, but the predestined adoption process as being through Jesus Christ. Paul is not teaching **who** is to be adopted as sons, but **how** the adoption process is to be carried out on those who become sons. The adoption process uses God's grace and Christ's death to bring everything into subjection to Jesus, resulting in

praise to God.

Paul continues this thought in verses 11 & 12. *"In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory."* Again we can see this passage as if it stated, *"In him we were chosen, having been predestined,"* or we can read what it really says. Paul is still developing his concept of a predestined plan or process, not a predestined list of believers. In case you get fixated on the first phrase of verse 11, let me suggest that this phrase relates to what follows his statement of a predestined plan, not to the plan itself. Specifically, I suggest what Paul is stating in this passage is the following: *"Those of us in him, in his family, were chosen to be holy and blameless followers of him. We were predestined to be adopted as sons through the sacrifice of Jesus and no other way, because that is how God wanted to do it. And he did it that way knowing that it would result in him receiving praise and glory, making our adoption as sons a reality that would bring even more praise and glory to the Father forever. To make this all happen in the way he chose before the foundations of the earth were laid, we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins only because of God's grace in offering the sacrifice of his son. And this grace will make it that much more clear for all eternity God's wisdom and understanding as he brings all things under his feet through his son."*

In other words, Paul wasn't teaching his own predestination to the Kingdom of Heaven, thereby implying that some were not predestined. Paul instead states his authority and leadership role in the Body of Christ by virtue of being in the group of early believers who were chosen to be an example used by the Spirit of God to draw people into the Kingdom. He then states the obvious: that his readers were also included in that Kingdom when they responded to someone's presentation of the Gospel, making no reference at all to his readers being predestined, chosen or elected.

Also in this passage, Paul presents two more concepts: God's will and God's purpose. While I have neither the space nor the time to develop these concepts, allow me to make a short observation. Throughout Scripture, the concept of **God's will** in the context of salvation is presented as relating to the process of using Christ's life, death and resurrection to bring people into the Kingdom of Heaven, and to calling believers to live in such a way as to facilitate non-believers in experiencing this salvation process (Matt 6:10 and 26:42; John 6:38-40; Acts 22:14; Gal 1:4). And throughout Scripture, the concept of **God's purpose** relates to bringing all things into subjection under Christ, bringing praise and glory to God (Acts 2:23; Romans 8:28 and 9:11-12; Gal 3:19; Eph 3:10 & 11; Heb 6:17). We will see these truths more clearly when we examine this next set of verses typically used in discussions of predestination.

The Book of Romans, beginning in Chapter 8 is the second primary reference used in debating this doctrine. This doctrine, along with related issues, is continued through the twelfth chapter. Paul takes almost four full chapters to properly develop his doctrine of predestination, not the verse or two referenced by most who debate classic

predestination. I will not quote the entire four chapters. Suffice it to say, however, that the typical discussion of two verses cannot possibly uncover the truth Paul uses four full chapters to teach. However, let us examine the few verses normally discussed, and we will see that even these few words do not teach what most represent them to teach.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. [Romans 8:28-30, NIV]

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. [Romans 8:28-30, KJV]

An incomplete reading of this passage would again seem to justify the view that God does indeed predestine some to heaven and some to hell. But, as before, in order to fully understand Paul's teaching on this issue, we need to read all of Paul's words on it, including the following three chapters where Paul continues his teaching on the issue. A cursory reading of all four chapters could lead one to conclude his/her belief in classical Calvinism is justified. On the other hand, a cursory reading of these same four chapters could seem to support the opposite perspective, also. Herein is the failure of a cursory reading of any part of Holy Scripture – one misses much of what God intends for one to understand. At the very least, one must read closely this passage in order to rightly divide the Word of Truth.

As we saw in the earlier verses, verse 29 does not teach that "*Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*" It states that those who God knew in advance would accept Jesus as Lord and Savior were predestined to be conformed to his likeness. There are many who have accepted Jesus as their savior who have not become conformed to his likeness. In fact, I submit that no believer can live in front of another believer and be mistaken for the holy Son of God. What is being taught here is, again, the predestination of the process of becoming Christ-like, of being absorbed into the life of Christ to such an extent that, perhaps slowly but certainly surely, the adopted son is changed to be more like the only begotten Son. It is both awesome and awful that God planned from the beginning of time for his only begotten son, Jesus, to die a horrible death so that you and I will have the option of being adopted into the Family of God. But having done that, it is simply incredible that we are predestined to be transformed into the likeness of our older Brother and Savior, Jesus!

Paul goes on in an attempt to clarify this teaching and, admittedly, it is a little confusing in some ways. For instance, Paul says in verse 32 that God gave up his son

for us all, using the Greek word Gr:pas. If we consult Strong's Exhaustive Concordance and Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, we find that Gr:pas means *all, every, everything, the whole*. This is the same word used in John 3:16, which is translated into *whoever*. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* "Whoever" implies any and all who want to may experience eternal life with Jesus. Yet, Paul also states, *"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?"* in verse 33, implying limited election. Let us take a quick walk through the next three chapters and try to establish what Paul is actually teaching.

In chapter nine, Paul tries to establish the nation of Israel as the chosen race, predestined above all other races or tribes to experience God in a special way. He says in verses 4 & 5 that theirs is the "adoption as sons; theirs is the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises." Yet he indicates this predestined tribe did not manifest this election completely. Paul goes on to say in verse six, "It is not as though God's word had failed." He continues with some statements of apparent predestination in the case of specific individuals, ending chapter nine in several references to the Old Testament establishing God's prerogative to save some and not save others. Yet Paul begins chapter ten with prayers for the Jews to be saved, and goes on to say that "...anyone who trusts in him will be saved..." and that "...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved..." In verse 16, however, Paul states, "But not all the Israelites accepted the good news." Apparently God predestined a tribe, but not each individual within that tribe lived up to the predestined path. Then Paul explains that faith comes from hearing the word of Christ, and that the Israelites both heard and understood. Still, not all Jews accepted. So, have we proven anything conclusively yet? Not yet, so we must continue reading.

In chapter 11 Paul asks, *"Did God reject his people? By no means! God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew."* This word *foreknew* is the same word he used earlier in chapter eight: *"Those whom he foreknew he also predestined..."* Then Paul states in verse seven that *"What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened..."* Now THIS sounds like classic predestination.

Finally, in verse 11 Paul asks, *"Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all!"* Here Paul draws on the olive tree analogy of Israel being the vine, and Gentiles being branches grafted onto the vine, dependent on the root. He teaches that some branches were cut off so that other branches could be grafted on. But he warns those which are grafted on that if they were not true in their faith that they would be cut off. In addition, if the original branches which were cut off, the Jews, finally returned to their faith, *"they will be grafted in again, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!"* (verses 23 & 24).

So, let's get this right. The Jews were predestined, but many of them didn't live

up to what they were predestined for. So the Gentiles, who were predestined to be on the outside, were included. But they are warned that, predestined or not, if they didn't live up to their predestined life, God would give them the boot and they would no longer be predestined. And the Jews, if they ultimately respond properly to their predestined path, then they would be predestined back into the Kingdom of God.

Are you properly confused yet?

Paul admits this is all somewhat of a mystery, and does not want them to be ignorant of it. Yet he goes on to add more confusion, by stating "*all Israel will be saved...*," yet calling the Jews "*enemies of the gospel*" while still being loved by God because of their election. "*For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.*" (verse 39).

So, what may we conclude from all these apparently incompatible teachings? Perhaps, I submit, we have been seeing the issue of predestination in an inaccurate and incomplete way. I believe this all begins to make sense, indeed is an exciting and inspiring truth, when we see the issue in an historical and national sense. Paul, I believe, teaches one consistent perspective throughout all these passages. Let me try to paraphrase what I believe to be his teachings.

The Greek word used for PREDESTINE is Gr:*proorizo* [pro-or-id'-zo], which both *Vine's* and *Strong's* suggest means *to limit in advance, i.e. (fig.) predetermine*. The word is usually interpreted to mean limiting or predetermining those who will enter heaven and those who will not. However, I would suggest the limits which have been predetermined are not the numbers or the names of those who get to heaven, but the numbers of methods by which ANYONE can get to heaven. Before the beginning of time God set out the guidelines, boundaries and parameters of his plan of salvation, and relegated all other methods and processes and systems of gaining favor with God to that of "wood, hay and stubble."

From the beginning of time, God knew man would sin and be driven out of his presence. So God designed a means to redeem humanity before we ever fell from the Garden of Eden. He predetermined a plan to redeem man through the life, death and resurrection of his only Son, Jesus. All those who would respond to his Spirit would be adopted as sons through his Only Begotten Son, and conformed to a life consistent with His Life. To secure this plan, God chose a people, the Jews, making an irrevocable covenant with the TRIBE. Knowing in advance they would not all individually respond to his call, God made provision to call Gentiles AS A RACE into his family, and in his own timing. The timing was predestined, as was opening adoption as sons through his Son to Gentiles as a group. In other words, God's **predestination** is to groups and nations, and not generally to individuals. God's **calling** is to individuals, and not generally to groups and nations. The Jews are still predestined as a nation to be his people. But many of those people have not individually accepted God's call on their lives. However, since they are *His People*, God reserves the right to deal with them in his own way. As a result, Scripture seems to teach that there will be a massive spiritual movement among Jewish people during the final days of the Tribulation, resulting in

literally millions of Jews accepting Christ as their Messiah. This is a direct result of God's predestination of the Jewish people as His People. The Gentiles, however, are not left out of God's plan for eternity. And here is where non-Jews can experience the grace of God as if they were Jews, chosen people, spiritual Jews as Paul says earlier in Romans. God's predetermination was intended to include all of mankind eventually, in his timing, to show his glorious grace, as Paul teaches in Ephesians:

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. [Ephesians 2:6&7, NIV]

It is true that God seems to have sovereignly placed his hand on a number of individuals, in a sort of personal predestination. Examples of this include Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptizer and Paul. It seems to many that these individuals (and others) have had little option but to experience God's calling, and little choice in responding, in the manner in which God wants. In addition, God appeared to Moses, Jesus appeared to Paul, and God took Elijah to heaven without his experiencing death. This should not lead the discerning Bible student to develop a doctrinal position that all individuals must experience the personal presence of the Triune God immediately before beginning a public ministry, or that the successful end of a public ministry results in being transported directly into heaven. Unique actions are SELDOM valid roots of a good theology! These unique experiences of certain specific individuals result directly from the fact that God is a sovereign God, able to do exactly what he wants without our permission or even our understanding. God reserves the right to make the rules, and then to make exceptions! And we must console ourselves with the grace he gives to us, each, individually. And great that grace is!

God has predestined the Jews to be his chosen people. In addition, he has predestined his grace to be shared with Gentiles. Also, he has predestined that all who follow him should come to God through his Only Son, Jesus, and through no other way. Further, he has called all of us who follow God to be holy and blameless. And he has sent his Spirit to call all people individually to himself, offering an abundant life on earth, and an eternity ruling with Jesus in heaven. We are called to respond to that Spirit, and yet given the opportunity to miss out, just like many of his chosen people have missed out. But *"It is not as though God's word had failed."* [Romans 9:6, NIV] It is, however, God's glorious and wonderful grace that any of us escape the hell we were all destined for, and even more grace that we can spend eternity with God in heaven.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. [Ephesians 2:6&7, NIV]