

Before the Foundation of the World

On Predestination, the Character of God, and the Comfort of the Gospel

The word predestination tends to produce one of two reactions. Either it sounds like cold theology, the kind of thing people argue about in seminaries but never bring to the dinner table, or it sounds troubling, as though God were playing a cosmic game with loaded dice. Most people who have heard the word land somewhere in the second category. They have a vague impression that predestination means God created a world full of people He intended to condemn, and the whole thing strikes them as fundamentally unfair. That reaction is understandable. It is also, I think, built on a misunderstanding of what the Bible actually teaches and why it teaches it.

So let us start with what predestination actually is. The simplest definition comes from Paul in Ephesians 1:4–5: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.”* Notice several things here. First, predestination is about adoption. It is a family word, not a courtroom word. God chose people to bring into His family. Second, this choice happened *before the foundation of the world*. It was not a reaction to anything we did or would do. It was settled in eternity. Third, it was *according to the purpose of his will*. The ground of election is not in the creature but in the Creator. God did not look down the corridor of time and see who would

choose Him and then rubber-stamp their decision. He chose, and that choosing is the reason anyone comes to faith at all.

I. Election Is God's Work, Not Ours

This is the point where the tension usually surfaces. If God chose who would be saved before anyone was born, then what about the people He did not choose? The question is real, and Scripture does not ignore it. Paul anticipates it directly in Romans 9:19–21: *“You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?”*

Paul's answer is not a philosophical argument. He does not attempt to resolve the tension in a way that makes it disappear. Instead, he points to the character and authority of God. The potter has the right. And the potter is not cruel. The same chapter that raises the hardest questions about election also gives us this: *“What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory?”* (Romans 9:22–23). God's patience, His power, and His mercy are all on display. The entire arrangement exists to magnify His glory, and specifically the glory of His grace.

But we need to be precise about something. When we say God “passed over” certain people, we do not mean He created them with the intention of sending them to hell for no reason. The Westminster Confession of Faith states it carefully: God, by the good pleasure of His will, foreordained some to everlasting life, and others He passed by and ordained to dishonor and wrath

for their sin. Those who perish do so on account of their own sin. They are not victims of an arbitrary decree. They are rebels who chose rebellion, and God, in His sovereignty, did not intervene to change their hearts as He did for the elect. The decree of reprobation is not symmetrical with election. God actively saves; He does not actively damn in the same way. The Reformed tradition has always insisted on this distinction.

II. Why Would God Create People He Knew Would Not Be Saved?

This question assumes that the highest good is the salvation of every individual human being, and that any arrangement that does not produce that outcome is morally deficient. But Scripture frames the highest good differently. The highest good is the glory of God. *“The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble”* (Proverbs 16:4). That is not a comfortable verse, but it is an honest one. God made a universe that would display the full range of His attributes: His justice, His patience, His wrath, and His mercy. Without the backdrop of sin and judgment, the grace of God in Christ would not shine with the brilliance it does. We would never know mercy if there were nothing to be merciful about.

Jonathan Edwards argued that the full display of God’s perfections required the existence of evil, not because God is the author of sin, but because God ordained a world in which sin would arise and in which He would glorify Himself through both judgment and redemption. Edwards writes:

“It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God’s glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God.”

The existence of those who reject God is not a problem that embarrasses the gospel. It is part of the canvas on which God has painted the whole picture of who He is. And notice, the emphasis in Scripture always falls on the mercy side of the equation. Paul devotes the entirety of Romans 9–11 to working through this question, and he ends not with a defense of reprobation but with a doxology: *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”* (Romans 11:33). The proper response to the doctrine of predestination is not anxiety. It is worship.

III. Predestination as the Ground of Assurance

And here is where this doctrine becomes genuinely pastoral. If salvation depended on our decision, our perseverance, or our strength of will, then none of us would have any real assurance. We know ourselves too well. We know how fickle our hearts are. But predestination means that the decisive act happened before we existed. God set His love on us when there was nothing lovable about us, and He did so with full knowledge of every sin we would ever commit. Jesus says it plainly in John 10:27–29: *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, 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 is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”*

The sheep are given to the Son by the Father. That is election. The Son holds them, and no one can remove them. That is perseverance. And notice who gets the credit: *“My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all.”* The security of the believer rests entirely on the greatness of God, not on the reliability of the believer. Romans 8:29–30 lays out the whole sequence: *“For*

those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Every verb in that chain is in the past tense. From God’s perspective, the glorification of His people is already accomplished. The golden chain cannot be broken at any link.

The Puritan Thomas Watson puts it with characteristic warmth:

“Election is the cause of our believing, not our believing the cause of election. God does not choose us because we believe, but He gives us faith because He has chosen us.”

— Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*

This is the comfort of the doctrine. You did not find God. God found you. And He found you not because of anything in you, but because of everything in Him. *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide”* (John 15:16). The fruit abides because the choosing was God’s, and God does not change His mind.

IV. Christ’s Redemption and the Scope of the Atonement

Some have framed predestination as Christ’s ‘knowing redemption of the world,’ and that is actually a perceptive way to begin thinking about this. Christ’s redemption is indeed knowing. He did not die on the cross hoping something would work. He died with specific people in view. *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:11). Not for the goats. For the sheep. *“I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those*

whom you have given me, for they are yours” (John 17:9). The High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John 17 is directed toward a particular people, the ones the Father gave Him.

This does not mean the gospel is not offered to all people. It is. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). The call goes out indiscriminately. The invitation is genuine. But the effectual work of the Spirit in drawing sinners to faith is particular. The Canons of Dort put it this way: the death of Christ is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world, but it was the sovereign counsel and intention of God that the efficacious work of Christ’s death would extend to the elect alone. The cross is sufficient for all; it is efficient for the elect.

And so predestination, rightly understood, is not a doctrine of exclusion. It is a doctrine of grace. It tells us that salvation from first to last is the work of God. It humbles us, because we contributed nothing. And it comforts us, because the One who began the work will finish it: *“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:6).