

Free Will and Predestination

by Roland Foster

[Disclaimer: I am not a professional theologian. I'm an amateur; a layman who loves to dabble in Christian theology. I don't present my ideas as "the truth," but rather as "this works for me." Use at your own risk.]

I'm sure some will think I'm an idiot for tackling a topic that has been debated by so many people for centuries, with no consensus being achieved. Maybe I am an idiot — so be it. I have studied the Bible, and I am convinced that most of the mystery about predestination is because people may not understand what the word means. Some have said they believe that God has "predestined" some people for salvation and Heaven, and others for damnation and Hell, and an individual's choices cannot change his or her destination. In my view, this belief is indefensible nonsense, totally inconsistent with both Bible truth and everything we understand about God.

Let's look at some Scripture passages:

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, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:3-10)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:11-12)

For those whom [God] 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. (Romans 8:29-30)

This clearly says that God "predestined us" for Heaven. The only questions here are the meanings of the words "us" and "predestined." I'll tell you what I believe they mean, and why I believe it. You can decide for yourself if I'm correct.

First, "us" can refer to any group Paul was part of. It could mean "us first-century Christians;" or it could mean "us human beings." Without further evidence, we can't tell which is the true meaning: the exclusive meaning, "us Christians," or the inclusive one, "us humans." But the Bible gives us a lot of clues:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

For me, the meaning of "us" in Ephesians 1:1-10 is clearly determined in verse 7: *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.* Did Jesus die on the cross for a selected subset of the human race? Absolutely not! We — all of us, every human being — have redemption and forgiveness; therefore we — all of us — are predestined for adoption as sons — that is, for Heaven. In verses 11 and 12 he switches gears: now "we" refers to the ones "*who were the first to hope in Christ*" and there is a different purpose, not human destiny but God's glory.

Now let us try to understand the meaning of "predestined." The problem, and some confusion, exists because many people, including some who write dictionaries, think that "predestined" and "predetermined" mean the same thing. My belief is that they could, depending on the context, but they also may not.

"Predetermined" means that it has been determined in advance that a particular thing is going to happen. There is no doubt, and no possibility of it not happening. It shall happen. On the other hand, I believe that "predestined" can simply mean "planned." God has "predestined us" for Heaven. In other words, God's plan and intention, the destiny He has prepared for all of "us," is that we shall be with Him eternally in Heaven.

What can prevent that destiny from becoming reality for any one of us? The answer is simple: God has given us free will.

If we were not free to choose one action rather than another, what would be the point of giving us commandments and guidelines? Beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and through all we know of God's dealings with humanity, His message seems to have been that He wants us to obey Him. But we are always free to disobey if we choose.

We have freedom to do what we want, rather than what God wants. We can, and we do, disobey His Ten Commandments and a lot of others. More importantly, we are free to shun God, to refuse His gift of grace — eternal life with Him through the forgiveness of our sins, which have been paid for by the shame, agony, and death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary. We can say "no" if we wish.

We're free to choose the destiny He has planned for us: eternal life, peace, and endless joy with Him in Heaven; or the eternal death and endless pain of Hell. As C.S. Lewis has said in his writing, God does not condemn anyone to Hell. Those who go there will do so by choice.

Consider this also: If God were to offer the sinner salvation, without the sinner having freedom to accept it, then God would be a liar, and much worse than a liar — He would be as cruel as the fiends of Hell. The idea that God would create some humans with no possibility of their being saved is contrary to everything the Bible says about God. How could anyone say God is love, or a loving God, if that were true? No, we — all of us — have been created specifically for eternal, intimate togetherness with God in Heaven.

Now, one more question about predestination. It is often said that God knows everything that is going to happen. This implies, of course, that He knows every choice that each of us will ever make. But does that mean that we have no freedom to choose one action instead of another? Not at all.

I like very much C. S. Lewis's "take" on this question. Lewis declares that God is not constrained to experience or perceive history by the passage of time, as we are. God exists in eternity, apart from physical time, so he is able to "see" the entire scope of history, from its beginning (creation) to its ultimate end, whatever and whenever that may be. Thus He does know what decisions we are going to make, and what actions we are going to take, before we make them and take them. In fact, He could see every moment of our lives "before" we were even conceived. He is outside of time, and sees all of it as a whole. Which is mind-bending for us, because we are finite; but He is not. His viewing all of history does not govern our free will choices.

Of course He sometimes acts to influence some decisions for His purposes, but stops short of forcing His will on us. If we do not have free will, there is nothing to gain or lose, for us or for God.

If we have a heart for God — if we're willing to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit — He will guide us, and we'll wind up where He wants us to be. If not, sad to say, we're on our own. Those who choose to live without God often wind up dying without God.

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
(Proverbs. 3:5-6)*

*Bible passages are from
The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016.
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles,
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.*