

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 4: God's Sovereignty and Our Free Will

Opening Discussion:

What is it about the idea of predestination that concerns some people? Why do they view it as bad news? What about it is good news?

What are the biggest questions raised by the idea of predestination?

God's Eternal Decree

Nehemiah 9:6 "You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.

Psalms 145:14–16

- [14] The LORD upholds all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.
- [15] The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
- [16] You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.

Hebrews 1:3 *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,*

Scripture teaches that God is in control of everything. It is not just a watchmaker that sets up the universe and lets it go on its own. God's providence is not a maintenance plan where God only comes in to fix problems as they arise.

He decrees all things.

WCF 5.1. *God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.*

Common Concerns or Objections

1. Does this mean that God is the author of evil or sin?

Isaiah 45:7 I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity;
I am the LORD, who does all these things.

This question is usually posed as an “either/or.” Rabbi Kushner in his bestselling book *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* argues that God is either all good or all powerful; he can’t be both. Given the choice, most would much rather abandon the idea of God’s sovereignty to cling to the hope that God is good.

This, though, is a false choice. God is both good and in control. God is not a spectator, but actively works good at all times.

We can resolve the tension by saying the God permits evil; he doesn’t cause it. But, in saying this, we don’t mean that he steps away from the controls in those moments.

God determines how long and to what extent he will let evil go. And, God will determine how he will overcome or work it for good. God’s sovereignty isn’t simply foreknowing; it is actively bringing about whatever comes to pass.

WCF 8.2. Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

Yet, he can work even things that are evil for good.

Look at the examples from scripture:

Genesis 50:20

[20] As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Joseph’s brothers were intent on doing evil, yet God took their act and transformed it for his good purposes.

Let’s take this to an extreme example: What is the greatest act of evil that mankind has ever done? From the Bible’s perspective, it is the crucifixion of Christ.

Acts 2:23

[23] this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

God could take the greatest evil humanity could devise and turn its purpose into the greatest good done on earth.

2. Does belief in God’s sovereignty deny human free will?

WCF 8.1 “...nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”

Michael Horton explains:

“Scripture clearly holds human beings responsible for hardening their hearts against his word and will, and it also teaches that God hardens hearts (Ex 3:19; 6:1; 7:3, 13, 22; 8:15, 19; Ro 9:18). Yet God’s sovereign agency is not the same in hardening hearts as it is in softening them. In the latter case, God gives his redeemed a new heart (Jer 31:32-33; Eze 11:19), but in the former case God gives the wicked over to their own desires: “So I gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (Ro 1:24). God’s permission of sin is not a mere acquiescence, but is a determination that ensures its defeat.”

This idea of “contingency of second causes” is hard for our minds to comprehend, but it is not irrational or impossible. God can both decree some action of ours, and we can freely choose to do that very same thing.

God can sovereignly plan the results and the means of getting there. He can determine that you will show up at church, and he can determine that you will show up there on the basis of your own free choice. The first cause is God’s decree; the second cause is your planning, weighing options, getting counsel, and making a choice.

This is why when we sin, God can hold us accountable. Even when he works the results out for good, we are responsible for our evil intentions. For instance, we can’t argue with God that our angry outburst is justified because God used it to turn someone to prayer.

The Bible takes sin seriously because it takes man (male and female) seriously... Christians do not deny the fact- in some circumstances- of diminished responsibility, but we affirm that diminished responsibility always entails diminished humanity. To say that somebody "is not responsible for his actions" is to demean him or her as a human being. It is part of the glory of being human that we are held responsible for our actions. John Stott, The Cross of Christ

Sovereignty in Prayer

Does God’s sovereignty ever keep you from praying to God?

Charles Spurgeon

It is well said that "asking is the rule of the kingdom." It is a rule that will never be altered in any body's case. If the royal and divine Son of God cannot be exempted from the rule of asking that He may have, you and I cannot expect to have the rule relaxed in our favor. God will bless Elijah and send rain on Israel, but Elijah must pray for it. If the chosen nation is to prosper, Samuel must plead for it. If the Jews are to be delivered, Daniel must intercede. God will bless Paul, and the nations shall be converted through him, but Paul must pray. Pray he did, without ceasing; his epistles show that he expected nothing except by asking for it.

Benjamin Palmer on God's sovereignty and prayer:

The scriptural principle is not that favors are, by our importunity, wrung from the reluctance of the Divine Being, but that they antedate the prayer in the determinations of His sovereign and gracious will; and the true spirit of prayer, which He also imparts, is the sign and pledge of the gift to be conveyed. Prayer then, as already stated, is not the cause which procures through its own efficiency, but merely the antecedent condition upon which a predetermined benefit is suspended. The purpose to give is, on Jehovah's part, sovereign and free; it is the spontaneous

movement of His own gracious and loving will. Yet, in the exercise of the same sovereignty and goodness, He interposes the prayer of the creature as the channel through which His favor shall descend.

Sovereignty in Salvation

Section 3-5 deals with the most difficult aspects of God's sovereignty. Is he even in control to determine who receives salvation and who is condemned?

Van Til observes:

“all Christians affirm God’s sovereignty over creation (that is, they agree that they are men and not dogs because God chose to make them men and not dogs); and almost all affirm His sovereignty over providence (that is, they would die tomorrow if God has not numbered their days differently); yet not all affirm His sovereignty over redemption. Calvinism understands them to be related. Either the Creator is completely free to do as He wishes with His creation (including determining, solely of His own will, whether immortality will even be offered to it), or He is not free to do so.”

WCF 8.3-5

3. 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.

4. These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

5. 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.

Predestination does not come from John Calvin; it comes from the Bible.

- The word “predestined” is found in Romans 8:29,30 and Ephesians 1:5,11.
- The words “elect” and “election” are used 14 times in the New Testament.
- The idea of God's sovereignty (control) in the salvation of sinners is found throughout the Bible (Mt. 24:22; Mk. 13:27; Rom. 11:7; II Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; I Peter 1:1; Acts 13:48; Jn. 6:37; 10:27-29; 6:39, 44, 65; 17:6,9)

Predestination is not fatalism. It is not the case that some people want to come to Christ but cannot since God has not predestined them. This is not the case.

Our Free Will

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1. *God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil.*
2. *Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.*
3. *Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.*
4. *When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by his grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.*
5. *The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone, in the state of glory only.*

Paul Althous, The Theology of Martin Luther

Without such a rebirth, man's will remains enslaved and bound. Man stands as under the inescapable necessity of sinning in everything that he is and does. This, however, does not remove his responsibility and guilt. A man is not forced to sin against his own inner will. Rather it is in his will that he experiences the inescapability of sin. He is necessarily a sinner but he is also a sinner voluntarily. "We do not sin against our will but rather according to our will... we are not able to sin involuntarily." Man is, however unable to change his basic will. And he himself is bound within it as a person. He cannot handle his lack of freedom to do good and his subjection to the evil as though it were his fate or a natural condition of his existence that could be separated from himself as a person. His will is bound, but it is and remains his will. He repeatedly and voluntarily acts according to it. For this reason, the inescapability of sin does not cast doubt on the fact of man's guilt. Luther always asserted both at one and the same time

Thomas Boston illustrates man's condition by comparing an unconverted person to a man in a pit. He can only get out of the pit by grabbing hold of the rope of the gospel let down by Christ and be pulled out of his misery. Yes, he may decide to pull himself up by the rope of the gospel, but there is one problem. The unconverted man is dead in the pit.

- **Eph. 2:1,4,5** - *"you were dead in your transgressions and sins...But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions -- it is by grace you have been saved."*
- **I Cor. 2:14** - *"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."*

What value is there in knowing about God's election?

In one sense, the answer is "none." We shouldn't speculate about who is chosen by God or not. We do not have God's plans. It can leave Christians feeling unwarranted anxiety about themselves or others.

In another sense, it is of great encouragement and can lead to healthy confidence in God.

How does the doctrine of predestination affect evangelism?

Two of the greatest evangelists in Christian history held opposing views.

John Wesley's Objection to the Doctrine of Election in Relation to Evangelism:

If this be so then is all preaching vain: it is needless to them that are elected; for they, whether with preaching or without, will infallibly be saved. Therefore, the end of preaching to save souls is void, with regard to them. And it is useless to them that are not elected; for they cannot possibly be saved; they, whether with preaching or without, will infallibly be damned. The end of preaching is therefore void, with regard to them likewise. So that in either case our preaching is in vain."

George Whitefield's response:

O dear Sir, what kind of reasoning, or rather sophistry is this! Hath not God, who hath appointed salvation for a certain number appointed also the preaching of the word, as a means to bring them to it? Does anyone hold election in any other sense? And if so, how is preaching needless to them that are elected; when the gospel is designed by God himself, to be the power of God unto their eternal salvation? And since we know not who are elect, and who reprobate, we are to preach promiscuously to all. For the word may be useful, even to the non-elect, in restraining them from much wickedness and sin. However, it is enough to excite to the utmost diligence in preaching and hearing, when we consider that by these means, some, even as many as the Lord that ordained to eternal life, shall certainly be quickened and enabled to believe. And who, that attends, especially with reverence and care, can tell but he may be found of that happy number? ... it is the doctrine of election that mostly presses me to abound in good works. I am made willing to suffer all things for the elect's sake. This makes me to preach with comfort, because I know salvation does not depend on man's free will, but the Lord makes willing in the day of his power and can make use of me to bring some of his elect home, when and where he pleases.

What was Whitefield's motivation in evangelism?

1. Whitfield was motivated by his trust in God's power working in the gospel to save.
 - **Rom. 1:16** *For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*
2. Whitfield was motivated by his love not for the "lost" generally, but for the lost of God's sheep, those who are the elect but do not enjoy the privileges.
 - **2Tim. 2:10** *Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.*
3. Whitfield's confidence in the efficacious power of the Holy Spirit to effectually call those God has prepared for salvation.
 - **Eph. 2:1** *And you were dead in the trespasses and ... 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved...8 For by*

grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

How should God's sovereignty in salvation lead us to greater boldness in sharing our faith?

A Doctrine that Leads to Praise

WCF 8.8. *The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.*

"Men treat God's sovereignty as a theme for controversy, but in Scripture it is matter for worship." J.I.Packer

In the Bible, when Paul begins to explain the challenging doctrine of predestination, he frequently pauses to praise God.

Romans 8:30–33 “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. [31]What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

Covering the same topic in **Romans 11:33–36**, he writes:

[33] Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

*[34] “For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”*

*[35] “Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”*

[36] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.