

Predestination and Free Will

This essay takes a look at a subject that continues to be widely debated amongst Christian scholars, pastors, and theologians. Differing opinions on this subject should not be a reason to break fellowship with anyone. In fact, because these subjects are so contested, it's greater reason to extend patience, gentleness, and understanding to one another. As I've read on this topic and heard sermons and debates of many people I trust, I've focused this essay primarily on the observation and interpretations of Pastor John Piper. Piper has been a key teacher in my life and I'd encourage anyone to consider reading/listening to his messages.

Foundations to Begin With

- 1) When it comes to predestination and free will, these subjects, like the Trinity or God existing eternally, cannot be fully grasped. We accept them to be true and we can understand concepts, but the subject remains a mystery, and to explain some components doesn't remove this mystery, but affirms it.
- 2) Predestination & free-will and real things and both are pronounced repeatedly in the Bible, sometimes in the same passage. They harmonize together. To say, "*I don't believe in predestination,*" would be wrong. A better statement would be, "*I don't agree with your interpretation of predestination.*"
- 3) God knows everything that will come to pass, Isaiah 46, John 13:19.
- 4) God foreknew sin would enter the world and He prepared the plan of redemption before the world began, Ephesians 1:4, 2 Timothy 1:9.
- 5) No one will be in hell that does not justly deserve to be there. No one will be in heaven that hasn't exercised personal faith.
- 6) We must trust God's infinite wisdom, always, and certainly on subjects beyond our ability to fully grasp.

Two Mistakes to Avoid

In 2 Timothy 2:10, Paul states, "***For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation.***" This statement clarifies two assumptions which are often mistakenly made.

- 1) We shouldn't assume, "*If there are people that are chosen, or called to salvation, before the foundation of the world, then there's no use in being diligent in evangelizing, especially when it could risk my life to do so.*" Wrong. Paul says, "***I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain salvation.***" Why make the effort? Why endure hardship? Paul strives because he knows his preaching is going to result in salvation. This creates certainty in him that doesn't make him stop preaching, but gives confidence that he's not wasting his time preaching, even though he has no idea who will be saved until they believe.
- 2) We shouldn't assume, "*If Paul, or myself, or anyone other Christian must preach and/or suffer in order to reach the lost, then there can be no such thing as eternal election, or those chosen by God to be saved, but only free will choice.*" Wrong. "***I endure everything for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they may obtain salvation.***" They exist! God mentions them right here, and elsewhere. The chosen are a real people that exist as free-will individuals. Therefore, Paul's commitment to press on and suffer in his efforts to preach doesn't mean some people aren't already chosen, but that God has appointed Paul, and others, to be His instrument for their salvation.

Clarifying Terms

FOREKNOW - This doesn't mean that God simply foresees who will believe in Him, and these are the ones He predestines or calls. In Romans 9:10-13, God says this about the twin brothers, Jacob, and Esau, before they were born, "***Jacob I loved, Esau I hated.***" How could God love and hate a person before they're born? What does this say about the two individuals and their ability to be saved? There are two things to draw out here. 1) God chooses Jacob over Esau before their birth, but Esau's life demonstrates that his sin and rebellion was real and blameworthy. 2) God is impartial (Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25, 1 Corinthians 1:26). Impartiality does not mean that everyone is treated the same, but rather that no one is given favor based on irrelevant considerations, like race, wealth, height, etc.

Other examples of God using the word “KNOW” give us additional insight as to what He means by it. For example, in Genesis 18:19 (God says of Abraham), “***I have known him***”, in English it’s translated, “*I have chosen him*.” In Amos 3:2, God says to the Israelites, “***You only have I known among all the families of the earth***.” God was completely knowledgeable about all the other earthly families too of course, but He only chose Israel. In Matthew 7:23, Jesus says to hypocrites at the Day of Judgment, “***I never knew you***.” Did Jesus never know about them? Of course, He did. He knew everything about them, but He never chose them because of their wicked denial of Him. In Psalm 1:6 it reads, “***The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish***.” He knows all about the way of the wicked too, but He knows the righteous in the sense of approving/recognizing.

CALLED – In Romans 8:30 it says, “***These whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified***.” So, all the called are justified and glorified. Justified means that one is rendered just, or righteous before God. Anyone who is justified will be glorified, meaning that the person will see eternal life. So, everyone who is called will be saved. But to be justified we must believe (Romans 5:1). So, Paul says all who are called believe and are justified. So, how can ALL who are called believe? “Called” is the work of God to bring about what He demands, an effectual call that creates what it commands, such as, “***Lazarus, come forth!***” (John 11:43). A divine call to eternal life is the cause, not the effect, of any man’s believing. Therefore, believing for justification is not a certain thing I do on my own; God enables me. Believing is something I do, but my doing is a gift of God. I do not take credit for it; I thank God for it.

Notice the difference in the way Jesus uses the word “called” in Matthew, versus the way Paul uses it in Romans. In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus give a parable about a wedding feast. In summary, a king holds a wedding feast for his son, who is getting married. The king sends servants to tell the invited guests that the time is ready and to come to the feast. However, the servants report that many of the invited guests paid no attention to the request and went on with their day. The king then commanded the servants to go into the streets and invite anyone that they find. Many came to the feast and the wedding hall was full. However, the king saw a man not dressed in wedding attire, but in common street clothes, and asked him why he hadn’t come prepared for the wedding. The man was speechless and the king tossed him outside, where there was darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. Here’s the meaning. The invitation is the gospel. The original invitees were the Jews, who the gospel was first given to. Many of them dismissed the gospel and rejected the Son, Jesus. Then the Father said to go instead to the Gentiles and offer the gospel to anyone that would listen. The man in the parable tossed out was a man who thought he could show up to the wedding without having properly responded to the invitation. There’s a proper response to being invited to the king’s son’s wedding; one cleans up, puts on appropriate clothes, and is honored to have been asked. But this man came having no appropriate response, no change, just assumed since he’d heard the gospel he’d be okay. However, the only appropriate way to respond to the gospel invitation is to respond in faith; to entrust oneself to the gospel and allow the Spirit to change us. On the day of judgment, when we stand before the Lord, there will be a separation between those who responded in faith, appropriately, and those that did not. Those who do not will be cast into hell where there will be weeping, darkness, and gnashing of teeth. The parable ends by saying, “***For many are called, but few are chosen***.” Here the word called means a general invitation that anyone can receive. This type of calling, as demonstrated by the man thrown out of the feast, goes to believers and non-believers. A global calling, which differs from the use of the word “called” in Romans, where only the chosen are called to salvation; a narrower call.

ELECTION - This choosing is unconditional; in that there is no condition man must meet before God chooses a man. Final salvation is not unconditional; the condition of faith in Jesus must be met in us to inherit eternal life. But faith is not a condition for election; just the reverse. Election is a condition for faith. It is because God chose us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) and He quickens us and brings us to faith.

HARDENING OF HEARTS – Romans 9:22 describes some people as, *“vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.”* This description refers precisely to this divine hardening of the heart. When Paul says of God in Romans 9:18, *“He hardens who He wills”*, what does this mean? He decides who will rebel in their hardness of unbelief and is therefore deserving of condemnation. The hardening of God does not make fault impossible; it makes fault certain. Here is the mystery – people who are hardened against God are really guilty. They have real fault. They are really blameworthy. They really deserve to be judged. And God decided who would be in that condition. How can it be that God decides who is hardened and yet they have real guilt and real fault? There are pointers in the Bible but they will not satisfy the natural, fallen human mind. It is a mystery, so we simply assert what is seen in the Word: God hardens whom He wills, and man is accountable. God’s hardening does not take away guilt, it renders it certain. It says in Romans 9:19, *“Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?”* It’s wrong to say, God finds fault because His hardening is a response to our prior self-hardening. For example, Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to humble himself. Therefore, God’s hardening of him was just, abandoning him to his own stubbornness. But this explanation is the opposite of Romans 9:18. Paul writes, *“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”* Verse 21 shows that Paul sees mercy and hardening as unconditional because he speaks of the objects of mercy and hardening as coming from the same lump of clay: *“Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump (crucial phrase!) one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?”* It’s not the nature of the clay that determined what God would do with it. It was the free, wise, and sovereign will of the potter. He has mercy on whom He wills and He hardens whom He wills – from the same lump of clay. This doesn’t remove a mystery, it states one. God hardens unconditionally and those who are hardened are truly guilty and truly at fault in their hard and rebellious hearts. How God freely hardens and yet preserves human accountability we are not explicitly told. It is the same mystery as how the first sin entered the universe. How does a sinful disposition arise in a good heart? The Bible does not tell us. God says in Exodus 4:21 and 7:3, *“I will harden his (Pharaoh’s) heart.”* Then, in Exodus 8:15 it reads, *“(Pharaoh) hardened his (own) heart.”* In each case it is happening *“as the Lord had said,”* meaning that behind “self-hardening” and behind the “being hardened” is the plan and purpose of God. It is not described as a response to what Pharaoh does, but as a sovereign rule over what Pharaoh does. Paul sees this and draws it out and states it in Romans 9:18, God *“has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever He wills.”*

FREE WILL – Another name for this is human self-determination. This too is a mystery because all angels and men were created innately good, and somehow, they chose evil from within. How does a sinful disposition arise in a good heart? Adam and Eve had a tempter (Satan), but Satan had no tempter when he originally sinned. So, what caused Satan’s desire to rebel against God to come about? We aren’t told. We trust God’s sovereignty in this. God endures the unbelief of those who reject Him, so that His wrath/power would be justly displayed in their punishment. Those who do believe, will see the glory of His grace more fully in contrast to the justice of His wrath (Romans 9:22-23). Regarding man’s will, John 6:44-45 provides insight where Jesus says, (44) *“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”* (45) *“It is written in the prophets, ‘AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me.”* Verse 45 explains verse 44. Basically, the Father, through the Spirit, teaches the elect to know the Son. Believers have been drawn by the Father. Being drawn is a result of hearing and learning from the Father. “Draw” means to be urged or led by something inward, by knowledge; not compulsory, but rather as hearing & learning removes ignorance and unwillingness. God gives not only the choice of believing, but the faith itself; a gift of divine grace. Additionally, it’s important to understand the words “all” and “everyone” in these verses. *“And they shall all be taught of God”* – The “all” here is not referring to the whole of mankind, even though all of mankind has, to a degree of certainty, been made knowledgeable of God (Romans 1 assures us that all people know God). The “all” in John 6:45, refers to the elect. As well, *“everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me”*, does not mean that everyone who hears the mere external objective teachings of the Word, will come to Jesus. Many hear the Word, and reject Jesus. Simply put, “all” or “everyone”, who are *“taught of God”*, who have *“heard and learned from the Father”*, will come to Jesus; i.e. the elect.

PREDISPOSITION – This is a term that may not be written in the Bible. Is it fair to say that men are predisposed to being saved? No, men are said to be disposed/inclined to a habit, or an act, a vice or virtue, but not to its reward or punishment, as to heaven or hell. Nor does it appear that these Gentiles (Acts 13:48) had any good dispositions to spiritual things or eternal life...salvation has been found in people, who have had no true inward dispositions to spiritual things, like many of our Lord's hearers; and there are in some, good dispositions to spiritual life, previous to faith, that desired eternal life, and sought after it, yet where faith does not follow, such as the rich young ruler, who came to Christ seeking heaven, yet left sorrowful (Mark 10:17-22). Therefore, many are so disposed, and do not always believe. So, faith does not arise from previous dispositions to eternal life, but is the fruit and effect of divine election.

PREDESTINED – This means having recognized us in the assembly. The closest English analogy could be the word recognize (re-cog-nize...having to do with cognition: to know, and putting the “re” in front...to foreknow). Those people that He knows this way He decides their destiny as conformed to Jesus (Romans 8:29). Predestined is to decide what becomes of you before you exist. So, does God predestine people to hell? In short, yes. In Ephesians 1:11, it says about God that He, **“works all things after the counsel of His will.”** Does **“all things”** include the final destiny of individuals in hell? Yes. In Proverbs 16:4 it reads, **“God has made the wicked for the day of trouble.”** In 1 Peter 2:7 it says, **“they disobey the Word as they were destined to do”**. In Jude 1:4 it reads, **“certain people...who long ago were designated for this condemnation.”** And in 2 Peter 2:3 it says, **“there condemnation from long ago...”**. His ways are mysterious to us but on the Day of Judgment no one will find legitimate fault with God; the damned will know they are deserving of condemnation.

Is Man Responsible for Sin?

Recapping, and perhaps adding a bit more, some important questions are, *“If God created man, and man is sinful, then why does God hold man responsible for sin?”* Or, *“If not all men all chosen for salvation, why do non-believers experience God’s wrath?”* Paul looks at these types of questions in Romans 3 and 9. Romans 3:5-7 says in summary, **“if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God...(and) if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?”** Regarding sin, even though when compared to God’s glory ultimately makes His magnificence stand out all the more, yet sin is nevertheless sin, and God deals with us appropriately as sinners who, in an act of our will, chose to rebel against Him.

In Romans 9, Paul addresses these sorts of objections in the following way. 1) God hardens whom He wills (Romans 9:18). 2) Who are we to raise legitimate objection (**“answer back,”** 9:20) to God’s actions? This doesn’t mean that one can’t ask God a question, but that we’re wrong to call God into question; to be skeptical of His wisdom, truth, or to respond as one who is fault-finding. An example of this is found in Luke 1:18-20 where Zechariah wants evidence to trust the angel. This contrasts the kind of question that Mary asks of the angel in Luke 1:34-35...her she believes what the angel says will actually happen, but simply wants to know how/method...help in understanding. 3) The rightness and sovereignty of the potter is not determined by anything in the clay, but the wisdom of His purpose in what He makes with the clay is what reveals His righteousness/sovereignty (9:20-21). An example of this is in Isaiah 29:16 where the pot makes two mistakes; he denies his creator and also finds fault with his creator. 4) God makes known His power and glory, and if those purposes call for the making of both honorable and dishonorable vessels (examples Jacob/Esau (9:13) and Moses/Pharaoh (9:15-17) and Mercy/Hardening (9:18), then He has the rightness within Himself to do it. 5) We (mankind) don’t have ultimate self-determination (free-will). Our will counts and is measured, but God’s will does hold sway.

Another pastor that I find to be sound, is John MacArthur. He was asked a question pertaining to the topic of predestination and free will. The question was, *“Why would God call all men everywhere to repent, if they can’t unless He helps them do so, as He chooses some and not others?”* He replied, *“I don’t know why God chose to do it that way,*

but that is the way it is. Everyone is held culpable and guilty for their own sin, everyone is culpable for not repenting. Like it says in the 2 Thessalonians passage that when Christ returns He will deal out retribution to those that didn't know God and didn't believe in the gospel. This is the great ultimate question that you come to in the doctrine of grace, which is the personal moral responsibility of man and the sovereignty of God; how do those two things come together. Clearly, they are taught in Scripture. What you want to avoid is some kind of middle ground that assaults both of those things. But, that's for God to fully resolve in His own mind. All men are sinners, all men are culpable, all men are guilty, all men are commanded to repent, and at the same time they are unable to respond and repent apart from the intervening sovereign grace of God. This is what the Bible teaches. The resolution of that is clear to the mind of God but difficult for us to understand."

Another minister, R.C. Sproul, when asked, "Does God offer saving grace to everyone?" Sproul said, "No. God is not obligated to offer saving grace to anybody. Paul, in Romans anticipates people to object and say, "God's not being fair! He's not giving the same grace to everyone!" To which Paul reminds us what God said through Moses which is that He will have mercy upon whom He chooses to give mercy. God owes me no grace whatsoever."

Sproul, when addressing the same question, gives the following self-made illustration. The illustration is this - God put Adam in the garden of Eden and told Adam to manage the garden, to work it and keep it up. But, God added, stay away from that large ditch over there and don't go near it. Before you know it, Adam goes over the ditch and jumps inside. Later, God says to Adam, "Why aren't you keeping the garden? It's a mess." To which Adam looked up from the deep ditch and replied, "How can I keep the garden when I'm stuck in this ditch and can't get out unless you lift me out?" In short, Adam being in the pit is our human condition. We are dead to sin and unable to obey God's command, but we are responsible for our being dead to sin by getting ourselves into sin in the first place. We're unable to respond to God apart from the intervention of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God is not obligated to come to the aid of any of us, much less all of us.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this essay does more than just confirm the mystery regarding harmonizing God's will and man's will. What we don't fully understand, we can still trust, because God's Word is trustworthy.