

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

FREE WILL AND PREDESTINATION

The Bible says that we are all mortal because of sin, but that God has provided a way to obtain eternal life through Jesus Christ. Is this way open to all who choose to take advantage of it, or does God select only certain people to follow that way? The former is what is meant by free will, the latter is what is usually understood by the term 'predestination'. Which does the Bible teach? There is much in the Bible to support the idea that we have free will. Although the word 'predestinate' does occur in the Bible, it is a misunderstanding to suppose that it means that God has determined already who will receive eternal life.

Man's free will and God's foreknowledge

The following is a selection of passages which speak of man's free will:

Moses said to Israel: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore *choose* life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deut. 30:19);

"By faith Moses . . . refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; *choosing* rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Heb. 11:24,25);

"And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And *whosoever will*, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

There is no doubt, however, that God has foreknowledge, as the following passages show:

"I am God . . . there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure" (Isa. 46:9,10);

"But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all His prophets, that Christ should suffer, He hath so fulfilled" (Acts 3:18).

Moreover, God does not just declare what will happen, He causes it to happen, as the following passages show:

"fear thou not, O My servant Jacob, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid" (Jer. 30:10);

"against Thy holy child Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel determined before to be done" (Acts 4:27,28).

The question is, Does God do this on an individual basis?

What does the word 'predestination' mean in the Bible?

The word 'predestinate' occurs four times in the Authorised Version translation of the New Testament. Although according to *Collins English Dictionary* 'predestinate' means "to decree from eternity (any event, esp. the final salvation of individuals)", this is the general understanding of the word. It does not accurately represent what the original Greek word means in the Bible, where it occurs six times and is translated in the AV as follows:

"predestinate" (Rom. 8:29,30; Eph. 1:5,11)

"ordain" (1 Cor. 2:7)

"determine before" (Acts 4:28).

The original word is derived from two Greek words meaning 'mark out' or 'determine', and 'beforehand', respectively. As we have seen above, God has determined beforehand His purpose with the earth, particularly in relation to His Son. Two of the above references are

consistent with this. In Acts 4:28, already quoted, the word is used of foreordaining His Son Jesus to his death upon the cross. 1 Corinthians 2:7 reads: "we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory". In context this is talking about the wisdom of God which is foolishness with men, the achieving of man's salvation through the crucifixion of Christ. There is no difficulty with the idea of predestination in this context.

Are individuals predestined to salvation?

The two passages in which the word 'predestinate' occurs in the AV, Romans 8 and Ephesians 1, are often taken to be referring to the salvation of individuals, and it is true that the word is used of the salvation of people, rather than of Jesus Christ as the means of that salvation. However, a careful look at these passages shows that Paul is speaking collectively of those who are saved.

In Romans 8:29,30 he uses the word twice: "For whom [God] 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". God's plan is to develop a class of people to become like His Son. He determined beforehand that they should be called, made righteous and eventually glorified.

The word also occurs in Ephesians 1:5,11, where we read, "In Christ [God] chose us before the world was founded, to be dedicated, to be without blemish in His sight, to be full of love; and He *destined* us—such was His will and pleasure—to be accepted as His sons through Jesus Christ . . . In Christ indeed we have been given our share in the heritage, as was *decreed* in His design" (vv. 4,5,11, NEB). Here the AV "predestinate" is represented by "destined" and "decreed". Here again Paul is referring to God's plan being fulfilled in the saints of his day, not the selecting of individual saints; it is "us", not "each of us".

A simple analogy will illustrate the difference between God's predetermined purpose and man's free will. We are in a railway station and a train is scheduled to leave for London; this is predestination. Each individual can choose whether or not to get on the train and whether or not to leave the train before it reaches London; this is free will.

God's calling

The idea that individuals are predestined to receive eternal life involves the idea of a call, by which is meant the action of God upon the mind of a person to make them respond to the gospel. Such an idea is contrary to Scripture. God does call, but it is by His Word, to which people respond by either accepting or rejecting it. We are saved by faith, and "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

This does not, however, mean that people accept the gospel simply because they happen to have had the good fortune to hear it preached. God can and does arrange that individuals who will be responsive to the gospel have it preached to them. However, they still have to respond to it in faith and then hold fast to it if they are to receive eternal life.

Final thought

Scripture teaches that God has foreknowledge and man has free will. It is difficult for finite human minds to understand how both can be true, and ultimately all we can do is accept that it is so. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8,9).

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