

GREAT BIBLE DOCTRINES - LESSON 6
THE DOCTRINE OF FOREORDINATION, PREDESTINATION AND ELECTION

Introduction: This is one of the hardest doctrines in scripture for finite humans to understand, because we are dealing with attributes of an infinite God. Through misunderstanding the scriptures, some very un-Biblical doctrines have been taught. People ask, "How, if God already knows everything that will happen before it happens, can our choices make any difference in what happens?" Yet the scriptures clearly hold us responsible for our choices and actions. Let's look at what the scriptures say:

1. God is able to foreknow all things - Isaiah 46:10.
 - A. He foreknew and foretold many facts about his plan to save the world. For example:
 - 1) Satan to be crushed by the seed of woman - Genesis 3:15.
 - 2) Christ, who would bless all nations, to be a descendant of Abraham - Genesis 12:1-3.
 - 3) Details about Christ's birth - Isaiah 7:14; 9:6, 7; Micah 5:2
 - 4) Christ's suffering for our sins - Isaiah 53, Psalm 22
 - 5) A New Covenant to be made with God's people - Jeremiah 31:31-34.
 - B. God foreknew the details of our individual lives - Psalm 139:16.
2. God is in control of all things - Daniel 4:25; Isaiah 46:10, 11; 14:24-27.
3. Before the world began, God had an eternal purpose to redeem men and women from sin through Jesus Christ - Colossians 1:27-29; Ephesians 1:3-7; 3:8-12.
4. God chose various persons as instruments to bring about this purpose. For example:
 - A. Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel - Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 2:24, 25; Romans 11:1, 2
 - B. Certain rulers, such as Cyrus, named long before he was born, to shepherd the Jews back home from captivity - Isaiah 44:24-28; 45:1-7; compare Romans 9:17
 - C. God used the unbelief of the Jews to turn the gospel to the Gentiles - Romans 11:11, 12.
 - D. God used the conversion of the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to jealousy and bring them to Christ - Romans 11:13, 14.
 - E. Above all, Jesus Christ is the "Chosen of God" to bring about our salvation - 1 Peter 1:20; Luke 23:35.
5. The choosing or election is by grace, and is not earned by an individual or nation - Romans 11:5-7; 9:11; Deuteronomy 7:7, 8; 9:4, 5.

6. Christians are the "chosen" or "elect" of God, foreknown before the world was - 1 Peter 2:4, 9, 10; Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 1:3-7.
7. This does not mean that each person is predestined to salvation or damnation without any choice on his own part, because:
- A. God's justice would not permit this - Acts 10:34.
 - B. God's love for all would not permit it - John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:7-9.
 - C. God is not the cause of man's sin - James 1:13-15.
 - D. Scripture everywhere assures man's freedom of choice, his ability to be saved, and his responsibility for his choices - 1 Timothy 2:3,4; 2 Peter 3:7-9; John 7:17; Matthew 23:37; John 5:40; Acts 17:30,31; 2:38-40; Revelation 22:17; Isaiah 55:1; Joshua 24:15.
 - E. Even those chosen and foreordained by God to cause the death of Christ were held responsible for their actions - Matthew 26:24; Acts 2:23, 38; 3:23.
 - F. Christ died for all, not just for a special group predestined to salvation - 1 John 2:2; John 1:29.
 - G. Those for whom God intended one fate can change their destiny by repentance - Jeremiah 18:7-11; Luke 13:3.
8. How do we reconcile God's foreknowledge with man's freedom of choice?
- A. Some say it is a paradox resolved in God's infinite mind but impossible for man's mind to reconcile.
 - B. Some teach a doctrine that simply does away with either foreknowledge or free will.
 - C. Some ideas that have been offered to reconcile God's foreknowledge and man's free will:
 - 1) To foreknow an event is not the same as to cause it. For example, you foreknow that there will be an eclipse on a certain date, but you did not predestine or cause it to happen. God is not limited to time as we are (2 Peter 3:8; Psalm 90:4) He lives in the "eternal now." He was able to foresee the choices we would make in our free will. This does not mean He caused our choices. This seems to be the best explanation.
 - 2) Such passages as Ephesians 1: 4, 5 can just as easily refer to the choosing and predestination of classes of people (believers) as to individuals.
 - 3) God might choose to limit his foreknowledge of some things. (Genesis 22:1-12).
 - 4) It would seem that God foreordains a broad framework of events in the plan of salvation but leaves freedom of individual choice within that framework.
 - 5) Many persons spoken of as "chosen" in the scriptures were chosen to play a certain part in God's plan, not to be saved or lost.
 - 6) God did not predestinate a person to be saved or lost. He did predestinate every

saved person to become like his Son - Romans 8:29, 30.

Conclusion: There is nothing in scripture to free you of responsibility to obey God, or to make you doubt the possibility of your salvation. You become one of God's chosen when you respond to the call of the gospel - Galatians 3:26, 27; 1 Peter 2:9. You confirm your calling and election by growing in the virtues of Christ and living a life committed to him - Colossians 3:12-14; 2 Peter 1:4-11.

Addendum:

God's Sovereignty and Man's Free Will: *Do We Have Any Choice?*

Pull Quote: *This issue has always been one of the toughest in Bible study.*

Pull Quote: *Calvin believed it is totally God's choice who should be saved.*

Pull Quote: *Arminius believed that a person is free to choose his or her eternal destiny.*

If God foretold Judas' betrayal of Jesus, how could God hold Judas accountable? If God knew from creation how my life would turn out, do I really have any choice? Is my destiny not already set in concrete? Does God predestine some to be saved and others to be lost? If so, why does he plead with me to accept the gospel and warn me against falling away from Christ?

The issue of God's sovereignty, foreknowledge and predestination versus man's free will and accountability has always been one of the toughest in Bible study. Some scriptures emphasize God's sovereign will and his eternal purpose that will be carried out, come what may. In God's mind, Christ was a lamb slain from the beginning of the world. Our salvation is in some sense predestined. God foretells the future and knows the end from the beginning. No one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him or her. God has given us eternal life and no one can snatch us out of the Father's hand.

Other scriptures emphasize our free will and our accountability to God for our choices. Whoever will may choose take the gift of the water of life, or may refuse it and not live. We are to choose this day what god we will serve. God sets before us life and death, blessing and curse. We will account at the judgment for everything done in the body. Judas was so accountable for betraying Christ that it would have been better for him if he had not been born. Christians who reject Christ face fearful, fiery judgment.

Calvin and Arminius

The issue of sovereignty versus free will is graphically illustrated in the opposing views of John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius during the Reformation Period. John Calvin (1509-1564) was the most powerful leader in the Swiss Reformation, and perhaps in the whole Reformation. Brilliant and well-educated, Calvin did invaluable work in exposing the tyranny and corruption of the medieval church. The teachings of Calvin formed the doctrinal basis for the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, many independent churches and most Baptists. Calvin believed that the

Bible is the infallible guide of the church, not the pope or other church leaders. He taught that people's aim in life should not be the pursuit of wealth or pleasure, but rather to glorify God and live a good and holy life. Calvin is best known for his teaching that salvation comes entirely by the will of God, and not by the will or choice of man. (The key thought in Calvin's doctrine of salvation is the *absolute sovereignty of God*). Nothing can change what God has done or decreed and nothing happens without God's decree. Calvin said a person has no ability to choose good or to decide to follow God, but that it is totally God's choice as to who should be saved.

Calvin's teaching is summed up in five points:

- 1) Original Sin and Total Hereditary Depravity - All people inherit the sin of Adam and their ancestors at birth. Man is totally sinful by nature and cannot decide or do any good thing.
- 2) Foreordination, Predestination and Election - Before Creation God predestined the salvation or damnation of each individual, and nothing a person may do can change his destiny. If a person is not one of the elect, he cannot be saved even though he wants to.
- 3) Perseverance of the Saints or the Impossibility of Apostasy - If a person is one of the elect, he cannot fall away from God and be lost, because God has predestined him to salvation. This belief is popularly known as Once Saved, Always Saved.
- 4) Irresistible Grace - A person cannot choose salvation or reject it. The grace of God comes to the "elect" person through the Holy Spirit to regenerate him, and he has no choice in the matter. It is all a matter of the will of God.
- 5) Limited Atonement - Jesus did not die for all people, but only for the elect, whom God predestined to salvation.

In Holland there was a scholar and theologian who differed markedly with Calvin's views. He was Jacobus Arminius(1560-1609), a teacher in the University of Leyden.

Arminius believed that a person is free and able to choose his or her eternal destiny. He said that God foreknew from eternity what each person would choose of his own free will, to be saved or lost. However God did not predestine any person to be lost or saved apart from the free choice of that person. All who choose to serve him in their own free will, God predestined to be saved and glorified. Christ died for all, but only those who choose to come to him receive the benefits of his atonement.

Arminius accepted that man has a sinful nature and cannot do the will of God without being regenerated (born again) and being helped by God's grace. But a person is able to desire and choose righteousness, and God gives enabling grace to those who do. Arminius believed that God never forces his grace upon those who do not want it. A person can refuse the grace of God and be lost. He may also choose to receive the grace of God and be saved. Fallen man loves sin, but he is not totally depraved; the person with a good and honest heart can still hunger for and decide toward the grace of God that can change him. And even though a person once chose to receive God's grace and become a Christian, he can yet change his mind and reject Christ and be lost.

Many churches today hold the views of Arminius, even as many hold those of Calvin. It seems to this writer that Arminius was much closer to the meaning of scripture than Calvin, for these reasons:

1. From the fall in Eden to the last chapter of Revelation, the Bible assumes that we have free choice and are accountable for our choices. It appears that God predestines a certain framework, but within that framework leaves room for genuine free choice. God's decrees will stand, but God makes some of his decrees conditional upon our choices. Arminius made room for free will and responsibility without denying human fallenness and divine sovereignty.
2. Humans are made in God's image and this has to include freedom of choice. A person without the power to exercise free will is not a person but a machine. Our love for God is not worth much to God if it does not come freely.
3. For God to predestine people to heaven or hell without regard for their choices would seem to make God an arbitrary, unrighteous despot. That does not square with the picture of God in scripture, who does not want anyone to perish but longs for us to come to repentance.
4. While it is true that we depend on the enabling grace of God, the Bible is full of scriptures warning us to remain faithful lest we be lost. Note particularly the book of Hebrews. This implies that throughout our life we have some choice about our destiny.
5. The scriptures that emphasize divine sovereignty and those that emphasize free will and accountability are all part of God's inspired word. Sovereignty must not be allowed to erase free will, nor free will to erase sovereignty. God's word teaches both. A theological system such as Calvin's that eliminates free will is extreme on the side of divine sovereignty and is not taking account of all the scriptures. (The reverse is also true.)

In fact many churches in the Calvinist tradition have modified their views on most of Calvin's five points, the exception for some being the impossibility of apostasy. That too will probably be modified in future, for Calvin's system is a logical whole with every point interrelated under the theme of absolute sovereignty. You cannot logically believe one point without believing them all.

If we allow for free will in any of the areas, we can also allow for it in the area of the security of the believer. Some of us have been at the other extreme, never feeling secure in our salvation, and that too is unbiblical. There is much security for the believer who is enclosed and kept clean by God's grace, but that need not mean that the believer cannot choose to forsake the Lord. We must be careful about all of our choices, for they do matter at the judgment.

We can learn at least three things from observing this controversy.

First: where inspired scripture reveals two contrasting truths such as sovereignty and free will, we must not explain away either one to accommodate the other. We must allow the truths to modify and balance each other.

Second: we should keep an appropriate humility about great spiritual paradoxes that have puzzled even the greatest minds.

Third: While study of such matters is helpful and important, we must not consume too much of our time and energy on this type of controversy. Most believers I know who emphasize sovereignty, predestination and eternal security live as though their choices mattered. And I know other believers who claim to be accountable for their choices but live as though nothing they did could affect their salvation. The first issue for all of us is to trustingly submit to the Lordship of Christ as fully as we possibly can. When we concentrate on that, God will gently guide us away from unbiblical doctrinal extremes.

---G.B. "B." Shelburne, from SHBI's course *Church History*

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