

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #28, PART TWO: GOD'S PREDESTINATION VERSUS MAN'S FREE WILL

By John Temples

I was recently asked by a brother at church about the apparent clash between God's predestination and man's free will. The question is this: if God preordains something to be done, how can He judge or hold responsible those who simply carry out what He has predetermined?

First, some definitions:

- **Predestination**--the teaching that certain events or outcomes (such as eternal salvation or condemnation) are foreordained and determined beforehand by God's divine decree.
- **Foreknowledge**--awareness of something before it happens or exists.
- **Free will**--the ability to choose between different possible courses of action freely and unimpeded.

In Part One of this article, we learned that the Bible does indeed teach a form of predestination. But it is not that God has arbitrarily decreed salvation for some individuals and eternal doom for others, as many believe. God's predestination is of a class or group, not individuals. God has preordained that those who obey the gospel will be saved, and that those who do not obey will be lost. But because of the gift of free will, each person is free to choose which group he or she will be in.

THE PREDESTINATION PARADOX

Note some Bible passages that speak of God's unlimited power to act in a sovereign manner and to preordain whatsoever He chooses:

- "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure'" (Isaiah 46:9-10).

- “But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases” (Psalms 115:3).
- “Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens” (Romans 9:18).
- “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (Ephesians 1:4-5).

But likewise consider the many passages that affirm that people have free will to make and execute their own choices:

- “...I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).
- “And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).
- “And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come.’ Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Revelation 22:17).

From our human point of view, these two concepts may seem to be in conflict. Here are some questions that have been asked:

- How can God judge me if He has already predestined my whole life?
- The Bible says God “raised up” Pharaoh to demonstrate His power. So how can God hold Pharaoh guilty for his wickedness and stubborn refusal to release the Israelites from bondage?
- Can Judas be guilty of sin if he was only helping carry out God’s “determinate counsel” regarding the crucifixion of Christ?

To resolve this apparent clash of concepts, we need to ask: Is everything and every event predestined? Obviously, choice is not possible if everything is

predestined. The Bible clearly indicates that God does NOT predetermine everything that happens. God said through Jeremiah the prophet, “For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight.... They have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, *which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart*” (Jeremiah 7:30-31).

However, in order to fulfill His prophecies, God must predestine history to a certain degree. The Bible clearly indicates that God predestined redemptive history, specifically, the coming of the Messiah. Jesus clearly stated that His coming was planned, including His death:

- “But He said to them, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because *for this purpose I have been sent*” (Luke 4:43).
- “Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But *for this purpose I came to this hour*” (John 12:27).

But not everything is predestined. That is the answer to the seeming paradox. Neither predestination nor free will exists and/or operates alone in God’s world to the exclusion of the other. Either extreme view is wrong, since the Bible clearly indicates that both predestination and free will are in operation.

THE STATEMENT OF JESUS ON PREDESTINATION AND FREE WILL

Jesus spoke of the parallel tracks of predestination and free will in Matthew 18:7--“Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!” The English Standard Bible reads, “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” A paraphrase version, the New Living Translation (NLT) says, “Temptations are inevitable, but what sorrow awaits the person who does the tempting!”

Jesus was saying that offenses, sins, and various evils are unavoidable facts of life (we might say they are “predestined”); yet those who cause such offenses are still held accountable before God for them.

Another Biblical reality is that God knows ahead of time what choices each of us is going to make, so He uses those choices to accomplish His will. Such is...

THE CASE OF PHARAOH

When Moses and Aaron stood before Pharaoh and demanded the release of the Israelites, Pharaoh refused, arrogantly saying, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice?" (Exodus 5:2). God proceeded to humble Pharaoh and the entire nation of Egypt with a series of plagues.

Two Bible statements trouble Bible students: Exodus 9:12 states, "The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh." And in Exodus 9:16, God declares to Pharaoh, "Indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I might show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." The question many ask is this: if God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and raised him up to punish him and make him an example, how can Pharaoh be held accountable to God?

The answer is this: Yes, God judicially hardens the hearts of people who obstinately resist Him; but only after these individuals have freely and irrevocably chosen to walk the path of disobedience. At least twice before God hardened Pharaoh's heart, the Bible says he hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15, 32).

Another troubling passage is 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12: "The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. *And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*"

Notice the order of things here:

1. These people persistently hate the truth.
2. They refuse to believe the truth.
3. They have pleasure in unrighteousness.
4. Only then does God send them a delusion so that they would believe the lie.

So the heart of the matter is this: If individuals freely and persistently choose to rebel against God, God will judicially harden their hearts; and God, knowing ahead of time that such people will choose evil, will use them to accomplish His purposes, all the while not violating their free wills. God does not cause them to do evil; therefore, He can be just when He judges them for their sins.

THE "GIVING UP" OF THE PRE-CHRISTIAN PAGANS

In Romans 1, we read of a situation in which God abandoned sinners to disillusion and destruction. The persons under discussion were the pagans and idolaters of Old Testament times. Three times in Romans 1--verses 24, 26, and 28--it is said that God "gave them up." But notice that before God gave them up, they established a solid and continual record of rebellion against God:

- They suppressed the truth (verse 18).
- They knew God, but did not glorify Him as God (verse 21).
- They were not thankful (verse 21).
- They changed the glory of God into images of earthly "gods" (verse 23).
- They engaged in perverted sex (verses 26 and 27).
- They "did not like to retain God in their knowledge" (verse 28).

The simple truth from these passages is that if people knowingly, willingly, and persistently reject the truth, God will allow such people to fully experience the intellectual and spiritual consequences of their decision, and will make no further efforts to restrain or restore them.

THE CASE OF JUDAS

The Bible makes two things clear regarding Judas: (1) what he did helped accomplish God's plan for the redemption of mankind through the death of Christ; but (2) he was nevertheless held accountable for the sin of betraying the Lord. Judas experienced remorse after betraying Jesus; but instead of saying, "I had no choice but to do it; it was preordained," he recognized his personal responsibility and said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Matthew 27:4).

Once again, we see the principle of God's preplanning and man's freedom of choice operating simultaneously. Brother Wayne Jackson writes: "[An] important fact that must be recognized is that **foreknowledge** does not demand **predetermination**. God foreknew that Judas, exercising his own free will, would betray his Son. These passages, therefore, reflect Heaven's foreknowledge, but not a predetermined action over which the betrayer had no control. Even Presbyterian scholar Albert Barnes, in commenting on John 13:18, wrote: 'It does not mean that Judas was compelled to this course in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled'.... The frequent rationalization, 'I can't help what I do; I was predestined to do it,' is a false notion, but one that finds ready acceptance in a modern world that seeks to escape from personal responsibility. The Scriptures teach that men will give an account on the day of Judgment for their own conduct (Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10) — not for actions thrust upon them by God." (<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/742-was-judas-predestined-to-betray-christ>)

THE DECLARATION OF PETER REGARDING THE PEOPLE ON PENTECOST

Here is part of Peter's inspired sermon to the Jews on the day of Pentecost: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know — Him, being delivered by *the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands*, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it" (Acts 2:22-24). Here, we have brought into direct juxtaposition the predetermined purpose of God and the free will of those who chose to murder Jesus.

Commentator Albert Barnes has an excellent explanation of this passage: "We have here a striking and clear instance of the doctrine that *the decrees of God do not interfere with the free agency of people*. This event was certainly determined beforehand. Nothing is clearer than this. It is here expressly asserted; and it had been foretold with undeviating certainty by the prophets. God had, for wise and gracious purposes, purposed or decreed in his own mind that his Son should die

at the time and in the manner in which he did; for all the circumstances of his death, as well as of his birth and his life, were foretold; and yet in this the Jews and the Romans never supposed or alleged that they were compelled or cramped in what they did. They did what they chose.... We have here a proof that *the decrees of God do not take away the moral character of an action*. It does not prove that an action is innocent if it is shown that it is a part of the wise plan of God to permit it.... The sinner must answer for his sins, not for the plans of his Maker; nor can he take shelter in the day of wrath against what he deserves in the plea that God has determined future events. If any people could have done it, it would have been those whom Peter addressed; yet neither he nor they felt that their guilt was in the least diminished by the fact that Jesus was 'delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God.'

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CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Man's free will and God's sovereignty are not opposed to each other but run parallel with one other.

God knows ahead of time the disposition of all persons, whether good or evil, and may therefore use them to accomplish His purposes. In every case, though, they are responsible for their own choices.

A person can so resist the truth that he finally becomes deluded and can only believe a lie. But he will still have to answer to God.

We have known for some time that "the devil made me do it" is not going to be a valid defense at the day of judgment. But now we know that neither is "God made me do it." --John Temples

