

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 29

Salvation – Part 5 Predestination – Choice

When I was in high school and early years of college, I had a friend named Dan Daniels. Dan and I had several things in common. We both loved high school debate, and we both loved the Lord. Having those two particular things in common can make for an interesting friendship. Let me explain.

High school debate draws those who have a naturally argumentative disposition, or at least those who have an ability to analyze multiple sides of an issue and set out the appropriate arguments. It also fosters one's inclination and ability to research and study. (Yes, I am still a proponent of High School debate today. In the Lanier household, debate is a required course for *all* children!)

On the other hand, loving the Lord sets into motion not only going to church and seeking a holy lifestyle, but it also draws out the need to know God more fully, the need to study his word, the need to understand him, and the world he has made. Living under a faithful relationship to God is both challenging and rewarding. It also provides for a deepened fellowship and friendship beyond that offered in the world.

Now, in light of the foregoing, consider what happens when you mix together two whose lives, to some great extent, rotate around those two points – loving the Lord and loving debate. You have two close brothers who fellowship together and revel in debating about God (call that “theology”¹) and his word! That was Dan and I. Most every day, we would discuss either some issue relevant to our debate topic, or one relevant to our faith. Let me clarify, we were not always debating each other on theology. Most times, we were on the same side of the issue and were debating an unknown person, or an author one of us had read.

One theological debate that still stands out in my mind over 30 years later was over the issue of predestination and free choice. Both of us struggled mightily to understand the issue. While we were able to “take a position,” I never really felt like it was taken in absolute certainty, for I could see plainly two debatable sides in Scripture. In Romans 9:15-24 Paul wrote:

¹ See lesson one in the Pauline Theology series at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called.

Those are difficult words to wrap one's mind around unless one accepts a doctrine of predestination!

As we debated Paul's meaning, the main verse that kept us from wholesale adoption of the doctrine of predestination came from the words of Jesus in his lament over Jerusalem:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (Mat. 23:37).

The words that stood out in our minds were, "How *I* would have...but *you would not*." I remember Dan telling me, "Those words seem hypocritical if the real truth is that God made the choice, not the people over whom Jesus laments."

These questions bring us to our discussion today. What can we learn about Paul's teaching on this subject? What can we learn that might make sense of both Paul's words and those of Jesus?

That is our goal.

PAUL'S DAY vs. OUR DAY

Few of us have spent much time studying the actual writings and thought of the Reformation movement: John Calvin, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and others. Still, fewer have carefully studied the lesser-known reformers like Jon

Hus. As we navigate the pages of pre-reformation church history, how many of us can honestly say we have spent a great deal of time understanding the writings and thought of Thomas Aquinas? Archbishop Anselm? If we dig deeper into the church's past, then we can ask how many of us have worked through many of the works of Augustine? Or, the early church fathers? Have we engaged our minds in ferreting out the impact of Greek thought on the church after the apostolic age?

For those who were in this class in our church history series, these names certainly ring a bell. Hopefully, a few lessons from those studies stir in our memories. We bring this up because each of those succeeding icons of church thought have played a part in getting theology where it is today. Few Christians could be asking the questions they ask today if these people had not already blazed trails with their understandings and insights. In other words, you do not have to know the writings of Augustine to be influenced by them.

Church thought has a historical chain to it. Each generation builds on the chain that was there from earlier generations. Admittedly, some times the efforts of the church are to try and restore the church of earlier chain links, if we keep with that analogy. Yet even then, the theology and thoughts of the 40 some odd generations that have passed before us have a strong influence.

We go into this much detail over this area because it takes an important role in our study this lesson. When we have a "predestination/choice" debate like Dan Daniels and I did in high school, we are asking a question Paul did not ask. We are attempting to glean answers to our questions out of writings that were written for a different purpose.

That does not mean our task is useless, but it does mean that we need to first do the homework to understand what Paul was saying, and why he was saying it, before we then try to subject his writings as proofs of what we do or do not believe.

We start then, with Paul's world, and the reasons he wrote as he did. We can get a view of Paul's world by reading from a contemporary of his, Pliny the Elder. Pliny was a bit younger than Paul. Pliny was born in 23 AD. Before he died in the eruption of Vesuvius (79 AD), Pliny wrote *Natural History*, a collection of 37 books that worked through history and the world in which he lived. In book 2, Pliny wrote on the universe, especially from the perspective of mathematics and weather. In chapter 5, he discourses on God(s). This is useful for us in showing the perception of God(s) by this military man/government administrator.

Consider these three quotes:

That that supreme being, whate'er it be, pays heed to man's affairs is a ridiculous notion. Can we believe that it would not be defiled by so gloomy and so multifarious a duty? (Verse 20).

We are so much at the mercy of chance that Chance herself, by whom God is proved uncertain, takes the place of God. (Verse 22).

This series of instances entangles unforeseeing mortality, so that among these things but one thing is in the certain – that nothing certain exists, and that nothing is more pitiable, or more presumptuous, than man! (Verse 25).²

Writings like these cause scholars to note the pessimism and despair of Paul's time and the failure of Roman/Greek religion to furnish any assurances. R.P. Martin wrote of this time:

Men and women were made to feel impotent and helpless, and religion was marked by a failure of nerve.³

W. A. Elwell wrote similarly:

They lived in a world influenced by skepticism and uncertainty about life's meaning and the ability of the gods to control evil and answer questions about human destiny.⁴

PAUL'S RESPONSE TO HIS GENERATION

Paul's world was one of fear and uncertainty where divinity was concerned. His Gentile readers came from religious roots of god(s) who were impotent and withdrawn, not really caring too much in the affairs of man. God(s) were unreliable and unpredictable.

Into this worldview came Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul knew the one God, and the true God, was not at all what the Gentile world thought. Invading the Roman worldview, Paul wrote of the true God. Consider in this vein the following verses:

- **Ephesians 1:4-6** He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his

² Our quotations come from the translation of H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library vol. 330.

³ *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (IVP 1993) at 984.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 225.

will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

- **1 Thessalonians 1:4** For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you.
- **Romans 8:28-30** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.
- **Romans 9:14-21** What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

Paul wrote to his readers addressing their needs and their concerns of life. His readers were not carrying on a debate about whether they were saved by their own volition or by the overwhelming irrefutable actions of God Almighty. Paul's readers carried the insecurities and doubts that came from their upbringing, from their parents, and from their communities. Did God even care? Was God involved? Was God reliable?

Paul gave his flock the answers! God did care. He cared enough to come into the world and call each believer. He cared enough to reach down in grace and adopt his children choosing to do so before he even created the world. God was and is involved. God is working all things out for the good among those who love him – those he has called. God was and is thoroughly reliable. He knew us before he made us. He predestined us to be in the image of his Son. We have the assurance that as he justified us (declared us “not guilty”) he also glorifies us, making us what we were meant to be.

Paul saw the world in terms of the believers God called into a way of life that God set out ahead of time. If we lose track of this original context, we lose track of a great assurance that Paul had for his flock, and that God would have us hear today.

Before we address our questions of predestination, we should take Paul at his word and appreciate his message. To those who wonder if God cares, to those who wonder if God can or will hold onto them and reliably honor their love, even though it is feeble, Paul shouts, “YES!” To those who sing the prayer of that beautiful hymn, *O Sacred Head*, as it asks, “O let me never outlive my love to thee,” we hear Paul speaking comfort.

Paul’s writings on this idea not only answered the doubting and fearful Gentiles, but they also spoke an important message to many of his Jewish readers. A real problem with many of the Jews that Paul encountered was their confidence before God that grew out of their deeds and holiness. Paul writes in a way that denies this pride as well.

Paul’s passages that emphasize God’s election take away any bragging by anyone. How dare anyone claim God’s love and attention because of their own deeds? God’s love is from God’s choice. Mankind’s goodness in deed and thought comes from God, not from man. There is no basis for boasting at all!

For a moment, let us lay aside this assurance and understanding of the context of Paul’s writings on *predestination* and let us turn to the other end of the spectrum. When people were running from godliness and holy behavior, Paul was never one to offer an excuse. Paul knew, believed in, and taught human responsibility for actions big and small.

In Galatians, Paul begins the letter “astonished” that the Galatians “are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6). Paul then announces a curse on anyone preaching a contrary gospel. In the close of the letter, Paul urges that if anyone is caught in a transgression then “you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” (Gal. 6:1).

Similarly, in the well known passage of Ephesians 2:8-10, while Paul writes of our salvation as “not your own doing,” as “the gift of God,” and “not a result of works,” he does not end it there. Paul adds that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we *should* walk in them.” Paul does not say we *must* walk in them; he says we *should*!⁵

⁵ Greek scholars reading this lesson should note that Paul writes with a *hina* clause that the translators (properly, I think) consider a *hina* purpose clause. This clause might be translated as “would,” but most committees consider it a purposeful “should.”

Paul later *urges* the Ephesians to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1).

This gives us the other end of the spectrum in Paul’s writings. When people were in danger of walking away from God and God’s calling, Paul wrote, encouraged, exhorted, and even threatened people to keep them choosing God and his will.

So the two ends of the spectrum, both of which we arrive at by reading Paul in context, are as follows:

To those in doubt or with fear/
worry Paul offers the assurance
that God has chosen them and he
will not stop loving them.



To those in danger of walking
away from the gospel or from the
responsibility of living as a child
of God Paul gives stern rebuke and
warning.

But, our questions are not necessarily answered by simply putting Paul’s teachings into this context. We turn now to address some modern questions a bit more carefully.

PAUL’S RESPONSE TO OUR GENERATION

I am going to try and offer some insight that I think is fair from studying Paul on questions that I find we are asking today in our age. I do so with the trepidation and warning that scholars have struggled with these concepts for centuries and have debated the nuances of these passages. I do not reasonably anticipate fully, completely, and adequately answering this question in the next four pages. I do anticipate giving some reasonable ideas for you to study further. In doing so, my goal is to foster further study. For in all candor, the riches of God and his majestic plan to bring all of this world to an ending for which he has already planned are deep enough to keep us reflecting and thinking all the way into eternity!

We shall approach this in a Question and Answer format, appealing to Scripture as we are able.

Question: Does God pick out who goes to heaven?

Answer: Yes and no! There is a Greek verb Paul uses five times: *proorizo* (προωρίζω). The word is not used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the “Septuagint”) and it is very rarely used in secular Greek. Paul has put together two Greek words: *pro*, meaning “before” and *orizo*, meaning, “to appoint or determine.”⁶ This is the word Paul uses in Romans 8:29 when writing that,

⁶ Bauer Danker Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (U. of Chicago 2000) 3d edition.

“those whom he foreknew he also *predestined (pro-orizo)*” (Paul uses it also in the following verse adding that, “those whom he predestined (*pro-orizo*) he also called”). Paul uses it a third time in 1 Cor. 2:7, “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed (*pro-orizo*) before the ages for our glory.” In Ephesians 1, Paul uses it twice, in verse 5 (“he predestined (*pro-orizo*) us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ”) and verse 11 (“In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined (*pro-orizo*) according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”)

Absent other good sources to understand greater nuances of this word, we are left trying to understand it from the context where Paul uses it. Perhaps it is clearest in Romans 8:29 and 30. God foreknew some whom he chose to predestine, justify, and glorify. Paul does not tell us what God’s foreknowledge was, and scholars fairly debate that point. Some think God foreknew how one would respond to the gospel, predestining those who would respond positively. Others believe the foreknowledge is a reference to God’s intimacy and relationship with us as part of God’s own decision. Douglas Moo makes this point asserting Paul does not write that God knew *about us* before hand, but rather that he knew *us*.⁷ Others place Paul as speaking about the church being predestined, rather than an individual.⁸

What we can confidently say, however, is that on some level, we are God’s, because God chose to make us his. This is the assurance from the early part of this lesson. Beyond that, we can also say that Paul never held a theology that precluded him from charging individuals with responsibility to hear and answer God’s call. Indeed, Paul spent most of his life as a missionary in the mission field seeking to bring the gospel to all who might listen.

I would urge us to leave a bit here to the mystery of God. God has somehow predestined the believer, and yet left the believer with an exercisable choice.⁹ Paul

⁷ Moo, Douglas, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans 1996) at 532.

⁸ See the lesson in church history on Jacob Arminius for more on this. It is found in the Church History series as lesson 64 at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

⁹ The responses to an early draft of this lesson are interesting. One writes, “One analogy that I have used is a coin. A USD coin has two sides that look totally different. And if you were going to describe that coin - you would have to describe BOTH sides to accurately portray the coin. They are not two different coins- but two parts that make up one truth. God's choosing and man's responsibility are really two parts of one truth- and to accurately ‘use’ ‘understand’ that truth you must consider both sides. They are not two competing truths- they are one truth.” Another is unsatisfied and writes, “I’ve read and re-read that section and still am not sure what it is that you mean to say. And maybe that’s partially the point. Still, I think the reader is left with a question about whether we choose God or He chooses us. I believe Scripture teaches the latter. You say at points that God chooses us, but then you say ‘on some level, we are God’s, because God chose

wrote, as did the Old Testament, that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21 "And the Lord said...I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go;" Rom. 9:17-18 "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.") Yet, Paul undoubtedly knew Scripture also taught that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex. 8:15 "Pharaoh...hardened his heart;" Ex. 8:32 "But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also;" Ex. 9:34 "Pharaoh...sinned yet again and hardened his heart").

Question: Is there any point in evangelizing?

Answer: Absolutely! This is true regardless of where one lands on the question of predestination. God has called his people to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." God has told us to spread his word. As Paul said:

For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:13-17).

We should never ask, "Why should we do or not do what God has told us to do/not do?" It is always enough that God has instructed us, whether we understand all his reasons or not.

As we set out these verses, we should add another note on the complexity of this issue from Paul's mind. Paul wrote the above in Romans 10, which is in the flow of Romans 8 ("those he predestined...") and Romans 9 ("I will have mercy on whom I have mercy..."). In the flow of those ideas, we read Paul emphasizing, "Everyone who calls...will be saved," Yet to "call," one must "believe." To "believe," one must hear, and to hear requires "preaching." This is personal choice and responsibility in action, both as to preaching and as to receiving and calling on the name of the Lord. Paul does not write, "Everyone God forces to call will be saved." Paul sets this call on the believer, in just the same way Paul places

to make us his.' That sentence, like the section, sends a mixed message, at least to me. Again, maybe that's the point." I confess to the crime of sending mixed messages because I think the mystery is scriptural. We need to be careful forcing Scripture into our 21st century mindset in ways that compromise the mystery of God.

the believers call on the Lord in other places.

Question: But what about Scriptures that indicate God keeps people from hearing the truth and believing?

Answer: We need to take those Scriptures into account, but understand them in light of the full counsel of God's word. So for example, consider Paul's writing in Romans 11:1-8:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, □ "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see □ and ears that would not hear, □ down to this very day."

At first blush this passage seems to only be one side of the coin. It is as if Paul is writing that God forces some to reject him, giving them a "spirit of stupor" and "eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear." Yet this passage does not negate the personal choices of these people. Paul quotes God saying to Elijah that the idolaters themselves "bowed the knee to Baal." God rejected those who rejected God. God did not choose those who chose Baal. Instead they got the spirit of stupor from God that they chose for themselves.

We see this over and over in the Old Testament. God chooses a person- Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jacob, David, Pharaoh, Isaiah etc. God knows them, initiates the call, equips the called, and disciplines the chosen but disobedient one. All are examples of predestination- people that God first called but that also were completely responsible for their actions.

Question: How can God be fair and send people to Hell?

Answer: No one in Hell will have an excuse. Paul said that people were without an excuse in rebelling against God:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal

power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse (Rom. 1:19-20).

Paul then says that God has given such up to “a debased mind,” to “dishonorable passions,” and to “the lusts of their hearts.” But again, this was not an action God did simply out of his own volition. Paul clearly links these decisions on God’s part to the just reaction to man’s willful decision not to honor God as God.

Paul also provides a seemingly harsh answer to those who might protest God’s fairness later in Romans 9:19-21:

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"

In the analysis and words of Elwell, Paul answered in a sharp way adding:

For those who so misunderstand God as to imagine that God works arbitrarily and on no moral basis whatsoever, let such an answer suffice.¹⁰

Question: What happens to the native Amazonian that will live and die never hearing about the work of Christ?

Answer: Scripture (and Paul) does not directly know the answer to this question. We do learn important things from Scripture and from the Holy Spirit through the pen of Paul that we can consider on this point. First, we know that apart from Christ and his sacrifice, no one can be saved. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through him (Jn 14:6). We know this verse to be true for all, regardless of geography, age, mental acuity, or sophistication. God has to pay the sacrifice for sin, or there is no atonement. God paid this sacrifice once, for everyone in Christ. (“Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” 1 Pet. 3:18).

We also know that God reckons faith as righteousness. This faith is based on the knowledge and understanding of the believer. For Abraham, that level of trusting faith no doubt had a different level of understanding than it does for those of us who see the deeds of the Lord upon the cross. Yet, the faith was still reckoned as righteousness, for Paul uses Abraham as the example of faith’s role in salvation in Romans 4.

¹⁰ Elwell at 228.

Where does this leave the infant who dies? Or, the person with severe mental limitations? Or, the person who lives an entire life outside the hearing of the gospel? We do not know for certain. Does God see that person's dependence and trust upon whatever level of revelation is there? We do not know. What we do know is that we are charged to take the gospel to all corners of the world. We also know that "whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you"* (1 Thes. 1:4).

Do you ever worry about whether God loves you? Have you wondered if you have offended him with your attitudes and sins? Do you fret over whether your death will see you in heaven or hell? Let me suggest two things. First, make certain you have taken the step of believing in Christ. By that, I mean put your trust in him, his sacrifice on your behalf. Such faith moves your heart to confess yourself a sinner in need of a Savior. Inherent in this faith is the repentance that goes with the confession. We also have the beautiful expression of this faith in a submersion in water symbolizing our submersion in Christ's death and our resurrection into the new life in him. Make certain you have put your faith in Christ.

Second, take your solace in the writings of Paul. If you are God's, then you can rest in the knowledge that he chose you. He has called you. He has predestined you to rightness and glory before him. In other words, God does love you. Christ took the offense of your sins and attitudes before the Father on the cross. Death will see you through heaven's gate as adopted children of God Almighty coming home.

2. *"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called"* (Eph. 4:1).

Paul gave solace to those wondering about God's love and commitment, but he pulled no punches on those who might ever take advantage of God's love. Paul knew that we have choices on what we do. God did not create machines; he created free will beings in his image. Adam and Eve chose to eat the fruit; God did not force them. Now we, their descendants, are born into a sin and depravity they did not have before eating the off limit fruit. However, we are still creatures with the abilities to choose. So, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to live up to the calling! In other words, God chose you, so act like it!

3. *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ”For who has known the mind of the Lord”* (Rom. 11:33-34).

Do not put God in a box. Live in wonder and awe. Study and meditate upon him, learn and grow. But never ever think you have him fully figured out! He predestined those who made the choice for him! That is a mystery, outrageous and true all at once!