

# GOD'S CHOICE OR OURS?

## *The Good News About Predestination And Election*

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**W**ho chooses where we will spend eternity? For generations, readers of the Bible have struggled with this question. Countless arguments over the role of God's sovereignty and human freedom have divided individuals, churches, and denominations.

In the following pages, RBC senior research editor Herb Vander Lugt shows us how to avoid such arguments. When the limitations of human logic and philosophy are recognized, we can hear and rejoice in what the Scriptures themselves have to say.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

Managing Editor: David Sper

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# THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT GOD AND MAN

The evening news showed starving Ethiopians, bodies lying in the streets, and mutilated corpses—all victims in a country wracked by civil war. Another news item showed the spot where a young man was gunned down. A third segment showed a mug shot of a man charged with brutally murdering a 6-year-old child.

At some point, a thoughtful person has to wonder, *Why? Why is there so much bad news?* Allowing for the fact that networks would lose audience share if they reported only good news, why is our world so filled with pain and loss?

All answers raise more questions. The person who

doubts the existence of God might respond, “This is what we can expect in a world ruled by chance and competition.” But if that’s true, where did all of the design come from? People who believe in a personal Creator are likely to say, “Pain and loss are symptoms of the rebellion that has disrupted the original design.” But if a good God does exist, why does He allow such rebellion, especially if He knows ahead of time how much suffering it is going to cause? And how much control does God still have?

Agreement ends here, even among those who believe in the God of the Bible. Some believe that God knows the future because He predetermined everything that would happen. Others believe that even though God knows the future, He is

still responding with freedom to choices we are freely making.

## **HOW MUCH DOES GOD DECIDE?**

Some believe that if God knows all that is going to happen, as the Bible says He does, then logic demands that we are not as free as we might think. They are convinced that God foreordained everything that would happen so that He would be assured of His own desired outcome and glory—every act of social kindness, every apparent human mistake, every murder, every rape, every expression of human goodness or abuse. They believe in this kind of predetermining action while still emphasizing that humans are responsible for their sins.

Those who teach God's absolute sovereignty also

say that God decided before the world was created that He would send His Son as Savior, that He would save certain persons by His sovereign grace, and that He would condemn the rest of humanity. They say it follows logically that if God has decreed the salvation of only some, He has predetermined eternal divine abandonment for the rest.

I grew up under this teaching and remember church leaders debating the question, "Does God sincerely offer salvation to all?" When I was 19, I began doing street-corner evangelism. But I was warned that I would be contradicting the teaching of my church if I told people that Christ died for each of them and desires every one of them to believe on Jesus. I wanted to proclaim the good news

of salvation, but my belief-system demanded that I view most of my listeners as predetermined by God for a lost eternity.

In church, however, I didn't hear much about this gloomy outlook. The pastors encouraged us to live godly lives, and addressed us as beings who could make real decisions. I took what they said seriously. So did my parents, my brothers, and most of my friends. We occasionally discussed the seeming contradiction between thinking that everything has been predetermined, but at the same time seeing ourselves as responsible to make right decisions. We agreed we couldn't logically harmonize this, but many of us could live under the tension. Those who couldn't, left our church.

We learned to put our

beliefs into two compartments: the "divine sovereignty" truth in one and the "human responsibility" truth in the other. We also learned to view all of life from two distinct standpoints—the human and the divine. From our human standpoint we could feel grief, anger, and dismay over terrible crimes or atrocities. But we were careful to refer to such happenings as only "seeming" tragedies, because in reality they had been preordained for the glory of God. We admitted our inability to reconcile the teachings of these two compartments, but we told ourselves that the seeming contradictions would be resolved in heaven when we see things as God sees them.

Some people, however, find it virtually impossible to live under that kind of

tension. They must live out of one box—either the one called “divine sovereignty” or the one called “human responsibility.” They feel compelled to carry everything they believe to its logical conclusion.

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*Some people find it virtually impossible to live with the tension between human responsibility and divine responsibility.*

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Two people I knew years ago illustrate the way the “sovereignty” position can be misused. One was an elderly woman on her deathbed. Her family and friends

spoke of her as having been an unusually kind, caring, and godly person. She was extremely fearful as she faced the end of her life. She said that she loved the Lord, believed Jesus died for sinners like her, and had tried to please Him. But she couldn’t shake off the feeling that she had been chosen by God to be what she called “a vessel of His wrath.” And nothing anybody said could allay her fear.

The other person was a churchgoing man who was abusive to his family. He admitted that this was wrong but insisted that he was powerless to change because he was only doing what he had been predestined to do. He said he hoped he would somehow be among God’s elect in heaven but often felt he was destined for hell.

It was difficult to help these people by giving them encouraging verses from the Bible. They had been taught that God has predetermined everything, including the behavior and destiny of every person. They logically confronted the possibility that they were among the unfortunate group of people who were elected for eternal condemnation.

### **DO WE HAVE A REAL CHOICE?**

Those who are troubled by the logical problem posed by God's "absolute sovereignty" need to be assured that the Bible teaches us to believe in genuine freedom of choice. We cannot by human logic understand how God knows the future and remains in control of His world while still giving us this real freedom. But the God of the Bible describes

Himself as One who is deeply grieved when His creation resists and rebels against Him. From beginning to end, the Bible presents people as

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making real moral choices about a God who is actively and emotionally involved in their lives. He is a God who wants us to know that He is unlimited in His love and that He desires the salvation of all (1 Tim. 2:3-4).

## **God Is Actively And Emotionally Involved With Us.**

Greek philosophy painted the supreme God as an “Unmoved Mover.” This is not the God of the Bible. The idea that our Creator cannot be touched by our weakness, our anguish, or our cries for help is contradicted on virtually every page of the Scriptures.

The God of the Bible is so involved with us that He agonizes over us (Hos. 11:1,8), grieves when we are distressed (Isa. 63:9), changes His mind about threatened punishment when we repent (Jer. 18:8; Jon. 3:10), and joins in our struggle against the forces of darkness (Isa. 42:13; Rom. 16:20).

All of history, and specifically Israel’s history as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, is a story of a God who wants His

people to believe that He genuinely cares about choices that they are responsible for. He is also a God who, like a great chess master, is always able to stay in control of the board while moving strategically to His predetermined “end-game.”

The story of the Bible does not allow for the conclusion that human history represents an emotionless God who writes the script of history and parades His characters like so many marionettes on a puppet stage. Even though the Scriptures make it clear that God has predetermined the ultimate goal of history, He has given us genuine freedom. He allows us to make choices while being continually at work, bringing order out of chaos, light out of

darkness, good out of evil, beauty out of ugliness, life out of death. He delights in forgiving us when we repent and receiving us when we turn back to Him in faith. How sad that the fearful elderly woman I mentioned earlier did not believe this good news about God!

**God Is Boundless And Self-Sacrificing In His Love.**

The second basic truth about God, which neither the fearful woman nor the abusive husband understood, is the scope and intensity of His love. This is made clear in the following verses:

*God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world,*

*but to save the world through Him (Jn. 3:16-17).*

*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn. 2:2).*

*We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe (1 Tim. 4:10).*

Some say that “the world” God loves is the world of the elect and that the “all” for whom Christ died merely means all kinds of people. But those conclusions are the result of “reading into” the Scriptures. A plain reading of the Bible indicates that God loves everyone, that Christ died for everyone, and that all who personally accept what God has done for them will be saved.



# THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT PREDESTINATION

Earlier we referred to a fatalistic husband who blamed God for his own abusive behavior and a heartbroken woman who was afraid to die because she thought she had been foreordained to be a

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*God can honor and be responsive to our will even while remaining in control of the outcome.*

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“vessel of God’s wrath.” Both found little good news for themselves in the Bible because of common misunderstandings about

divine sovereignty and predestination. Both saw God’s sovereignty as existing at the expense of their own needs. What they didn’t see is that God can honor and be responsive to our will even while remaining in control of the outcome.

## THE PATH TO GOD’S PREDETERMINED GOAL

One thing about the good news of the sovereignty of God that all can affirm is this: God *predetermined* that His Son would become a member of the human family so that He could provide salvation.

After Christ’s resurrection, Peter told a Jewish audience, “This man was handed over to you *by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge*; and you, with the help of

wicked men, put Him to death” (Acts 2:23). Knowing what the leaders of Israel would do when confronted by someone who exposed their failures, God used their freely chosen acts to fulfill His eternal purpose that Jesus would die as “the atoning sacrifice . . . for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2). God declared Jesus to be His chosen one when He said at the Mount of Transfiguration, “This is My Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him” (Lk. 9:35).

This is the eternally predetermined path by which God in His holy love made possible our salvation. By His own loving initiatives, God sovereignly moved into our world to offer us rescue from the darkness of our own choices.

## **THE ELEMENTS OF GOD’S PREDETERMINED GOAL**

God has predetermined an outcome for us and for the entire universe that we can barely begin to comprehend. He has

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already decided to powerfully and lovingly assure us that in the future there will be:

### **A Family Of Blameless People.**

God did more than give us an invitation. He immersed Himself in

His plan for our rescue. While reminding us that we are going to be held accountable for our own choices, God showed His own willingness to pay the legal penalty for our violations of His law.

This is the wonder-filled story of God's suffering in and through the death of His Son in our place. All of His purposes in election and predestination must be understood in terms of His willingness to do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

To assure the outcome of those who rely on Christ for rescue, the Scriptures inform us that we have become members of a community chosen by God before the creation of the world (Eph. 1:4-8).

### **A Family Of Transformed People.**

Another element of God's predetermined plan is found in Romans 8:29,

"Those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers." God is bringing to Himself a group of *foreknown* and *pre-loved* people destined to become like Jesus. This "likeness" begins to take shape in our present lives (2 Cor. 3:18) and will be completed when we receive our new bodies and will "be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 Jn. 3:2). Jesus will be the elder brother in God's family (Heb. 2:10-13).

**A Reconciled Cosmos Under Christ.** The Bible shows that God's predetermined plan for the future includes the whole universe. It is a plan that encompasses not only the salvation of individual men and women but of all creation as well.

Ephesians 1:9-10 says that God “made known to us the mystery of His will . . . , which He *purposed* in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

God predetermined “to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His [Christ’s] blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:20).

After Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, “God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

The term *predestination* is used only in the positive sense of those who are saved. The Bible does not say that anyone is predestined to condemnation. Furthermore, predestination cannot be separated from God’s foreknowledge—and it is beyond our ability to comprehend how God foreknows while still protecting the “mystery” of human freedom.

We can find comfort in the fact that the Bible never speaks of anyone being foreordained for damnation. We can rejoice in the realization that everyone will someday bow before Jesus—either willingly or reluctantly—in a cosmos united under Him.

# THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

The word *election* often conjures up the thought that because God chose some for heaven, He also chose others for hell. However, when we trace God's electing activity through the Bible, we find that His election, which is connected to His foreknowledge (1 Pet. 1:2), is always good news.

This truth is expressed well by Herbert M. Wolf in his article on foreknowledge in the *Baker Dictionary Of Biblical Theology* (p.266):

In each case, foreknowledge precedes election and is intricately linked with God's will and

purpose. Yet we should not think of this as some kind of fatalism or determinism. God does not force anyone to become a believer but works in a person's heart so that the individual freely chooses to receive Christ as Savior.

## A CHOSEN FAMILY

Consider God's *election* of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Even a casual reading of the book of Genesis shows that when God chose to reveal Himself to these patriarchs, it was good news not only for them but for the whole world. By selecting the Jewish people, God created an ancestral line that culminated in the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of all who would believe.

Did God, by selecting Abram, reject the rest of

the human race of that time? No. He didn't reject contemporaries of Abram such as Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20) or Job.

God's choice of Isaac as the son of promise didn't cause Ishmael or his descendants to lose the opportunity to have faith in God. On the contrary, Ishmael received God's promise of blessing and multiplied descendants (Gen. 17:17-27), all of whom had access to the evidence of God through creation, conscience, and by observing the blessings and judgments God gave His chosen people.

Malachi 1:3 refers to Jacob as being "loved" and Esau "hated." But this one statement describes the love that God was showing Israel while at the same time judging the descendants of Esau for rejecting His love. In time,

Israel too would fall under the severe mercy of God. God doesn't play favorites. But He does choose some to have a special role in revealing His love and truth to the world.

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***God doesn't play favorites. But He does choose some to have a special role in revealing His love and truth to the world.***

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God sovereignly selected Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be a family through whom He would ultimately bless "all peoples." But by selecting them, He did not reject their "non-chosen" contemporaries and keep them outside the offers of His mercy and salvation.

God chose three men to play a unique role in His program of providing salvation for the world. Their election was meant to be good news—for everybody.

## **A CHOSEN NATION**

From Jacob's twelve sons, God brought into being one nation for the benefit of all other nations. In choosing Israel to be His servant, God did not reject the other nations. Just the opposite. He made Israel a special object lesson of His love so that she could be a witness to the nations.

Israel's election to be God's messenger was not an easy calling. The dangers for disobedience were as bad as her opportunities for blessing were good. When Israel failed to remain faithful, she became "a people of

holocaust" long before her misery in our own 20th century.

Israel's election made her an example to the whole world of both blessing and judgment. She was also chosen to illustrate the mystery of sovereignty and free will. On one hand, she was sovereignly chosen by God to be His servant. Yet, her own choices were real. God did not treat His people like rocks or trees that had no capacity for moral and spiritual choices. He treated them instead as having the capacity to at least cry out for His forgiveness and enabling grace.

## **A CHOSEN LINE**

Having chosen one *family* line through which He would bless all the nations, God gave us another example of His election. In sovereign

grace, He chose the Jewish King David to become part of the *legal* line to the Savior of the world (Mt. 1:6-16). Yes, David was chosen by God to be the royal ancestor of Messiah. But that election did not involve the rejection of the rest of the Israelites. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel were not in the Davidic line. Neither were the devout Jews who appear in Luke's account of the Christmas story: Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna.

## **A CHOSEN MESSIAH**

On the basis of Isaiah 11:1, Micah 5:2, and many other Old Testament passages, we see that the Jewish people of Jesus' day anticipated the coming of Messiah. Most of Israel, however, expected their national

savior to come in the form of a military deliverer.

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Jesus did not fit that mold. So His claims to be the Son of God confused and then infuriated them. The idea that He was somehow the Anointed One chosen by God to be the Messiah was a central issue in the Jewish trial (Mk. 14:61-65) and the focal point of the mockery hurled at Jesus as He hung on the cross (15:31-32). But they were wrong. Jesus was indeed "God's elect," the "Anointed One," the one "Seed"



in whom the promise to Abraham and his descendants find their ultimate fulfillment (Gal. 3:16).

## **A CHOSEN MULTINATIONAL BODY**

Acts 2 records God's sovereign action in giving birth to another elect group that was more international in scope than the chosen people of Israel. Known as the church, the first members of this elect "congregation" were all people of Jewish ancestry. Later the church became largely Gentile in makeup.

Scripture calls this chosen group "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27) and His "bride" (Rev. 21:9). At the moment of faith, all who receive Christ as Savior become members of this body through the baptism of the Holy Spirit

(1 Cor. 12:13). In this body of Christ, the former distinctions between Jew and Gentile are gone (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22).

The church is an eternally elected community who find their identity and mission in Christ. Paul wrote, "He [God] chose us in Him [Christ] before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

The church's purpose is to carry out the mission of Matthew 28:19-20. This will continue until Christ returns to remove living believers from the earth and to resurrect those who have died (1 Th. 4:13-18).

## **A CHOSEN GOAL**

It's clear that the conclusion of the church age does not end God's plan of salvation. The next chapter of earth's history will not be finished until God has shown the whole

world that in choosing some His purpose was to bless all who would trust Him.

We still wait for the day when “all peoples on earth will be blessed” through the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:3). God later promised, “The whole land of Canaan . . . I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (Gen. 17:8).

Many Old Testament prophecies (e.g. Isa. 2:1-5; 11:1-16; Jer. 23:5-8; 31:1-14; Ezek. 36:22-38; Zech. 12-14) declare that Israel will one day recognize and accept her Messiah. She will experience God’s unparalleled blessing in her own land and be the spiritual center of a kingdom marked by international peace, civil righteousness, universal prosperity, and a world

free from the ravages of the curse. To fulfill His promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), God has predetermined that in the last days He will use Israel to bring peace and happiness to the whole world.

For the last 2,000 years, however, God has been using believers in Christ to do what He originally chose Israel to do. In the first century,

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this willingness of God to use Gentile believers raised many questions.

Had God broken His promise to use Israel as His chosen servant? How could He set aside the nation He had set apart for Himself?

In response to these questions, the apostle Paul wrote Romans 9–11 to Jewish countrymen, undoubtedly believers in Jesus, who were having a hard time with the idea that God had set Israel aside. After expressing his deep love for his Jewish brothers, Paul developed the theme of 9:6, “It is not as though God’s Word had failed.” He wanted his readers to know that God still had a future plan for the people through whom He had chosen to bless the whole world.

Understanding Paul’s purpose will help us to see that Romans 9–11 is not a treatise on predestination or individual election as some have supposed. It is

not saying that some people have not and never will have an opportunity to be saved. Rather, it is saying that God has the power and prerogative to choose the servants He will use to point the world to a salvation that comes not from works but from grace alone.

### **God’s Undeniable Rights (Rom. 9:6-29)**

*God has the right to choose the line of promise (vv.6-13).* In choosing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be the line of promise, God was neither being unfair to nor rejecting those who were not chosen. He was simply exercising His right to choose those through whom He would bless all mankind.

*God has the right to choose His candidates for mercy (vv.14-18).*

In choosing Israel as a

people on whom He would show compassion, and in choosing the Pharaoh of the Exodus as an object lesson of His wrath, God was being neither arbitrary nor unfair. God brought to the throne of Egypt a man who was proud, obstinate, and defiant, gave him ample opportunity to repent, and then hardened his heart only after he had chosen his own way.

As Romans 1:18-32 dramatically demonstrates, this hardening or spiritual blindness occurs in those who instinctively know God, who refuse to worship Him as God, then push Him out of their minds and make themselves or other created things into gods. When God's patience runs out, He confirms them in the path they have chosen.

It is in this context that Paul wrote:

*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy (Rom. 9:14-16).*

**God has the right to choose His method of dealing with rebellious subjects (vv.19-29).** In being merciful and patient with some while exercising His wrath on others, God is not acting unfairly as charged by a hypothetical opponent (v.19). Paul turned the tables on his critics by transferring to them what he had said about Pharaoh. He pointed out that just as God for a short time endured the perversity

of Pharaoh and used his obstinacy to bring redemption to Israel, He did for a long time endure

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**“The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise . . . . He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”**

**2 Peter 3:9**

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Israel’s unbelief and is making it a means of blessing to all mankind (vv.25-29). In fact, a special point is made in verse 22 that God was patient in awaiting the repentance of “the objects of His wrath.” Romans 2:4 also indicates that the purpose of God’s patience is to await repentance.

We see in the words of Peter such patience tied to God’s desire for all to repent:

*Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:8-9).*

The “objects of His wrath” became such when God’s patience had finally run its course.

### **Israel’s Accountability (Rom. 9:30–10:21)**

Many of the Jewish people thought that because of their knowledge of the law they deserved God’s salvation. It was this self-

righteous attitude that led them to reject God's grace, even when it was personified among them in the person of Jesus Christ (9:30-10:13).

Paul's message was powerful. Unrepentant people are to be blamed, not God. He sent His chosen people authentic preachers and heaven-sent messengers, but the majority continued to grieve Him through their unbelief (10:14-21).

### **God's Vindication (Rom. 11:1-36)**

In always preserving a saved remnant, God has shown that His choice of Israel is unchangeable in spite of her continued unbelief (vv.1-10). In making Israel's fall the means by which He opened the door to the Gentile world and grafting them into Israel's stem, God has given us a

foreshadowing of the tremendous benefits that will attend Israel's restoration when the natural branches are reattached (vv.11-24).

This ultimate triumph of God's grace at the end of the long discussion of Israel's story compelled Paul to offer one of the Bible's great doxologies in verses 33-36:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay Him?" For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.*

# THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT GOD'S FREEDOM AND OURS

**T**he unexplainable tension that exists between God's sovereignty and human choice extends beyond the issues of election and predestination. Both religious and nonreligious people find themselves wondering about how much of life is beyond their ability to influence.

People with or without faith in God can be heard saying with some degree of resignation, "Whatever will be will be." Some say this as if deferring to forces of impersonal fate. Others consciously assume that it is a personal God who has predetermined the circumstances of their lives.

I encountered this fatalistic response when a man told me about his sister whose husband had abandoned her and their small children, then added, "Well, God predetermined this for her, so there must be a reason." A friend of mine has such a strong conviction that God has predetermined everything, that he has concluded: Prayer changes nothing—except us.

Many assume that such responses harmonize with faith in a powerful God who has eternally foreordained whatever happens. But is that what the Bible tells us?

The Scriptures indicate that we are able to make choices that affect God. They describe a God who freely interacts with us as He gives us freedom to make our choices. The Bible seems to teach that

only part of what happens has been eternally predetermined. That's an idea we will now explore.

## **GOD'S FREEDOM**

God, as we meet Him in the Bible, takes a genuine interest in people and reacts to what they say and do. He does not seem to be boxed in by an all-encompassing script that covers everything that happens. Yes, He has a predetermined goal and a predetermined way of bringing history to a close. But the Bible indicates that God, in the process of reaching His predetermined outcome, gives us genuine freedom. Certain Bible passages lead us to believe that God in some mysterious way lets our choices be a factor in the shaping of history.

In this atmosphere of real but limited freedom,

the God of the Bible makes at least five choices: (1) to become genuinely involved with us, (2) to react to us as He pleases, (3) to make sovereign choices, (4) to reveal what He wants to reveal, and (5) to use evil for the accomplishment of His good purposes.

### **God Is Free To Become Genuinely Involved With Us.**

From beginning to end, the Bible presents God as involved with His image-bearers in a mutual give-and-take relationship. In the opening chapters (Gen. 1:28–4:16), God tells Adam and Eve to fill the earth and subdue it, and then forbids them to eat the fruit of one tree in the garden. When they disobey Him, He confronts them and pronounces judgment. When God sees them vainly trying to cover



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This pattern continues through the Scriptures. God continually interacts with His image-bearers—making known what He expects, promising blessing for obedience, threatening punishment for disobedience, acting in mercy and judgment. And in all of it, God describes Himself as emotionally vulnerable—sometimes

pleased, sometimes disappointed, sometimes hurt, sometimes suffering with His people when they suffer, sometimes agonizing over them, and always ready to forgive those who repent.

This genuine involvement with us culminated in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the purity, compassion, sorrow, and self-sacrificing love of Jesus, we see God's supreme revelation of Himself. He is not at all like the untouchable, immovable God of Scholastic Theology who works only to carry out what has been eternally decreed.

**God Is Free To React To Us As He Pleases.** The Bible also exalts God's freedom by showing us that He exercises His sovereign right to choose how He will respond to our

prayers and our conduct. He chose to give Hezekiah the extended life he requested (2 Ki. 20:1-11), but He withheld from Paul the request to remove his “thorn” (2 Cor. 12:7-10). He chose to be patient with David when he committed a sin for which the Law demanded death (2 Sam. 11-12), but He killed Uzzah for inadvertently touching the ark, something only the Levites were permitted to do (2 Sam. 6:1-11). God chose to endure Manasseh’s rebellious behavior for many years, giving him a great deal of time to repent, but He gave his wicked son Amon only 2 years of kingship (2 Chr. 33:10-25).

The Bible writers describe God responding to sin as He chooses and as the situation unfolds. They never say He treated people according to an

irresistible eternal decree. We may not be able to understand why He responds differently. But He has given us reason to trust His infinite wisdom, goodness, love, justice, and mercy.

**God Is Free To Make Sovereign Choices.** God sometimes makes choices that appear to be absolutely unconditional. We saw this in His choice of Isaac and Jacob (Rom. 9:6-13). He “knew” Jeremiah before he was born, set him apart, and appointed him to be a prophet (Jer. 1:5). Before John the Baptist was conceived, God told Zechariah that he and his wife would have a son who would become the forerunner of the promised Messiah (Lk. 1:11-17). After making a personal appearance to Saul of Tarsus, the Lord said of him, “This man is

My chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles” (Acts 9:15).

George MacDonald speaks of this divine election as “God’s choosing certain persons for the specific purpose of receiving first, and so communicating the gifts of His grace to the whole

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*Who can say that God does not have the right to choose whomever He wills to carry out His loving purposes?*

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world; . . . [not] the choice of certain persons for ultimate salvation, to the exclusion of the rest” (*The World Of George MacDonald*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1978, p.93).  
Who can say that God

does not have the right to choose whomever He wills to carry out His loving purposes?

**God Is Free To Reveal What He Wants To Reveal.**

In my role as a pastor and a Bible teacher, I have been asked many questions to which I could give no informed answer.

Questions like: “When we get to heaven, will we see our baby who died?” “Will infants and small children be resurrected in small or grown-up bodies?” “Will our resurrection bodies, though perfected, be similar to the ones we have now?” “What kind of duties will we have in heaven?” The Bible doesn’t give us specific answers to these and many other questions. We may be able to deduce from some Bible passages reasonable answers to certain questions, but our

conclusions will always be speculative. The fact is that God has chosen to reveal everything we need to know to be saved from our sins and to be the kind of people He wants us to be. He withholds information that would serve no purpose except to satisfy our curiosity. In this we trust His wisdom.

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*God has chosen to reveal everything we need to know to be saved from our sins and to be the kind of people He wants us to be.*

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**God Is Free To Use Evil For Good.** The Bible repeatedly shows God using the evil of people to accomplish His good purposes. The sale of

Joseph into Egypt by his envious brothers was the means by which He gave Jacob's family a place where they could multiply into a nation (Gen. 37–50). He used Rahab's lie to save the lives of Israel's spies (Josh. 2). He used the lies of false prophets to bring His judgment on Ahab (1 Ki. 22). He made the wicked rejection and crucifixion of Christ the means of atoning for our sins. And He used Israel's unbelief as the occasion for opening the door of salvation to the Gentile world (Rom. 11:11).

God uses evil, but the Bible affirms that it is impossible for God to be the author of sin, to tempt anyone to sin, or to help anyone to sin (Dt. 32:4; Hab. 1:13; Jas. 1:13; 1 Jn. 1:5).

Peter declared that Jesus was handed over

to wicked men “by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23) and affirmed that Herod, Pilate, the Jews, and the Romans did “what Your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:27-28). These statements do not imply that God caused the indescribable cruelty perpetrated by the Jews and Romans. Taking these two passages together, we see a blending of God’s eternal “set purpose” (that Jesus would be crucified to provide the atonement) and His “foreknowledge” (that wicked men would hate Jesus enough to do all they did to Him). God permissively willed, but did not eternally predetermine, all that occurred.

Puritan theologian William Ames observed that the “will of God does

not imply a necessity in all future things, but only a certainty in regard to the event. Thus the event was certain that Christ’s bones should not be broken. . . . But there was no necessity imposed upon the soldiers” (*Essentials Of Evangelical Theology*, Donald G. Bloesch, Vol.1, pp.47-48).

God’s sovereignty is most certainly a sovereignty of the ends—but not necessarily of all the means to those ends.

## **OUR FREEDOM**

God is free to be God and we are free to be morally responsible beings who live in His presence and genuinely choose belief or unbelief, obedience or disobedience, submission or rebellion. To a pagan audience Paul declared, “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Through nature (Rom. 1:18-20), conscience (Rom. 2:14-15), and the voice of wisdom (Prov. 1:20-33), God has given all mankind some knowledge of His power and moral nature. But because all of us are spiritually dead by nature (spiritually separated from God), we would never find God if left on our own. Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (Jn. 6:44). God was moving in us before we moved toward Him. This abolishes all pride and self-confidence.

The apostle Peter described what God did and is doing in and for us:

*In His great mercy  
He has given us new  
birth into a living hope  
through the resurrection  
of Jesus Christ from  
the dead, and into an*

*inheritance that can  
never perish, spoil, or  
fade—kept in heaven for  
you, who through faith  
are shielded by God’s  
power until the coming  
of the salvation that is  
ready to be revealed  
in the last time  
(1 Pet. 1:3-5).*

We do not come to God nor remain in relationship with Him on our own. He bought us through Calvary’s price. He moved in us before we moved to Him. Therefore we can trust Him to keep us through faith until the day we reach His predetermined goal for us.

Salvation is always initiated by God. He always is the One who seeks us out and by His Spirit enables us to believe. Yet we are left with the choice to accept or reject the undeserved kindness and mercy He offers us.

# THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD

**B**ible scholars differ greatly in their understanding of the Greek word translated “foreknew” in Romans 8:29, “Those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.”

Some say it simply means “to know beforehand,” referring to people God eternally knew would become believers. Others say it means “chosen,” that the people predestined for likeness to Jesus were unconditionally chosen from before the beginning of time.

Because the Greek word in question can only mean “to know beforehand” in Acts 26:5 and 2 Peter 3:17, many believe it should be

translated that way elsewhere. So Romans 8:29 would mean that from eternity past God foresaw certain people as His own and predestined them to become like His Son. But how

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*It's predestined  
that all who  
reject Christ  
will be judged.*

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much or how little His foreknowledge of their character, conduct, or choices had to do with His choices is not revealed.

This interpretation of the word *foreknowledge* leaves the mystery element in the divine election and human responsibility question without diminishing either God's absolute sovereignty or our genuine freedom.

One thing we can say for sure is that all believers have been “chosen according to [in harmony with] the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Pet. 1:2).

## ELECTION AND YOU

**T**he declaration “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2) assures us that no one has been predestined for eternal condemnation.

John 3:16-17 promises us:

*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.*

No one ever needs to ask, “Have I been elected?” The proper question is, “Have I accepted Jesus’ atoning death for me?” If you have acknowledged your sin, have believed that Jesus died for you and rose again, and have committed yourself to a life of trust in and reliance on Him, you are a member of His elect (chosen) body, the church (Rom. 10:9).

What you do with Jesus *now* determines whether you will bow before Him in joy or despair, whether your destiny will be heaven or hell. The good news is, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). God’s heart is for everyone when He promises, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13).





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