

Predestination & Human Responsibility

Some have doubted whether predestination is consistent with the free agency of man. We believe that man does as he pleases, yet notwithstanding he always does as God decrees.

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Introduction

The subject of God predestinating men and women to salvation and man's role in salvation has almost always generated strong reactions. But regardless of one's preferred wording, the issue is, "Did God select certain people for salvation and do we have the responsibility to believe in Jesus?" Did God choose some men and women to be saved? Do we have responsibility to believe?

There are three major views regarding God's role in the salvation of the souls of men and women in Jesus Christ. The first common view is that man chooses to believe in God on his own. The second common view is that God determined who would believe in Him before any human being was created. The third common view is that God in His foreknowledge knew who would believe and respond to Him if given the choice. Then He predestinated those men and women to believe and submit themselves to Jesus Christ. A fourth will be explored at the end.

There are great tensions with the first three views. There is the tension of those who hold to God's sovereignty in salvation. There are those who consider God to be unfair if He decides our destiny. Since God is the creator and we are His

creation, our viewpoint is actually not only unimportant; it lacks a divine perspective. God is not running a democracy where we can vote. Whatever God has decided and whatever God does is fair not just because He is God, but because He is holy and righteous. Unfortunately we are not. Our thoughts and motives are frequently evil. We are selfish and self-centered. Scripture teaches us that we are not really interested in God. If we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize that we are evil. Here is God's view of us.

There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for god; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness . . . There is no fear of god before their eyes. Romans 3:10-14, 18 (NASB)

God's perspective is superior to ours in every way since He is God and we are His creation. Regardless of your final opinion or the conclusions of this study, the following pas-

Views of Predestination & Man's Will

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|-----------------------------|---|
| Man's Responsibility | - People believe and respond to God. |
| God Elects | - God determined in eternity past who would believe and respond. |
| Middle Ground | - God looked ahead to see who would believe in Jesus Christ and predestinated them. |
| Conclusion | - The Antinomy. |

sage is true,

Seek the LORD while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the LORD,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

Is. 55:6-9 (NASB)

May the Lord bless you as you read and ponder the statements in this study.

Man's Responsibility

There are many passages in the New Testament that imply any person is free to believe in Jesus Christ and gain eternal life. The scriptures would seem to suggest that each man, woman, and child can decide. The scriptures are general and wide open. One of the most well known is John 3:16.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16 (NASB)

The Greek word that is translated as “whoever” in this verse

think they are good people.

BUT AS MANY AS RECEIVED. John 1:12 also implies that anyone who “receives” or “chooses” Jesus will belong to Him.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name . . . John 1:12 (NASB)

The Greek word translated as “right” actually means “to have authority or power.” That is, the one who responds to Jesus by believing in Him has the authority or power, the

*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that **whoever** believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*

John 3:16 (NASB)

is *pas* and it means “all.” Some want to limit the meaning of the word to mean less than “all,” but the text does not do that. The Greek word translated as “believe” is a present participle which means that all the ones who are actively, continuously believing are the ones who will have eternal life. That is, all true Christians are those who are believing in Christ. John 3:16 is often displayed at football and baseball games and signs are posted along streets. It is an offer to have our sins forgiven and be at peace with a holy and righteous God. Jesus said that He did not come to save the righteous - those who think they are good - but those who consider themselves to be wretched, needy sinners (Luke 5:32). This is a great promise for those who understand the truth about their spiritual condition. Jesus did not come for those who

ability, or the right to become His spiritual child. The verse implies that men and women have the freedom to choose Jesus Christ. Otherwise, why include it?

WHO HEARS AND BELIEVES. In John 5:24 we find an unconditional offer to anyone who believes in Jesus.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. John 5:24 (NASB)

Jesus does not put any conditions on His words. It is a simple promise. Anyone listening to Him would have assumed that one could respond in belief and have eternal life. There are no conditions or restrictions to His statement. The word

“believe” means more than just believing facts. It includes the idea of obedience, persuasion, confidence, trust, and conviction. True faith not only believes that Jesus is God, but it also submits to Him.

The next two passages are also unconditional,

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies . . .” John 11:25 (NASB)

For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day. John 6:40 (NASB)

In the last verse Jesus adds that “everyone who beholds” and believes will gain eternal life. Jesus says that anyone can believe and have eternal life - anyone!

DESIRE ALL MEN BE TO SAVED. The strongest invitation of all is found in 1 Timothy 2:1-4,

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:1-4 (NASB)

Here God encourages us to pray for “all men,” “kings” and “all in authority.” Some who have battled over this passage have on occasion claimed that “all” does not mean “all.” Some have claimed that God is referring to “some men,” “a few kings” and a “select number in authority” - those whom God elected. But the Greek words for “all” in this passage are *panton* and *pantas*. They mean “all, whole, or every.” That is, God “desires all men to be saved.” The passage teaches that God wants all men, whether kings, those in authority, and those working in the office or in the field - all men - to be saved.

NOT WISHING ANY TO PERISH. The final passage we will consider is 2 Peter 3:9.

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness,

but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9 (NASB)

The Greek word translated as “wishing” is *boulomenos*. The root Greek word is *boulomai*. It means “to think, with the purpose of planning or deciding on a course of action.”¹ The sense of the word is that God not only does not wish any to perish, but God is planning and working to make that a reality. Once again we see that God does not want anyone to perish, He wants all to repent and to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

COMMANDED TO BELIEVE. Lastly, we are commanded to believe in Jesus Christ.

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 1 John 3:23 (NASB)

This command is to all men, women and children. It is a universal and unconditional command. God desires all men to be saved. The following passages leave one with the strong impression that if anyone of us believes in Jesus, we will be saved.

He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. John 1:7 (NASB)

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. John 3:36 (NASB)

. . . that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved . . . Romans 10:9 (NASB)

For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers. 1 Timothy 4:10 (NASB)

1. Louw & Nida. Greek-Lexicon of the New Testament. United Bible Societies. 1988., vol. 1, p. 357.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men .

.. Titus 2:11 (NASB)

God Elects

Scripture also teaches that God chooses people to be saved. Repeatedly throughout the New Testament we discover that God calls Christians saints, the chosen, and the “elect.” The New Testament meaning of “saints” is not one who is honored or venerated. The word refers to one who has been made holy or righteous by God because his or her sins have been forgiven. Those who are called “saints” are also called the elect. Jesus refers to the “elect” for the first time when His disciples ask Him about the signs of the end of the world. Here is His reply,

and **THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER** His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. **Matthew 24:31 (NASB)**

Jesus will gather His elect ones from around the world. The same message is repeated in Mark and Luke and finally in Romans,

Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God,

*But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God **has chosen you** from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.*

2 Thessalonians 2:13 (NASB)

Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. **Matthew 24:22 (NASB)**

who also intercedes for us. **Romans 8:33-34 (NASB)**

Those who belonged to Him are “the elect.” He did it again in verse 24.

CHOSEN ONES. The word “elect” comes from the Greek word *eklektos*. It also means “chosen.” Therefore, it is not a surprise that our English Bibles also translate *eklektos* as chosen ones. Our first passage is found in Matthew,

For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. **Matthew 24:24 (NASB)**

For many are called, but few are chosen. **Matthew 22:14 (NASB)**

He said it again in verse 31,

Jesus used this in a parable to imply a spiritual truth. While many are called, only some are elect. The same is true about Israel and the Gentiles. The Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit says that even though Israel is seeking peace with God, they have been unable to realize their

And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET

goal due to their own sin. The chosen ones or the elect have obtained it.

What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened . . .
Romans 11:7 (NASB)

The others God has hardened. Then in Colossians 3:12 we find that the “chosen” are chosen by God and not by themselves.

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience . . . Colossians 3:12 (NASB)

Our next passage is probably the most significant so far.

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. 2 Thessalonians 2:13 (NASB)

If we had any doubt about the meaning of being “chosen by God,” we are now told that God chose us before the foundation of the world. Ephesians tells us that God’s act of choosing occurred before the world was created.

. . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love . . . Ephesians 1:4 (NASB)

The names of the chosen or the elect were recorded in the Book of Life before the world was created (Revelation 13:8; 17:8). When did God select the chosen ones for salvation? The answer is before you were conceived in your mother’s womb. Before you did right or wrong. Before you committed any evil or good act.

So Paul was eager to spread the good news about Jesus Christ so that these chosen ones could respond in faith because he did not know who they were, but he wanted to get the good news to them.

For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory. 2 Timothy 2:10 (NASB)

The chosen ones are everywhere.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen . . . 1 Peter 1:1 (NASB)

APPOINTED ONES. The scriptures tell us that God has elected, chosen, and called people to be saved (Romans 1:6-7; 9:24; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5). God has been active. God has been appointing people to be saved. The book of Acts tells us that God has been selective in those whom He elects or chooses to have eternal life.

When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. Acts 13:48 (NASB)

The Greek word translated as “appoint” comes from the root word *tassow*. It means to appoint, designate, set aside, command, order, and direct. The word was used of one who was in a position of authority giving orders to another. The verb is a perfect passive participle which means that God did the appointing in the past with lasting effect. That is, He appointed people to have eternal life and His appointment will not and cannot be changed. As a result, each person who was appointed will believe in Jesus Christ. That is a strong statement.

GRANTED, DRAWS, AND WILL COME. But the strongest statements about God’s role in the selection of people for eternal life comes from Jesus’ own lips in John 6. Our first key passage is John 6:65.

And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” John 6:65 (NASB)

These words were spoken to a crowd. It must have been a

surprise to the crowd that no one could come to Jesus unless God the Father had already granted him permission to come. That is the meaning of the Greek in this verse.

Then in John 6:44 we discover that no one can come to Jesus unless God the Father draws him.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. John 6:44 (NASB)

Not only must God the Father give us permission, He is the one who draws us. Listen to Jesus. We cannot come on our own. Permission must be given, and the Father must draw us or we will not come to Jesus. Why? The answer is given in Romans 3:10-12.

. . . as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one." Rom. 3:10-12 (NASB)

The answer is that no one seeks for God on his or her own. God must pull us to Jesus or we will not come. During Jesus' message He indicated that those whom the Father grants permission to come to Jesus will come.

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. John 6:37 (NASB)

Jesus declares that those whom the Father draws will come.

They have no choice. They will come! Those whom God the Father gives permission to come to Jesus will be drawn and they will come. Period!

THE IMPOSSIBILITY. Scripture teaches that God selects or appoints sinners to be saved. They are the chosen or the elect. God chooses men and women to have eternal life. If He did not decide, none of us would come because none of us seek for God on our own. Scripture further teaches that man is a prisoner of sin (Romans 6:6-20; Ephesians 2:1-2). Here is Romans 6:5-7.

For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Romans 6:5-7 (NASB)

We are also told that Satan has blinded people to the truth (2 Corinthians 4:4). Therefore, how can anyone be truly free to believe in Jesus Christ on their own? The truth is that men and women do not have the freedom to choose Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord unilaterally. The message is that every man and woman needs help in order to believe. John 16:8-11 tells us that the Holy Spirit is the one who help us understand the gospel. A person hears the gospel (Romans 10:14-17) and Ephesians 2:8-9 says that God gives him the gift of faith. Man cannot generate faith on his own. Salvation is strictly a gift of God. He chooses men and women for salvation.

The Middle Ground

We have discovered that scripture teaches that man has the responsibility to choose Jesus Christ and God chooses people to be saved too! But how does this work? How can we explain this mystery or paradox? Some have suggested that Romans 8:28-30 provides the answer.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. Rom. 8:28-30 (NASB)

sage and the rest of scripture do not support this view.

FIRST PROBLEM. First, the Greek word for “foreknew” means more than just looking ahead into history. The word “foreknew” is a good initial translation of the Greek word *proginosko*, but it is missing an important shade of meaning. The Greek lexicon of Louw and Nida provides this definition,

“. . . to know about something prior to some temporal reference point, for example, to know about an event before it happens . . . It is also possible to understand PROGINOSKO . . . as meaning “chosen beforehand.”¹

Colin Brown agrees and provides this definition,

And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose, because those whom He foreknew were also predestined to share the likeness His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

Romans 8:28 -30

The passage states that God predestinated those whom He foreknew. Therefore, one proposed solution to our paradox says that God looked ahead into the future to see who would accept Him as Lord and Savior if given a chance. Those whom He foreknew would believe in Jesus Christ are the ones that God elected, chose, selected, or appointed to be saved. That is, He predestinated them to have eternal life. This appears to solve the problem, but unfortunately the pas-

“. . . to know beforehand or in advance, choose beforehand . . .”²

So we see that *proginosko* means more than advanced knowledge. It includes the idea of selection. It includes a secondary sense of selection.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 335.

2. Colin Brown. Dictionary of New Testament Theology. Regency Reference Library. Grand Rapids, MI. vol. 1, p. 693.

SECOND PROBLEM. The second reason that this view is not biblical is found in the Greek grammar. Acts 2:23 helps us understand that to foreknow is identical to predetermining. Here is the verse,

... this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. Acts 2:23 (NASB)

The words “predetermined” and “foreknowledge” are connected by the Greek word *kai*. Our English Bibles do not translate the Greek word *kai* which means “and.” According to the Greek Granville Sharp rule, any time two nouns of the same case are connected by *kai* the words refer to the same thing if the definite article appears before the first noun and not the second.³ This means that “foreknowledge” and “predetermined” refer to the same thing. That is, God’s act of foreknowledge was also an act of predestinating people to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. God does not predetermine because He foreknows. He foreknows because He predetermined. That was His plan.

THIRD PROBLEM. Acts 3:16 reveals that faith does not occur because of any choice we make. Here is the verse.

And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. Acts 3:16 (NASB)

Here we discover that faith is not a work. It is not something that we develop, create or generate. Faith comes through Jesus Christ and not through the individual. Faith comes from God as a gift. So God cannot look down through history and discover if someone will believe since no one can believe in Jesus unless God gives them the faith to do so.

SUMMARY. God did not look into the future to see who would accept Jesus if given a chance. Romans 8:28-30 does not teach that. The passage teaches that God looked ahead and selected those whom He desired. His foreknowledge was

part of the act of choosing.

Acts 2:37-38 and Acts 2:46-47 capture this truth perfectly. The first passage reveals that men choose God.

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:37-38 (NASB)

This was the result of God’s decision before the foundation of the world. God had chosen and men responded. At the end of the chapter we read this,

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2:46-47 (NASB)

And then later in Acts 13 we read,

When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. Acts 13:48 (NASB)

Scripture is clear that God chose and man must choose.

3. Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament. MacMillian, p. 147.

Conclusion

What is the correct understanding? Is it true that God chooses people to have eternal life and men and women must believe to have eternal life? The answer is that both are true! It is a mystery or a paradox! The same problem exists with the trinity. The Bible teaches a paradox called the trinity. That is, God is one and yet God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Both are true so we believe God is a trinity, but we do not understand it. We cannot understand everything that scripture states.

But someone will say, "But how can that be if God is fair?" The Apostle Paul had an answer for that question. Even the apostle realized that this paradox did not seem fair and so he wrote the following to the Christians in Rome,

before either child could perform a moral deed, a wrong one or a right one, God decided that one would serve the younger. God made the decision. The decision had nothing to do with a sinful act of either child.

Then Paul reminds us of what God said to Moses,

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 does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. Romans 9:15-16 (NASB)

God is the ultimate chooser and decider. That is the message. So why does God find fault with us? Paul's answer is

So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?

Romans 9:18 -20 (NASB)

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED." Romans 9:10-13 (NASB)

Rebekah had two twins in her womb: Jacob and Esau. Yet,

straight and to the point,

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? Romans 9:19-20 (NASB)

Who are you to question God? Even the apostle did not understand how God can choose and make decisions that affect us and yet be holy, righteous, and fair.

God chose us before the foundation of the world and

yet we must believe in Jesus Christ. We would never have believed in Christ because we are sinners and we do not seek God. Yet, we are commanded to believe in Christ in 1 John 3:23. How does this paradox work? The answer to this paradox is unknown to us. Scripture teaches both truths. Therefore, we must believe both because scripture teaches both.

Over the years people have asked if man must believe in Christ to be saved (Acts 16:30-31; Romans 10:9). The answer is “Yes!” Others have asked if God has chosen people before the foundation of the world to be saved (Ephesians 1:3-5). The answer is “Yes!” Both are true because scripture teaches both. Only God knows how all of this works. It is a paradox or an antinomy in theology.

John 12:35-42 is a great example of this paradox. In verses 35-36, Jesus urges a crowd to believe in Him. Then in verse 37, scripture states that they should have believed in Christ. It is a statement of rebuke. Earlier Jesus directly rebuked the Pharisees in Matthew 21:32 when they did not repent and believe in John the Baptist. Jesus’ rebuke clearly implies they were responsible. Then in John 12:38-41 we are told that the people did not believe because God had prevented them from believing. Yet, in verses 42-43 we are told that some believed in Christ. The simplest truth is that God independently and sovereignly chooses men and women before the foundation of the world to believe and be saved (Acts 13:48;

Ephesians 1:3-7) and we are responsible to believe in Christ to be saved (Romans 10:9). Both truths are true. Only God knows how to resolve this paradox.

We will close with the following event in the life of Dr. Harry Ironside.

Dr. Harry Ironside told of a man who gave his testimony, telling how God had sought him and found him. How God had loved him, called him, saved him, delivered him, cleansed him, and healed him. It was a tremendous testimony to the glory of God. After the meeting, one person in the service took him aside and said, “You know, I appreciate all that you said about what God did for you, but you did not mention anything about your part in it. Salvation is really part us and part God., and you should have mentioned something about your part.”

“Oh,” the man said, “I apologize. I am sorry. I really should have mentioned that. My part was running away, and God’s part was running after me until he found me.”¹

Are you running from God or have you already found Him? Do you want God to forgive your sins and takeover your life? If yes, then tell Him and He will.

¹ Michael P. Green. Illustrations for Biblical Preaching. Baker Book House. 1985. p. 267.