

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 43:9-11  
SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 1:3-14  
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## **“Chosen”**

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Predestination jokes abound online. There’s the new Calvinist dating site. There’s no need to sign up. Your dates are already pre-selected and you should be getting a phone call soon. Also don’t forget the new the Calvinist scoreboard manufacturer. Their scoreboard posts the final score at the beginning of the game.

Being chosen and predestined by God. This is one more time when context is **everything**, because what God means by predestination and what we *think* God means by predestination are two different things. Predestination does not mean that every action we take and every decision we make is pre-ordained and we have no role whatsoever. In addition to that being a complete abdication of responsibility, that is fatalism, the definition of which is “the belief that all events are predetermined and therefore inevitable.” I have heard many well-intentioned Christians over the years express this opinion. In the face of a tragic death they say, “Well it was their time.” Every injustice, trial or tragedy in life is to be met with passive acceptance. But there are times when God wants us to DO something! I am also dumbfounded when people use this as an excuse to ignore science. I know a lovely Christian woman who absolutely refuses to be vaccinated. Her response when questioned is, “When it’s my time to go it’s my time to go.” My response is—**God sent you a vaccine!** There is a difference between God’s permissive will, as in allowing things to happen, and God’s express will—what God wants to happen. When we pray for God’s will to be done we are praying for God’s **express** will.

But getting back to why we misunderstand predestination so much in the first place. Beginning just before the Reformation a new interest in the individual began to arise. The trend developed first in cities. Rural regions remained very much group oriented. But in the cities traditional relationships and responsibilities break down. The trend continued gaining speed in the western world with each succeeding generation to the current day. And Americans are among the most individual-focused people on earth. While we do like teams, and we certainly recognize that we are citizens of a nation, when push comes to shove, we think of ourselves as individuals. One of the reasons it has been so challenging to get people in America to wear masks is that doing something for the betterment of the whole community doesn’t make sense to some people. Our bias towards the individual permeates everything we do. **The ancient world was not like this.** The group—not the individual—came first.

And everything in this text that we interpret as directed to us as individuals is actually written in the plural. It's "we" and "us." The chosen and predestined by God before the beginning of time are the Jews **as a group** and the Gentiles **as a group**. Ephesians is concerned with the struggles between Gentile believers and Jewish believers. Jews had one paramount claim. They were the chosen ones. But now, at this unique turning point in history, Paul says, it is time for the Gentiles to be brought in. God planned and foreordained this from the beginning. God predestined it.

Of course, it doesn't take much for humans to come across a word like predestination and run with it. And the farther away we are from the world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century where the critical issue was how Gentiles could be incorporated into the body of Christ, the more distorted the doctrine gets. John Calvin's central theological conviction was the absolute sovereignty of God. Calvin understood God to be the sole actor in salvation. There is no free will in Calvin's world when it comes to being saved. People are predestined to be saved. God's grace brings this about. This is basic to reformed theology. But a generation after Calvin came the logic driven ultra-Calvinists. If God predestines some to salvation, they concluded, then God must predestine others to hell. This little gem is called double predestination. So we have moved from a God who decided to widen the base of the faithful to include Gentiles to a God who sits up in heaven and deliberately creates people solely for the purpose of throwing them into hell. And, of course, we are not permitted to question why God would want to do this.

The consequence of the doctrine of double predestination, theologically and psychologically speaking, was to create a lot of people unsure of their own salvation. The early Puritans were wracked with insecurity. Rev. Increase Mather, a prominent early Puritan minister died in torment and fear, unsure of his final destiny. If even a faithful believing Christian could actually be destined for hell, assurance of salvation was illusive. Our lot today would take that idea and say, "Eat, drink and be merry" because it makes no difference! But what happened then is that people started to work really hard to prove to themselves and others that they were part of the elect who were saved. It's not logical, but anxiety seldom is. An unintended result of all this angst is that it made the workaholic Protestants rich. But consider the God behind this idea—a cold and wrathful being making arbitrary decisions and utterly lacking in compassion. Is this really the Father of Jesus?

Presbyterians are sometimes called the Frozen Chosen, because we are the theological descendants of Calvin. But instead of becoming obsessed with the idea that God predestines some to heaven and some to hell, we can strive to uncover the real message behind Paul's words. Paul intended to be comforting! Paul was saying, *You too, not just the Jews, but even you Gentiles are included! This was God's plan from the beginning!*

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish believers were torn about accepting Gentiles. Some believed that the Gentiles had to convert to Judaism first and keep the law. Those who followed Paul disagreed, and the two groups were at odds with one another. The churches found living together in faith a challenge. At the center of Paul's argument is that this mystery or plan of God has now been

revealed. The time of fulfillment has come. It is time— “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.”

Living with people who are different is not easy. It is much, much easier to be part of a group where all of the members share the same political views, understanding of scripture and outside interests. It is far harder to have the type of people God puts together. God seems to like picking up a random sample and throwing in a little of everything. It’s a bit like cooking. Salt is more popular but somebody has to be the pepper. And whose idea was it to mix sweet with sour?

Paul thanks God for all of the challenges in verses 3 to 14, which in Greek happen to be all one very long run on sentence. First, speaking for Jewish-Christian and Gentile Christian believers already in fellowship with one another, Paul says,

- God chose US to be holy and blameless.
- God predestined US for adoption through Jesus Christ.
- In him WE have redemption.
- In him WE were also chosen
- In order that WE, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory

Then Paul switches gears to talk to the largely Gentile Ephesians.

- And YOU (plural) also were included in Christ when YOU (plural) heard the message of truth, the gospel of YOUR (plural) salvation.
- When YOU (plural) believed, YOU (plural) were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit

This is not speculative theology. This is not about a God who makes petty and arbitrary decisions about who is in and who is out before the beginning of time. This is about a God who chose Israel first in order to establish a standard, and then sent his Son to open the doors to all.

We can be chosen to make the team, and then not turn up. We can be chosen for a part in a play, and opt out. We can be chosen to make a speech, and not make the speech. Being chosen does not rob us of the ability to also choose. God chose to save us. God’s mercy and grace is there in abundance. And a hardcore Calvinist would describe this grace as irresistible. Many of us have experienced this strong pull towards God in our lives. How could we turn our backs on such grace and love? But we do know that there are people who do turn their backs on God. Some would say that it is because they are not part of the elect chosen by God for salvation. Having lived in Scotland I have met people who hold to this doctrine. But I find the concept of a God who creates people for the sole purpose of sending them to hell incompatible with the nature of Christ. And if Jesus is the human face of God, how could God do anything that Jesus would not do?

At the end of the day what is essential for us to know is that God chose us. We didn’t sneak in while the lights were off and the door was left accidentally unlocked. We’re not on a stand-by flight to heaven where we’ll only make it if the regularly scheduled passengers don’t show up. We not second best or last in line. We do that to one another. God never does that to God’s children. God chose us, and we choose to say yes. Amen

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 43:9-11

<sup>9</sup> All the nations gather together  
and the peoples assemble.

Which of their gods foretold this  
and proclaimed to us the former things?

Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right,  
so that others may hear and say, "It is true."

<sup>10</sup> "You are my witnesses," declares the Lord,

"and my servant whom I have chosen,  
so that you may know and believe me  
and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed,  
nor will there be one after me.

<sup>11</sup> I, even I, am the Lord,  
and apart from me there is no savior.

SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 1:3-14

<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. <sup>4</sup> For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. <sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace <sup>8</sup> that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, <sup>9</sup> he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, <sup>10</sup> to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

<sup>11</sup> In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, <sup>12</sup> in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup> And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup> who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.