

Predestination

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📌 1 Various Interpretations

The word “**predestination**” occurs several times in the Bible, but there are **two main lines of thought** about the understanding of this term.

- The first is predestination **on the basis of foreknowledge**. Predestination is the eternal decision of God, arising from love, by which he sets out a historical plan of salvation giving every person the possibility to receive eternal salvation. God predestined Jesus to be the only and absolute mediator between Himself and mankind.
- The second is the belief that **God is sovereign and decides everything that will happen regardless of the will of man** and that what God determines no man can change. Within this line of thought there are two directions of understanding: “**single predestination**”, which some Lutherans believe in and “**double predestination**”, which the Calvinists believe in. Single predestination means that God elects in advance who will go to heaven. Double predestination means that God determines in advance who will be in heaven and who will go to hell.

In the rest of this article the word “predestination” will be used for this second line of thought.

Within this second stream of understanding of predestination there are **three important advocates**:

1.1 Augustine (354–430)

Augustine was the first person to develop a **systematic teaching of predestination**. The compulsion he felt to defend the undeserved, arbitrary nature of grace led him to develop the doctrine of predestination. In “Ad Simplicianum” he developed his teaching explaining Romans 5:12 and Romans 9.

So that the purpose of God does not stand according to election, but election is the result of the purpose of God.

(Ad Simplicianum I,2,6) [1]

Moreover, he declares that God predestines as many men for heaven as there were angels who deserted the faith. (Faith, Hope and Charity /Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate/ 9,29)

1.2 Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther, himself a monk of the order of Augustine, **adopted and further developed this teaching** more than thousand years later. In his most famous work "On the Bondage of the Will" he writes:

For if we believe it to be true, that God fore-knows and fore-ordains all things; that he can be neither deceived nor hindered in his prescience [2] and predestination; and that nothing can take place but according to his will, (which reason herself is compelled to confess;) then, even according to the testimony of reason herself, there can be no Free-will—in man,—in angel,—or in any creature! [3]

1.3 Calvin (1509-1564)

John Calvin's teaching gained a lot of influence when it was discussed and developed at the **Synod of Dort** (1618-1619 in the Netherlands) and **became the official teaching of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.**

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation. (Institutio Christianae Religionis 3.21.5)

✠ 2 The Biblical Understanding

God lives in eternity. He does not live in time as people do. For Him everything is present. Therefore He knows what choices men make. Because God knows who chooses Him, He can elect and predestine them to become His obedient children.

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 8:29-30*)

Verse 30 should be read in connection with verse 29 where it is expressed that God elects according to foreknowledge. This means that God does not choose at random but on the base of the decision of man, which he foreknew. Everybody, about whom he knew that they choose Him, he predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus...who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ.... (*1 Peter 1:1-2, NASB*)

God in his love desires to predestine (elect and save) all people to be together with him forever

but he does not force anybody to have a relationship with Him.

This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. *(1 Timothy 2:3-4)*

The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. *(2 Peter 3:9)*

In the Bible we find the clear teaching that **God wants everyone to be saved**, but that people have a free will to choose against this. If God did not consider the decision of people, hell would be empty because God would indeed save everyone.

...but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him (John). *(Luke 7:30)*

So the Pharisees and the lawyers themselves decided not to take part in God's purpose. God also wanted them to come to repentance, but they were not willing.

⚓ 3 The Aim of the World

God created the world because He is love. He wanted to share His love with people. Therefore He created us to be holy, as He is holy (1 Peter 1:16). **God never intended for people to sin.** The fact that man was disobedient and sinned against God is a distortion of the original plan. The original aim was for man to have a relationship with the Creator. Now, we know that God is love and that He is righteous and that all other virtues are combined in His being. Therefore His plan to create the world was pure as well. He loves the beings He created. If He had decided that everything should happen according to his will, the fulfilment of His plan for a world full of love and peace would remain unchanged even today. Since He respects the will of people, sin could come into the world through their decision. **The teaching of predestination** implies, in fact, that **God planned in advance for men to sin** and wants the majority of people to go to hell. **This would make God the author of sin.** Before they are even born it has already been decided that the majority of people will never have the chance to be saved (according to Calvin).

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? ...Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live. *(Ezekiel 18:23,31-32)*

In the Bible people are very often called to "Repent!" This presupposes that it is possible to respond to this call! When Jesus calls: "Repent!" he does not order, but he encourages, asks, urges, implores. It is not a humiliation for the Almighty God to ask us, because he is perfectly humble: "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." *(2 Corinthians 5:20)*.

⚓ 3.1 Relationship, Love and Will

The purpose of man's existence is to have a relationship with God (John 17:3). **The most important characteristics of a relationship are love and a free will.** If someone is forced to be together with somebody else, it is not an expression of love. A relationship is based on love when both parties have the

freedom to choose to stay together and the possibility to separate. If you can control somebody's will, he has become like a robot. Robots do what you have made them for. God did not create robots, but human beings that have the choice to love Him, or not to do so.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him....” (*Deuteronomy 30:19-20a*)

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! (*Matthew 23:37*)

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it. (*Genesis 4:7*)

Even after the fall of humankind people are not under the compulsion to sin but have the possibility to rule over it.

⚓ 4 Consequences of This Teaching

- People who believe in predestination **deny** that man has a **free will** to accept or reject God's offer of salvation.
- They also believe that **man is totally depraved**, because if a man is able to do good, he can choose the good and seek God.

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves.... (*Romans 2:14*)

- Furthermore if you are predestined to live an eternal life with God, it is impossible to go away from God, so if someone teaches predestination, he also has to deny the possibility of **apostasy**.

(See our article entitled "[Apostasy](#)")

- Moreover someone who is elected **cannot resist the "grace"**, because those who are predestined will come to God with certainty.

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. (*Acts 7:51*)

- Predestination **annuls the importance of deeds**. The Bible speaks very clearly of the fact that "faith without deeds is dead" and that faith alone cannot save a person.

(See our article entitled "[Faith and Works](#)")

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ...Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (*James 2:14,20*)

This teaching, by stripping the deeds of their significance, maintains that it is not possible to see according

to the fruits of a person whether he is a Christian or not.

(See our article entitled [“What Does It Mean to Be a Christian?”](#))

This is a contradiction to Matthew 7:16 which tells us that we will recognize a tree by its fruit.

You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? (*Matthew 7:16*)

Real faith is followed by deeds of devotion.

- **“Church” loses its meaning** because it is not clear anymore who belongs to the church and who does not. Within local “church” assemblies today there are many unbelievers, although it is clearly stated in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 that believers and unbelievers can not be yoked together and fight for the same kingdom.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, *“I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”* Therefore *go out from their midst, and be separate from them,* says the Lord, and *touch no unclean thing;* then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.” Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God. (*2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1*)

Therefore a distinction has been made between the local “visible” church assemblies (where there are also unbelievers) and the “invisible church” made up of true believers independent of place and time. But this artificial distinction does not have any biblical basis.

(See our article entitled [“The Visible Church”](#))

- Predestination also means that even if someone wants to repent today, he cannot, because he has to wait till God “converts” him. This means that he cannot start to live a holy life pleasing to God, although in Hebrews 3:7–8 and Psalm 95:7–8 it is written: “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked me.” This is a disastrous deception, which brings about **passivity** in people.
- **False Image of God:** If God predestined men regardless of their will, it would mean that God’s wrath is upon those he does not save and that he would punish people whom he does not want to save in reality. It is not righteous to punish someone for something he is not responsible for; it is not his fault.
- Predestination states that everything happens according to the eternal plan of God. This would mean that God not only wants good, but also evil. **This makes God the author of sin.**
- There may be different teachings about predestination: single and double predestination. In the end there is no decisive difference. Both teachings exclude the free will of man. If God “only” chooses those who will go to heaven, then the others will automatically go to hell. **In this way God’s own nature is the reason for the condemnation of people.**
- Whoever teaches predestination should be conscious of the fact that he understands and defines the nature of man in a wrong way. **He deprecates the value of human being as a person.** For being

a person means being able and obliged to act out of liberty and reason, following certain motives and goals. It means being able to gain access to the sense of life and experiencing the effects that one's chosen way of life brings.

⚓ 5 Passages That Seem to Exclude the Free Will

5.1 Ephesians 1:3-5 & 11

We are aware of the difficulty somebody who is used to this teaching may experience when reading some passages in the NT. To gain a real sense of the meaning of verses which sound like predestination would require an in-depth study. Nevertheless, it is essential to keep in mind what we know about God's nature. After all, there are many other expressions in the New and Old Testaments that cannot be understood literally.

(3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, (4) even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. (5) In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.... (11) In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.... (*Ephesians 1:3-5 & 11*)

What is emphasized in verse 4? If we emphasize "He chose us", then one could understand it in the way Calvin did. However it is a completely different matter if one reads "He chose us **in Him**." If we understand the statement in this way, then this verse is effectively no different from John 3:16. Hence it is stated that **God wants to save everyone who believes in His Son and that those who reject him will be condemned.**

In Ephesians 1:4 this means that he elected us in Christ and *in Him alone*. The same thought is expressed in verses 3, 5 and 11. Consequently this means that if we do not come to Christ, we place ourselves outside of the election and purpose of God. The teaching of election or predestination in Christ in this form is simply an expression that we can only be saved by the grace of God. It is not based on our deeds, but on the mercy God has on us. Yet this mercy is obtainable for all people (1 Timothy 2:4), and not only for a predetermined number of people as the Calvinists understand it.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (*Philippians 2:12-13*)

In the beginning of the chapter Paul writes about the example Jesus gave us by humbling himself totally and looking for the best for the others, giving his life in every aspect for the people. Therefore His glory was restored to Him.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.... (*Philippians 2:9*)

In verse 12 Paul goes on to explain that "**therefore**" we ought to do every thing possible within our power to hold onto our relationship with God and reach the goal of our salvation. It is clear that for this decision,

our own power and will are never strong enough. Therefore we should turn to God with “fear and trembling”. This expresses honour, seriousness, respect and the consciousness of standing in front of the omniscient almighty God (v 12), who **strengthens the little will** we have (v 13). He can give us the power to will and to act.

Verse 13 should not be misunderstood to mean that man cannot have an influence on his own will, otherwise Paul would never have written in v 12, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”. To do this presupposes that a person has the free will to decide. Verse 13 starts with “**for** it is God who works in you”. This expression shows that verse 13 explains **why** we should turn to God with fear and trembling, namely, **because** He is the only one who **can help**. [4]

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*)

Jesus had just expressed in the preceding verses that he is the true bread and he gives eternal life and people should believe in Him. Therefore he calls people to follow Him as the Messiah. For Jews it was always clear that they should follow only God. So it was very difficult for them to accept the claim of Jesus (that people should follow him). For that reason he emphasizes the deep unity between the Father and Himself. Jesus explains that the only way to Him is through the Father whom they already knew.

The fact that the Father draws a person expresses **how** someone comes to Jesus, but does not say that the Father would not be willing to draw everyone if they were ready to follow.

Still more about the context:

The statement of Jesus is a direct reaction to the partly despising, partly disappointed question in verse 42.

They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (*John 6:42*)

It would be entirely out of context if Jesus had replied in this way, “You don’t have any choice”, or, “The Father predestined the people who can have a relationship with me.” But the reaction of the people shows that they understood that Jesus claimed to be the son of God coming down from heaven, who is in complete unity with the Father. In verse 45 he continues:

It is written in the Prophets, “*And they will all be taught by God.*” Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.... (*John 6:45*)

The verses speak about the right understanding of God’s revelation and the right attitude towards the Messiah, that is towards Jesus. Everyone is invited, not only an elite group of people who do not know it yet.

⚓ 5.2 Romans 9

5.2.1 The Problem of the Jews (Especially Romans 9:1-8,30-33)

The Jews relied on the law and on the promise given to them in a formalistic way and not spiritually (Luke 3:8). They did not listen to Jesus (John 8:39). The consequence was the paradox that the gentiles, who did not seek salvation found it, and the Jews who eagerly pursued salvation did not find it (Romans 9:30-32). Paul solves this “contradiction” in the ninth chapter of his letter to the Romans by saying that man and his activity cannot set the standard for righteousness. He starts with the topic of the promise.

📌 5.2.2 Now to the Text in Detail

In verses 1-5 Paul describes what Israel received: the adoption as sons, divine glory, the covenants, the law, the Temple worship, the promises that the Messiah would be of Jewish descent. The Jews regarded these things as a guarantee of salvation. Nevertheless Paul states (verses 1-3) that most of them are not saved. For the Jews this is a contradiction. In responding to the supposed question, “Has the word of God failed?” (verse 6) Paul shows what the reaction of the Jews is to this paradox that on the one hand they are given the promises and on the other hand there will be no salvation for most of the Jews.

Verse 6: Has God’s word failed? Surely not. The most important thing is not being a descendant, but being obedient to God—being a child of the promise who is regarded as Abraham’s offspring. (V.7)

Verses 9-13: Paul writes about Isaac and Jacob. Jacob is an especially good example for the fact that the promise was not transmitted according to human standards. Esau was the first-born and according to the custom he should have been the heir of the promise. The reality was different, which shows that God retained the right to decide who would be the bearer of the promise.

Paul speaks here basically about the question of spiritual tasks in the plan of salvation.

█ ...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad.... (verse 11)

God made the decision that Esau should serve Jacob. This submission of Esau to Jacob expresses by no means that God would have determined who would be saved and who would be condemned, but God decided before their birth who would receive the promise. In this way, Jacob could not boast of having received this through his deeds. (V.12)

Many people interpret verse 13 to mean that Rebecca was told before the birth of the twins that God loves Jacob and hates Esau. This is wrong, because verse 13 is a quotation of Malachi 1:1-5 and was written many centuries after the death of Esau and Jacob. What is meant here is simply that God had rejected the nation of Esau (the Edomites), because they had a hostile attitude towards Israel from the very beginning (Numbers 20:14-21). Again it is not Esau’s personal fate which is the topic but the fate of the Edomites as a nation. Paul quotes Malachi to show that Israel (Jacobs’s offspring) is the chosen one.

Verses 14-16: Is God unjust? By no means. Because God chooses and elects according to his own standards and not according to human standards or customs, He has the right to determine who the bearer of the promise will be.

Verses 17–19: The salvation of Pharaoh is not the topic here, but the permission for the Israelites to leave Egypt. God’s plans will be executed, even if, for instance, Pharaoh does not want to accept it. Nobody can stop God’s plan for mankind. Even if Pharaoh had permitted the Israelites to leave, he wouldn’t have changed his belief, but would have remained an idol worshipper. God created man in such a way that he hardens himself if he rejects God. In this example it is clear that Paul does not want to explain why Pharaoh is condemned and thus not elected by God, but he wants to emphasize his wickedness in rejecting the Jewish nation.

Verses 20–24: Paul derives the following thoughts from Jeremiah 18:1–10: A potter is forming the clay. It seems that he sees how people act and according to this he forms his vessels. But something else happens here. The potter forms new vessels for glory out of the ones that were destroyed. This means that this text speaks strongly against predestination, instead underlining God’s mercy and grace.

Paul uses the parable of the potter in two different ways in verses 20–21 and 22–24.

Firstly in verses 20–21 Paul states that a man cannot criticize God for the way he is made. The potter has the right to create one vessel “for honourable use and another for dishonourable use”. It is important to notice that both the vessels for honourable use and the vessels for dishonourable use are important in a household. This means that these verses do not speak about salvation and condemnation, but about an important and a less important purpose. God has the right to determine that one person receives either an important or less important task.

In verses 22–24 Paul speaks about the vessels prepared for destruction and vessels prepared beforehand for glory. He identifies the second group with Jewish and gentile Christians. Vessels prepared for destruction are people who have decided against God. The fact that people decided against God is not explicitly mentioned here, but we have to suppose it through other passages. We see that Paul touches the topic of salvation. He does not want to say that we cannot influence our salvation but that man should submit to God and to his paths which are prepared in advance (verse 23). It is difficult to see a clear transition between both topics. God’s prominence is emphasized not because God decides arbitrarily about somebody’s salvation but because man should submit to God and to the way he prepared for us in Christ.

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Footnotes

1. J. H. S. Burleigh, *Augustine—Earlier Writings*, p. 390; 1953, SCM Press.
2. Foreknowledge.
3. Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*; translated by Henry Cole; T. Bensley, London, 1823; pp. 374–375.
4. The interplay between God’s activity and our own activity is also expressed in Hebrews 13:21.

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