

## I WISH THE PREACHER WOULD TALK ABOUT...

### *What is Predestination?*

Romans 8:26-30

August 6, 2023

I suppose that if I were a physician, I would field questions about unusual symptoms. From strangers, I mean, on airplanes. Instead, I get...

*Oh, so you're a pastor. I have a question. Do you believe in predestination?*

Now there is a simple, if entirely unsatisfying, answer to that question. It is this: I do not believe in predestination—I believe in God. And this, I believe, must be the starting place for any Christian doctrine conversation on an airplane or otherwise. *God's agency. God's freedom. God's power.*

So, let us begin by naming what makes the doctrine of predestination, which I will call the doctrine of election, a source of controversy or, worse, embarrassment among us. It is the assumption that predestination means this: There is a special group of people—call them the elect or the chosen—whom God has decided, before the foundation of the world, to save, to favor, to reward, to prefer. This conviction creates either smug arrogance (*we are the saved*) or draining anxiety (*Am I? Am I among the elect? How about those I love? The ones who don't believe?*). The doctrine, it is assumed, carves the world up into two distinct, inseparable groups. The redeemed and the reprobate. (By the way, those were the names of the intramural football teams at my seminary.) The redeemed and the reprobate. The saved and the lost. The chosen and the rejected. God's favorites and those God has left behind. And, perhaps worst of all in this conceiving of the doctrine, there is nothing that any of us can do about the group we've already been selected for. Human freedom utterly evaporates. We become puppets on a divine string.

And if this were the picture of predestination that I found in the pages of the Bible, I would join those who oppose, reject, or simply ignore it. But when I read scripture, when I seek to understand its meaning, what I find is something else entirely.

I wish Wayne Boulton was here to describe it. Wayne was a dear friend, a beloved pastor, a gifted scholar, professor of Christian ethics at Hope College, president of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, and in retirement, came to Indianapolis where he was an active participant in the life of this congregation.

I met Wayne when I arrived in Indianapolis in 2018, and for several months, I had the opportunity to sit in his presence and absorb his wisdom. I quickly learned from Wayne that he was in the final stages of writing a book on predestination. I quickly learned *not* from Wayne that he was also in the final chapter of a journey with pancreatic cancer. I remember one conversation when Wayne described a tussle he was having with his then publisher and, with a big smile and a laugh, said, "Chris, I can't switch publishers—I'm dying!" Wayne died on February 1, 2019. His book, *God Saves: Rethinking Christianity's Most Controversial Doctrine—and Why it Matters*, was published in January of 2022.

His title is his message. God saves. This must be the starting place for any discussion of the doctrine of predestination. Wayne writes, "The doctrine of election, in brief, is the doctrine that doctrine will not save us. Religion will not save us. Good behavior will not save us. Why? Because God does all the saving... and because God saves, we can rightly and assuredly place our hope not in ourselves but in God."

There is then a kind of tragic irony in the way that this core belief in God's power, which should elicit comfort and humility has instead been used to divide, cast judgement, and create feelings of self-importance and pride. In my experience, these misuses of scripture say far more about our cultural moment and our human sinfulness than they do about scripture or theology.

In fact, when we turn to the stories and images, the words, and concepts of scripture, a different understanding emerges. At its heart is the conviction that God is *both* sovereign (all powerful) and gracious (all loving). The wonderful story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis provides a case in point. The dramatic account of Joseph's rise to power in Egypt and the jealous and vindictive designs of his brothers—it reads like the script of a Netflix miniseries. There is conflict. Betrayal. Hatred. Attempted murder. His brothers always at his heels. And yet, throughout the story, there is this deeper, subtle power at work. Joseph summarizes it when he is finally reunited with his brothers, and he chooses grace over punishment. Joseph says to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good." Here God's sovereignty and power and God's grace and love are joined together in an incredible moment of reconciliation and even salvation. As Wayne writes, "If grace is forgiving love, then salvation is grace in action."

Throughout the letters of Paul, which make up nearly half of the New Testament, we find a similar pattern emerge. Paul struggles with the reality of human sinfulness, even evil, our rejection of God's freely offered grace. In Romans 7, he makes it personal. "I do not do the good I want to do. Instead, the evil that I do not want is what I do I keep doing." Paul then moves, as we do every Sunday morning, from confession of sin to the assurance of God's grace. "Fear not! God's Spirit dwells within you." Paul begins the eighth chapter of Romans, "There is no condemnation for those in Christ." That's the context

for this morning's scripture, meant by Paul to be filled with the reassurance of God's unconditional love and the freedom that brings. God, who is full of grace and mercy beyond human imagining, has chosen you to be a child of God. This comes as a gift. This is why, even as Paul continues to struggle with the contradictions of human life, he ends his reflection not with language of doctrine but with doxology—"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, how inscrutable his ways!" Indeed, Paul! Indeed.

What might it look like to recover the doctrine of predestination as a word of assurance and grace? Against the temptation to pride, we would affirm God's grace. We would acknowledge the limits of our human understanding. We would affirm *God* saves. We do not. That truth alone should inspire humility among us.

Wayne's son Matthew, theologian and former president of Christian Theological Seminary here in Indianapolis, authored a reflective piece last summer on his father's project. In it he suggests that we, who are fallible and finite, must acknowledge that every single person we encounter is potentially one of God's elect. Matt writes, "After all, in each and every case, salvation is the graceful, undeserved embrace of a sinner, not a saint. In this way, rightly grasped, the doctrine of predestination has the effect of sabotaging any attempt to build a wall between 'us' and 'them.' If we take the doctrine seriously, we dare not draw the circle of salvation...It's not our circle to draw."

That particular phrase reminded me of a moment in my ministry that was a parable of God's grace in action.

It happened in Austin, Texas, where our son Samuel and I had traveled to surprise the youth choir of the congregation I was serving in Atlanta who were on tour there. Sitting next to my three-year-old son, I heard the voices of that choir sing words that struck me to the core. Mark Miller wrote the lyrics.

*No matter what people say, say or think about you, you are a child of God.*

*No matter what the world says, says or thinks about you, you are a child of God.*

And, finally...

*No matter what the church says, decisions, pronouncements on you, you are a child of God.*

And then channeling the Apostle Paul...

*There is no thing, and no one, who can separate you from this truth. You are someone, you are family, you are meant to be a child of God.*

The words are powerful, but it was hearing them sung with conviction by this particular group of teenagers that made the difference for me. You see, I knew these students—their struggles and their celebrations, their pain and their promise. I knew that some of those singers had been rejected by congregations because of who they were. And when they sang “I am a child of God,” they proclaimed the truth. No matter what. And as that melody enveloped the room and tears streamed from the faces of the singers, it was a moment I’ll never forget. Please hear this, my friends: the boundaries of God’s love are not ours to draw. And neither should we be immobilized by fear and anxiety over our ultimate fate. For this, I believe, is the final gift of God’s power and grace. Far from limiting us, God’s grace frees us to live in love. God’s saving power opens the way to lives of purpose.

In our home, we reached a watershed moment this summer, at least for me. I had the joy of watching the Lord of the Rings movies with Samuel, now nearly ten years old. I knew he would love them, but what I didn’t anticipate are the theological conversations the movies would evoke. Several times in recent weeks, we’ve returned to the lines of the great wizard Gandalf, offered to the young hobbit Frodo after he has expressed a wish that the ring of power would never have come to him. Gandalf says, “So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not

for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.” Author and Christian believer JRR Tolkien shines a light on the gift and responsibility of faithful living. Friends, only God decides the times we are given—how much and when. Ours to decide is what we will do with what is given to us. I want to choose love. I want to choose compassion. I want to choose grace.

My final visit with Wayne Boulton came just before Christmas. Physically he was feeling lousy, and I could tell. But he seemed glad to see me. Our conversation that morning was brief, every word carefully chosen. Two days later, I was surprised to receive an email. Wayne wrote, “I send this to you with renewed uncertainty given the latest news here and with a deep sense of life’s brevity now closing in around me.” It was Wayne’s final thought that has stayed with me. He wrote, “This Christmas time, we are so grateful you are around...that you simply exist. For why did God’s Son come? In His turning toward us, to turn us toward others.”

That’s it. That’s the answer I wish I’d given on the airplane. That’s the truth of the Gospel. That’s the essence of our hope. *God saves. Amen.*