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PREDESTINATION

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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To understand the doctrine of predestination correctly we should view it firstly from the standpoint of a Christian who is experiencing and enjoying fellowship with his heavenly Father in the Holy Spirit through the forgiveness that comes through our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible constantly deals with the subject from this point of view. For example, in Ephesians 1:4-5 we read God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blemish before Him in love : having predestinated us unto the adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto Himself according to the good pleasure of His will."

As a Christian reflects on the grace of God which he is experiencing in his own life he cannot but attribute it all to God's goodness; in himself he knows he deserves nothing. St. Paul said "In me, i.e., in my flesh, dwells no good thing". There is nothing in us which deserves God's favour and yet how wonderfully Christians experience this favour. The Christian life is one of peace with God through forgiveness; joy in His presence and love towards Him and others by His Spirit; faith in the present life and sure hope in the future; a daily fellowship with God through prayer and His Word. All this relationship to God is God's gift, and it springs entirely from God's initiative. As Jesus said to His disciples "You have not chosen me but I have chosen you and ordained you that you might bear much fruit". Our present Christian experience and our future hope is clearly attributed in the Bible to God's decision, a decision which was made from the beginning of creation with regard to us personally. We read "God chose you from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thess.2:3). And again in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 "God appointed us not unto wrath but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ". Speaking of Christians Paul says that they are "vessels of mercy which God before prepared unto glory" (Romans 9:23). So as we experience our Christian status as adopted sons of God, all the glory and the thankfulness for this state of things must be given to God. It is not shared partly with ourselves as though we contributed, in some way the vital link which made the difference between ourselves and others.

A clear illustration of God's sovereignty in salvation is the life of St. Paul. He was a man totally immersed in his prejudices. On his own initiative he had asked for authority from the chief priests to journey to Damascus to arrest and imprison believers. He certainly didn't seem to be a bright prospect for conversion, nor was he. His conversion resulted from extraordinary intervention by God on his behalf. He was converted because as the risen Lord Himself put it, he was a "chosen vessel". A light shined around him and he heard the voice of Jesus addressing him; indeed the heavens were opened and he had a vision of our Lord so bright that for days he was blinded. It is not surprising that after such an experience he should recognise Jesus as Lord and give his life to His service. It is plain that his conversion is to be attributed entirely to God, it took extraordinary means to bring this chosen vessel into the kingdom. But the same is true of the conversion of everyone, though it is normally not so spectacular. The initiative lies entirely with God. It must be so because in ourselves we are blind and cannot see the truth, "the mind of the flesh is at enmity against God and is not subject to God's will nor indeed can it be" says St. Paul. God must intervene. He alone can open the eyes of the spiritually blind, take away the stony heart, re-create the personal relationship with Him, for when a man is in Christ, says St. Paul, he is a new creation, and it is God alone to which this new creation is to be attributed.

The doctrine of predestination really means that God is sovereign in salvation - it is He who chooses those whom He adopts as sons. Even our response of faith is God's gift, given according to His purpose. Thus, St. Paul tells the Philippians that it was God's gift to them that they believed on Jesus (Phil. 1). Frequently in the Bible repentance is said to be the gift of God and this is natural because we have not the power of self-recovery within ourselves so as to turn back from a self-centred life to a God-centred life - for this is what repentance means : to change your world view to see God as your Lord and Jesus as your Saviour. If anyone repents in this radical way it is God's gift to him, and Christians know this to be the case. As they reflect on their own experience they recognise that were it not for the

grace of God they would still be living the old life of self-centredness and sin.

Belief in the doctrine of predestination doesn't come naturally - it is only because it is so clearly taught in scripture that anyone holds it, and yet when it is firmly grasped it has a tremendous effect in releasing our spirits from our anxiety and stress. The evangelist who knows that God is sovereign in salvation doesn't feel driven to all sorts of expedients to get people converted. He will rely primarily on prayer and on preaching the clear truth of the gospel in the context of love and relationship. He will not be driven to get decisions by methods and expedients which may be unworthy of the gospel with which he has been entrusted. For he knows that it is God who gives repentance and faith in fulfilling His purposes of grace and salvation. Not that belief in God's sovereignty in salvation will ever excuse lethargy in prayer or slackness in preparation on the part of the minister, or the individual Christian, for God works His purposes of grace through us and through our natures and our gifts, and we must be obedient in our use of our gifts and opportunities. There is a two-sidedness which cannot be escaped. God is sovereign in salvation; we are responsible in our obedience. The writer of Acts found no contradiction here. In chapter 13 v. 48 he described the results of the preaching of Paul and Barnabas in terms of God's sovereignty "as many as were predestinated to eternal life believed" and a few verses later (14:1) he put the other side, writing that the apostles so spoke that many believed. Both are true at the same time. God is sovereign, we are responsible.

It is because the Bible so clearly teaches the doctrine of predestination that Christians ought to embrace it without hesitation for it is certainly true, and we should adjust our attitudes in conformity with it. There is a wonderful passage in Romans 8:28-30 "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew He also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. And whom He foreordained them he also called: and whom He called, them

He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified". Notice the emphasis of God's purpose which He fulfilled in our lives and this purpose is that we might be formed to Christ's likeness so that we should be one of His brethren. Notice the "golden chain". Whom He predestinated them he also called; whom He called them He also justified and whom He justified them He also glorified". None are missing. Those whom He foreordained in due course He called, justified and finally glorified.

There is equally clear teaching about predestination in Romans 9 and Ephesians 1, to mention only two of the numerous passages of scripture which teach predestination.

The doctrine reminds us that it is God's purpose to confer blessing. The scriptures tell us that God chose Abraham in order that He might bless him and St. Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with "Blessed by God.....Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing....He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.....having predestinated us unto adoption as sons....."

A realisation of this goodness of God quite undeserved by us, should make us humble and appreciate our blessings.

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