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PREDESTINATION

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By D.B. Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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In considering the doctrine of predestination as taught in the Bible, we must exclude from our thoughts any concept that God's predestination is based on His foresight of our response, perhaps even of our virtues or our faith. The Bible is clear that God's choice is based entirely within His own character and in no way evoked by any foreseen response or virtue in us. In the early history of the Old Testament Moses made clear that God's choice of the Israelites was not based on anything within themselves but only because of God's character (Deut. 7:7) "The Lord did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people, for you were the fewest of all peoples but because the Lord loved you.....". Our salvation is the result of God's mercy, and mercy, of course, is always unmerited. For were there something in us which deserved mercy it would cease to be mercy and would become justice. It would be due to us. But mercy can only be extended to those who have no claim on it, and this is certainly true when God shows us mercy, for while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The unmerited nature of God's mercy is very clearly delineated in Romans 9. In this chapter St. Paul is unravelling the problem that although Jesus, the Messiah, had come to God's people the majority of the Israelites had rejected Him. It was a very depressing problem for St. Paul. He writes "I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were an anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh : who are Israelites;" In spite of all their privileges the majority of the Jews were rejecting the Messiah. How was it to be explained. St. Paul attributes it simply to the choice of God. God was having mercy on whom He was having mercy. It had always been so, and "at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace, but if it is by grace it is no more of works otherwise grace is no more grace. What then? That which Israel seeks for it obtains not but the election hath obtained it and the rest were hardened. According as it is written, God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear, unto this very day". In contemplating this suggestion of God's choice, we must remember that we have no claims on God. In the first place, we were created by Him. Can the pot dictate to the

potter? There is no unrighteousness in God, all He does is perfect.

We cannot probe the purposes of God beyond what He has revealed to us in scripture. We know His character of love and graciousness. He is dealing with a sinful and rebellious race, creatures who reject their Creator, yet He has mercy and His actions of salvation spring from within His character of wisdom and love and righteousness. St. Paul points out that this is one of the first lessons for us to learn if we are to have a right relationship with God. God chooses. Of Abraham's children it was Isaac whom God chose and of Isaac's two children who were twins, and so absolutely equal as it were, St. Paul reminds us that the scripture says that "before the children were born neither having done anything good or bad that the purpose of God according to His choice might stand, not of works but of Him that calls: God said to the mother, the elder shall serve the younger. Even as it is written, Jacob I loved and Esau I hated".

St. Paul is aware of the intellectual problem that God's sovereign discrimination poses, but He doesn't answer it in any simple manner. He imagines an objector saying that God's choice of one rather than another is unjust, but Paul will not allow a thought that God could be unjust to be entertained. God who is the source of our own sense of justice will not contradict in any of His actions what is just. However, the scripture makes clear that God is free in choosing on whom He will have mercy. The apostle quotes from the Old Testament saying "God says to Moses 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" The exercise of mercy springs entirely from within the One who is merciful. No rebellious sinner, as we all are, can demand that God shall be merciful to him. St. Paul concludes by saying "God has mercy on whom He will and whom He will he hardens" just like He hardened Pharaoh by leaving Pharaoh in his sin.

Once again the apostle imagines an objector saying that this is unfair, but the apostle replies "Nay but, O man, who are you that reply against God? .....What If God, willing to



shew His wrath, and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fitted to destruction : and that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy which He before prepared unto glory, even us whom He called". You will note that St. Paul recognised the problems in the doctrine of predestination, but he doesn't take the easy way of saying that God's decisions are based on His foresight of our response. For God's decisions are not based on His foreknowledge of how we react. On the contrary our response is based on God's foreordination and these decisions of His are based only in Himself, on His own wisdom and will.

The apostle also is clear that we sinners have no right to be angry with God because of the way things happen. We all deserve God's judgement because of our Godlessness, and if we are not experiencing that judgement immediately this is due to God's longsuffering. Sinners have no claims on God, no right to be angry with God, for we all deserve a great deal more than anything that might be happening to us at present.

That is the first thing that the doctrine of predestination teaches us. If we receive any blessings and especially if we receive restoration of fellowship through salvation it is because of God's mercy. God is a merciful God; there is a gospel of salvation, and we are invited to respond to it. This invitation to respond reminds us of the mystery of predestination that there are two sides to be kept in mind at the same time. On the one hand, there is God's sovereignty, having mercy on those who could not possibly be saved apart from His mercy, and on the other our responsibility to respond and to believe the gospel. St. Paul keeps both sides of the truth before his readers. In Romans 9 he emphasises God's sovereignty in predestination and election but he completes his discussion of this subject in the eleventh chapter by reminding his readers that those who are lost are lost through their own unbelief, while if his readers hope to be saved it can only be by their continuing in faith, otherwise they will be lost like the rest. Yet we must not jump to the conclusion that this faith originates in ourselves. It is our faith it

Is true, but it is God's gift to us, and because it is God's gift to us we may look to the future with confidence that He will continue to give us the grace to believe. As Hebrews puts it "Christ will save to the very end those who come to God by Him". If we are Christ's sheep "none can pluck us out of His hand". Our confidence for the future, (and we all should have this confidence), rests in God, not in ourselves; for God has promised to be faithful and to complete that which he has begun in us. He will keep this promise, for He is faithful and will do it. If our salvation were to depend on ourselves, then, of course, it would be presumptuous to be sure what our future might be, whether heaven or hell; but since our salvation is entirely God's gift from beginning to end, then He will complete the salvation of those whom He chose before the foundation of the world. We may therefore rest in thankfulness on the goodness of God which He has extended to us though we didn't in any way deserve it and we may accept with equanimity the events which His goodness allows to enter our lives, knowing "that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28. We may work for Him without the tension of thinking that everything depends on ourselves, and we may trust Him for the future, knowing that those whom He foreknew He also called and those whom He called He also justified and those whom He justified He also glorified. For God has not appointed us to wrath but to the obtaining of salvation through Jesus Christ.

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