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PREDESTINATION

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By D.B. Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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The subject of predestination is one that often puzzles Christians. There are verses in the Bible which seem to teach it clearly,, such as Luke's comment on Paul's preaching in Acts 13:48, "as many as were predestined to eternal life believed"; or our Lord's words "all that the Father gives me will come to me" (John 10:37); or St. Paul's words in Ephesians 1:4,5 "He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world having predestinated us". The question of how to think about predestination is an important one. It affects our whole attitude to life and salvation and to our trust and joy in God.

The basic concept of the Christian faith is that God is gracious. This is clearly revealed in the Old Testament when God declared His character to the children of Israel in the early days of the desert wanderings (Exodus 34:6,7) "The Lord, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy and truth keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin". There are, of course, other aspects of God's character equally important to remember but this is the one that perhaps we should begin with. "God is love", and His actions are governed by His character of benevolence and beneficence of love and of graciousness. His tender mercies are over all His works.

But an equally important truth to remember, and one which we are much more readily disposed to forget, is that God is Creator of everything and sovereign Lord over all that He has created. Men and women are happy enough to think of God as gracious and loving, but they are not so ready to acknowledge God as their Creator and therefore their Lord. Indeed, it is the fundamental sin of mankind to accept the notion of God but to refuse to draw the plain conclusion that as Creator He must therefore be Lord; the One to whom we are to give thanks for all that we have received as He is the source of it all. And yet the sovereignty of God is clearly taught throughout the Bible. He is the Creator of the heaven and the earth and of everything that is, and He is the controller moment by moment of it all. Jesus said that it is God who makes the sun to rise and who sends the rain (Mt. 5:45). It is perfectly true that He does this consistently so that we

are able to predict the rising of the sun and are able to work out the meteorological laws to which the weather conforms. Because we can do this we imagine that these regular sequences, or laws as we call them, are the things which control nature, but of course this is not so. It is God who controls nature. But since He is a consistent God, nature will reflect that consistency. Yet He remains sovereign, able to rise above His laws, i.e., His usual and consistent way of working, if there are reasons for it. His sovereign Lordship is not only over the impersonal happenings of nature but He is also sovereign over the lives of men and women who are also His creation. But His sovereignty in our lives is not exercised in an impersonal way, but through the natures He Himself has created, through our natures, that is. Thus, the way He exercises His sovereignty will appear to us to be natural. We live our lives according to our natures, that is to say, we live truly human lives - this is God's gift to us - and yet God remains sovereign even in the affairs of our life. It must be so. To think that God has withdrawn from any area and given over His sovereignty would be an unbearable thought. Or to think that God is unable to remain sovereign having created men and women with true human natures and human wills is, of course, absurd. The Bible teaches clearly, and common sense confirms, that God is sovereign over every aspect of His creation, over the great and over the minute, over men and women - their actions and thoughts and wills, and even over evil men and their evil wills. He is sovereign over death. He can bring the dead to life by His word as easily as He brought creation into existence out of nothingness. His sovereignty is not diminished because of man's rebellion against Him. He does not originate evil; we do that. But God is always Lord and sovereign in His own creation. His own acts reflect His character of goodness. "He gives us all things richly to enjoy" : The beauty of the world, the pleasant things of good weather and good health and friendship; all these things are God's gifts to us in creation and are illustrations of His goodness which never changes.

Alongside the goodness of God and the Lordship of God, the Bible places the rectitude of God. He is upright in His thoughts and actions, and He has implanted the same sense of rectitude

in our own minds and consciences. We approve righteousness and justice, and the Bible is very clear that God approves righteousness and justice. He is the vindicator of the right and the awarder of rewards and punishments in accordance with desert. How frequently we read in the Bible that God will judge every man according to his works. It is just here that the human problem becomes acute. Our own sense of rectitude and our own conscience tells us that we ourselves often do things which deserve not reward but punishment; and in particular our relationships with God are very different from what they ought to be. As our Creator and source of all the pleasures which we enjoy we ought to acknowledge Him and continually be thankful. But we don't do it. We use our lives for our own purposes with hardly a thought for God, and instead of having the same care for our neighbours which our Creator has we act very selfishly, very often, harming them in a way we know to be wrong. The up-shot is that God gives us up to our own self-centredness which we ourselves have chosen; and there is no power of recovery within ourselves to turn back to acknowledge God in the way that we ought to. Our only future is a fearful expectation of judgement whenever we remember that God is righteous and sovereign so that He will judge the whole creation in righteousness and truth. God's rectitude will ensure that justice and right is vindicated.

Our problem is that in a world where justice will be vindicated in the end, we ourselves too often are unjust; indeed, our attitude to God is always unjust, for we never render Him fully, if at all, the honour, the gratitude and the obedience which is due to Him as our gracious Creator. The Bible is clear that "there is none of us righteous, no not one"; we are all turned aside, we are all under God's condemnation without power of self-recovery, and none of us can be saved unless God saves us. As Jesus said "no man can come to me except the Father draw him". As Jeremiah put it "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). Or as St. Paul put it "The mind of the flesh is enmity against God for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be, and they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7,8). Because we choose to do what we know to be wrong, God gives us up to our choice. That is

fair, but it means hell for all of us. There is no difference, all have sinned. By disobedience we have all cut ourselves off from God, the source of life. We are involved, we have involved ourselves, in death, physical death, spiritual death, eternal death. Dead people cannot save themselves.

What each of us needs is a complete new start, a new creation as it were, a new birth, a spiritual resurrection. Even the religious leader, Nicodemus, was told by Jesus "unless one is born anew he cannot see the Kingdom of God You must be born anew" (John 3:5,7). And it is God, the Creator, alone who can bring about this radical change and new start, this new creation, this spiritual resurrection. We must be born of the Spirit.

The need of men and women for salvation is absolute and God's graciousness has provided this salvation through Jesus Christ, His Son. There is no other way of being forgiven except through Him. With our short memories we may forget the past but on the judgement day the sovereign Judge will not, and being a God of absolute rectitude and justice He will reward every man according to his works. Jesus alone has lived life entirely as it ought to be lived. Only those who are in Him on the judgement day can possibly hope to hear the Judge's verdict of approval.

Now is the time to relate ourselves to Jesus.

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