

“Are We Predestined For Heaven or Hell?”
Romans 8:28-39; Exodus 3:13-20

In the summer of 2001, Jean and I flew to Maine to perform Bradford Taft’s wedding. Bradford, son of Bat and Shirley Taft, was a member here, and he and Bonnie had decided to marry at the summer house where Bonnie’s family vacationed. It was a lovely affair. Maine was beautiful, the lobster delicious.

The only glitch was that it took us two days to fly from Greenville to Bangor. They closed both the Atlanta and Boston airports because of storms. American wouldn’t put us on their Boston to Bangor flight, etc., etc. It got so ugly that Delta rented a private car to chauffeur us from Boston to Bangor, something that would not happen today.

Well, on the way back we spent the night at the hotel right across the street from the Bangor airport in order to make the early morning flight. And during check-in I was talking with the young woman at the desk, swapping hotel and airline stories. Describing my recent escapade to do the wedding she asked my denomination.

“Oh,” she excitedly noted, “I’m Presbyterian, too. I’m Orthodox Presbyterian. I really like Calvinism.”

“Well,” I said, “it’s good to run into you. There aren’t many Presbyterians in this part of the country.”

“Oh, I don’t go there anymore,” she sadly laughed. “When I got divorced, things at the church changed.”

Now, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is not and has never been affiliated with our denomination. But that church must take literally Jesus’ prohibition against divorce except in the case of unfaithfulness. Apparently, those in her church were unwilling to accept the biblical scholarship that would view Jesus’ statement as an ideal. And though divorce is never to be taken lightly and a couple must make every effort to work out their struggles, in the context of the biblical view of love and forgiveness, we believe people can divorce and begin again.

But as I stood there observing the grief covering this young woman’s face, I thought, how sad. In the most painful and traumatic period in this woman’s life, her church has rejected her because they have interpreted a scripture passage to mean she has committed a sin which places her outside the community of faith.

Sadly, the road of Christian history is stained with the grief of those rejected by the Church. Throughout the centuries, the Church has tortured, beaten, killed, and ostracized people who did not fit our interpretation of scripture. And often, scriptures whose intent is positive are interpreted negatively.

For instance, take the divorce passage. In a male dominated society in which women were viewed as possessions of their husbands, Jesus says you can’t just whimsically divorce your wife, throwing her away like a piece of trash. This scripture gave women some protection from husbands tossing them out in the street because they were tired of them. Also, if you read the divorce passages carefully, you will note another innovation. In a society that severely punished adultery by a female, and winked at the males, Jesus said, “Oh, no, it is not right for either of you.”

One of the reasons biblical scholarship is so important is that to understand what the Bible is truly saying takes an awareness of the culture, language, religious situation,

and style in which it was written. It is easy to fall into the trap of interpreting scripture from a 21st century perspective. Our historically factual, scientific view always wants to know if something is true.

For instance, some people will argue over whether the talking donkey in the Balaam story in the Book of Numbers could really speak. But, the ancient Hebrews weren't stupid. They knew donkeys couldn't talk. The story is a satire illustrating how big shot know-it-all Balaam was actually less perceptive than this supposedly stupid animal.

The Bible is not a history or science book. There is some history and science along the way, but its intent is to illustrate God working among God's people. And like our literature today, it employs all different kinds of methods to do this.

Dave Charlton, pastor of First Baptist Church in Newcastle, Kentucky told about a mother with a fidgety seven-year-old boy. One Sunday after church she related to him how she finally got her son to sit still and be quiet. About halfway through the sermon, she leaned over and whispered, "If you don't be quiet, Pastor Charlton is going to lose his place and will have to start his sermon all over again." He immediately settled down.

We want to be careful that in trying to get people to do what we think they should do, we don't make the Word of God negative when it is positive.

Now, I bring all of this up because our passage this morning is one of those that through the centuries has been used negatively instead of positively. The eighth chapter of Romans powerfully expresses the love of a dependable, eternal God who commits Himself to stand with His children through every adversity. It is a poetic piece composed around the broad brush strokes of theology. But if the general tenor of its tone is not observed, if one attempts to box it into logical equations, its message of God's eternal love and care can be twisted into a weapon of condemnation and prejudice. And this still occurs today. Let me show you how this happens.

Look at verse thirty: "And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." The message of this verse is that from the very beginning of the world God loved us and chose us to be His children. And not only that, but by choosing us God remains with us throughout our earthly lives and all eternity. The entire passage is written in the form of a religious experience, an expression of hope, of confidence in our God.

From passages such as this comes the theological concept of predestination. The central idea of predestination is one of comfort, that God chose us, knew us, loved us even before we ever existed. Just as a mother and father love their baby before she is ever born, so God loved us from the very beginning. Throughout the scriptures, predestination is a positive expression of God's salvation and eternal presence, a love that we do absolutely nothing to earn.

But also throughout history and today, some take these expressions of religious exaltation and apply the eye of cold, hard logic. Well, they say, if God chose some people for eternal bliss, then He must choose others for eternal damnation. Note, that the Apostle Paul never says anyone is predestined to eternal damnation. Next, they say, if He chooses some for heaven and some for hell, then wouldn't that show up in their lives? Wouldn't the good prosper and the bad suffer? Therefore, if bad things happen to you, you must not be on the right list. But if you are prospering, especially financially, you

must be one of the good guys. Therefore, if God is prospering the elect and punishing those he hasn't selected, that means he has already determined everything that happens.

So you end up with the common, but totally unbiblical definition of predestination, that God has already decided everything that occurs in our lives. Which works pretty well when my life is running along smoothly, and I can understand why all those poor people are in the situation they're in and I'm not.

But then, my husband leaves me.

Or, my child runs in front of a car.

My mother unexpectedly dies.

My job is eliminated.

My biopsy comes back cancerous.

And then I'm faced with the question: Why did God plan this for me? Why would God choose to hurt me? Understanding the Bible is so important because it is so easy to make it say what it does not.

After the baptism of his baby brother in church, little Johnny sobbed all the way home as he rode in the back seat of the family car. Three times his father asked him what was wrong. Finally he replied, "The minister said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home. But I want to stay with you guys!"

Correctly understanding the Bible enables us to know that God is not seeking to remove Himself from us, but rather to draw us closer in the relationship God has already established.

So, what is the point of this passage? That nothing can separate us from God. Paul is not attempting to sugar coat life. He is not seeking to cast evil things as good, to attach some pseudoreligious, sentimental label on the bad elements of our existence. Rather, he wants us to know that no matter what occurs, whatever form of sin and evil, however death and disaster batter us, God is still here. God has loved us from the very beginning.

The passage reminds us that we do absolutely nothing to earn this salvation. God's love is a free gift through His Son Jesus Christ. These words fly in the face of anyone who believes he or she in any way, shape, or form is more worthy of God's love than another human being. Every single one of us is a sinner dependent on a loving, forgiving God.

Yet, God knows all this and still loves us. These words lift us to the very heights of joy and confidence. Knowing our sinfulness, our God still loves us, still promises to stand by us.

In the last two verses Paul lists categories of creation, both natural and supernatural. He explains that no dimension of reality can upset God's love and care for us. From their very inception, these words have warmed the hearts of Christians as they do for us today.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Dorothy Day, well known Christian activist and social worker, in her book, On Pilgrimage, told about a woman showing up at their mission in New York City one day with a policeman.

She was a very difficult alcoholic whom Irene, who has charge of the women's house, had tried to help for the past six months. Over and over again she had cleaned Ann up, had tried to get her on her feet, had helped her to jobs, had forgiven her seventy times seven rather than put her out on the streets. The last time she was drunk, she had lost ten dollars in the house, and we found it. Tom has charge of the money of the house, and it was turned over to him and used for "flop money" for others, for beans for the soup, or whatnot. When she next came in, sober, with a job, and asked for her money, we told her that we had found it but used it. We live often from day to day, so there was nothing at that moment in the house to give her. We did not say that she owed us far more for her six months' stay with us. And now here she was, coming in threateningly with a policeman, demanding her ten dollars.

God doesn't remind us that we could never repay what we owe Him. Rather, in the midst of our struggles, our cries of unfairness, demanding to know where He is in our sufferings, God continues to forgive us, care for us, and love us.

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When children are separated from their parents we often use the term "separation anxiety," noting the unhappiness a child experiences in that parting, and his fear whether that separation will last. Difficult times in our lives bring separation anxiety to us. We question whether God has abandoned us, left us to the whims of worldly tragedy and trauma. The Apostle Paul reminds us that God loves us even before we enter this earthly existence. It is a love that is never forsaken, never terminated, never forgotten.

This morning, as we struggle with the difficulties of our day to day existences, let us grasp hold of God's promises, recalling the comfort and confidence of verse thirty-one: "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

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