

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## What does the Bible teach about: Predestination and Election

### Defining the terms

I think we'd better begin this talk by defining the two words in its title: "predestination" and "election".

Let's deal with election first, partly because it's the more common thought in the scriptures, and partly because it's a word we're all familiar with. The meaning of an election, in the political sense, is a choice. Voters choose between competing candidates or political parties. And the meaning of the word in the Bible is the same. It means choice.

But when we talk about election as a biblical doctrine, we mean the idea that God has made the choice, in particular that He has chosen, or picked out, certain people to receive His blessing.

So what is the meaning of "predestination"? Predestination is God putting into effect the results of election. If God has, for example, chosen in advance who is going to go to heaven, then we could say that their destiny is already decided. They have been "predestined" to that end.

Now although I've barely started this talk, I think it must already be obvious that the biblical doctrines of election and predestination lead to difficulties in the minds of most people. I could of course dodge that issue by sticking strictly to the title of this talk "what does the Bible teach about predestination and election?" and leaving it to you to sort out the difficulties!

But I don't intend to do that. We call this programme "*Truth for Today*", but we add the subtitle "the Bible explained" and I don't believe I would be doing justice to today's subject if I didn't address those questions and difficulties, and hopefully by the conclusion of this talk leave you with a resolution of them which brings glory to God, and peace to our hearts.

This is not going to be an easy ride, but what I plan to do is firstly to set out what I believe the Bible really does teach about these subjects, then to recognise that the Bible also says other things, things which seem, to our minds at any rate, to be incompatible with them and finally to put to you a way of looking at this entire question which, to me at any rate, makes the difficulty evaporate and leaves us giving glory to God.

### What the Bible says

Firstly then, what **does** the Bible actually say? Election is mentioned quite a lot in the Bible, but I'm going to base this talk on just one passage, Romans 9:10b-24. Before we look at it, I'm going to read Ephesians 1:3-6, because that passage specifically mentions both election (God has chosen us) and also predestination. Here it is: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved.*"

Now we come to Romans 9:10b-24, which to my mind is **the** passage where the guts of the doctrine of election are gone into. Whilst the word "predestination" is not mentioned, the idea of it is clearly here also. I'm going to read Romans 9:10b-24: "*...when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad - in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of Him Who calls - she was told 'The older will serve the younger'. As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then He has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever He wills. You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?' But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to*

*make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath [fitted] for destruction, in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory - even us whom He has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?"*

I doubt that you could find, anywhere in the Bible, a clearer statement of the absolute sovereignty of God. God has the absolute right, we are being told here, like the potter moulding the clay, to make of each of us whatever He chooses.

On some He chooses to have mercy, and yet on others He does not, and if we burst out in protest and say "But, but, but ... that's not fair!", then the response is, "*Who are you to answer back to God?*" (Romans 9:20).

We're going to look in a moment at what we might call "the fine print" of this passage, what precisely it says, and what it doesn't say, but before we do that, can we just reflect for a moment as to why it is that the assertion of God's absolute right to do whatever He sees fit provokes such indignation.

I suggest to you that modern man has long since lost sight of how horrific sin is, and of how far away from God we, that is, as members of present day society, really are. Although we may be believers, all too often our own thinking is moulded by the climate of thought in which we live.

Perhaps the first step along the road to understanding the subject before us today is to face up to a terrible reality, a devastating reality, but reality nonetheless. It is that for God to condemn anyone to hell is not in the least degree unfair. He has every justification for doing just that.

So then for anyone to escape His wrath can only be by an act of astonishing mercy on His part.

With that as our starting point, let's now look at the precise wording of Romans 9:22-23. I read from the English Standard Version, and anyone who was actually following the readings in that version may just have spotted something. They may have noticed that I changed a word. The English Standard Version says that the vessels of wrath in Romans 9:22 were "*prepared*" for destruction and that the vessels of mercy in Romans 9:23 were "*prepared*" for glory.

But I changed the first of those to "fitted" and I believe there is very good reason to do so. The two words translated "*prepared*" are two entirely different words in the Greek original, so for a start, translating them by the same English word obscures that distinction. More importantly, to say that the vessels of wrath were "*prepared*" for destruction links that statement with what is said immediately afterwards about the vessels of mercy, that is, that God prepared **them** for glory, and so can easily leave the reader with the impression that God has similarly prepared the vessels of wrath for destruction. But this is what the scripture is careful **not** to say. It says they are fitted for it, that is completely ready and suitable for that end, ripe for judgment we might say, but it does **not** say that God prepared or fitted them for it. They were fitted for destruction by their own rebellion against God.

I know this may sound like splitting hairs, but the absolute precision of the inspired word of God should constantly call forth our wonder and admiration. I believe that Scripture never actually says that God has predestined anyone to hell. Predestination is always spoken of in connection with blessing. It is therefore sound biblical exegesis ("*rightly handling the word of truth*" to quote 2 Timothy 2:15) to make the following two statements:

1. If we end up in hell it is because we deserve it, not because God has predestined us to it; and
2. If we end up in heaven it is because God has exercised His great sovereign prerogative and has chosen to have mercy upon us.

Now this still leaves us with the basic mystery of why God has chosen to have mercy only on some and not on all. But before we get to that I suspect that I may need to deal with objections to the claim I've just made, that Scripture never actually says that God has predestined anyone for judgment.

There **are** several statements in this passage which come very close to saying that. It likens God to the potter making one vessel to honour and another to dishonour. Isn't it saying that He has the right to do the same with us? Yes, it **does** say He has the right. It **does not** say He has ever exercised it! In fact, in the verses we have just discussed, Romans 9:10b-24, it says that God "*has endured with much patience those vessels of wrath which are fit for destruction*" (Romans 9:22). That seems to suggest that, far from it being God's purpose or intention that they should be destroyed, He is bending over backwards to leave every possible opportunity for them to repent and escape His wrath.

Secondly, what do we make of what is said about Pharaoh? The reference is to Exodus 9:16, between the sixth and seventh of the ten plagues. By this time in the history Pharaoh has already made abundantly clear his implacable opposition to God and his fixed intention never to obey Him. What I believe we see here is an example of a very solemn thing. It is what is sometimes called “judicial hardening”. It is not that God purposed from the beginning for Pharaoh to be swept away in divine judgment, *“to show God’s power in him and that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth”* as Romans 9:17 says. It is rather that it is sadly possible for someone to take a stance so immovably opposed to God that God as it were abandons hope (if that is the right way to put it) that they will ever repent. What God is saying to Pharaoh through Moses, in Exodus 9:16, is “all right then, seeing that you are determined never to obey Me, I will allow you to go on to even greater lengths in your opposition to Me, in order that I may demonstrate in your final downfall that My purposes cannot be frustrated by even the most determined of men”.

And then, what about *“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”* (Romans 9:13) which is a quotation from Malachi 1:2-3? If instead it read “Jacob I chose but Esau I rejected” we would simply see it as a confirmation, from a much later stage in biblical history, of God’s original sovereign choice to bless Jacob rather than his older brother. The difficulty lies in the word *“hated.”* What I suspect is that we have to understand the word *“hated”*, in this context, as being akin to what the Lord meant in Luke 14:26 when He said that no one could be His disciple who didn’t hate their closest relatives. No one suggests that He was actually advocating hatred in the normal sense of the word. What He was saying was that if you would be His disciple, you must give Him absolute and unquestioning priority over every other love and every other loyalty in your life, so much so that your affections for everyone else will appear as hatred in comparison with your love for Him.

So here, I believe, the phrase is just an extreme way of stating that God chose Jacob and not Esau.

### The other side of the coin

So far we’ve been looking at the scriptural truths of election and predestination, but we now have to recognise that, taking into account the entirety of biblical testimony, two different ways of looking at the whole question of how someone is brought to faith in Christ are presented.

On the one hand, it is all God’s doing. He has chosen, before the foundation of the world, those who will believe the gospel and receive Christ as their Saviour. Yet on the other, every man, woman and child in the world is the object of God’s indiscriminate love and He longs for every one of them to be saved. He sent His Son to be the Saviour of the whole world (see 1 John 4:14), and no one is excluded from God’s offer of salvation.

In 1 Timothy 2:3-4, Paul tells us that God *“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”* And 2 Peter 3:9, God answers those who mock at the promise of Christ’s return, which will bring to an end the present day of grace when everyone has the opportunity to respond to the gospel. To those who say, in effect, “it will never happen”, he explains that the reason for the delay is that God is still patiently waiting *“not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9).

The Lord Jesus says, in Matthew 11:28, *“Come to Me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* and He means it! It is only their refusal to believe and close in with His offer which prevents anyone from receiving eternal blessing.

Both of these things are taught with equal clarity and equal authority in the scriptures, and yet our minds cannot see how they can both be true. I know some theologians dispute this, but I cannot follow their arguments, and I suspect most of those listening will agree with me that we just cannot see how these two truths fit together.

### An illustration

I’m now going to do something which may make the size of my audience today collapse as dramatically as did the size of Gideon’s army when, just before going into battle, and acting on God’s instructions, he dismissed all but 300 of his 32,000 troops (see Judges 7:1-18). I’m going to give you an illustration from the subject I studied at university, rather a long time ago - that is, Physics. Not only that, but I’m going to talk about a branch of Physics which has a particular aura of incomprehensibility, namely what is called quantum theory or quantum mechanics.

Well, for those still listening, here goes.

It’s no exaggeration to say that in the early twentieth century, Physics went through a lengthy period of turmoil, because facts came to light which were not only baffling, but seemingly contradictory.

Talking of things coming to light, it’s light which I’m going to talk about. Some of you will probably know that what I’m going to say doesn’t just apply to light, but for our purposes today we’ll stick to light.

You can prove by doing experiments that light is made up of tiny waves. This was well known and had been demonstrated time and time again well before the twentieth century.

But then people discovered that light was in fact “quantised” which means that it always travels around packaged into tiny discrete “lumps”. We call these lumps photons and they are not a bit like waves but more like little billiard balls.

So how can light be like little balls and like waves at the same time? Well, without turning this talk into a Physics lecture by describing in detail some of the weird ways in which this kind of split personality - is it a wave or is it a little ball? - actually shows up in experiments, it is difficult to get across just how baffling this problem is, but please believe me, it really is a deep and imponderable mystery. It perplexed the world’s greatest physicists when it was discovered and it still does. One of the early pioneers in this field, the Danish physicist Niels Bohr, said “anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it”. Another famous physicist, the American Richard Feynman, said “I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics”.

Here then is something in the physical world which it seems we are simply incapable of understanding. There are two ways of looking at how the universe works, and they are both true. Yet our minds cannot fit them together.

Why then should it surprise us if we find the same situation in the realm of spiritual truth? The Bible describes something in two different ways, and they are both true, yet our minds cannot put them together.

### **The problem evaporates**

Now we come to the eye opener, the realisation which, at least for me, makes the problem evaporate.

Why is it that the Bible writers, such as Paul, can write perfectly happily expressing both of these truths without so much as a hint of a suggestion that they see any difficulty? It is for the very good reason that if we simply take the Bible at face value, not questioning either of these truths, and “get on with the job” of living the Christian life, we find that our inability to see how they can be reconciled causes us no practical difficulty whatsoever!

We preach the gospel to everyone, telling them with biblical authority that God loves them and has given His Son to die for them, and that “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*” (Romans 10:13). We believe not only that anyone can be saved but also that God desires everyone to be saved. Yet at the same time we pray that God will make the preaching effective and save souls. Why do we do that? Because we believe it is all God’s work. We believe it is all up to Him.

And when someone accepts Christ we thank God that He is “*adding to the church daily those who should be saved*” (see Acts 2:47) don’t we? Of course we do. It is the most natural thing in the world to as it were switch between the two ways of looking at things without any practical difficulty.

And what of our own experience of conversion? Everyone’s spiritual history is unique of course, so this may not fit in your case, but what I think most of us would say is that we came to the point at which we made a decision. To the best of our knowledge we were free agents, and we chose to bow the knee to Christ and accept Him as Lord and Saviour, but I suspect that for most of us, immediately after taking that step it was the most natural thing in the world for our hearts to well up in thanksgiving to God because we just knew instinctively that this was not our doing but His.

It is sometimes pictured like this. You are standing outside a great walled city, the city of salvation. There is a doorway in the wall and the door is open. Inscribed above it are the words of universal invitation taken from the final gospel appeal in the Bible, in Revelation 22:17 “*Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.*” As you stand before that open door, you make a decision, “I’m going to go in”. You go through the door by accepting Christ into your heart. Finding yourself on the inside, you turn round to look at the doorway through which you have come. And there, inscribed above the door on the inside are the words of Ephesians 1:4 which we read at the beginning, “*chosen in Him before the foundation of the world.*”

Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk on Predestination and Election in our “What does the Bible teach about” series, talk number 1101.

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