

Predestination

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Few doctrines have divided Christians more painfully than the doctrine of predestination. In one direction it has been pressed into a determinism that empties the Cross of its universal love; in another it has been softened into a sentimentality that denies the seriousness of the human response. The Orthodox Church refuses both extremes. We confess a God who foreknows all things because He is eternal, and who calls all to salvation because He is love, yet who will not override the freedom He Himself planted in the human heart. This lesson walks through the scriptural passages most often cited in this debate, places them within the mind of the Fathers, and shows why the Protestant doctrine of unconditional election and irresistible grace is a grave departure from the apostolic faith. Our aim is not to win an argument but to protect the souls entrusted to our teaching from a doctrine that produces either despair or false security, and to steady them in the humble, synergistic, sober hope that the Church has always held out.

Predestination According to Foreknowledge, Not According to Will

The decisive Orthodox distinction in this entire subject can be stated in a single sentence: predestination in the apostolic faith is grounded in the foreknowledge of God, not in a prior decree of His will that some should be saved and others damned. St. Paul never once teaches that God sovereignly chose certain individuals to salvation before creation while passing others over. He teaches something quite different, and far more consoling.

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Romans 8:28-30

The order of the sentence is the key. St. Paul does not say that God works all things for good in those whom God loves; he says that God works all things for good in those who love God. Salvation is not a package handed down to a passive recipient; it is a covenantal response from a heart that has chosen to love. And the predestination that follows flows from what God has already foreknown concerning that heart's love.

St. Peter makes the same point with the same precision when he greets the Christians of Asia Minor.

“Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 1:2

The election is real. The foreknowledge is real. But the election is according to the foreknowledge, not the foreknowledge according to the election. The distinction is not a clever play of prepositions. It is the hinge on which two entirely different pictures of God turn. In one picture God looks down from eternity,

sees who will love Him, and honors that love with the gift of final glory. In the other picture God looks down from eternity, decrees that this soul shall be saved and that soul shall be damned regardless of anything they do, and then works history to bring about that decree. The first picture is the faith of the apostles. The second is not.

The Will of God That All Should Be Saved

Before turning to the harder verses, we must set down what the Scriptures say directly and without qualification about the will of God toward the human race. The verses are plain, and they govern every other passage we will read.

"Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4)

"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." (Titus 2:11)

"He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." (1 John 2:2)

These four witnesses together forbid any reading of any other passage of Scripture that ends in God's willing the damnation of some while willing the salvation of others. God's universal saving will is not one voice among many in the apostolic writings; it is the settled premise from which every other text must be read. When a particular verse seems to push against it, we have misread the verse – not caught the Spirit contradicting Himself.

On this premise the whole Orthodox doctrine of predestination rests. God desires the salvation of every person He has ever made. Christ died for every person He has ever made. The Holy Spirit is offered to every person He has ever made. What differs from soul to soul is not the offer but the response. And because that response lies in the free will God Himself has honored, predestination names what God foreknows the response will be, not what God has unilaterally decreed it must be.

Jacob and Esau: A Verse That Must Be Read in Context

Romans 9 is the chapter most often pressed into the service of an unconditional predestination, and verse 13 is the line most often pulled out of it.

"Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." Romans 9:13

Read alone, the verse is jarring. Read in its context, it tells a different story. The very next verse shows that St. Paul himself anticipated the objection his readers would raise — the same objection the Calvinist reading raises today — and he rejected it outright.

"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!" Romans 9:14

If St. Paul's meaning had been that God arbitrarily decrees some to eternal loss before they are born, the charge of unrighteousness would be unanswerable, and the Apostle's indignant denial would be empty. St. Paul denies it because he does not teach it. He is speaking of God's choice of vessels and peoples in the outworking of the economy of salvation, not of the eternal destinies of individual souls. God loved Jacob and placed him in the line of promise. God loved Esau too — He willed his salvation as He wills every man's — but foreknew that Esau would despise his birthright and trade the heavenly for a bowl of soup. The love of God for both was equal; the hatred is directed at the godless choice Esau made against the promise.

The same pattern is visible in the very next apostolic example the chapter reaches toward.

“But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace.” Galatians 1:15

Here is St. Paul, set apart from the womb by the sovereign foreknowledge of God. And yet what do we find him doing for the first thirty years of his life? He is persecuting the very Church he was predestined to build. The man set apart from the womb was dragging Christians to prison. If predestination obliterated free will, this could not happen. But it did happen, because foreknowledge names what God knows, not what He compels. The One who knew from before the world that Saul would become Paul did not, in that knowing, reach down and move Saul's feet toward Damascus as a puppet's feet are moved. Saul walked his own road, chose his own rage, and at last, on the Damascus road, chose — in freedom — to fall before the voice that had always been calling him.

The Potter and the Clay

The second great passage of Romans 9 is the image of the potter and the clay, and here too the Calvinist reading and the Orthodox reading diverge sharply.

“Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” Romans 9:21

A careless reading takes this to mean that the potter forms some lumps for honor and other lumps for dishonor according to no reason at all — a sheer bare act of sovereign will. But a careful reading, and a patristic reading, notes something the careless reading misses: the potter is wise, and the potter is just. It would be absurd that a wonderful lump of clay would come into the hands of this wise potter and that he would make of it a vessel for dishonor. And on the other hand, if the clay is rough and unfit to be a vessel for honor, the potter — bound by the nature of the material before him — will be obliged, because of its condition, to make of it a vessel for lesser use. The will of the potter is always to make every lump a vessel of honor. What the clay becomes depends, under the wise potter's hand, on what the clay is.

The prophet Jeremiah sets the full meaning of this image before us.

“Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull

down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.” Jeremiah 18:6-10

This is the sovereignty of God rightly understood. The potter has absolute power. The potter also has absolute wisdom. And the potter exercises His power precisely by responding to the clay — blessing what turns toward Him, withdrawing the blessing from what turns against Him. Sovereignty does not mean indifference to the response of the thing He is shaping; it means that He is free to honor that response with absolute justice. The story of Nineveh is the standing biblical illustration. God told Jonah that in forty days the city would be overthrown. The city repented. God relented. Was God fickle? Was God's first word a lie? No. God's word was always conditioned on the clay, as every word of judgment is — and the city, once doomed, became the city saved.

The Protestant Heresy of Unconditional Election

Against this ancient and sober faith stands a doctrine that arose out of the Reformation and was hardened by Calvin into the teaching called unconditional election, commonly summarized under the acronym TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints). The doctrine holds that God, before the foundation of the world and without reference to any foreseen response, chose some human beings to eternal life and passed over the rest, leaving them in their sin. Christ died, on this reading, only for the elect. The grace given to the elect cannot be resisted. And the elect, once saved, cannot possibly fall away.

It is necessary to say plainly what the Orthodox Church has always said: this doctrine is a heresy. It contradicts the universal saving will of God. It contradicts the universal scope of the Atonement. It contradicts the plain testimony of Scripture that the Holy Spirit can be resisted, grieved, and insulted. And it produces two twin spiritual diseases that no pastor of souls can fail to recognize.

The first disease is despair. A soul that has come to believe it may not be among the chosen — that no amount of repentance or love or labor can change its eternal destiny if the secret decree has gone against it — is a soul thrown back upon itself with nothing to cling to. It cannot look at the Cross and know that Christ died for it, because the doctrine of limited atonement forbids that certainty. It cannot look at its own repentance and find evidence of God's working, because the doctrine teaches that the non-elect can mimic repentance and still perish. This is the soil on which Puritan despair grew thick, and it has not ceased to produce its bitter harvest wherever the doctrine is preached.

The second disease is presumption. The other soul under this teaching reasons that since it has once made a decision for Christ, since it feels itself among the elect, nothing now can separate it from salvation — not any sin, not any apostasy, not any return to the old life. This is the doctrine often preached in its popular form as "once saved, always saved," and it dissolves the fear of God and the moral seriousness of the Christian life into a cheap confidence that has no scriptural warrant. The Protestant teaching thus produces, in one household, the brother who trembles because he may not be

chosen, and the brother who presumes because he is certain he is. Both are without the sober hope of the Gospel.

Can a Believer Fall Away? The Testimony of Scripture

The whole Protestant system collapses the moment Scripture teaches that a true believer can fall from grace and perish. And that is precisely what Scripture teaches, plainly and in many places. We will take only the two clearest witnesses.

The first is St. Paul's olive-tree warning to the Gentile believers in Rome.

“And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.” Romans 11:17-23

The grafting in is real. The standing in the tree is real. And yet St. Paul warns, in the same breath, that the grafted-in branch can be cut off. Not a hypothetical unconverted pew-sitter — the branch that is already drawing sap from the root. The warning would be empty if it could not happen. But St. Paul's warnings are never empty. A true believer can fall.

The second witness is even clearer, because it names the very doctrine Protestantism has invented.

“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?” Hebrews 10:29

The person described here was sanctified by the blood of the covenant. He was a genuine partaker of grace. And he has fallen. The decisive phrase for our purposes is "insulted the Spirit of grace." The verb is active and intentional. The Spirit of grace has been resisted, spurned, pushed away. If grace were irresistible, as Protestant doctrine claims, the phrase would be impossible. Scripture here tells us not only that a believer can fall, but that the very mechanism by which he falls is the rejection of a grace that could have been received. The doctrine of irresistible grace is refuted in a single line of Scripture.

The Cautionary Case of Nicolaus the Deacon

The Book of Revelation refers, in the letters to the seven churches, to the deeds of a group called the Nicolaitans, and speaks of those deeds with divine severity.

"But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

Revelation 2:6

Tradition identifies the namesake of that sect as Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven proto-deacons chosen by the apostles themselves, ordained alongside St. Stephen the Protomartyr. Acts 6 names him in the same breath with the others: "Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte from Antioch." He was chosen by the Spirit, laid hands upon by the apostles, set into the service of the Church. And he fell. He became a heretic. The sect that took his name was condemned by the risen Christ Himself in the words of Revelation.

This is not an obscure footnote. It is a case study, built into the foundational history of the Church, of a man who received the fullness of the Spirit's call and later rejected it. If he could not fall, the warnings of Scripture are theatre. If he could then every teaching that makes the believer's perseverance automatic falls to the ground with him. The Church remembers Nicolaus not to dishonor him but to warn us. No grace received today exempts us from the watchfulness required tomorrow.

Synergy: The Orthodox Vision of Grace and Freedom

What the Orthodox Church teaches instead of unconditional election and irresistible grace is the ancient doctrine of synergy; the co-working of divine grace and human freedom in the one work of salvation. It is the doctrine St. Paul preaches in a single breath without blushing at any tension:

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." Philippians 2:12-13

The same verse speaks of what we do and of what God does, and sets the two in the most intimate cooperation. We work out our salvation. God works in us to enable both the willing and the doing. The Father's grace goes before, accompanies, and follows every good act of the will. But the will is our own, and it is ours to yield or to refuse. This is the balance the Fathers hold everywhere.

"He who made you without you will not save you without you." — St. Augustine, Sermon 169.13

One sentence, and the two errors are cut away. Against Pelagius and his modern descendants: He who made you without you — salvation is pure gift, not wages. Against Calvin and his modern descendants: will not save you without you — the gift must be received by a free and willing heart. The whole Orthodox doctrine of predestination lies between those two clauses. God wills all to be saved. Not all will be. What differs is not God's love — that is equal for every soul — but the response the soul freely gives. And because God is God, He has always known that response before the world was made. That is what predestination is. That is all it is.



Review Questions

1. If God wants us all to be saved, how come some people perish? (A: Despite God wanting all to be saved, not all are saved and that's because of their free will.)
2. Since God has the foreknowledge of who will use their free will to be saved and who will not, how is this freewill if it is predetermined? (A: God's foreknowledge of our actions does not interfere with our free will. Some may use it to gain salvation, some may use it to lose salvation.)
3. All things work together for good to those who God loves. (A: False, notice that St. Paul says that all things work together for good to those who love God, he did not say, to whom God loves.)
4. Can a believer perish? (A: Yes)