



Predestination is Not Speculative; It is Spoken

The God of an idea, like universalism, that says "God loves everybody," such a God never gets around actually to saying it to anyone.

by Jason Micheli, Preacher in Residence

Earlier at the crest of his letter Paul to the Romans asked, "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" For Paul, it's not a rhetorical question. For Paul, it's a question at the beating heart of the Bible.

If God is for us— all of us— if God is determined to reconcile and redeem all of us, then what could stand in God's way? "What can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?" the apostle asks. And then, one by one, Paul proceeds to eliminate the possibilities. Except, the Apostle Paul does leave one possibility off his list; see if you can spot it:

- Hardship
- Injustice
- Persecution
- Famine
- Nakedness
- Peril
- War
- Death
- Rulers
- Powers

Notice there is one possibility missing from Paul's list, one potential dis-qualifier lingers still. You.

Can you finally separate yourself from the love of God? Can I? Have we been made with the ability to sever ourselves forever from the love of our Maker? If Injustice and Persecution and War can't leave our ledgers permanently in the red, can our Refusal?

Do sinners possess the stubborn strength to fight God to an everlasting draw? Can we separate us ourselves from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?

On the one hand, it appears we are able. After all, scripture is unwavering in the sole qualification for salvation.

"Christ is the end of the law of righteousness," the Bible says, "for everyone who *believes*." "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord," says scripture, "and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." The bar is the same in the Old Testament too. The Book of Joel says quite clearly, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord [*in faith*] will be saved."

Can we separate us ourselves from the love of God? On the hand, it certainly seems so, for unfaith abounds.

On the other hand, though, Paul insists that the word of God cannot fail.

"My word will not return to me void," the Lord tells the prophet Isaiah. The word of God can only work what it says, do what it decrees, accomplish what it announces. And the word says clearly, the Lord's not content with just you and you and you. God wants all of you.

For the apostle Paul, this question is no theological abstraction. The reason that famous passage in Romans is so impassioned is because Paul is agonizing over the fact of Israel's unfaith. The God of Israel has raised his eternal Son from the dead, yet the Israel of God believes not these tidings.

"Does this mean God has rejected his people?" Paul asks at the top of Romans 11. The grammar of the question gives away the answer. As soon as Paul refers to Israel as God's possession, he's already shown his tell. "By no means!" Paul answers

immediately. After all, God made a promise, “I will be your God, and you will be my People.” And if God can break his no-strings-attached, unconditional, promise, then *God* is the very troubling answer to the question,

“What can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?”

Does this mean God rejects those who do not believe? By no means!

For all the ink Paul spills in his anguish, the problem can be put rather simply:

1. God desires *all* to reciprocate his love and mercy— made flesh in Jesus Christ— with faith, alone.
2. Many— but especially the Israel of God— do not so believe.
3. Finally— here’s the kicker— God’s word can no more fail than God’s promise can be broken.

In wrestling with this sorrowful conundrum, Paul looks to the past and there he discovers a pattern that enables him to predict a hopeful future. Specifically, Paul considers the twin sons of Rebekah (you were wondering when I was going to get around to our text). Jacob attempted to swindle his older brother at a moment of acute vulnerability while Esau foolishly was willing to forsake his entire inheritance in order to satisfy his appetite.

Neither of Rebekah’s children prove exemplary; nevertheless, both Jacob and Esau are chosen by God while they’re still in Rebekah’s womb. God’s election happens *in utero*. The promise was spoken to Rebekah, Paul writes of Jacob and Esau:

“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— Rebekah was told, “The older shall serve the younger...” So then it [the purpose of election] depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.”

As Paul dwells on his fellow Jews’ apparent rejection by God, Paul sees a pattern behind the way God has worked in the past, *election and rejection*.

- Abel over Cain.
- Sarah instead of Hagar.
- Moses against Pharaoh.
- David to the exclusion of Saul.
- Israel rather than any other nation of the earth.

In each and every case, God’s choosing “neither corresponds to nor is contingent upon prior human difference.” Jacob and Esau are twins. There is no difference between them—that’s precisely the point! God’s *choice* creates the difference.

God elects for the promise to go through Jacob not Esau, and God elects Jacob not Esau *before* either Jacob or Esau could do any bad or any good. Therefore it is a choice God makes irrespective of merit or demerit.

It’s a choice premised on the providence of God not on the performance of either Jacob or Esau.

What’s more, Paul notices that this pattern of election and rejection, faith in some and hardness of heart in others, is an inextricable part of the history God makes with his world. What looks like God’s rejection of some in scripture always serves God’s redemption of the whole. The Father seemingly rejecting the Son, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” even that forsaking is for all.

Hope is the child of history.

Paul’s hope for the future, his hope for those who do not believe, is a child of *this* history, election and rejection. “Has the Israel of God stumbled so as to fall away forever?” Paul asks before he answers in the very same breath, “No!” Instead Israel’s unfaith, what appears to be God’s rejection of them, it is a choice God has made *for* the reconciliation of the whole world, Paul says. “For God has consigned all to disobedience [to the Gentiles their ungodliness, to the Jews their unfaith],” Paul writes, “so that he may have mercy on all.”

God has consigned some to unbelief; so that, God may have mercy on all. The failure of some to believe is, in fact, the means by which God is working even now to show mercy to all.

In other words — pardon the cliché — it's all a part of God's plan. God's *predestination*.

It's not surprising that Paul concludes Romans 9-11 with God's plan. Paul began with predestination too. Just before Paul wonders, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Paul reminds us that those whom God predestines — the whole world — God *calls*. Those whom God has chosen according to his plan (i.e., all of us) God calls, and God calls — specifically — with his justifying word (i.e., the Gospel).

That's Romans. Chapter eight. Verse thirty. That's the word of God. *Predestination*.

It's not a primordial choice that makes you no more than a bit of code in the Almighty's matrix. It's a present-tense call. That is, God applies his predestination in the here and now through the handing over of the goods of the Gospel.

Like Jacob and Esau, God makes choices. God has consigned some to unfaith. Why? So that, those who do not believe might be summoned into faith by the handing over of the goods. By you.

By Christ's own word on the lips of the likes of you. As scripture says plainly, "faith [which saves] comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

Predestination is not abstract. It's auditory.
Predestination is not speculative. It's spoken.

The God of an idea, like universalism, that says "God loves everybody," such a God never gets around actually to saying it to anyone.

The God of predestination, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, wants to say to everyone, a creature at a time, "I love you. I forgive you. You're mine."

Is that clear, I wonder? Predestination isn't a divine decision that hovers a thousand miles above us and a billion years behind us. Predestination happens, here and now, in the gospel word on the lips of a sinner to another sinner.

As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For it pleases God to save..." How? "It pleases God to save through the folly of proclamation," Paul says. In other words, it

pleases God to save the whole world through such foolishness as you and your words.

The Lord God desires to save all. And the Lord God has elected to show mercy upon all through those whom he has called. That is, the baptized.

And just as surely as God chose Jacob over Esau, he has consigned some to unbelief so that unbelievers might hear God say — hear God on *your* lips say, "I love you. I forgive you. You're mine." By virtue of your baptism, you have been called to a particular, peculiar task.

The baptized are authorized to do the mighty acts of God's predestination. Your baptism commissions you, therefore, to speak *not* about God. Talk about God never comforted any conscience. Talk about God has yet to save a single soul.

Your baptism authorizes you to speak not about God but *for* God. God wants to hide on your lips in a word like, "Your sins are forgiven" or "Christ Jesus will raise you from the dead" or "The Devil has no power over you because Christ Jesus has saved you."

God wants to hide on your lips in the promises he's given us. The Holy Spirit lives in the promises he's given us to speak. The purpose of the doctrine of predestination is not speculation. The purpose of the doctrine of predestination is proclamation. The purpose of the doctrine of predestination is to give you a platform on which you can stand. It's to give you certainty. It's to give you an actual message, a concrete promise to deliver, because, by the doctrine of predestination, you can know without any doubt that if someone comes to you with unfaith, if someone comes to you burdened by their sins and regrets, if someone comes to you fearful of death or feeling forsaken by God, then it's because the Lord God has sent them to you.

The Lord God has sent them to you — *you*, whom he has called to speak for him. God has chosen them and sent them to you. This is how God's plan plays out.

It's not how I'd plan the salvation of the whole world, but give the Big Guy credit. He himself calls it folly.

Can anything separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord? As it turns, the "No" depends on you daring to do what he redeemed you to do.