

## God is “in control”

There's a phrase that I have heard more times than I could count, from my good Christian brothers and sisters, but which I do not understand. I always feel like I should be asking a follow-up question such as, “What do you mean when you say that?”, but I almost never do, because it's so complicated. The statement is simply this, “God is in control,” and my question is, “What does that mean?” Does it mean that God is the one who gave my son Crohn's disease and made his recovery from surgery so difficult? Does it mean that God is responsible for the drone attacks in the Middle East that, for example, killed seven people who were out looking for a missing child? Does “God is in control” mean that there is no such thing as human freedom, that everything we do is determined by God? These are important questions and, believe it or not, they are not questions all believers agree on.

My first line of approach to these issues is to start where we began this series, a declaration that God is a good Father and that He operates towards us in grace. Isn't that what we learned from the Parable of the Prodigal Sons, a parable that Jesus told and that Chris Price spoke to us about last Sunday? Remember that Jesus told that parable in response to the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complaint that He associated - even ate meals with - tax collectors and other notorious sinners. And what He revealed about the Father, and about His own ministry during His telling of the Parable, was that God is loving and generous and welcoming and good, very, very good. Did He control the younger son after the son asked for his inheritance and then wasted it in the far country? Did He control the older son as he poured out his resentment in the field outside the party that was being thrown to welcome home his younger brother? No, no control, just patient love.

So, if Jesus described a Father as one who is patient and loving, who takes the hurt of His children's rebellion onto Himself, who extends forgiveness and welcome to both the prodigal and the proud, where do we get the idea that He is a controller?

The early church understood that God is sovereign, but it wasn't until Augustine in the 5th Century, that God's sovereignty began to be seen as His providential oversight of everything. Augustine was convinced that humans were free, but he was also convinced that God made everything happen, which just doesn't jive with any objective understanding of freedom. And, Augustine also failed to fully explain how a God who was the cause behind everything that happened could not be the author of evil - and that same issue haunts the church today.

But I'm going to guess that you don't want to listen to me talk about the history of an idea, as much as you would appreciate looking at the Scriptures and trying to discern from them the scope of our freedom. So, let's begin this week with a look at the biblical concept of “election” and how it fits with the idea that human beings are free to choose to trust in Jesus and also free not to trust in - and follow - Him.

Here's the problem: if some people are chosen by God, or “elect” to be His children, forgiven for their sins and included in God's family, what about the ones who are not?

Are they then chosen from the beginning of time to be unforgiven, not included, not accepted or elect by God? And, if that's the case, if God arbitrarily chooses some for salvation and some for eternal punishment, then isn't He responsible for a great evil? And if that is true, how can we continue to speak of the goodness of God?

Here is another way of stating the problem, this time by the pen of the 16th century reformer, Martin Luther:

*(The) omnipotence and foreknowledge of God, I repeat, utterly destroy the doctrine of free will ... Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence to common sense or natural reason, that God, Who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torment of such poor wretches. It seems an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable thought to think of God; and it is this that has been such a stumbling block to so many great men down through the ages.*

And one more, this time from John Calvin:

*By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God by which He determined with Himself whatever He wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or to death.*

When Calvin talked about "whatever God wished to happen with regard to every man", he was talking about our eternal destiny. And, while Luther seemed at least a bit uncomfortable with the idea that God could be callous and cruel towards any human being, Calvin didn't express the same regrets - in fact, like some of our own new Reformed teachers, he seems to have thought that this harshness and total control of people's choices was somehow to God's glory.

By the way, I'm not going to make any attempt to sound at all sympathetic to these arguments because I believe that they misrepresent the teaching of Scripture. I'm trying to represent them fairly, but not sympathetically, and I'm sure you can hear that as we move along.

Now we go to Scripture. There are two words that are used to buttress the arguments of those who see God as a "controller" - the words are foreknow and predestine. The idea of the first word is that if God knows something in advance - something we call "foreknowledge" - then it's the same as if He makes it happen. If He knows that you're going to choose strawberry ice cream over chocolate or maple walnut, then you have no choice in the matter. If God knows who is going to believe in His promises and trust in Him for salvation, then the human who has faith has it without any element of personal choice. That also means, that we have no responsibility for that choice - it's entirely God's responsibility.

It's important to note that this is not a biblical idea; it's more rooted in philosophy, in the Greek world rather than the Hebrew world. It's an idea that doesn't appear in the writings of the early Church Fathers - not until the time of Augustine early in the 5th century. In the Bible, there is nothing about God's foreknowledge that makes our human responsibility less. The Bible teaches that we are responsible for our choices, that humans face judgment for our choices, that choices have huge implications for how we live life and how our lives affect others. A great example is from Luke 22:22 where Jesus says, "For I, the Son of Man, must die since it is part of God's plan (foreknowledge). But how terrible it will be for My betrayer." God knew what was going to happen - in fact, in this case He planned it - but that didn't take responsibility away from the person who did the act. Judas was still responsible for his choice to betray his Master.

The other word is "predestine", which means to determine something in advance. You have to have power to predestine something - Think back with me to your days in high school. You could try to determine in advance that you will get straight A's on your next report card, but that doesn't help you unless you have the ability to make it happen. God clearly has the ability to make things happen - He made the plan for our redemption through the cross of Jesus and carried it out - but does that mean that everything, including the eternal destiny of every individual on the planet, has been predetermined, or predestined, by God?

If that were so, we would expect to read the Bible differently. Let me give you some examples that indicate that the suggestion that God's sovereignty equals "control" doesn't reflect the whole counsel of Scripture:

1. Jesus tells us to pray that God's Kingdom would come and His will done. Why ask us to pray that if God's will is always being done?
2. Jesus wept over Jerusalem in Luke 19 saying that they had rejected the opportunity God had given them. Again, why weep over something if the people had no choice in it?
3. Isaiah 65:2 - *"I opened My arms to My own people all day long, but they have rebelled."* God is offering to come, to save, to help, but His offer is repeatedly rejected - people make the choice to rebel against His rule, to go their own way, even while God keeps His arms open to them.

There are examples like this all through the Bible, where God places a choice in front of people and asks them to choose well, to choose life, to choose Him - and more often than not they choose rebellion, independence, the path of pride.

Of the twelve references in the New Testament to God's predestination of anything, only 3 can have anything to do with human salvation. 7 of the 12 are directly related to Jesus' death, resurrection and His future as the Judge. What are the three texts we need to look at?

1. *For God knew His people in advance and He chose them to become like His Son, so that His Son would be the firstborn, with many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, He called them to come to Him. And He gave them right standing with Himself ...* (Romans 8:29,30 NLT)

2. *His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:5 NLT)*
3. *In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:11,12 NIV)*

When you've been chosen for something, it makes a difference what exactly you've been chosen for. A casual glance at these texts might suggest that they are talking about God determining who was going to be saved and who was not, but a closer look tells us something different. The Romans passage talks about God knowing something in advance, actually, knowing some people in advance. Who are these ones called "His people"?

If we go back one verse, we read that God causes all things to work together for good to "those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them." If you look at John 3 closely, you'll see Jesus teaching that our response to Him, whether we choose to believe in Him or not believe in Him, determines what will happen to us. In verse 16, we read that those who believe in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. In verse 18 we read that there is no judgment for those who trust Him. Later in the chapter, John the Baptist teaches that those who believe Jesus discover that God is true and then says that those who believe in God's Son have eternal life.

The same principle is at work here - the thing that comes first is loving God and what follows from that is that God has chosen to make us more and more like Jesus. The relationship is established first and it's out of the relationship that we then experience the call of God to our destiny in Christ. The text doesn't say that God chose some people in advance to believe in Him, to become Christians and therefore that He chose others to not believe and to experience judgment. It says that those He knew ahead of time, those ones would experience change in their lives as He worked in them to make them more like His Son.

The first chapter of Ephesians is core to the doctrine that God chooses some for salvation and others for damnation. I'll read it from the New International Version and ask you to listen closely to see what God has chosen people for:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He chose us, in Him, before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons (read sons and daughters) through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will - to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves ... In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit ... (Eph. 1:3-6; 11-13)*

What are people being chosen for in these verses?

1. To be holy and blameless in the sight of God!
2. To be adopted as God's children
3. To be a blessing to God (for the praise of His glory)

What these texts tell us is that God had a plan from before the creation of the world to bring great blessing to this world through those who:

1. were the first to hope in Christ, and
2. were among those who heard and believed, and
3. were marked by the presence of God's Holy Spirit

The people who believe that God elects some for salvation and some for eternal punishment would argue that God's 'choosing' in these verses has to be an arbitrary choice based on His own freedom to choose and can be rooted in nothing about the individuals He chooses. That is extremely hard to justify based on the content of this passage. There is indication in the text of people hoping in Christ, believing the Gospel and then receiving the blessings. They aren't given the Spirit before they believe, but it is given as a seal following their expression of faith. I think that personal experience and common sense tell us the same things. We wrestled with the idea of faith in Christ and, at some point, made a decision to put our hope in Him, and then we experienced the blessing of assurance and joy and the presence of God's Spirit with us.

As you know, this series is all about the goodness and grace of God. I start my prayer time each morning with the words, "My Father, in heaven, may your name be kept holy" - a version of "hallowed be Your Name". In my desire to see God's name be honoured as it should be, I need to avoid coming to false conclusions about His nature. I'm going to read one of those conclusions to you now, from a theologian who believes that a good God has chosen millions of people for destruction from before the creation of the world:

*Although all things - unbelief and sin included - proceed from God's eternal decree, man is still to blame for his sins. He is guilty; it is his fault and not God's.*

Notice carefully what is being said here: Everything, including sin and unbelief, proceed from God's will, from His decree, but we are still to blame.

Elsewhere in the same book, the author says that his view is "illogical, ridiculous, nonsensical and foolish." That would be hopeful if it wasn't followed by this statement, "This secret matter belongs to the Lord our God and we should leave it there." It's hard to believe that a serious scholar who has written a book in which reasoning plays a serious role can then conclude that his illogical, ridiculous, nonsensical and foolish view is a reflection of God's will. It would be far better for him to look for the flaws in his own argument, to retrace his steps and see where he might have gone wrong, than to conclude that God is responsible for an illogical, ridiculous and foolish view.

Why is all of this important to us? Why should you still be awake and paying attention? Because, while this author tells us that this is all mystery, God's secret, and we should "leave it there", the Bible itself gives us an entirely different approach. The Bible tells

us that we have a capacity to make moral judgments and that we are responsible for them. Listen to these words from John 3:19-21:

*Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done through God.*

Do you see the connection there between human freedom, our choice - and God's working in us? God provides light to the world, but then it's up to us how we respond to that light. Loving darkness is an offence against God and is subject to judgment. Living by the truth is done openly in front of the watching world and brings glory to God.

These contrasting views of the sovereignty of God and what it means are held by people who both take seriously the Scriptures, but approach them in very different ways. That difference is huge and it makes for a terrible divide between a God who is always good and loving and one that can't be seen that way.

Books have been written, trying to explain how a God who is love can have shown His love to people by condemning them to eternal punishment before they were even born. In my opinion, any argument to that end will fail, because it doesn't reflect the God who revealed His identity, His personhood, to Moses with these words:

*Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exodus 34:6,7)*

And then God proceeded to live that compassion and grace out, patiently, with His people Israel, and then, through Jesus, to the whole world.

What brings glory to God, throughout our Bible, is not His arbitrary power to do whatever He wants, but His whole nature, His entire being, the wonder and grace and goodness of who He is. If we listen to all the voices out there, including some voices coming from within the church, we will get a twisted view of who God is and we won't be able to love Him and worship Him as He deserves. That's why I'm teaching these topics that I don't enjoy very much at all - my goal is that we will truly know Him and truly love Him, that we will be humble before Him as we seek to understand what we can of His ways, and that our lives will shine with the joy of hearing His voice and bringing glory to His name.