

## Predestination and Election in Ephesians 1

By Nicholas Liguori

With the exception of the ninth chapter of Romans, few passages in the Bible are thought to teach the doctrine of predestination as convincingly as the first chapter of Ephesians. Perhaps equally persuasive are the poor responses and weak arguments typically raised by Arminians. But let us dissect this passage and see what the truth of the matter is.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,*

*4*just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him In love

*5*He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

*6*to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

*7*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

*8*which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight

*9*He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him

*10*with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him

*11*also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

*12*to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:3-12)

First, many are led to believe that this passage teaches predestination for a very simple reason. In the words of one pastor, “You can’t argue with it, he uses the word.” But there is nothing in the word “predestine” which requires a Calvinistic view, when we study the Greek from which it is translated. This word can actually take a range of meanings, and is variously translated in English Bibles. The translation as “predestine” is somewhat problematic because of its theological and philosophical connotations to modern western readers. But in Paul’s day, *proorizo* was a simple, everyday word that meant “predetermined,” or “purposed” or even “designed” or “planned.” It comes from the root of our word “horizon,” conveying the meaning of setting a limit or a boundary, or appointing a criteria.

No Bible scholar is more qualified to expound upon the meaning of the Greek word *proorizo* than the Greek early Christians of the ante-Nicene period, who spoke Greek as their native language and who were familiar with its cultural and historical usage. Yet it is very significant to observe that these same Greek-speaking early Christians, in

their various comments on Ephesians 1, Romans 8, and other passages that use the word *proorizo*, never expressed the thought that this word supported anything like Calvinism. Rather, they universally taught and believed in human free will!

More significant—and what I will be addressing in the remainder of this article—is the argument that predestination is taught, not merely because of the word *proorizo*, but because of the entire context of its use. Foremost of all is the opening statement that God “chose us ... before the foundation of the world.” “Is that not predestination?” one might ask. And other words, like “inheritance” and “purpose”, and the general context in which they fall here in Ephesians 1:3-14, are considered strong testimony in support of this doctrine.

I am *not* going to argue that those statements cannot be interpreted in support of Calvinism. However, I would argue that when viewed in the context of this entire passage, this is not the most straightforward interpretation of the text. I will make my case exegetically from scripture, then illustrate my point with an analogy.

Simply put, this passage is all about Jesus Christ as the focus of everything and the source of all blessings. It is about spiritual blessings *in Christ*, the spiritual blessings that belong to Christians as a result of being joined to Christ through salvation (see my forthcoming Bible study on the atonement). The focus is not upon *who* gets to have these blessings, but on *what* those blessings are and from *whom* they come.

### In Christ

After a careful reading of this passage, the most significant thing I find is the way Paul uses repetition of the phrase “in Christ,” or equivalent phrases like “in Him” or “through Christ.” Paul steps back, looks at the big picture, and says that God the Father accomplishes or performs something *in Christ*. The doctrinal portion of this epistle is, in this regard, unique among all of Paul’s letters. Consider all the blessings and fulfillments that are achieved by God “in Christ.” I have used quotation marks and italics for emphasis:

Salvation “*in Christ*” (1:2)

Blessed us with all heavenly spiritual blessings “*in Christ*” (1:3)

Chose us “*in Him*” (1:4)

Adopted as sons “*through Jesus Christ*” (1:5)

Grace bestowed on us “*in the Beloved*” (1:6)

Redemption, forgiveness “*in Him*” (1:7)

Fulfilled His kind purpose to us “*in Him*” (1:9)

Summing up of all things in heaven and earth “*in Him*” (1:10)

Our inheritance “*in Him*” (1:10-11)

We have hope “*in Christ*” (1:12)

“*In Him*”, sealed “*in Him*” with the Holy Spirit (1:13)

Paul continues this theme in the theological portion of this epistle, extending past our subject passage and into the third chapter. Notably, Paul's theology only deepens as we read into chapters two and three, all about Paul's "insight into the mystery of Christ" (3:4). Yes, even Paul calls it a mystery (5:32). I will attempt to shed some light upon these things in my forthcoming Bible study on the atonement, but let us suffice it for now to simply note the general thoughts conveyed. Continuing, we read:

God exerted His strength "*in Him*" (1:20)  
 All things put in subjection under *His* feet (1:22)  
 The church "*His body*," the fullness of "*Him who fills all in all*" (1:23)  
 Raised us up "*with Him*," seated us "*with Him*" in the heavenly places "*in Christ Jesus*" (2:6)  
 Will show us the riches of His grace "*in Christ Jesus*" (2:7)  
 We are His workmanship, created "*in Christ Jesus*" (2:10)  
 Gentiles brought near "*in Christ Jesus*" (2:13)  
 "*He Himself*" is our peace (2:14)  
 Access to the Father in the Spirit "*through Him*" (2:18)  
 "*In whom*" God's household is being built (2:21)  
 Growing into a holy temple "*in the Lord*" (2:21)  
 "*In whom*" you are being built together into a dwelling of God (2:22)  
 Gentiles also partake of the promise "*in Christ Jesus*" (3:6)  
 Unfathomable riches "*of Christ*" (3:8)  
 Eternal purpose carried out "*in Christ Jesus*" (3:11)  
 Boldness and confident access through faith "*in Him*" (3:12)  
 Christ dwells in your hearts through faith (3:17)  
 The love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (3:19)  
 Glory to God "*in Christ Jesus*" forever (3:21)

These are not merely the words of some mystical writer, overly fond of embellishment and lofty theoretical discussions of religion. No, Paul's words are sober truth, spoken by a man who was a sold-out servant of Christ. Paul was well-acquainted with the crucified life of a follower of God. In preaching, in persecution, in trials and temptations, Paul knew what it meant to say that "it is not I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Paul has in mind the spiritual life of Christ imparted to the believer, and the regeneration and the newness of life that this produces. The intimacy and clearness of conscience of a person indwelt by Christ's Spirit—the very Spirit of God himself. This comes about after forgiveness takes place, which is made possible by Christ's death and by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. When a man is thus changed by the Holy Spirit of God—when he is *indwelt by Christ*—his life will never be the same! And there are many corollaries of this: gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, victory over sin and answers to prayer, acceptance with God, powerful church meetings that are full of life, deeper fellowship with other believers, and many promises of things to come in Paradise.

This passage is, therefore, all about the blessings and fulfillment of ancient promises of God that we receive when Christ dwells in us. But the focus of this passage is certainly on Christ, not us. This passage is about the blessings that Jesus Christ gives to Christians, but it says nothing about which individuals *get to be* Christians (as is by some divine decree, or predestination).

### Corporate Election

Once we understand this as the focus of Paul's address, any thought of "predestination" must rightfully take a backseat to the former idea—that God has given many blessings and performed many purposes in the person of Jesus Christ. So then what shall we say about verses 4 and 5, which speak about us being "predestined" and chosen "in Him before the foundation of the world"?

I see them as teaching that God chose before time to make salvation available through Jesus Christ as the elect vessel. If we are in this vessel, or "boat" if you will, we receive salvation and acceptance from God. This is a biblical view of election: we are elect inasmuch as we stand in the elect vessel, Jesus Christ himself. "Just as God chose us *in Him*." Notice also that election has a purpose: our being sanctified in the present life and accepted of God, as it says that God chose us in Him *so that* "we would be holy and blameless before Him." But we do not have time to discuss this atonement-related thought at present.

Please observe that the election "in Christ" I am describing is a *corporate* election rather than an *individualistic* election. Therefore it does not specify certain individuals, nor rule out others as reprobates. It specifies a *criterion*: "be in Christ!" "Believe the gospel about Jesus as the risen Lord, and repent and be baptized in His name for forgiveness of sins!" Just as the apostle John spells out the criterion, "whoever has the Son has the life, whoever does not have the Son does not have the life" (1 John 5:12).

Corporate election is suggested by the "in Christ" phrases that pervade this section of scripture. Similarly, Paul concludes our passage by saying that God "gave Him ... to the church, which is His body." (1:22-23) That is corporate language, not individualistic. To be sure, we are saved as individuals just as we believe as individuals (Romans 12:5). But we are individually elect, only inasmuch as we are grafted into Christ, who is the election. Just as Isaiah prophesies:

"Behold, my Servant, my chosen one [*eklektos*, "elect" in Greek LXX], in whom my soul delights." (Isaiah 41:1)

Corporate election is also evidenced by the peculiar way in which Paul describes Jesus Christ as the *instrument* or *means*—or better yet, "manifestation"—used by God to perform some task or purpose. This fits perfectly with the same "big picture" perspective from which Paul begins to talk about God's purposes from eternity past (e.g., 1:4-5).

## A Simple Analogy of Predestination and Election in Ephesians 1

At this point, I think a cheap and simple illustration is helpful in understanding the corporate election which Paul speaks of here. Consider Jesus Christ the elect "Boat," as described by God in a conversation with a crowd of people:

**God:** "Faithful ones, I give you my blessings. I am so glad to see you all, after arriving from your long journey over the vast ocean. As I now speak with you all on dry land, turn around and behold once again the Boat of your salvation. This is my holy Boat, in which you rode and by which you now stand before me on dry land. I have chosen and predestined before the foundation of the world to save you through this Boat, that you would be clean and dry before Me. I have chosen to perfect, cleanse and make you holy as you rode aboard this Boat. Inside this Boat, I adopted you and gave you membership as my sons. I forgave you of your sins inside this Boat. I had mercy upon you and poured out my love for you while inside this Boat. I bestowed many blessings upon you, and gave you many gifts, as you rode inside this boat. You learned new skills and grew in maturity and character while aboard this Boat. In the future, I will continue to show you my kindness inside this Boat."

**People:** "What an amazing Boat!"

**God:** "In this Boat, you also received an inheritance, as was predestined according to my purpose and will. I predestined that the inheritance would be given on the basis of membership with and fellowship with the Boat. I fulfilled many purposes when I came to save you in the form of this Boat, such as the defeating of many enemies and the unifying of your competing tribes and groups. The Boat broke down the dividing wall of hostility, as people from both camps of yours jumped into the Boat for salvation. In this Boat, you are becoming new people and you are enjoying sweet fellowship and friendship with one another. And you were once helpless and drowning, but I saved you and lifted you up above the waters in this Boat, my servant. I spoke to you and persuaded you of the salvation that can be found in this Boat. You beheld the Boat, humbled yourself, asked for help, and I pulled you up into the Boat by my grace. If you can understand it, I also am the Boat that loved you and saved you."

That, in a nutshell, is the thought conveyed in Ephesians 1-3. But suppose one Reformed seminary student in the crowd came forward with a question:

**Man:** "God, when you said '*I have chosen and predestined before the foundation to save you through this Boat, that you would be clean and dry before Me*' and when you said, '*In this Boat, you also received an inheritance, as was predestined according to my purpose and will,*' did you mean that you chose to save **only us**, and that you planned to let those other people drown out there in the ocean? Does this mean we are special?"

**God:** "All day long, in this Boat, I have held out my hands to a stubborn and disobedient people. They rejected my rescue plan, and for this reason they find themselves in

their current state. I did not save them because of their unbelief. But you stand by your trust in the Boat. Do not be conceited, but fear. And if they do not continue in their unbelief, I will save them yet, for I desire salvation for all people. Indeed, I am sending you out again onto the raging seas. Only do not worry, because I will be with you in the Boat, and I am sending you out in the power of the Boat. And you will be my ambassadors, begging these drowning people to be saved by me. Freely you have received, freely give."