

Predestined

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday after Christmas Day, January 4, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:10-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Are the events of our lives determined by chance? Or are the circumstances of our lives and the affairs of our world in the hands of a wise and loving God, whose will is revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ? How we answer that question makes all the difference. I'm speaking today to those of us who often feel the need for a strength from beyond ourselves to meet the challenges of life... to people who feel that your lives are out of control... for those longing for a faith that will give us the courage to struggle on for what we know is right - despite repeated failures on our part. And my message is that God rules; that the God who has come to us in Jesus of Nazareth is in control of the world that he made; in control of our individual lives. God is working in, around, through, under, and over all the events of our lives for the good of all who love him. In short, my message is about *predestination*. St. Paul wrote: "*God chose us* in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. *He destined us* for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.... In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, *having been destined* according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will."

Predestination is at the very heart of my own personal faith in God's love and grace. If I didn't believe in predestination I'd feel despair a lot more often than I already do. I'd feel hopeless and I'd feel lost because I know the power of sin in my life - in the past and in the present. I'd feel hopeless and lost if I didn't believe that God has taken the initiative in saving us and the whole world. God has destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of predestination has been much misunderstood. One misunderstanding is that predestination is nothing more than fatalism. Fatalism says, "Whatever will be will be." But predestination says, "What God *wills* to be will be; what God has determined to accomplish God will bring to pass." The doctrine of predestination says that "God's will for the world is good and that God's will shall be done." That faith can give us courage and hope.

Let me try to explain as best I can. There are some things in our lives which we know aren't God's will. Sometimes we deliberately disobey God's will. We do and say things that we know are

not God's will. When we do those things we should be ashamed. We should expect to suffer the consequences of our sinful actions. We should repent. We should ask God to forgive us. We should ask God to give us power to do God's will. But, plainly, not everything in our lives is God's will. The same is true when we look at the world. It's plainly not God's will for Christians and Moslems to kill one another in Bosnia or in the Middle East. It is plainly not God's will for millions of people to starve when we have the means to feed a hungry world.^{It's not God's will for millions of people not to know & trust} Nor are disease and accidents God's will. We simply can't look at human history and say that everything that has ever happened is God's will. Predestination doesn't teach that whatever happens is God's will.

Predestination does teach that whatever happens - whatever disease, or distress we face, whatever accidents we and our loved ones experience, and however strong suffering and death is - God's grace and love is greater. God does not predestine us to suffer and die with cancer.^{God doesn't predestine anybody to die not knowing} God predestines us to share in Christ's glorious resurrection to eternal life. Predestination teaches that God is more powerful than cancer and disease and death and war and famine. Predestination means that God has determined that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing!

When my boys were younger I taught them to play chess. When they were learning I could easily win. Sometimes I'd warn them not to take a certain move. They'd ignore my warning and suffer the loss of a knight or a bishop. Sometimes they were simply careless. They didn't look ahead. They moved their bishop or rook in harms way and lost their piece. On several occasions they were reduced to their king and a bishop and a few pawns. They were in a hopeless situation. The game seemed over. But then I'd say, "Let's turn the board around. I'll play your pieces. You play mine." And when they turned the board over to me, I could win with their pieces. That's just a hint of what God is like. We may ignore God's warnings.^{at our own peril.} We may be careless. We may deliberately move in harms way. We may have lived a life that has led to one failure after another. But predestination teaches that "no man was every born to be a failure." God is able to take our lives and make them achieve his good will for us and the world.

We can become overly concerned about the condition of the world, and of our lives, and of even our personal salvation. Ben Lacy Rose, a former moderator of the General Assembly of the

Presbyterian Church, once wrote that "a frantic nervousness over the future or ourselves or of the church or of the world is unbecoming a Christian. Our proper stance, if we believe in Christ, is to look forward with joy to the sure victory that God has promised to his Son and to all who are bound to him by faith. For God is the Lord of future history."

But that doesn't mean that we're to be passive. More than any people in Christian history, Presbyterians have understood our lives in terms of a destiny given to us by God. We've interpreted human history in terms of the fulfillment of the divine purpose. At our best we've believed with all our hearts that God is working His purpose out in individual lives and in human society. John Leith of Union Seminary in Virginia writes that "The awareness of a destiny, given by God, instilled in Reformed believers a sense of purpose and of direction that made them a strong people personally and the shapers of history in their public lives. This awareness of a destiny given to each human person by God is the heart of the Reformed tradition."

Finally, come to the Lord's Table trusting that God has, indeed, destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ. Receive Christ as he offers himself to us in the Bread and Cup! Believe in His name! He has given us power become God's children! Born, not of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. Come to the Table! Do not doubt that God has chosen you to accomplish God's purposes in your life, in your family, in your community. But even if you doubt that God has chosen you, come anyway! Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ. Do not come in order to be saved! Come because, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have been chosen to make God's love and grace known and visible to the whole world.

Eternal God,
a thousand years in your sight
are like a watch in the night.
As you have led us in days past,
so guide us now and always,
that our hearts may learn to choose your will,
and new resolves be strengthened;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.