

DIVINE
PREDESTINATION

BY

OCTAVIUS WINSLOW

Copyright (Public Domain)

www.reformedontheweb.com/home/.html

(Reformed on the Web)

DIVINE PREDESTINATION

“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” — Romans 8:29.

Guided by the latter clause of the preceding verse, we were led to advert to the settled purpose and plan of God as it related to the conversion of His people. The passage under present consideration carries forward the same argument another step, and shows that the doctrine thus clearly enunciated is not a crude and speculative dogma of the schools, which some suppose, but is a truth of distinct revelation, divine in its origin, experimental in its nature, and sanctifying and comforting in its effects. Let us, then, divesting our minds of all prejudice, address ourselves to its consideration, in prayerful reliance upon the teaching of the Spirit, and with the earnest simplicity of children desiring to come to a knowledge of the truth, and to stand complete in all the will of God.

“Whom he did foreknow.” In this place the word “foreknow” assumes a particular and explicit meaning. In its wider and more general application it must be regarded as referring not simply to the divine prescience, but more especially to the divine prearrangement. For God to foreknow is, in the strict meaning of the phrase, for God to foreordain. There are no guesses, conjectures, or contingencies with God as to the future. Not only does He know all, but He has fixed, appointed, and ordered “all things after the counsel of his own will.” In this view there exists not a creature, and there transpires not an event, which was not as real and palpable to the divine mind from eternity as it is at the present moment. Indeed, it would seem that there were no future with God. An eternal Being, there can be nothing prospective in His looking on all things. There must be an eternity of perception, and constitution, and presence; and the mightiest feature of His character — that which conveys to a finite mind the most vivid conception of His grandeur and greatness—is the simultaneousness of all succession, variety, and events to His eye. “He is of one mind; and who can turn him?”

But the word “foreknow,” as it occurs in the text, adds to this yet another, a more definite, and, to the saints, a more precious signification. The foreknowledge here spoken of, it will be observed, is limited to a particular class of persons who are said to be “conformed to the image of God’s Son.”

Now this cannot, with truth, be predicated of all creatures. The term, therefore, assumes a particular and impressive signification. It includes the everlasting love of God to, and His most free choice of, His people, to be His special and peculiar treasure. We find some examples of this —“God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew” (Rom. 11:2). Here the word is expressive of the two ideas of love and choice. Again, “Who verily was foreordained (Greek, foreknown) before the foundation of the world” (1 Pet. 1:20). “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). Clearly, then, we are justified in interpreting the phrase as expressive of God’s special choice of, and His intelligent love to, His church — His own peculiar people. It is a foreknowledge of choice, of love, of eternal grace and faithfulness.

“He also did predestinate.” This word admits of but one natural signification. Predestination, in its lowest sense, is understood to mean the exclusive agency of God in producing every event. But it includes more than this: it takes in God’s predeterminate appointment and fore-arrangement of a thing beforehand, according to His divine and supreme will. The Greek is so rendered—“For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done” (Acts 4:28). Again, “Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will” (Eph. 1:5). It is here affirmed of God, that the same prearrangement and predetermination that men in general are agreed to ascribe to Him in the government of matter, extends equally, and with yet stronger force, to the concerns of His moral administration. It would seem impossible to form any correct idea of God, disassociated from the idea of predestination. As a divine wrote, “The sole basis of predestination is the practical belief that God is eternal and infinite in and over all. And the sole aim of its assertion should be, as the sole legitimate effect of that assertion is, to settle down the wavering and rebel soul from the vague, skeptical, and superstitious inapplicabilities of chance as to this world’s history, unto the living, overwhelming, and humbling practicality of conviction, that, just because God sees all things, provides all things, and has power over all things, therefore man must act as if he believed this to be true. The first and the last conviction of every honest inquirer must be, that God is, and is Lord over all—and the whole of Scripture bears testimony to the fact of His infinitude.”

And yet how marvelously difficult it is to win the mind to a full, unwavering acquiescence in a truth which, in a different application, is received with unquestioning readiness! And what is there in the application of this law of the divine government to the world of matter, which is not equally reasonable and fit in its application to the world of mind? If it is necessary and proper in the material, why should it not be equally, or more so, in the spiritual empire? If God is allowed the full exercise of a sovereignty in the one, why should He be excluded from an unlimited sovereignty in the other? Surely it were even more worthy of Him that He should prearrange, predetermine, and supremely rule in the concerns of a world over which His more dignified and glorious empire extends, than that in the inferior world of matter He should fix a constellation in the heavens, guide the gyrations of a bird in the air, direct the falling of an autumn leaf in the pathless desert, or convey the seed, borne upon the wind, to the spot where it should fall. Surely if no fortuitous ordering is admitted in the one case, on infinitely stronger grounds it should be excluded from the other. Upon no other basis could divine foreknowledge and providence take their stand than upon this. Disconnected from the will and purpose of God there could be nothing certain as to the future, and consequently there could be nothing certainly foreknown. And were not providence to regulate and control persons, things, and events—every dispensation, in fact by the same preconstructed plan, it would follow that God would be exposed to a thousand unforeseen contingencies, or else that He acts ignorantly or contrary to His will.

But it is not so much our province to establish the truth of this doctrine, and explain its reasonableness and the harmony of its relations, as to trace its sanctifying tendency and effect. Predestination must be a divine verity, since it stands essentially connected with our conformity to the divine image. “Predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son.” Addressing ourselves to this deeply interesting and important branch of our subject, let us first contemplate the believer’s model.

“The image of his Son.” No standard short of this will meet the case. How conspicuous appears the wisdom and how glorious the goodness of God in this—that in making us holy, the model or standard of that holiness should be Deity itself! God would make us holy, and in doing so He would make us like Himself.

But with what pen—dipped though it were in heaven’s brightest hues—can we portray the image of Jesus? The perfection of our Lord was the perfection of holiness. His Deity, essential holiness—His humanity without sin, the impersonation of holiness, all that He was, said, and did, was as flashes of holiness emanating from the fountain of essential purity, and kindling their dazzling and undying radiance around each step He trod. How lowly, too, His character! How holy the thoughts He breathed, how pure the words He spake, how humble the spirit He exemplified, how tender and sympathizing the outgoings of His compassion and love to man. He is “the chief among ten thousand, the altogether lovely.”

Such is the believer’s model. To this he is predestinated to be conformed. And is not this predestination in its highest form? Would it seem possible for God to have preordained us to a greater blessing, to have chosen us to a higher distinction? In choosing us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy, He has advanced us to the loftiest degree of honor and happiness to which a creature can be promoted—assimilation to His own moral image. And this forms the highest ambition of the believer. To transcribe those beauteous lineaments which, in such perfect harmony and beautiful expression, blended and shone in the life of Jesus, is the great study of all His true disciples. But in what does this conformity consist?

The first feature is, a conformity of nature. And this is reciprocal. The Son of God, by an act of divine power, became human; the saints of God, by an act of sovereign grace, partake “of the divine nature,” 2 Peter 1:4 says. This harmony of nature forms the basis of all conformity. Thus grafted into Christ, we grow up into Him in all holy resemblance. The meekness, the holiness, the patience, the self-denial, the zeal, the love, traceable in us—though faint and imperfect—are transfers of Christ’s beauteous and faultless lineaments to our re-newed soul. Thus the mind that was in Him is in some measure in us. And in our moral conflict, battling as we do with sin, Satan, and the world, we come to know a little of fellowship with His sufferings and conformity to His death.

We are here supplied with a test of Christian character. It is an anxious question with many professors of Christ, “How may I arrive at a correct conclusion that I am among the predestinated of God—that I am included in His purpose of grace and love—that I have a saving interest in the Lord’s

salvation?” The passage under consideration supplies the answer—conformity to the image of God’s Son. Nothing short of this can justify the belief that we are saved. No evidence less strong can authenticate the fact of our predestination. The determination of God to save men is not so fixed as to save no matter what their character may be. Christ’s work is a salvation from sin, not in sin. “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy” (Eph. 1:4). In other words, that we should be conformed to the divine image. That we should be like Christ in His divine nature, in the purity of His human nature, in the humility He exemplified, in the self-denial He practiced, and in the heavenly life He lived. In a word, in all that this expressive sentence comprehends—“conformed to the image of his Son.”

As we grow day by day more holy, more spiritually minded, more closely resembling Jesus, we are placing the truth of our predestination to eternal life in a clearer, stronger light, and consequently the fact of our salvation beyond a misgiving and a doubt. In view of this precious truth, what spiritual heart will not breathe the prayer, “O Lord! I cannot be satisfied merely to profess and call myself Thine. I want more of the power of vital religion in my soul. I pant for Thine image. My deepest grief springs from the discovery of the little real resemblance which I bear to a model so peerless, so divine—that I exemplify so little of Thy patience in suffering; Thy meekness in opposition; Thy forgiving spirit in injury; Thy gentleness in reproof; Thy firmness in temptation; Thy singleness of eye in all that I do. Oh, transfer Thyself wholly to me. What were this world, yea, what were heaven itself, without Thee? A universe of creatures, the fondest, the holiest, could not be Thy substitute to my yearning, longing soul, O Lord! Come, and occupy Thine own place in my heart. Awaken it to Thy love. Sweep Thou its chords with Thy gentle hand, and it shall breathe sweet music to Thy dear name.”

*"I love Thee, Savior, for my soul craves joy!
I want Thee, without hope I cannot live!
I look for Thee; my nature pants to give
Its every power a rapture and employ;
And there are things which I would fain destroy
Within my bosom; things that make me grieve;
Sin, and her child, Distrust, that often weave
About my spirit darkness and annoy:
And none but Thou canst these dissolve in light;*

*And so I long for Thee, as those who stay
In the deep waters long for dawning day!
Nor would I only have my being bright,
But peaceful, too; so ask Thee if I might
My head on Thy dear bosom lean away."*

—Townshend

“That he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” The Son of God sustains to us the relation of the Elder Brother. He is emphatically the “Firstborn.” In another place we read, “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also likewise took part of the same.” He is the “Brother born for adversity.” Our relation to Him as our Brother is evidenced by our conformity to Him as our model. We have no valid claim to relationship which springs not from a resemblance to His image. The features may be indistinctly visible, yet one line of holiness, one true lineament, drawn upon the heart by the Holy Ghost, proves our fraternal relationship to Him, the “Firstborn.”

And how large the brotherhood—“many brethren”! What the relative proportion of the church is to the world—how many will be saved—is a question speculative and profitless. But this we know, the number will be vast, countless. The one family of God is composed of “many brethren.” They are not all of the same judgment in all matters, but they are all of the same spirit. The unity of the family of God is not ecclesiastical, nor geographical; it is spiritual and essential. It is the “unity of the Spirit.” Begotten of one Father, in the nature of the Elder Brother, and through the regenerating grace of the one Spirit, all the saints of God constitute one church, one family, one brotherhood—essentially and indivisibly one. Nor is this relationship difficult to recognize.

Consider an illustration: Two brethren in the Lord of widely different sections of the church, and of much dissonance of sentiment on some points of truth, meet and converse together. With the Word of God in hand, each is surprised that the other does not read it as he reads it and interpret it as he interprets it. But they drop the points of difference and take up the points of agreement. They speak of Christ—the Christ who loves them both, and whom they both love. They talk of the one Master whom they serve; of their common labors, infirmities, trials, temptations, discouragements, failures, and successes. They talk of the heaven where they are journeying; of their Father’s house, in

which they will dwell together forever. They kneel in prayer; they cast themselves before the cross; the oil of gladness anoints them; their hearts are broken, their spirits are humbled, their souls are blended; they rise and feel more deeply and more strongly than ever that they both belong to the same family, are both of the “many brethren,” of whom the Son of God is the “Firstborn,” the Elder Brother. Oh, blessed unity! What perfect harmony of creed, what strict conformity of ritual, what sameness of denominational relation, is for a moment to be compared with this? Have you, my reader, this evidence that you belong to the “many brethren”?

It is our purpose to conclude by briefly showing how encouraging the doctrine of predestination is to the soul in sincere and earnest seeking of Christ, and by tracing some of the peculiar blessings which flow from it to the saints of God. There is a class of individuals, unhappily a large one, over whose spiritual feelings the doctrine of divine predestination would seem to have cast a deep and settled gloom. We refer to those who are apt to regard this truth with deep antipathy, if not with absolute horror, as constituting, in their view, one of the most formidable and insurmountable obstacles to their salvation. But the validity of this objection we by no means admit. There can be nothing in the Bible adverse to the salvation of a sinner. The doctrine of predestination is a revealed doctrine of the Bible; therefore, predestination cannot be opposed to the salvation of the sinner. So far from this being true, we don't hesitate most strongly and emphatically to affirm that we know of no doctrine of God's Word more replete with encouragement to the awakened, sin-burdened, Christ-seeking soul than this.

What stronger evidence can we have of our election of God than the Spirit's work in the heart? Are you really in earnest for the salvation of your soul? Do you feel the plague of sin? Are you sensible of the condemnation of the law? Do you come under the denomination of the “weary and heavy laden”? If so, then the fact that you are a subject of divine drawings—that you have a felt conviction of your sinfulness—and that you are seeking for a place of refuge, affords the strongest ground for believing that you are one of those whom God has predestinated to eternal life. The very work thus begun is the Spirit's first outline of the divine image upon your soul—that very image to which the saints are predestinated to be conformed.

But while we thus vindicate this doctrine as being inimical to the salvation of

the anxious soul, we must, with all distinctness and earnestness declare that in this stage of your Christian course, you have primarily and mainly to do with another and a different doctrine. We refer to the doctrine of the atonement. If you could look into the book of the divine decrees, and read your name inscribed upon its pages, it would not impart the joy and peace which one believing view of Christ crucified will convey. It is not essential to your salvation that you believe in election; but it is essential to your salvation that you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. In your case, as an individual debating the momentous question, "how a sinner may be justified before God," your first business is with Christ, and Christ exclusively. You are to feel that you are a lost sinner, not that you are an elect saint. The doctrine which meets the present phase of your spiritual condition is not the doctrine of predestination, but the doctrine of an atoning Savior. The truth to which you are to give the first consideration, and the most simple and unquestioning credence is, that "Christ died for the ungodly," that He came into the world to save sinners, that He came to call, not the righteous, but sinners to repentance, that in all respects, in the great business of our salvation, He stands before us in the relation of a Savior, while we stand before Him in the character of a sinner.

The mental conflict into which you have been brought touching this doctrine, is but a subtle and dexterous stroke of the enemy to divert your thoughts from Christ. Your soul is at this moment in what may be termed a transitional state. A crisis in your history has been reached. How momentous the result! Shall we portray your present feelings? You are sensible of your sinfulness, are oppressed by its guilt, and are in dread of its condemnation. You have no peace of mind, no joy of heart, no hope of heaven. Life with you has lost its charm, society its attractions, and pleasure its sweetness. A sombre hue paints every object, and insipidity marks every engagement. Whence this marvellous revolution, this essential and wondrous change? We answer, it is the Spirit of God moving upon your soul. And what truth, do you think, meets the case? Predestination? Election? Oh, no! These are hidden links in the great chain of your salvation, upon which in your present state, you are not called to lay your hand in grasping that chain.

But there are other and intermediate links, visible, near, and within your reach. Take hold of them, and you are saved: "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save

sinners.” “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” “Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.” “Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.” “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.” “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” “By grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.” “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him.” “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”

Grasp, in simple faith, each or any one of these golden links, and from that moment for you there is no condemnation. But what is the real difficulty? It is not predestination. Travel into the inmost recesses of your heart and ascertain. May there not be some defect in your actual conviction of sin? Were you thoroughly convinced of your lost and ruined condition as a sinner, would you cavil and demur at any one revealed doctrine of Scripture? Would this, of all doctrines, prove a real stumbling block in your way? Would the question of election give you a moment's serious thought? Would it interpose a true and valid objection to your coming to Christ to be saved by Him? Suppose, to illustrate the idea, you were roused from sleep in the dead hour of night by the approach of flames kindling fiercely around you. One avenue of escape presented itself. Would you pause for an instant upon its threshold to debate the question of your predestinated safety? Would you not at once decide the question in your favor, by an instant retreat from the devouring element, through the only door that proffered you deliverance? Most assuredly. To a matter so momentous as your salvation apply the same reasoning. Were it not folly, yea, insanity itself, to hesitate for a moment to consider whether you are predestinated to escape the wrath to come, when, if you do not escape, that wrath will assuredly overwhelm you? One refuge alone presents itself. One avenue only invites your escape. Let no other doctrine but faith in the Lord Jesus Christ occupy your thoughts at this juncture of your religious course. Diverging from this path, you will be plunged into a sea of perplexities, you know not how inextricable, which may land you, you know not where. For they who have

*"Reasoned high
Of providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate,
Fixed fate, freewill, foreknowledge absolute,
Have found no end in wandering mazes lost."*

O let one object fix your eye and one theme fill your mind—Christ and His salvation. Absorbed in the contemplation and study of these two points, you may safely defer all further inquiry to another and a more advanced stage of your Christian course. Remember that the fact of your predestination, the certainty of your election, can only be inferred from your conversion. We must hold you firmly to this truth. It is the subtle and fatal reasoning of Satan, a species of atheistical fatalism, to argue, “If I am elected I shall be saved whether I am regenerated or not.” The path to eternal woe is paved with arguments like this. Men have cajoled their souls with such vain excuses until they have found themselves beyond the region of hope!

But we must rise to the fountain by pursuing the stream. Conversion and not predestination, is the end of the chain we are to grasp. We must ascend from ourselves to God, and not descend from God to ourselves, in settling this great question. We must judge of God’s objective purpose of love concerning us, by His subjective work of grace within us. One of the martyr Reformers has wisely remarked, “We need not go about to trouble ourselves with curious questions of the predestination of God; but let us rather endeavor ourselves that we may be in Christ. For, when we are in Him, then are we well: and then we may be sure that we are ordained to everlasting life. When you find these three things in your hearts, repentance, faith, and a desire to leave sin, then you may be sure your names are written in the book, and you may be sure also, that you are elected and predestinated to eternal life.” Again he observes, “If thou art desiring to know whether thou art chosen to everlasting life, thou mayest not begin with God, for God is too high, thou canst not comprehend Him. Begin with Christ, and learn to know Christ, and wherefore He came; namely, that He came to save sinners, and made Himself subject to the law, and a fulfiller of the law, to deliver us from the wrath and danger thereof. If thou knowest Christ, then thou mayest know further of thy election.” And illustrating his idea by his own personal experience, he says, “If I believe in Christ alone for salvation, I am certainly interested in Christ; and interested in Christ I could not be, if I were not chosen and elected of God.”

In conclusion, we earnestly entreat you to lay aside all fruitless speculations, and to give yourself to prayer. Let reason bow to faith, and faith shut you up to Christ, and Christ be all in all to you. Once more we solemnly affirm that, conversion, and not predestination, is the doctrine with which, in your present state of inquiry, you have to do. Beware that you come not short of true conversion—a changed heart, and a renewed mind, so that you become “a new creature in Christ Jesus.” And if as a poor lost sinner you repair to the Savior, all vile, guilty, unworthy, and weak as you are, He will receive you, and shelter you within the bosom that bled on the cross, to provide an atonement and an asylum for the very chief of sinners. Intermeddle not, therefore, with a state which you can only ascertain to be yours by the Spirit’s work upon your heart. “Your election will be known by your interest in Christ; and your interest in Christ by the sanctification of the Spirit. Here is a chain of salvation; the beginning of it is from the Father; the dispensation of it through the Son; the application of it by the Spirit. In looking after the comfort of election, you must look inward to the work of the Spirit in your heart; then outward to the work of Christ on the cross; then upward to the heart of the Father in heaven.” Oh, let your prayer be “God be merciful to me a sinner,” until that prayer is answered in the assurance of full pardon sealed upon your conscience by the Holy Ghost. Thus knocking at mercy’s door, the heart of God will fly open, and admit you to all the hidden treasures of its love.

We can but group some of the great blessings which flow from this truth to the saints of God. The doctrine of predestination is well calculated to confirm and strengthen the true believer in the fact and certainty of his salvation through Christ. Feeling, as he does, the plague of his own heart, experiencing the preciousness of the Savior, looking up through the cross to God as his Father, exulting in a hope that maketh not ashamed, and remembering that God the Eternal Spirit only renews those who are chosen by God the Father, and are redeemed by God the Son, this doctrine is found to be most comforting and confirming to his faith. The faintest lineaments of resemblance to God, and the feeblest breathing of the Spirit of adoption he discovers in his soul, is to him an indisputable evidence of his predestination to divine sonship and holiness.

Another blessing accruing from the doctrine is the sweet and holy submission into which it brings the mind under all afflictive dispensations. Each step of

his pilgrimage, and each incident of his history, the believer sees appointed in the everlasting covenant of grace. He recognizes the discipline of the covenant to be as much a part of the original plan as any positive mercy that it contains. That all the hairs of his head are numbered; that affliction cometh not out of the earth, and therefore is not the result of accident or chance, but is in harmony with God's purposes of love; and, thus ordained and permitted, must work together for good.

Not the least blessing resulting from this truth (2 Thess. 2:13) is its tendency to promote personal godliness. The believer feels that God hath "chosen us to salvation through sanctification and belief of the truth"; that He hath "chosen us that we should be holy and without blame before him in love" (Eph. 1:4); that we are "his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Thus the believer desires to "give all diligence to make his calling and election sure," or undoubted, by walking in all the ordinances and commandments of the Lord blameless, and standing complete in all the will of God.

And what doctrine is more emptying, humbling, and therefore sanctifying, than this? It lays the axe at the root of all human boasting. In the light of this truth, the most holy believer sees that there is no difference between him and the vilest sinner that crawls the earth, but what the mere grace of God has made. Such are some of the many blessings flowing to the Christian from this truth. The radiance which it reflects upon the entire history of the child of God, and the calm repose which it diffuses over the mind in all the perplexing, painful, and mysterious events of that history, can only be understood by those whose hearts have fully received the doctrine of predestination. Whatever betides him inexplicable in its character, enshrouded in the deepest gloom, as may be the circumstance—the believer in this truth can "stand still," and, calmly surveying the scene, exclaim: "This also cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts, who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working. He who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will hath done it, and I am satisfied that it is well done."

In conclusion, saints of God, have close relations and intimate dealings with your Elder Brother. Repose in Him your confidence, yield to Him your affections, consecrate to Him your service. He regards you with ineffable

delight. With all your interests He is identified, and with all your sorrows He sympathizes. He may, like Joseph, at times speak roughly to His brethren, in the trying dispensations of His providence; yet, like Joseph, He veils beneath that apparent harshness a brother's deep and yearning love. Seek a closer resemblance to His image, to which, ever remember, you are predestinated to be conformed. In order to this, study His beauty, His precepts, His example, that with "open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, you may be changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."