

CHOSEN IN CHRIST JESUS

Ephesians 1

The rock group “RUSH” wrote the song “Freewill” which goes like this:

There are those who think that life has nothing left to chance
A host of holy horrors to direct our aimless dance
A planet of playthings, we dance on the strings of powers we cannot perceive
The stars aren't aligned or the Gods are malign, blame is better to give than receive
You can choose a ready guide in some celestial voice
If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice
You can choose from phantom fears and kindness that can kill
I will choose a path that's clear, I will choose Freewill.

These words express the desire in our culture to have freedom, to have the choice to make what we want of our lives. Philosophers are traditionally divided into two groups—“determinists” and “indeterminists.” “Determinists” believe that everything is already decided by the forces of nature. Nothing is just chance. “Indeterminists” say that there is free will, then we are free to choose what happens in our future. Even though science has shown strong links to why things happen like finding out that genetics has more to do with our decisions than the choices we make, our emphasis on personal freedom has led to a development of “determinist” philosophers who say that are “conditional” determinists, that though there are limits to what we can or not choose, we do have some free will.

I do not want to get too deep into philosophy, but the problem is which one is true? On one hand if everything is determined, then why worry about anything? We are just pawns who are not guilty for anything we do wrong. On the other hand if we are free to do what we want, then why do we need God?

In our culture most Christians feel that though we sin, we have free will. We can decide whether or not to follow God. But how then do we account for what Paul says in Ephesians?

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved. In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.

“Predestination”—also called “election”—is the word that can strike us as we hear Paul’s words. Predestination is determinism—everything is already decided in advance. We are simply like computers doing what we are already programmed to do. It is the belief on Muslims who always remind themselves with the word “Inshallah” that everything is predetermined by their god Allah.

That doesn't sit well with us who value so much freedom. A week ago we celebrated the 245th birthday of a nation that defends "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." If you have such a determinist view of things, then it is so tempting to want to ensure that you are on the right side of God's choice—you want to prove that you are God's elect. So when we think of that view of predestination, then we rightly picture in our minds the legalism of strict Muslims or the Puritans and their witch trials in New England.

But Paul's words remain—"God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world," "He predestined us." "We have been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will."

Martin Luther wrote a ton. There are 54 thick books in our church library of his works. Yet he said that you could throw them all away except for two works—his Small Catechism, which many of us know from confirmation class, and The Bondage of the Will. Luther wrote that book in response to The Freedom of the Will written by Desiderius Erasmus, the most noted scholar in the western world 500 years ago. Erasmus wrote that we do have free will to choose to follow God or not. Luther blatantly spoke against that. Luther didn't say that we are simply puppets who do what is predetermined. I can choose whether or not what I want to eat today or whether or not I want to go to work tomorrow. But in terms of our relationship with God we have no choice. It is in the same letter to the Ephesians that Paul tells us, "We were dead in our sins." Dead things can't make choices. As sinners we are slaves to sin. The only choice we can make is to go against God. That is totally slavery to sin and death.

But "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." We who were trapped and bound in our sin have been given life as God the Holy Spirit has worked faith in us. Paul says, "In Christ you, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed by the Holy Spirit." Faith is not our choice, but God's gift to us. We who were slaves are now free to follow God. In Christ we now have free will, the will to follow Him.

The problem always with predestination is the question, "Why are some people saved and not others?" We could say with Muslim that God makes the decision. But then why bother with faith in Jesus? Or we can say with most Americans, and as Erasmus did, "We make the decision." But then our salvation depends on our choice. It leaves our salvation open to all kinds of doubt.

"God chose us in Christ." "He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ." "In Christ we have obtained an inheritance." Paul never speaks about election or predestination apart from those vital words, "in Christ." God does not spin a wheel or take a token out of a spinning cage to determine our future. But He had each one of us in mind when He determined before creation to send His Son, Christ Jesus to that cross and raise Him from that tomb to rescue from the bondage of sin. I do not know why I received faith in Jesus and not others. God doesn't tell us that. What He does is show us how complete our salvation is in Jesus, that

even our ability to follow Jesus is His work. Our salvation depends 100% on God. If even 1% depended on Mark Heilman, it would be hopeless for me.

Paul's words are not spoken in a course on Christian teaching, but as a hymn of praise. If we look at the language of Ephesians 1 it is just one long, incomplete sentence. It is a burst of joy from a man who had been bound in sin and was freed from that by Christ Jesus. When Paul writes formally about Christian teaching in Romans he only speaks of predestination after fully showing that we are dead in sin and freed by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus. Predestination is not where we begin with the Gospel—we start with the cross of Jesus. "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which He lavished upon us." Predestination is only for the Christian, those who have faith, to give us the full assurance of how complete our salvation is because it rests solely in Christ. If we use it to explain why some are saved and not others, then we are trying to control the situation. That is why Luther was so strident in condemning what Erasmus said about free will. All we do is live in the freedom God has won for us in Christ Jesus.

"Rush" chose free will. Unlike many rock groups who breakup the three members of "Rush" remained friends. Neal Peart, the group's drummer, who wrote the words to the song, died last year. His death has so grieved guitarist Alex Lifeson that he has not picked up a guitar since then. No amount of "free will" can save us from death. On our own we are bound to it.

But in Jesus there is true freedom. It happens not because of struggle to assert ourselves and put our first foot forward, but by the grace and love of God. God chose each one of us, called us by name through Baptism, and assures us that it is certain because He had each one of us in mind in Christ Jesus before creation. We can't and do not have to figure out how that can be, just rejoice that God has done that for us, as Paul did when he said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."