

What Is Predestination?

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R. C. SPROUL

What Is Predestination?

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Chapter One

The Inevitable Question

No doctrine in the Christian faith engenders more debate than the doctrine of predestination. On seminary campuses and now especially online, people display a fiendish delight and inherent fascination with this doctrine, and it has fueled many midnight discussions and fierce social media debates.

Not only are people significantly divided over their views of predestination, they're also profoundly divided on how the doctrine should be treated. Some are convinced

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that, like religion and politics, it should never be discussed in polite company. Such people view predestination as a topic that ends in godless controversy and useless debate, and they think it has no value in terms of spiritual edification. Others believe that the doctrine of predestination is fundamentally important to a complete perspective of our relationship to God and our salvation, and they consider it wickedly neglectful to ignore or denigrate its importance in any way.

Martin Luther affirmed the central place of predestination and the importance of teaching it. He called it the *core ecclesia*, meaning “the heart of the church.” While Luther was at times given to overstatements and hyperbole, this is not such an instance. No other doctrine more clearly demonstrates our utter dependence on divine grace and mercy than the doctrine of predestination. No other doctrine is more comforting to the personal struggle of faith than the doctrine of election.

All the saints of history who believed that predestination belongs at the very heart of our understanding of Christianity—Augustine, Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards—believed just as strongly that great care must be taken in handling the doctrine, for it can be easily

distorted and seriously misunderstood. Such misunderstandings can lead people into such a distorted view of God that He becomes almost demonic.

Much is at stake in how we understand predestination, and we must be extraordinarily sensitive and careful in how we handle this doctrine. It is profoundly important to our understanding of the character of God, His grace, and our own salvation, yet it is a volatile issue, and one by which many people have run into ruin by their lack of care in understanding it.

Historically, virtually every denomination and every church that has a confession of faith or creed has developed some doctrine of predestination. We cannot say that Presbyterians believe in predestination and Methodists don't, or that Episcopalians believe in predestination but Roman Catholics don't. Every church and every Christian has some doctrine of predestination because the Bible has a doctrine of predestination. Any church body or individual Christian who takes seriously the contents of the New Testament must sooner or later struggle with this doctrine.

The word *predestination* wasn't invented by Augustine or Luther or Calvin. It is found in the New Testament itself, and therefore, it is not peculiar to a movement in church

history after the Apostolic age. The word refers to a biblical concept, and anyone who is convinced of the authority of Scripture must recognize that in order to submit to the Apostolic word, one must have some understanding of the doctrine of predestination.

Suppose for a moment that it is the first century AD, and you are a member of the Christian community. You long for a word from Christ, an authoritative teaching, and you know that the chief Apostle to the gentiles is Saul of Tarsus. Word has just arrived that a circuit rider has appeared in Ephesus with a letter from the hand of the Apostle Paul addressed to all the Christians. A special gathering is held for the epistle to be read aloud, and you are hearing it for the first time.

You've never had an argument about predestination. You've never been involved in a theological discussion. You're simply a new Christian in Ephesus, and you hear the following greeting: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:1–2). Then the body of the letter begins: "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, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (vv. 3–4).

The very first statement of the body of the epistle announces that you have been chosen by God before the very foundation of the world. Does that get your attention? Paul did not tack on this statement as a postscript at the end of his epistle. Instead, he jumps to it right at the beginning. The letter continues: “Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons 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” (vv. 4–6). In verse 11, Paul says, “In him 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.”

At the very outset of this epistle, Paul plunges into the depths and the riches of the doctrine of predestination. In fact, he makes it central to his teaching. Predestination does not refer to the course of the stars, God’s general divine superintendence, His providence over the universe,

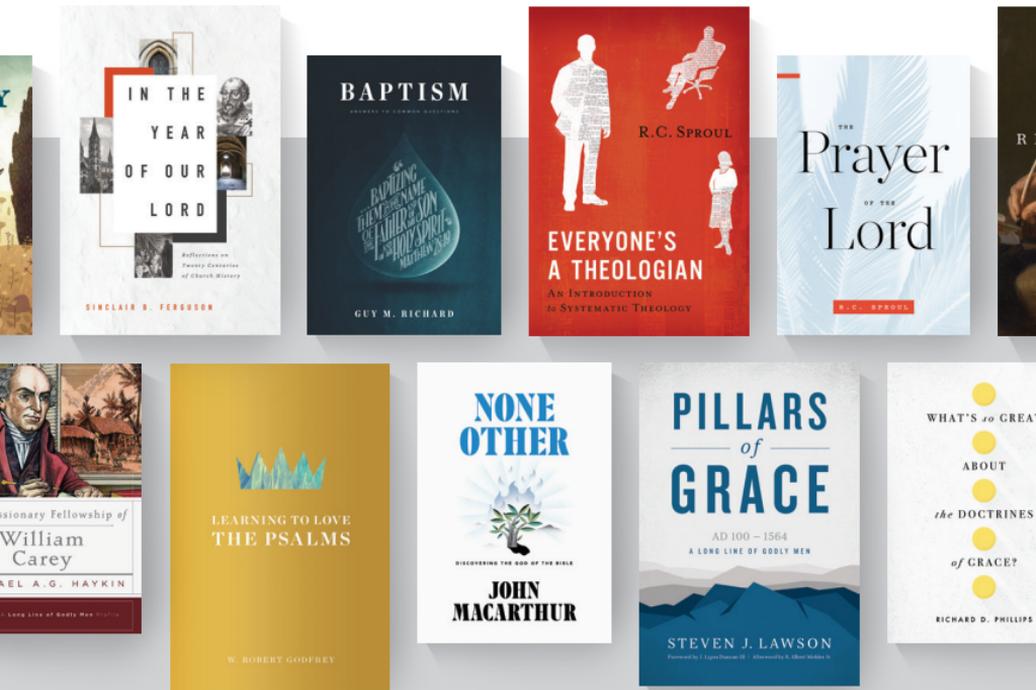
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or His governance over natural laws. Rather, Paul is talking about salvation—a predestined salvation in which, from the foundation of the world, believers were chosen by God to be saved.

What are we to make of this? If we are to grow in maturity in Christ, we must understand the biblical teaching on predestination. We may not like it at first, but with careful study and attention to the witness of Scripture, we can come to see the doctrine's sweetness and its excellence and to experience it as a great comfort to our souls.

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Why does God save some and not others?

The Bible clearly teaches that we contribute nothing to our salvation. “It is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8), and He alone saves. Yet many Christians bristle at this idea. If God decides who will believe, they reason, doesn’t that destroy free will? Isn’t it unfair to punish people who had no choice?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul clears up common misconceptions and distortions of the doctrine of predestination. Far from being fatalistic, this doctrine reveals the riches of God’s grace and brings comfort to our souls.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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