

Chapter 43

Predestination

(Romans 9:21–23)

Paul has raised the question of the tragedy of Israel (9:1–3), a nation which had received many blessings from God (9:4–5), and yet had apparently fallen aside from God's purpose. Yet the promise of God to Israel has not fallen aside, because God had never guaranteed to save and use for honour every Israelite. Not all are God's **elect** Israel, chosen to salvation and usefulness, simply because they come from the nation of Israel (9:6–7a). God works by a process of 'calling' into being those he wants to save and use. This is illustrated in the story of the two children of Abraham (9:7b–9) and the two children of Isaac (9:10–13). Having put forward this basic teaching Paul began answering the question as to God's right to do this. Is God unrighteous (9:14)? No, says Paul, it is a matter of free mercy in some cases (9:15–16) and hardening the wicked in other cases (9:17–18).

A further objection is put forward in verse 19. If God achieves his will, is he just to punish the sinner? Paul rebukes the questioner and asserts God's right to use the sinner as he wishes (9:20). He continues with the point in verse 21. *Or has not the potter authority over the clay to make out of the same lump one utensil for honour, and another for dishonour?* It is important to note here that by 'lump' Paul is referring to **sinful** humankind. Paul is not saying that God has the right to use **sinless**, unfallen humanity for dishonour. He is not saying anything at all about

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what God could have done with unfallen Adam. He is certainly not saying that God **created** the human race to be punished. We must not press Paul's teaching concerning predestination one millimetre beyond what he actually says. The 'lump' is fallen humanity. There is no mention at all of what took place **before** humankind fell into sin.

The entire human race is 'one lump'. The wrath of God is on the entire human race (see 1:18). All have sinned (3:9–20). The human race as a single unit fell in Adam (5:12). We are all by birth wicked and fallen men and women. We are potter's clay. God utilizes the material already there, sinful men and women, for his purpose. In one case God will step into the sinful person's life and send his Spirit upon him to convict him and draw him to the Son he offers to everyone. He will begin to use him as a utensil of honour in his plans for his kingdom. In another case, like that of Pharaoh, God brings out the sinfulness that is already there. He hardens him by abandoning him in sin and uses him as a utensil of dishonour.

In all of this there is great mystery. Paul is pressing us to the extreme limits of revelation. I do not think even Paul himself knew anything more than he is telling us. He is going to the extreme limit of what was given to him to know concerning this matter. Beyond this that he is sharing with us there is nothing but mystery.

He continues: ²²*And what if God, willing to show forth his wrath and to make known his power, endured with much longsuffering utensils of wrath fit for destruction?* ²³*And what if he did this in order that he might make known the riches of his glory for utensils of mercy, which he previously prepared for glory?* He is continuing to assert God's right to show mercy or to harden as he wills. He says, 'what if . . . ?' What if this is the way it is? Can you complain? What will you do about it? What can you say to it?

There is something here that is very important for our understanding of the doctrine of predestination, and that is that the

two cases, wrath and mercy, dishonour and honour, are not parallel. It is worth taking careful note of the differences in the way in which the two cases are distinguished. (i) The wicked are 'endured'; the elect are 'prepared'. God did not predestine the wicked to sin. He is simply 'enduring' them. (ii) The wicked are 'fit' for destruction; the elect are 'prepared' for mercy. God has to actively do something to make the utensils of mercy ready to be used in God's kingdom as people of his own. He does not have to do anything to get the sinner ready for destruction. He is 'fit' in and of himself for God's wrath. (iii) The wicked are not the objects of predestination 'beforehand' or 'previously'; the elect are '**previously** prepared'. God's 'beforehand' predestination concerns only those he will save. There is no choosing for damnation 'before the foundation of the world'. A word or prefix meaning 'beforehand' or 'previously' is not found in the case of the utensil for dishonour. There is no **wrathful** predestination 'before the foundation of the world'. There is only **merciful** predestination.

Concerning God's purpose with the utensils of wrath we discover five things. (i) God 'endures' them. (ii) God uses them to show his wrath and his power. (iii) God shows them much longsuffering. He takes no **pleasure** in the death of a sinner (Ezekiel 18:23). He **wants** no one to perish (2 Peter 3:9). Yet without even greater and further grace no one would ever accept his offer. He 'wishes all men and women to be saved' (1 Timothy 2:4, 5) but he has a purpose that does not powerfully bring everyone to salvation. (iv) God destroys them. God brings them to utter ruination. (v) God uses them to display the contrasting mercy to others.

Concerning God's purpose with the utensils of mercy Paul has profound encouragements for us. (i) He predestined them. They were '**previously**' prepared for 'glory' or 'prepared **beforehand**'. Before the foundation of the world, without any reference to any good works, without any reference even to prior faith, God set

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his heart of love on some people whom he would bring into being to be his people. (ii) They experience God's mercy. They are 'utensils of mercy'. God ignores their sinfulness in his choosing them, so that they are saved by grace. They are chosen 'in Christ' before the foundation of the world. (iii) They experience God's intervention. Beginning in eternity God had plans for them, but in this life also they were being 'prepared'. (iv) They are used by God. Just as the utensils of wrath are used by God, so are the utensils of mercy. They are both 'utensils' or 'vessels'. In the case of his elect God has nothing but good plans for them. Their good works are 'prepared beforehand' just as they themselves were. (v) They experience 'riches of his glory'. This refers to the immense abundance of the goodness of God as it is poured out on his elect. We discover that God is amazingly patient with us and does not deal with us according to our sinful ways. (vi) They reach glory. They were 'previously prepared for glory'. This is the ultimate purpose for them that God had all along the way.

This is Paul's teaching concerning predestination. It must never be turned into a cold academic philosophical fatalism. It must be used only in the way that Scripture uses it. If God himself has predestined us to be holy, then I have hope that it will happen! I am called to have a heart of compassion 'as God's elect, holy and beloved' (Colossians 3:12). It is because God has this determination to bring us to be like Jesus that I am to put on kindness, lowliness, meekness, longsuffering (Colossians 3:12) and am to be forgiving (Colossians 3:13) and loving (Colossians 3:14) and a peacemaker (Colossians 3:15). If I try to resist God's plans for me, it is the doctrine of election that makes me know that I can expect trouble for myself and the disciplining hand of God. If God is determined to have me to be like Jesus I can expect trouble if I am ever so foolish as to refuse to co-operate.

God's purpose leads me to worship. I shall say, 'Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Ephesians 1:3)

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and shall be led on to see the wonders of all spiritual blessings given to me in Jesus. They begin with being chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. Then they go on. But all of them are ‘to the praise of the glory of his grace’ (Ephesians 1:6), to the end that we should be ‘to the praise of his glory’ (Ephesians 1:12), ‘to the praise of the glory of his grace’ (Ephesians 1:14).

We need to go back to a high doctrine of God’s grace, back to Paul, back to Jesus. According to the Bible we are saved ‘by grace’ – grace more amazing than perhaps we ever realized.