



A Skeleton in Our Closet

Rev. Jeff Wood

October 16, 2016

Romans 8:28-30 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. [29] For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. [30] And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

Ephes. 1:4-5 *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love [5] he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.*

Since it is October with Halloween not far away, I suppose it is appropriate to speak of skeletons, skeletons in the closet. A woman who grew up in New Mexico recently told me of a friend she had there, and how it was after, perhaps a decade of knowing this friend, that she discovered her to have a handicapped sister. The family, it seemed, felt the need, unfortunately, to hide the handicapped girl. Because of her condition she was like a skeleton in their family closet.

Maybe your family has one? A great grandpappy who was hung as a horse thief? Maybe once it was having a sister who had a child out of wedlock? I want to speak to you about today...a skeleton in our Presbyterian family closet. We pray.

In a few weeks we'll have not only Halloween, but as well Reformation Sunday. That's when we remember the Protestant arm of the church. It's not the only arm, but it is a

good arm. One of the oversimplified and overworked parts of Protestantism is something called the five points of Calvinism. It is remembered by the acronym TULIP. I'm just glad it has only five points and doesn't need to be remembered by, say, "CHRYSANTHEMUM."

That reminds me of the guy who called 911 after his wife had gone unconscious for some reason. They asked his address and he said, "9875 Eucalyptus Ave." The operator asked him to spell that. There was a long pause and then, "Look, I'll just drag her over to Oak Street and meet you there."

The five points mentioned a moment ago are these: "T" is for "total depravity." "U" is for "unmerited favor." "L" is for "limited atonement." "I" is for "irresistible grace, and "P" -- if you ask people about Presbyterianism, sooner or later the word "predestination" will come up.

When I was in college, we played Calvin College in soccer. They'd lose and we'd shout from our side of the field, "It was predestined." Walking away from the stands if we tripped, we'd get up and say, "I'm glad I got that over with." But "P" doesn't refer to "predestination." It stands for "perseverance of the saints."

Ah, but I opened the closet when I mentioned "predestination" and all of TULIP really is about that skeleton.... PRESTINATION.

When we hear "predestination" we ask, "Are you telling me God planned that I'd put on these particular shoes this morning? That I'd have cream of wheat and arrive five minutes early? Or that my mother would die of cancer or my son not go to heaven?" Is this when we gulp and offer that we're modern Presbyterians? Is this when we hear the bones in the Presbyterian closet rattle? It might be, IF this is what we think predestination is. It isn't. That's predeterminism.

Well, if predestination doesn't mean that God predetermined that I'd wear these shoes and all that, what does it mean? Let me, before answering that question, first take us to the Westminster Confession (6.021), one of the documents in the constitution of the Presbyterian Church. It states "the doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care." (cf, 2 Helvetic 5.056, 5.061; Institutes, XXI ch 1, 2). In other words, "Easy does it." All our guides who lead us into the territory of this message of the Bible warn us, "Be careful." It's like nitroglycerin. Applied properly, it can safely clear out a rockslide, but shaken carelessly, it can blow off your hand.

Now for a definition of predestination, let me read again from the Westminster Confession. This document was composed in 1656 by some of the finest pastors and scholars in Christendom. But its language dates from that era and is sometimes hard to follow. The confession defines predestination this way: "God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby, neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." (6.014)¹ Clear as mud, right? Let me explain practically what all that means.

First, predestination practically means something about God. It means he plans. Reasonable persons do. I am going to San Antonio for Wednesday and Thursday night to meet my new grandson. I have a destination that I have planned for. I'm not going to show up at the airport and wonder about a destination. I have a predestination. I've planned.

¹ See also 6.192.

Architects don't build without plans and generals don't take to the field of battle without plans; neither does the supreme God. And his planning, making, sustaining, and using is broad enough to cover all the universe and all eternity, and narrow enough to cover every neutron and each nanosecond. That's how big, how involved, how able, how in control, he is. He made everything. Everything that exists came from him and depends on him. If he removed his hand, all we are and see would become instantly nothing.

Further, this created order all serves one great purpose: his glory. "I thought it was all about me." Nope, him. "I thought that Jesus came to save me." Nope, he saved you so as to glorify God. He is the most pure, most life, most true, most beautiful, most powerful, most center . . . and to be true to reality, he must be registered and recognized and enjoyed that way. But he has made it so that his glory shines by his saving of us. So God's purpose is his glory and our good. All comes from him, is sustained by him, and goes to him.

God then, being so able, is never confounded. Have you ever found yourself in a situation saying, "How did I get into this?" I once did a part in a worship service which the visiting organist took to be a cue for something much later in the service. Instantly people were rising to sing when they weren't supposed to, and the ministers up front were all trying to figure out how to get things on track. That never happens with God. He never is looking at this human race saying, "If only he or she had chosen plan A, but they chose B, and now how am I going to make this work."

God then, being so able, is never thwarted. The Bible speaks of him as a potter with us and all creation like clay made into a pot. Has a pot ever staged a rebellion against the potter,

had him barricaded out of his studio? No, and it doesn't happen with God and us and this world either.

Predestination says about God, "He is able. He is able. He is able. He is sovereign. No one surprises him. No one thwarts him. No one confounds him. Ever."²

But predestination also says something about you. Predestination explains to you, first, "You are not a surprise." There are many families who have a child that they were not planning on. We call them surprises. I'm enough older than my youngest sister that I can remember my parent' announcing that she'd be coming. They sort of added the words, "A surprise." You may have one. God doesn't. You are God's child. He planned on you from the beginning. He didn't set up the universe and walk away from it, and because he set it up with biology and reproductive drives, you just showed up. No. Before you were conceived in your mother's womb, you were conceived in the mind and heart of God.

Secondly, predestination says, "You are not an obligation." I remember someone else with an adopted son saying they were called into the preschool because their son kept telling the other kids, "Your parents had to take you, but mine chose me." Paul tells us in Ephesians, "Before the foundation of the world, we were predestined *to be his adopted (translate "chosen," "wanted") sons and daughters.* (4:1)

A third lesson predestination has for us, about us, is that it's not all up to you. One time, to help settle any nerves she might have, I told one of our youth that was going to be a worship leader, "You can't mess up." Her eyes got big. I

² I was searching the internet for a chorus I thought I remembered about God being able. There were several and how beautiful to hear them and worship through them as I read again and again lyrics that extolled, "He is able, able, able."

realized my words were having the wrong effect. She heard me saying, “You are not allowed to mess up.” I was really meaning, “It is impossible for you to mess up.” How is it impossible to mess up? “Because God loves you.”

“If only I give a little more, God will love me more.” We act that way. No. “If only I don’t say anything bad or have any bad thoughts, then I won’t lose my favor with God.” No. Your efforts or failures don’t help or hinder God. Not that we shouldn’t cooperate with his Spirit, but very sincere people worry that they’re letting God down, that he gets us to the Red Zone, but we have to score, that he cleaned the slate but it’s up to us to keep it clean. No. We, again says Paul, are saved by his grace and not our works. *We* don’t make it or break it. *He* does.³

The last message of predestination is one that is whispered right down into the creative and energetic part of our souls. “You have a destiny.” Predestination has the word destination in it, but it also has the word destiny in it.

I told you about a relative a few weeks ago who went to work at a business right out of college. Stan hustled and was bright. The company liked him. One day Stan came home fabulously excited. The vice president he reported to sat down with him and shared how they wanted to expose him to this part of the company, and then that part, how they wanted to then have him head up one of the small divisions for a couple years before transferring him to a larger one. Stan said it felt wonderful to know that they cared about his development, about his gaining more skill and responsibility, and that there was a purpose and plan thought out for him. This is true of you and

³ Remember our study of Philippians? “I am confident that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.”

God. He brought you to this time and place for a reason. And it wasn't just to be saved. He saved you to serve.

Sometimes a church's slogan will read, "We are called *to be* the family of God." I think, "That's great ... as an *identity* statement ... but not as a *mission* statement. An *identity* statement says who we *are*, a *mission* statement says what we *do*." God saves you *to be* his sons and daughters *and* he saves you *to serve*. Identity *and* mission. The president of the universe has a plan for you ... a destination in mind ... destination ... *predestination*. Identity and mission. That is predestination.

Calvin's treatment of predestination in his Institutes of the Christian Religion occurs after the topic of salvation and before the topic of resurrection. That's how this doctrine works – we look back on our lives as we go on to heaven and see what we didn't see so easily going forward, "That God was working all things together for the good of those who love him, and are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

So each of you and all of us, when forlorn-ness comes knocking at the door of our hearts ... when we wonder if life makes sense, if we're worth two cents, if we're no more than rats in a race, if in our lives we get spooked about its meaning or sense, get that not-so-shameful skeleton out of the closet, that Reformation doctrine of predestination, and remember this good news – God is able and you are loved!

The word of the Lord.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

revjeffwood@gmail.com www.welovefirst.org

www.facebook.com/welovefirstsebastian