

Election, Predestination, and Human Suffering

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This topic is a very broad one. However, I will do my best to draw the main teachings and most pertinent texts out of Scripture. We will first examine the biblical doctrine of Election as it relates to salvation and answer objections to those who do not believe it. Then, we will look at the reasons given in Scripture as to why human beings suffer. Finally, we will tie it all together to get the big picture—to see things as God sees them. In doing so, we are attempting to understand the infinite Mind of God with our finite understanding. By definition, we cannot fully do so. Therefore, where Scripture leaves a question partially unexplained, it falls on the Christian to trust God in such things. *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts”* (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Election in the Bible is God’s choice of specific individuals or nations in order that they might fulfill specific purposes preordained by God that His Glory might be made manifest. Predestination refers to God’s control and direction of the events that must come to pass so that His purposes are fulfilled. Bible scholars are generally agreed that God is sovereign (Jeremiah 32:17), omniscient (Hebrews 4:13), unchangeable (James 1:17), and that He takes the initiative with regard to salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9). There is also general agreement that human beings are accountable for their own decisions (2 Corinthians 5:10) and are responsible to do the work of evangelism, preaching the gospel faithfully (Romans 10:13-15).

The point of dispute that has arisen within Christianity is whether the human will is the determinative factor in salvation (Arminianism) or whether the sovereignty of God is the determinative factor (Calvinism). The Arminian will cite Scripture texts which stress the aspect of the human free will in choosing, or not choosing, to yield to God and be saved (Joshua 24:15; Mark 1:15; Acts 7:51; Acts 17:30-31). It is true that we all have free will. However, the Bible says that if we

were left to our own free will, none of us would choose God (Romans 3:11). Therefore, if we are to believe the Arminian theology, nobody would ever be saved! What we know as Calvinism is not a doctrine that originated with John Calvin, but a doctrine that originated with Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “*Without Me, you can do nothing*”, which includes choosing our eternal destiny (John 15:5). He also said, “*You did not choose Me, but I chose you*” (John 15:16). From that statement, who exactly chose who first? Peter also tells us that the elect were chosen beforehand unto salvation by God (1 Peter 1:2; 2 Peter 1:3). Paul says that the elect (the saved) have been chosen before even the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Paul unabashedly declares to the believers at Thessalonica that “*God from the beginning chose you for salvation*” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Many are not content to simply take Jesus and the Apostles at their word. Some point out that it is God’s desire that all be saved (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4). That is true, and it saddens the heart of God that some choose to take the broad road to hell. Others argue that God would not send people to hell because He is a loving God. That is absolutely correct, and He does not send people there. People send themselves there (Romans 1:20-32; Romans 3:10-12). He is also a just God, which means that He cannot overlook sin. Therein lies the problem, and in Jesus Christ lies the solution. It is only by His grace (giving what one does not deserve) that anyone is saved at all (Ephesians 2:8-9)! A third common objection is that if God has already chosen some for salvation, then the need to evangelize is eliminated. This is presumptuous in that it assumes that we would disregard the clear commands in Scripture to evangelize (Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 10:14-17). Far be it from us to know who the Mind of God and who He has chosen (Isaiah 46:10). He is the Potter and we are the clay (Romans 9:22-23). It is enough for us to serve Him obediently and seek His will in all things (Romans 12:1-2). Our conclusion then is that although we cannot completely understand the ‘ins and outs’ of how Election works, the Bible clearly teaches it. God’s sovereignty and His Power is clearly greater than the power of the human free will.

We now come to the next question. Is our suffering predestined as well? God by definition is all-knowing, or He could not be God (Psalm 139). Therefore,

He is surely aware and always has been aware of the particular sufferings that we experience in our lives on earth. God is not caught by surprise. Nevertheless, He allows them. All things work out for good according to God's plan (Romans 8:28). We must remember, however, that God gets to define good and not us. In other words, God will work things out according to His purposes and not ours (Ephesians 1:11). If we truly trust God, we will trust that His plans for us and for others are best. Sometimes God brings suffering into our lives to grow or test our faith—to grow us spiritually (1 Corinthians 10:13; James 1:2-4). Sometimes it is to teach us to rely on Him more—to pray (Proverbs 3:5; Luke 18:1; James 1:5). Sometimes the suffering causes us to humbly realize that we need His grace (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

There are three broad categories that we can identify as root causes of suffering. They all go back to one thing—sin. The first is personal sin. We pay the consequences of our own sinful actions (Galatians 6:7). However, not all suffering is the direct result of our own personal sin. This is the point that Job's friends missed and that Jesus Christ Himself made (Luke 13:1-5). The second is the sin of another person. For example, a child is hit by a car driven by a drunk driver. The third is the fact that sin pervades everything and everyone on this planet—the entire creation (Romans 8:20-22). The fact that death exists means that all manner of sickness and disease exist as well.

The thing that bothers people about this whole subject is the fact that some things happen that do not fit neatly into one of these categories. This is where Job, David, Peter, you, and I struggle to come to grips with why God allows certain things. The Book of Job is all about this struggle. Here we have a godly man who seems to do everything right, and he goes through amazing trials. The reader knows that this is a result of a cosmic battle between good and evil, but Job never knows why. God never answers Him but instead He points out in the closing chapters of the book the fact that He is the Sovereign Lord of the Universe, and we would do well to remember that. Sometimes we never know why something happens, but if we want the peace of God through the trial, we

must look to Jesus Christ (John 6:68). He will never leave us nor forsake us, so He will not forget about you (Hebrews 13:5). In fact, Jesus Christ has compassion on you because He has been there (Hebrews 4:15). Becoming bitter toward God will only hurt us in the short run and, if we nurse our bitter spirit, the long run as well. If you are angry with god, I urge you to make your peace with Him today. Acknowledge that He is God and is on His throne, and keep your eyes on heavenly things. If you are a Christian, you have the sure hope of eternal life. In this life, we are promised trials and tribulations, but we are called to hope and not despair because our God and Savior Jesus Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33).