

YAMs

Summer Midweek 2009



Week One:

If God knows the future, isn't it predetermined whether we go to Hell or not?



covenant chapel

Question: If God knows the future, isn't it predetermined whether we go to Hell or not?

The Short Answer: Yes. As Christians, we believe that God is omniscient, or all-knowing, and sovereign, or in absolute control of all things. All followers of Jesus, therefore, believe God knows the future and knows beforehand who will be in Heaven and who will be in Hell.

What's not agreed on is how active we are in the result. All Christians say God chooses, (or elects or predestines) people to follow him. But while some say that it is purely God's choice based on His grace alone, others say that God looks into the future and sees who will choose Him and who will not, and chooses people based on that.

At Covenant Chapel, we believe the former: we are saved solely by the choice and action of God. We believe that left to ourselves, we would never choose God and that apart from the action of God in our lives all of us would go to Hell.

The Long Answer

First, let me begin by saying that answering all of the questions this summer, we will look to the Bible as our ultimate authority. We may pull from other sources like history and other books, but the Bible will be the foundation.

And as we go through these questions this summer, I would encourage you to do the same. There are two ways people can use the Bible. We can either come with our own answers, ideas and thoughts and try to make the Bible fit to those. Or, we can go first to the Bible, without our own agenda, and base our answers, ideas and thoughts on that. I will always encourage the second approach.

Having said that, this week we answer one of the most popular questions you submitted: If God knows the future, isn't it predetermined whether we go to Hell or not?

Now for this particular one, we could be done in about 30 seconds or we could talk for days. Because the answer is Yes - God does know the future and it is predetermined whether we go to Heaven or Hell. But I'm going to guess that you'd like a little more explanation than that. So here it goes...

All Bible-believing Christians believe that God is omniscient, or all-knowing, and sovereign, or in absolute control of all things. All Christians, therefore, believe God knows the future and knows beforehand who will be in Heaven and who will be in Hell.

What's not agreed on is how active we are in the result.

All Christians say that God has chosen people to follow him. This view comes from verses like in the Bible like

Ephesians 1:4-6, 11 - "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 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... 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"

Notice some of the words in this passage because they'll be important in a second: "chose, predestined" - some other versions and passages use the word "elected" or refer to these people as "the elect."

So all Christians who trust the Bible agree that there are people who go to Heaven and people who go to Hell - in other words, some people accept Christ and some who don't, and not everyone goes to Heaven.

The question then becomes, "what's the difference? Why do some go to Heaven and some go to Hell?" And the answer the Bible clearly gives is that those who go to Heaven are those who have trusted Jesus' death and resurrection as payment for their sins and their ability to spend eternity with God. (Romans 10:9; John 1:12, John 3:16). Not by works or actions, but by belief.

But is that belief - our trust in Jesus - an act of God, something we do, or both?

The Two Views: Calvinism and Arminianism

There are two main views on this. Some say that it is purely God's choice based on His grace alone - a one-handed effort where God reaches down and chooses to save some people. This view is known as Calvinism or "predestination."

Other people say it is a two-handed effort where God reaches down and saves those who choose to reach back to him. Said a different way, that God looks into the future and sees who will trust in Jesus and who will not, and chooses people based on that. This view is known as Arminianism or "free-will."

At Covenant Chapel, we believe the former: we are saved solely by the choice and action of God. We believe that left to ourselves, we would never choose God and that apart from the action of God in our lives all of us would go to Hell.

It's summer, so let's think of it in terms of a lifeguard and a drowning swimmer. In Arminianism, God the lifeguard reaches out to a drowning swimmer, the drowning swimmer reaches back, and God saves him. In Calvinism, God the lifeguard dives in and pulls the drowning swimmer out.

Now before we go any farther, let me say that I believe a person can hold either of these beliefs and be a genuine follower of Jesus. These two views have been around for a long time and there are very solid men and women of God that hold both positions. But let's also note that no Christian thinks the drowning swimmer saves himself. We cannot save ourselves; God has to be involved, or we're talking about a different set of beliefs entirely.

But I believe that the Bible clearly teaches the Calvinist position. And because I don't want to talk forever I will mention the two primary reasons why I think so - the sinfulness of man and the glory of God.

The Sinfulness of Man.

Let's start with something that is essential for us as followers of Jesus to understand. And that is that we are sinful people by nature and by choice. Now that is not a popular view today in a world with a belief in the good of humanity. But contrary to what so many people believe in our world today, we do not have a good nature.

And moreover, I would argue that we are incapable of doing anything good apart from Jesus changing our hearts.

What does that mean? It means that since the fall of Adam and Eve we all sin. All we do is sin. In our words, in our actions, in our thoughts, in our hearts - that none of us is righteous (Romans 3:10). It means that apart from Jesus even the "good" things we do are done out of a wrong motivation like making ourselves look good for others, or even worse, trying to self-righteously earn our salvation by putting God into our debt.

Ephesians 2:1-5 - And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved

Apart from Jesus we are dead. Dead people can't all of a sudden choose life. They stay dead unless God makes them alive in Christ.

If we don't first recognize the depth of our sinfulness, we will never grasp the awesome grace of God in our salvation. Instead we will look at this concept of predestination and see an angry God casting people into Hell as they cry out "I'm sorry, forgive me!"

But that is not the way it works. Because of sin in our nature and the sin we commit by our choice we are already condemned and destined for Hell. (John 3:16-18) That is our choice. That is the choice we make by our free will. But before we could do anything good on our own, God in his mercy reaches down and saves some from themselves. (Rom 5:8)

As we look at this concept, we will see that God creates some people who he has not chosen for Heaven. As we consider that, we will be tempted to think that God is unfair.

And that is true - God is unfair. But not in the way we might think. If God were fair, all of us would go to Hell. That would be the logical consequence for the natural and chosen sin in our lives. But God unfairly and undeservingly sends Jesus to die in our place and chooses to reach down and save some people who would otherwise go to Hell. God is unfair and it is to the benefit of every single person he saves.

The Glory of God

The other reason I'm such a firm believer in the Calvinist position is that attributes all of the glory to God for our salvation.

If we are unable to choose God, as Calvinism teaches, it means God has to do all the work - therefore we can take none of the credit. If we have the ability to choose - to reach back to God - that means that something in us will get part of the glory as well. That would mean that the reason I am saved but my extended family is not is because I am smarter or better or have figured out something that they haven't. Something in me would get some of the glory.

But if there is one theme we should get when we read the Bible, it is that God works for his glory and people exist for his glory. As much as we might not like that or like its implications, it is what the Bible teaches. And so, from my perspective, the Arminian position of choice gives me too much credit. Calvinism attributes all of the glory to God.

If we look at examples from the Bible we will see examples of this all over the place. God does not choose "good" men. He just chooses. As **Exodus 33:19** says - "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

Romans 9 is probably the greatest text in the Bible on this subject. And in there Paul talks about how God chose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for no logical or human reason, but simply because he chose them. No one can look at the lives of these people and give them the credit - all glory goes to God.

Paul was also one of the greatest examples of the saving action of God. He was a murderer of Christians. Why would he ever choose to all of a sudden become the greatest missionary in the history of Jesus' church? Because Jesus went after him, pursued him, stopped him on the road to Damascus and transformed his heart. There is not a chance Paul would get a single bit of glory for that. It all belongs to God.

As a last point on this, I want you to think back to when you began your relationship with Christ. Was it because of God's action or because of your choice? I will always look back and say that God transformed my heart and apart from that any choice I would have made would not have been toward Him.

The Implications

This was one of our most popular questions that were submitted a couple months back. And most likely that's because you care not just about answer, but the implications of the answer - the "so what" about the answer. Here are a few...

Implication 1: We do, from our conscious perspective have choices - they are limited, but they are nonetheless choices - so we should choose well.

Even though we believe that it is God alone who chooses us, we do agree with the Bible's teachings that we must believe and trust Christ's death and resurrection for payment of our sins. That, from our conscious perspective, is a choice.

In addition, we all have choices that we make every day about how to use our time, money and lives and what those things will glorify. Predestination does not mean that we are robots; but it does mean that we are not big enough to mess up God's plan. To think that our choices could hinder God's plan would be giving us too much credit.

So we do in this sense have freedom. Our freedom is just limited. But think about that - only God has true freedom because only God can do anything. I cannot choose to fly, for example, even if I have the freedom to make that choice. Just because I "choose" it doesn't mean it's going to happen. Any choices we have as human beings are limited.

And yet they are choices with consequences and we should choose wisely and well, which leads me to our next implication of predestination...

Implication 2: We are still responsible for our actions.

If we don't have free will, are we still responsible for our actions? It's a logical question that people ask when considering this. And for some this is the reason

that they cannot accept Calvinist teaching - because it does not seem fair that we would still be held responsible for our actions if we don't have free will.

This is one of the greatest mysteries of following Jesus. I don't know how this works exactly. All I know is that the Bible teaches clearly that God is in complete control and chooses us, and also teaches that humans are fully responsible for their actions.

As an example, let's look at Judas Iscariot - the disciple who betrayed Jesus. We as Christians know that Jesus had to die, right, that Jesus had to be killed in our place to pay the penalty for sin that we should have paid. That was part of God's sovereign plan.

But at the same time, that did not excuse Judas from his role in helping the Jewish leaders arrest Jesus. The Bible clearly teaches the opposite...

Mark 14:21 - For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.

Clearly, Judas is held responsible for betraying Jesus - even though it was part of God's plan. In the same way, though our lives are ultimately controlled by God, Romans 14:12 teaches us that we all will give an account of our lives when Jesus judges mankind.

It's a difficult teaching, but just because it's difficult does not make it untrue.

Implication 3: We don't sit back and do nothing - especially in evangelism.

We may be inclined to think that since God controls everything, what's the point of anything we do? This is especially true in regards to evangelism. Opponents of Calvinism would say that belief in predestination would lead to us doing nothing to share the gospel.

Instead, we share our faith often with love and boldness. Some say that the Calvinist position causes people to stop sharing their faith with others. The argument is that since it's already determined where people will spend eternity, what's the point of sharing the gospel with them?

This is a huge misunderstanding of Scripture however. We are called to go and share the gospel because that is the means God most often uses to save people. (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

Paul, whose life is one of the greatest examples of predestination was also one of Jesus' boldest missionaries. And his view of God's election impacted where and how he shared the gospel. In Acts 18, for example, Paul decides to stay for 18

months in Corinth (much longer than he stayed in most places) because God told him that, "I have many people in this city who are my people." In other words, God had many people he had chosen for salvation in Corinth and Paul stayed there to make sure that they heard the gospel.

Furthermore, this should give us confidence and encouragement in evangelism. We aren't responsible for saving people or convincing them with some awesome sermon. We must go and share and let God do the work. Predestination frees us from the burden of the results - those are up to God.

Conclusion

Yes, God does know the future and it is predetermined where we will spend eternity. There are two main ways Christians explain how that works - Calvinism and Arminianism. While I believe a genuine follower of Christ can hold either position, Covenant Chapel and I personally believe that the Calvinist view is more accurate, Biblically-supported, and beneficial for our view of God and his salvation of sinners.

Learn More

From the Bible:

Verses about God's Heart for people:

Ezekiel 33:11; John 3:16-17; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 22:17

Verses about man's response:

John 5:40; Acts 7:51; Romans 10:21

Verses about God's Election:

Acts 13:17; Romans 9; 1 Corinthians 1:27-28; Ephesians 1:3-11
Ephesians 2:1-10

Examples of Predestination

Abraham - Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1, 4-6; 18:18-19; 22:17-18

Isaac - Genesis 21

Jacob - Genesis 25:23; Malachi 1:2-3

Pharaoh - Exodus 9:15-17

Judas - Matthew 26

Paul - Acts 9

From Books:

Chosen for Life by Sam Storms

Desiring God by John Piper

On the Web:

www.monergism.com

www.desiringgod.org

www.marshallchurch.org/media/religionsaves/predestination

www.ccel.org/ccel/boettner/predest.html