



Predestination: Does That Sound Like Good News to You?

TEXT
Ephesians 1:3–10

January 20, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Asked what was on your mind, and quite a few of you said, “Predestination.” Now I don’t know, but I imagine someone once said to you, “You’re Presbyterian, and you guys all believe in predestination.” And you probably thought, “I have no idea what predestination is, but I don’t think I believe in it.”

Well, you can believe in it or not and still be Christian — Presbyterian, even. But before you decide, let’s make sure you know what it means.

There are some pretty common misunderstandings of this teaching. The most common is the assumption that everything in your life was already predetermined before it happened; that God has decided — in advance — every circumstance of your life.

One summer day, I was watching the Royals on TV. Carol passed through the room. “Who’s winning?”

“It just started, but we are going to lose.”

She said, “Don’t be so pessimistic.”

“I’m not.” She looked at me quizzically. “I’ve seen this game before. It ends with Gordon on third, and we lose by one.” I was watching ESPN Classic — you

know, the station that replays old games. Game 7 of the 2014 World Series broke my heart in 2014, and a couple other times on ESPN Classic.

Some suggest predestination means that our lives are like ESPN classic. God already knows every pitch, every hit, every out and the final score. He not only knows it, but has predetermined it. It’s just news to us. But everything has been predetermined.

I hear this theology frequently. Oh, I don’t hear people say, “Well, that was predestined.”

No, what we say, particularly in times of trouble, is this: “Everything happens for a reason.” Do you believe that? Are the collection of burdens and blessings that make up our lives ... are they all predetermined? Is our life just one ESPN rerun?

Dr. Kate Bowler is an assistant professor of Christian History at Duke Divinity School. She is a brilliant scholar. A few years ago, at age 35, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer. She has shared that journey, with insight and faith, in her book *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I’ve Loved)*.

She tells of a neighbor who visited her. Her neighbor said,

“You be strong, and remember, everything happens for a reason.” She was, of course, attempting to offer comfort. If there is a reason, then there’s a plan. If there is a plan, then God is in control. If God is in control of every detail, then even the things that appear bad and tragic, well, they can’t be that bad or tragic because God has God’s reasons.

Of course, that offering crashed on the rocks of Kate’s husband’s response. He said, “I’d love to hear it. I’d love to hear the reason my wife is dying.”¹

Dr. Bowler said, “My neighbor wasn’t trying to sell him a spiritual guarantee. But she wanted to believe there was a reason why some people die young and others grow old. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos. There has to be a reason, because without one, we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else.”

Some hold on to this thought as a means of comfort. But what’s the reason that cancer claims some and bypasses others? What’s the reason that violence is common in some zip codes and seems shocking in others? What’s the reason some will feast today and others will die because they have no access to clean water?

There are things that happen as a result of our choosing. We all make choices, and our choices have consequences for ourselves, and often for others as well. But there are also things that just happen. God does not determine every aspect of our lives. You can't show up late for work and say, "Sorry, I wanted to be here on time, but I'm Presbyterian. It's predestined for me to be here about now." No, it doesn't work that way.

I believe that God brings meaning to every circumstance, and God redeems the broken places in our lives; but I do not believe that God predetermines every circumstance. Predestination is not about every step of the journey; it's about our destination.

Let's listen to the text: *God has chosen us in Christ before the foundations of the world. He destined us in love to be his children in Jesus Christ.*

What God predetermined is that we belong to God. Predestination is about belonging. *Before the foundation of the world, he destined us in love to be his children.* That's what this doctrine proclaims. It's not about every step of the journey, but it's about the destination of the journey: You will be with God. God has already decided that.

I learned this from a young woman years ago. She sat in my study with tears running down her cheeks. She had wanted a baby, but she was among the multitude of folks who struggle with infertility. She spoke of months, even years of praying and waiting and taking medicines, and yet there was no child.

But now, she learned that she would become a mother; she was adopting a baby, a child whom she knew nothing about. Was it a boy or a girl? She didn't know. Would the child love music or numbers? She didn't know. Would the child be sweet and gentle or rambunctious and loud? She didn't know.

All she knew was that she was going to be a mother — and with tears of love, she spoke of a child that would belong to her; a child chosen before the foundation of the world, if you will. It was a decision of her heart, and there was nothing that child needed to do, nothing that child could do, to influence that choice of her heart.

That's predestination. Paul says, *You belong to God. You were destined before you even knew you were you, you were destined in love to be God's child. Not because of your faith, not because of your righteousness, not because of your resume, but because of the love that lives in God's heart. God has predetermined this.*

Now, if you are like some, you may be thinking, "Wait a minute, Tom. If God has determined to gather up all creation, to include all in God's grace, if my destination was determined before the foundation of the world, then why am I in church? What difference does my faith make? Why do I try to live a life of love? Love is hard work. Why bother if God has already determined my destination?"

Well, if the only reason you live a life that loves God and neighbor is so that you will be

rewarded with heaven or other blessings ... if that's the only reason you live a life of faith ... then don't. If the only reason we trust in Jesus Christ is to save ourselves, then we have completely missed what Christianity is about. It's not about saving us; it's about redeeming all.

A mature faith actually sees this in reverse. It is because God loves with a never-letting-go love that everything we do matters. Because we are God's children, we are to live as God's children — not so that we will be rewarded, but because we belong. If I live my life only to see what I can gain for myself, that's just selfish; and selfishness is what Christ came to save us from. No, because I already and always belong, I can live my life as a gift of gratitude to the God who has claimed me and will hold me forever.

How do I do that? Love. It has been predetermined that humans are meant to love. Here's what I have come to believe. You are who you love and who loves you. You are not your accomplishments or status. You are not your net worth or the sum of your victories. You are who you love. That's what makes you human. That's the only thing that matters in your life.

Oh, we can live in lots of other ways, but we can't make those ways human. God created us to live a life of love of God and neighbor. It's not that we can't live in other ways; we have that freedom. We just can't make those other ways human.

This is what I mean. I used to play golf — never well, but I

enjoyed it. But here's the thing about golf. There are beautiful fairways, and there are immaculately kept greens. There are also water hazards, and there are sand bunkers, and there are woods — lots of woods.

But worst of all, there are white stakes. You know what I'm talking about. You stand on the tee box, and just off the fairway is a long line of white stakes. White stakes are out of bounds. If you hit your ball beyond the white stakes you start over, with penalty. You can hit your ball anywhere, but if it goes beyond the white stakes, it's not golf anymore. Everywhere else, you play it where it lies. But not beyond the white stakes, that's out of bounds; that's not golf. That has been predetermined.

Don't get me wrong, you have the freedom to hit the ball past the white stakes. Let me testify, it's easy. What you don't have is the power to make that golf.

Now that's a silly example, but this is what I am saying: We can live our lives differently than Jesus. We do all the time. But for God's children, it's out of bounds; it's not human anymore. That's been predetermined.

God has not predetermined every circumstance of your lives. You have the freedom and power to make many decisions, and there will be some things that just happen at random. But what has been predetermined is this: We are destined in love to be God's child. There is no power in heaven or earth that will change that. And we are called to live as God's children.

Stacey and Josh, Alice and Tim, Alli and Stephen bring their children for baptism today. They know what predestination means — because as infants, there is so little these parents know about them. But they know this: Lily and Raymond and Caroline belong to them.

I've never had a parent bring a child for baptism and say, "We aren't sure yet. Don't know enough about George. We are going to give him a test drive for a while, give him a look-see, and maybe we will keep him. But it's too early to tell. No, that never happens, because love predestines belonging.

Before the foundation of the world, God has destined us to be God's children. You are a child of God — and the greatest response to that love, the most faithful response is to live like you believe it's true.

¹Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)* (2018), pp. 112–113

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.