

“Predestination” From God’s Prophet Jeremiah

Based on commentary by John Calvin
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What is predestination?

Calvin’s definition of predestination: Predestination is the act by which God chooses every single individual according to His own will and at the same time appoints and also sanctifies him.¹

The prophecy of Jeremiah makes several contributions to the Biblical doctrine of predestination, including both the teachings of the election of God’s chosen remnant and the reprobation of those who are eternally doomed.

God shows that the beginning and fountain of all blessings was this—that it pleased the covenant LORD to choose the people for Himself (Jer. 2:1-2).²

The Lord Jesus Christ taught that the one road that leads to heaven is small and difficult. Jesus said, “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide *is* the gate and broad *is* the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).

Such was also the case in the days of Jeremiah. Even among God’s chosen people, the Jews, there were few who were truly God’s servants, His sheep, His elect. Jeremiah said, “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; See now and know; And seek in her open places If you can find a man, If there is *anyone* who executes judgment, Who seeks the truth, And I will pardon her” (Jer. 5:1). There were then in the city some true servants of God, and some as yet remained who had true religion, though the number was small. God gathered as it were together the few in whom remained any seed of true religion, the few in whose hearts any religion was found. They were not then numbered with the people. So now Jeremiah did not consider Baruch and a few others as forming a part of that reprobate people; and he speaks of the community in general; for there were some separated from the rest, not only by the secret counsel of God, but according to the judgment that had been pronounced.³

Despite the great apostasy among the masses that claimed to be followers of God and yet were sorely deceived, God would be mindful of His covenant in preserving a remnant (Jer. 7:17-19; cf. Ps. 102:19; Rom. 10 & 11).⁴

As the apostle Paul teaches in Romans, chapter 11: “God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, “LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”? But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. I, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 36.

² Vol. I., 71.

³ Vol. I., 254-255.

⁴ Vol. I, 385.

bowed the knee to Baal." Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace." (11:2-5)

In Jeremiah's day, there was hardly one in a hundred whom the fear of God influenced. The Prophet exhorts all the faithful children of God to disregard the multitude, and to gather courage, and to make more account of God's word than of the contumacy [obstinate, contemptuous resistance to authority] of them all. (Jer. 9:12)⁵

There ever was a remnant among the people, inasmuch as God never suffered His covenant to be made void. As then the Church was still existing, the Prophet had regard to the hidden seed and therefore blended consolation with grievous and dreadful predictions (Jer. 12:14).⁶

Jeremiah teaches us that God is faithful to preserve to Himself a remnant in each generation: Judea was, as it were, the threshing-floor of God, on which there was a great heap of chaff, for the multitude had departed from true religion; and there were a few grains found hidden in the rubbish. Hence the heart of God was not towards the people, that is, towards the degenerated children of Abraham, who were proud only of their name, while they were covenant-breakers; for they had long ago forsaken the true worship of God and all integrity. At the same time God preserved, in a wonderful and in a hidden manner, a remnant.⁷

God's promises are confined to the elect, who were few in number and were hidden like twenty or a hundred grains in a large heap of chaff (Jer. 12:14).⁸ He doubtless knew that the faithful among the people were very few (Jer. 14:20).⁹ The true Church was then very small; hardly one in a thousand called on God in truth and from the heart (Jer. 14:21).¹⁰ Throughout the book of Jeremiah, God teaches that He would be so merciful as to receive unto favor not all indiscriminately but a small number, constituting the elect (Jer. 23:1-3).¹¹

True Christians must be holy, which means to be set apart from the world and set apart unto God; without holiness no one shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). As God's saints, Christians must be separated from the world, which means that they must be separated from the ungodly, which includes being separated from religious hypocrites. Some might call this pride, but Calvin argues that this is what God requires of His faithful children: Were it necessary for every one of us to become separated and to live apart, were God to scatter each of us through all the regions of the world, so that no one were to strengthen and encourage another, yet we should still stand firm, under the conviction that we sat apart on account of God's hand. *Let the Papists then complain as they please, that we are proud, and that we disturb the peace of the whole world, provided we have this answer to give—that we sit apart on account of God's hand, because we seek*

⁵ Vol. I, 478.

⁶ Vol. II, 150.

⁷ Vol. II, 249.

⁸ Vol. II, 151.

⁹ Vol. II, 237.

¹⁰ Vol. II, 240.

¹¹ Vol. III, 132.

to obey God and to follow His call; we can therefore boldly and safely despise and scorn all the reproaches with which they falsely load us. (Jer. 15:17)¹²

From this we are reminded that faithfulness to God and His Word must come before any sort of artificial peace and unity. True Christians are unified by the Truth, for there is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:5-6). By nature we desire to have friends and be popular, and therefore our tendency is to seek to please people. But Christians must seek to please God above all else; the apostle Paul said, “if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10). Sometimes obeying God and His Truth leaves us without friends and feeling totally alone; we might feel isolated and as though the whole world hates us. But if that is what faithfulness to God requires, if that is what obedience to God and His call require, then we must willingly submit to such isolation.

That is the life God called the Prophet Jeremiah to live, just as Abraham, the father of the faithful, lived as a stranger and exile on the earth (Rom. 4:16; Heb. 11:13). Abraham dwelt in tents with Isaac and Jacob (Heb. 11:9); he could have coveted a more stable life like he had experienced in Ur of the Chaldeans (Heb. 11:15); yet he lived by faith and endured such exile because he desired a better country, a heavenly one (Heb. 11:16). Living by faith alone, Abraham “was called the friend of God” (Jas. 2:23). So also James warns us not to be spiritual adulterers and adulteresses, for “friendship with the world is enmity with God. Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4).

Are the elect subject to chastisement? Of course. Does God judge the elect and the reprobate alike? By no means. Though God indiscriminately punishes the sins of the whole world, there is yet a great difference between the elect and the reprobate, for God grants this privilege to His elect—that He chastises them paternally as His children, while He deals with the reprobate as a severe Judge, so that all the punishments which they endure are fatal, as they cannot see anything but God’s wrath in their judgments. (Jer. 10:24)¹³

Punishment is what the elect and the reprobate have in common; but the end and fruit of punishment is far different; for the reprobate become more and more hardened, the very reverse of being submissive to God; but the elect are subdued, for God not only smites them with His rods, but also tames them within, subdues their pride, and, in a word, bends their hearts to obedience by His Spirit (Jer. 31:18).¹⁴

What does the doctrine of predestination mean for evangelism and our prayers? Should we pray only for certain people? No, because we do not know who the elect are; only God knows because He chose them. Therefore, we are to pray for all people, both saved and unsaved: So at this day, when we pray, we ought, according to the rule of charity, to include all, for we cannot fix on those whom God has chosen or whom He has rejected; and thus we ought, as far as we can, to promote the salvation of all; and yet we know, as a general truth, that many are reprobate for whom our prayers will avail

¹² Vol. II, 289, emphasis added.

¹³ Vol. II, 61.

¹⁴ Vol. IV, 100.

nothing; we know this, and yet we cannot point out any one as by the finger (Jer. 15:1-2).¹⁵

What do we make of Jeremiah's imprecatory prayers? As it does not belong to us to distinguish between the elect and the reprobate, let us learn to suspend and check our zeal, so that it may not be too fervid, for we may often mistake, if we follow generally what the Prophet says here, *Bring on them the day of doom, and destroy them with double destruction*. Were we thus to speak indiscriminately of all, our zeal would often hit the very children of God. We must therefore bear in mind, that before the Prophet uttered this imprecation he was taught by the Spirit of God that he had to deal with reprobate and irreclaimable men (Jer. 17:18).¹⁶

If any one now, after the example of the Prophet, should wish all his enemies destroyed, and would have God armed against them, he would act very presumptuously, for it does not belong to us to determine before the time who the reprobate and the irreclaimable are; until this be found out by us, we ought to pray for all without exception (Jer. 20:13).¹⁷

In the book of Jeremiah, we also find the famous illustration of the potter and the clay:

Jeremiah 18:1-6: "The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying: "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words." Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the LORD. "Look, as the clay *is* in the potter's hand, so *are* you in My hand, O house of Israel!"

Jeremiah teaches us that as the clay is at the will and under the power of the potter, so men are at the will of God; God then is compared to the potter. There is indeed no comparison between things which are equal, but the Prophet argues from the less to the greater. Then God, with respect to men, is said to be the potter, for we are the clay before Him.¹⁸

The apostle Paul refers to this illustration in his teaching on the doctrine of predestination in the New Testament in Romans, chapter 9: "But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? *What* if God, wanting to show *His* wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, *even* us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?" (9:20-24)

Paul does not here refer to faithfulness nor to repentance, but rather he speaks of the hidden purpose of God, by which He has predestined some to salvation and some to

¹⁵ Vol. II, 248.

¹⁶ Vol. II, 376.

¹⁷ Vol. III, 43.

¹⁸ Vol. II, 394.

destruction (Rom. 9:21). Isaiah also seems to have had the same thing in view; for he says only, “Woe to them who rise up against their Maker” (Isa. 45:9). Cannot I determine, says God, with regard to men, as the potter, who forms the clay as he pleases? We must then maintain this principle—that men are thus formed according to God’s will, so that all must become mute; for uselessly do the reprobate make a clamor, object and say, “Why have You formed us like this?” Has not the potter, says Paul, power over the clay . . . ? This is what must be said of God’s hidden predestination.¹⁹

Like the apostle Paul in the New Testament, the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah likewise addresses not only the positive aspect of God’s predestination but also the negative. The Bible ties these hand in hand—election and reprobation. For example, God says, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated” (Rom. 9:13; cf. Mal. 1:2-3).

That mortals are not moved when God thunders by His threatenings against them but on the contrary become more hardened—this is an evidence of a diabolical madness. It is a sign of reprobation when we are not terrified when God threatens and declares that He will become our Judge, and when He brings forward our sins and also shows what we deserve. When, therefore, all those things produce no effect on us, it is a sure sign of hopeless madness (Jer. 36:24).²⁰

The Biblical doctrine of predestination ought to be handled with care, as Calvin emphasizes in regard to our inability to judge whether someone is elect or reprobate. Nevertheless, this doctrine should give all Christians much hope and encouragement. For it teaches us that the gates of hell shall not prevail against Christ’s Church, which is His chosen bride, His “remnant chosen by grace” (Rom. 11:5, NIV).

So whenever the Church seems to be so oppressed by enemies as to exclude any hope of restoration, this ought always to be kept in mind by us, that as God has once chosen His Church, it cannot be but that He will manifest His faithfulness even in death itself and raise from the grave those who seem to have been already reduced to ashes. Let this then come to our minds when the calamities of the Church threaten utter ruin and nothing but despair meets us; and when enemies insolently arrogate everything to themselves, and boastingly declare that we are accursed. But God is the *habitation of justice*, and was the *hope of our fathers*; let us, then, rest on that grace which He has once promised, when He decided to choose us for Himself and to adopt us as His peculiar people (Jer. 50:7).²¹

¹⁹ Vol. II, 397-398.,

²⁰ Vol. IV, 347.

²¹ Vol. V, 138.