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TIME, OR NOT

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Rom 8:29)

The question of the foreknowledge and predestination of God has been argued over the centuries. On the one hand you have men like John Calvin who argue that God determines in advance all things and man can not change God's decree. The logical conclusion is that God determines based on his own criteria who will be saved and who will not, and there is nothing a man can do to change his destiny. On the other hand, there are those who argue that man has free will, that what happens to him on the physical and spiritual planes is dependent on his choices. There may even be those who hold a middle ground that God knows everything in advance, but man's choices can change God's will under certain circumstances.

A fourth view is that the foreknowledge and predestination spoken of in the Bible is not on an individual basis, but that the writers who speak of this are referring to the church as a whole. That is, God planned the church from the beginning, but each individual has the choice whether to obey or not. This seems to be the best resolution between the two seemingly opposing, but both biblical, concepts of predestination and free will.

Someone once raised a paradox in relation to this question. Even if man has free will to choose his own way, if God knows what he will choose does that not eliminate choice? If God knows something will happen, then is there any way for it not to happen? And if man is free to choose, does that limit God's knowledge? If man truly has free will, could God possibly know what is going to happen?

Perhaps related is the question of guilt. If God predetermines that an event will happen, how can he hold a man accountable for his actions? For instance, how could the Jews and Romans who crucified Jesus be held as guilty? After all, Peter said, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain. (Acts 2:23) In fact, how could Peter even call them "wicked hands" if it was by the "determinate counsel and

foreknowledge" of God? The conclusion of this thinking is that God is unjust to punish anyone, and therefore must save everyone. Yet that conclusion flies in the face of such scriptures as "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." (Matt 7:13-14)

So how do we resolve this apparent conflict between God's foreknowledge and man's free will? Perhaps the easiest way is to rephrase it. Since time is a creation of God, he is outside of time. His entirety of being and knowledge is eternal. Thus what we, in our finite minds, call "foreknowledge" is not really knowledge before the event but concurrent with all events. God "foreknows" because he exists and knows in our tomorrow as well as our today. He knows when the Chicago Cubs will win the World Series not because he dictates it, but because he is now (in our thinking) there at the final pitch. Does that mean that he causes the blessed event? Or does it just mean he knew it happened because to him it is current/future/past history? Thus, God knows my choices because he has "already" seen me make them. He can still hold me liable for those choices. Yet I can still be free to make a different choice.

The concepts of "pre" and "fore" are as meaningless to God as beginning and end. God knew Jesus would die because he had died. To God, the fall and the restoration are virtually simultaneous. He need not decide who will be saved and who will be lost because we have already made those decisions for him, although we have yet to make them for ourselves. Who are we, as slaves of time, to judge the knowledge of a timeless God?

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JESUS IS FOR LOSERS

Winners. We all want to be winners. We idolize them, emulate them, and then when they are no longer winners we drop them. The contract of a sports coach is only good until he becomes a loser. Even those of us who are fans of the Chicago Cubs begin to rethink our position during those unfortunately long periods when they can't seem to win. We love winners, but don't have much patience with losers.

Jesus showed us a different way. Who were his biggest followers? Who did he say he came for? It was the losers. The successful, according to our way of thinking, rejected him. The losers flocked to him, and he loved them. In fact, they flocked to him because he loved them.

Mary of Magdala

Outside of the apostles, perhaps the best known disciple of Jesus was Mary of Magdala, also called Mary Magdalene. She has become so well known, although little is written about her in the gospels, that she even figures prominently in a major musical, and more recently in a

Jesus had associated with Judas for three years, knowing who he was and what he would do.

best-selling novel. Unfortunately much of what is said about her is pure speculation. Some say she was a prostitute. Others say she was the mother of Jesus' children. There is, of course, no scriptural support for either of these fantasies. She was, however, what many would consider a loser.

One of the few facts we know about Mary was that she was at one time an outcast. It is bad enough to have a demon in you. Some who had one demon lived poor lives. Mary didn't have a demon, she had seven. (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2) The Bible doesn't describe the life she had then, but it could not have been pleasant.

That life changed when she met Jesus. When nobody else could help her, he cast out her seven demons. She could, and did, now live a productive life. It may not have been a prosperous life, but it was enough that she could make a living for herself and then some. Among the tributes to Mary it is said that

she, among many other women, "ministered unto [Jesus] of their substance. She was so grateful for what he had done for her when she was a loser that she helped support him as he taught.

While we may not have had seven demons, like Mary, each of us has had our pet sins. When we come to know Jesus, he casts sin out of our lives. We are no longer losers. How can we but give of ourselves to support the teaching about Jesus?

The Apostles

Not all of the apostles were what we might call losers. Some were apparently successful fishermen. One, Matthew, was a relatively wealthy government official. Many we don't have much information about at all. But some were among this world's losers.

Who is more of a loser in our minds than Judas Iscariot? When another Judas wrote one of the books of the New Testament, we change its author's name to Jude. When someone wants to refer to another as a traitor, what names come up? Benedict Arnold, possibly Quisling, and certainly Judas. Granted, he has become a loser especially because of what he did at the end of Jesus' and his own life, but his betrayal of the Christ was merely an extension of an already exhibited personality. Even before he sold out for the price of a slave, John said of Judas, "he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein." (Jn 12:6) And yet, Jesus had chosen Judas as one of his closest students. Jesus had associated with this loser for three years, knowing who he was and what he would do. How much trouble Jesus could have avoided if Judas had not been one of his disciples, but he didn't reject Judas. He embraced him as one of his own.

There was another disciple that might be called a loser. What else would you call a man who believed that his nation could throw off the yoke of the greatest empire the world has ever known? Simon the Zealot's efforts to free Judaea from Roman rule would be comparable to an eight-year-old competing against an Olympic weight lifter in the clean and jerk. There was just no chance. Matthew and Simon probably argued this frequently along the road. Yet Jesus chose to associate with this doomed-to-fail revolutionary.

Jesus accepted, even sought out, men that he knew supported losing causes. He worked with a man he knew was thief and future traitor. Even in their flaws he saw a potential that others did not. What flaws do we have that he cannot overcome?

Zacchaeus

Some in the Roman government may have looked favorably on men like Matthew and Zacchaeus. These men helped finance road construction and the police force. They were tax collectors, and the scripture specifically says Zacchaeus was rich. (Lk 19:2) Most of the Jews, and probably most Romans, considered them losers. It appears that “tax collector” was an epithet even then. The Jews considered them traitors. The Romans tolerated them, but probably saw them as opportunists of the lowest order. After all, there was only one qualification to be a tax collector for Rome. You had to negotiate a territory with the government, and then pay the tax in advance. The way you made your living was to collect more than you had already paid out. This system naturally led to abuses. Zacchaeus and Matthew probably got rich by adding exorbitant amounts to the taxes they demanded. Most Jews, therefore, considered them thieves as well as traitors.

In addition, the nature of the person who would become a tax collector would most likely lead them into the Jewish sect known as the Sadducees. These were Jews who tried to live like Greeks or Romans. They interpreted the law as loosely as possible, in order to justify their assimilation into the norms of the conquerors. In some cases they even rejected circumcision. Although the majority party, observant Jews like the Pharisees considered them losers.

Consider then, the unusual events of Luke 19. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. Not only is he a rich tax collector and probably a Sadducee, he has the disadvantage of being altitudinally challenged (that’s Political Correct speech for “short”). To see the Master he has to climb a tree. As Jesus comes along, he walks straight up to the tree and calls him by name. This may have been miraculous, or Zacchaeus may have been Matthew’s supervisor. In either case, Jesus is planning on eating with him. If Jesus were inclined toward any one sect it would have been the Pharisees. Yet here he is, about to eat with the enemy, and a tax collector, and a short tax collector at that. When some people complained, Jesus made a statement that summarizes his feelings for losers. “The Son of man is come to seek and save that which is lost.” (Lk 19:10) When others could only see the “sinner” Jesus saw the soul.

Other Losers

Many other losers came to Jesus. The poor, the beggars, the prostitutes. He accepted even the lowest of the low. After all, how much lower can you get than a leper? Here is somebody who has contracted a miraculous disease unknown to modern medicine. (Jewish scholars

say it came upon people primarily for the sin of gossip or “bad speech.”) These people could not live in the city. Technically, they could not even live with each other. They had to warn others of their presence, so nobody would accidentally touch them and become unclean. If there ever was a person truly an outcast of society it was the leper of Palestine. Yet even these people were accepted by the Son of God.

“And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.” (Matt 8:2-3) Some people might have healed the leper, had they the ability. Jesus did more; he touched him in the process. He didn’t have to do so. But by touching him Jesus showed his compassion, and his acceptance. He put the leper on his level, rather than stooping to the level of others. One leper he cleansed (Lk 17:11-19) was doubly considered a loser, for he was also a Samaritan, a half-breed.

If Jesus accepted these people, can we do any less? Why do some churches reject people because of

Here Jesus is, about to eat with the enemy, and a tax collector, and a short tax collector at that.

race? If a known prostitute, murderer, or homosexual entered the assembly, would they be welcomed or shunned? If a man came to the assembly in heavy makeup, long eyelashes, and long hair, would he be called a “freak” or a “friend?” I know what Jesus would say. What would you?

I have heard of people saying that religion is for losers, implying that successful people didn’t need religion. If somebody tries to tell you that Jesus is for losers, you can proudly reply, “Yes, but he will accept you, too.” We should be glad that Jesus is for losers, because when it comes to salvation none of us is a winner without him. We can not earn, win, or work our way to salvation. No matter what we do in this life, we are ultimately losers. It is great that Jesus is for losers, because that means he is for me.

This article was inspired by a column by Charlie Madigan of the Chicago Tribune.

WHAT OF THE DEAD?

The following is a question and answer from my web site, <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>.

Question

Thanks for your answers. There is a scripture in Corinthians that says why are they baptized for the dead; what does that mean? When a person dies can you see them again? I guess people always say they have seen a deceased family member.

Answer

“Else what shall they do which are they baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:29)

This passage comes at the end of a section that begins, “But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen; and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:13-14) The similarity in phrasing indicates that these may be the start and end of one thought. That thought is that Jesus rose from the dead. If there is no resurrection, then Jesus was not resurrected. But that is one of the essentials of the gospel. Jesus died, was buried, arose on the third day, and was seen after his resurrection. (Same chapter, verses 1-8) If Jesus was not raised, we have no hope. The resurrection is the proof that Jesus is the Messiah.

Then comes the verse in question. Who is/are “the dead” in this passage? Is he saying people are baptized on behalf of other people who have died but were not baptized? That is what the Mormons believe. Or is he asking, as I believe fits the context better,

“What will we do who were baptized because of Jesus, if he could not have been raised? Why be baptized for a dead man, instead of a resurrected man?” So, I believe “the dead” here is referring to Jesus, not any dead people.

There is no evidence from the Bible that you can see dead people again until the resurrection at the end of the world. While there is nothing that directly says you can’t, there are passages that seem to hint that the dead don’t reappear on earth. In 1 Samuel 28, King Saul went to a woman who claimed to be a medium. He asked her to speak to Samuel, who was dead. When Samuel actually appeared in order to give Saul a message from God, the woman was genuinely shocked. It was almost like she had been faking it all her life, and couldn’t believe that it was actually happening. That, of course, was a special case. In Luke 16 Jesus told the story of a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. When the rich man, in torment, asked Abraham to send someone back to earth to warn his brothers, Abraham answered that even something as unusual as someone coming back from the dead would not convince them. Finally, after Jesus died, “the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection.” (Matthew 27:52-53) It took something as powerful as the resurrection of Jesus to cause others to be raised as well. In all of these cases, though, it was a resurrection of the bodies of the dead. There is no evidence that the dead can come back in any other form, or that they could do so today. Some people under stress claim to “see” their dead relatives, but this often appears to be their own mind working, and not the dead actually appearing.

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