

The
Tram
Question

An enquiry into
predestination

John Everett

A limerick

There was a young man who said "Damn!
I perceive with regret that I am
But a creature that moves
In predestinate grooves
I'm not even a bus, I'm a tram."

This limerick is attributed to Maurice E.
Hare, 1905.

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Introduction

Predestination is hardly a topic one hears referred to in conversation very often these days. I cannot remember ever hearing a sermon dedicated to it. It may be that I am moving as a Christian in the wrong circles. And I certainly cannot understand why the topic has begun to absorb me.

The more I think about it the more, however, I realise that it raises extremely important questions. Is it right to speak of 'the elect'? What is the salvation that is offered to us? What of those who are outside this salvation? In what way should we speak of the sovereignty of God? What is God's relationship with time? To name but a few.

So I have been researching the subject for several months now, and feel impelled to record what I am beginning to discover, from the Bible, from the history of Christian thought, and how my mind is trying to resolve some of the puzzling issues that the topic raises.

What follows is by no means academic. I do not begin with the purpose of defending a particular position, although I know that for some the issues are considered vital to their theology.

If what follows helps the reader to clarify (or simply instigate) their own thinking, well and good.

John Everett (Spring 2018)

A Starting Point

This passage from the Acts of the Apostles brings us straight to the central issue of predestination. God's purposes are foreordained. Peter and John have been forbidden to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus by the Jewish rulers in Jerusalem. This is how they responded:

Being let go, they came to their own company and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, "O Lord, you are God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who by the mouth of your servant, David, said,

*'Why do the nations rage,
and the peoples plot a vain thing?
The kings of the earth take a stand,
and the rulers take council together,
against the Lord, and against his Christ.'*

"For truly, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together against your holy servant, Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your council foreordained to happen. Now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of your holy Servant Jesus." (Acts 4:23-30)

Here we have it: what happened to Jesus on the cross was foreordained. The local tetrarch Herod and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate were doing what God had planned for them to do. There are many indications in the gospels that Jesus knew precisely what fate awaited him as he made his last journey to Jerusalem. He knew what God's plan was.

We are just beginning to address the problem here. Were Herod and Pontius Pilate free agents? Could they have acted other than they did? Does God actually, in some kind of eternal 'now', have a view of all the actions and events that, from our perspective, are not only past and present but also future?

This is the area that I hope to explore in the pages that follow. Each question that we ask seems to raise further questions, all of them focusing on what it means to be a Christian.

God and Time

The passage cited in the previous chapter raises lots of questions about the relationship God has with time. We experience time in a linear fashion. There is the now, there has been a past, and there will be a future. Our knowledge of the now is by being awake and receiving all the stimuli we are used to. We are aware of what we are thinking. Our consciousness is embedded in the present. We can remember the past, even though not always perfectly. We can imagine the future, with acknowledged uncertainty. It seems, however, that with God things are different. Let us look at a few passages from the Bible about this.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ; even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and without defect before him in love; having predestined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his desire, to the praise of the glory of his grace, by which he freely gave us favour in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:3-6)

Something took place 'before the foundation of the world' which affects my own now, my own past, my own future, and that of every one of us. Let us check out this phrase. Peter uses it here:

You were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold, . . . but with precious blood, as of a faultless and pure lamb, the blood of Christ; who was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the

world, but was revealed at the end of times for your sake. (1 Peter 1:18-20)

And again here:

All who dwell on the earth will worship him, [the evil beast] everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been killed. (Revelation 13:8)

And here:

The beast that you saw was, and is not; and is about to come up out of the abyss and to go into destruction. Those who dwell on the earth and whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel when they see that the beast was, and is not, and shall be present. (Revelation 17:8)

The 'book of life' is another phrase we need to think about. It seems that to have one's name written in the 'book of life' is the equivalent of being adopted into God's family, which is the important category that Paul has used in the passage quoted above when he wrote to the Ephesian Christians.

The Psalmist prays about evildoers:

Let them be blotted out of the book of life, and not be written with the righteous. (Psalm 69:28)

Writing to the Philippians Paul says:

Yes, I beg you also, true partner, help these women, for they laboured with me in the Good News, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:3)

We have already noted two passages from the book of Revelation. Here is a third:

He who overcomes will be arrayed in white garments, and I will in no way blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. (Revelation 3:5)

These passages are unequivocal, and establish a very clear Biblical basis for the doctrine of predestination. From the very beginning of time God has known who would become part of his family, and - metaphorically no doubt - has had their names inscribed in a book.

There is another key word we need to think more about, again from the Ephesians passage, and that is 'chose'. We Christians have been chosen by God. What does this actually mean? It is worth a whole chapter to itself.

Chosen

This concept is at the heart of the doctrine we are examining. The 'chosen ones' and 'the elect' are equivalent terms, with 'election' being a cognate noun.

In a democratic election people vote to choose a representative whom they prefer against candidates they do not prefer. If I choose one chocolate from a box, it means I am leaving the others behind.

To say the God has chosen some implies that he has not chosen others. We need to ask: on what basis?

Israel regarded themselves as God's chosen nation, and the whole record of the Old Testament confirms this. Here is Moses speaking to the people just rescued from slavery in Egypt:

You are a holy people to Yahweh your God. Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, above all peoples who are on the face of the earth. Yahweh didn't set his love on you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples: but because Yahweh loves you, and because he desires to keep the oath which he swore to your fathers, Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

(Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac; but Isaac was the one chosen to inherit the covenant God had made with Abraham. Isaac had two sons:

Esau and Jacob; it was the younger of these twins who received the special blessing of being within this covenant. Jacob received the name Israel, and hence his descendants are called Israelites. But the Bible makes it clear that this choosing was not based on any special qualities possessed by Isaac or Jacob; it was simply God's choice.

Paul comments on this choice in his letter to the Romans:

But it is not as though the word of God has come to nothing. For they are not all Israel that are of Israel. Neither, because they are Abraham's offspring, are they all children. But, "your offspring will be accounted as from Isaac." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as heirs. For this is a word of promise, "At the appointed time I will come, and Sarah will have a son." Not only so, but Rebekah also conceived by one, by our father Isaac. For being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him who calls, it was said to her, "The elder will serve the younger." Even as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? May it never be! For he said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who has mercy. (Romans 9:6-15)

Paul contrasts election, that is choosing, with works, that is things that deserve to be rewarded.

He is adamant that no one who belongs to God should boast that this is a reward they have earned. On the contrary he emphasises that it is purely a gift.

But God, being rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus; for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:4-9)

It is clear that 'works' matter, not as a means to earn salvation, but as the result of salvation we have tasks to carry out with the enabling from God to do so.

God's choosing also implies a calling. You could call this calling an invitation. It is what precedes the moment when a person accepts the invitation to belong to God. It is worth a chapter of its own.

Calling

Let go straight into a Bible passage on this topic:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn amongst many brothers. Whom he predestined, those he also called. Whom he called, those he also justified. Whom he justified, those he also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

I think Paul intends us to read a sequence here: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified.

I remember very well my own experience of a calling. It was in the second week of February 1960, and I was in my second year at university. I had begun a relationship with a young lady. I was a very confident agnostic then, proud of my rejection of all things religious, in spite of my christening as a baby and confirmation at the age of twelve. Now I was intellectually convinced that religion was not for me. This young lady persuaded me to have a chat with a local vicar. I told him I was sure that religion was nonsense and that I could argue this against all comers. He suggested we confine our debate to some text from the Bible, and I agreed to this. His choice was the Gospel of John. So, to qualify for an argument with him, I read the whole of John. To my great surprise this reading led to a conclusion: that Jesus was real. I could put it in no other way. I had no doctrine yet, just the thought that the man I had read about was real. I said all this when we met. The

vicar then showed me a passage depicting this Jesus:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, then I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with me.

(Revelation 3:17)

He asked me if I would open the door and invite Jesus into my life, and I said I would. He suggested I kneel with him and pray aloud a simple request for this to happen. I did, and so began a journey that has transformed my life. It began with the decision to read Theology in the final year of my degree, and to start work as a teacher of Religious Education after that. This is the account of my calling, and no doubt there are many different types of calling. The key thing is that I was not seeking God when it happened. Quite the reverse. I see now that it was God who was seeking me, using ordinary people, a young lady and a clergyman, to do so. God's initiative in calling is emphasised in these words of Jesus to his disciples:

You didn't choose me, but I chose you and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain. (John 15:16)

Once again we can note the connection between God's choosing and the good works, here fruit by way of an obvious metaphor, that should follow it. It is clear that whomever God calls has been given tasks as an outcome.

The Elect

The name given to the community of those chosen by God is often simply 'the elect'. It is a sort of shorthand and it is worth looking at the passages where it is used. Sometimes modern versions translate the original Greek into 'the chosen ones', so for the sake of consistency I will use the translation made in 1611, often called the King James Version. Talking of the end times Jesus said:

And except that the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh should be saved: but for the elect's sake, whom he hath chosen, he hath shortened the days.
(Mark 13:20 KJV)

For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect. (Mark 13:22 KJV)

And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven. (Mark 13:27 KJV)

Paul asks this rhetorical question:

Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. (Romans 8:33 KJV)

And gives this exhortation:

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; (Colossians 3:12 KJV)

We even find Paul referring to elect angels, presumably in contrast to fallen angels, in his first letter to Timothy (5:21).

To keep this list within bounds I will not cite another six or so verses where the term is used in the New Testament writings.

When looking at the record of Scripture I find it impossible to avoid the conclusion that I belong as a Christian to God's family because he has chosen me to be there. Not because of any special qualities I may happen to possess, I hasten to add. Not because I have earned this privilege either. Simply a decision God has made for reasons of love.

This conclusion places a burden on me to make full and proper use of this privilege, and gives assurance that I can rely on God's love in all circumstances. Paul says as much in his wonderful letter to the Romans.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God's love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

Reviewing the doctrine of election from within gives great encouragement. As I approach my eightieth

birthday I can look back on my life, both before and after my conversion, and see God's hand in so many events. I am able to give him constant thanks for his love and caring, and I can be assured that what I know of this physical life is but a shadow of even greater and more glorious things to come.

Intellectually, of course, I am aware of the questions that the doctrine of election raises, and I cannot avoid dealing with them.

Free Will

In my research into predestination I have read three books that are currently available via the Internet. I have dipped into the writings of Augustine of Hippo. I have reread some of the chapters of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion - I have actually got this in two volumes, bought when I was studying Theology as an undergraduate.

All these books raise the question of free will. Can, or does, God overrule a person's will so as to make them either chose or reject the invitation to follow Jesus?

If we believe in the sovereignty of God we may want to answer in the affirmative to this question. Calvin certainly did. But, in my view, the equation of God's sovereignty and my lack of freedom is not as simple as it may seem. God cannot do anything that is logically impossible. He cannot make a square circle. This would be a contradiction in terms. Take this thought a step further. Can God make a human into a puppet? If a puppet then, by definition, not a human. Throughout the Bible there are urgings via the prophets of God in the Old Testament, and by the Jesus himself and his followers in the New, that we should obey God's commandments and especially that we should love one another. These urgings imply, surely, that we have both the capacity and the responsibility to do so. How can we be judged to have fallen short of God's requirements of us as humans if we have no capacity to fulfil them.

There is a sense that none of us is perfectly free. Paul says that 'in Adam', in other words as a human, we are full of sin. We are somehow 'spoilt' creatures, and we need to be saved and transformed. We can see this as we look around us: we know that we have inherited much of our character from our parents; we know that we have benefited, or been harmed, by the way we have been brought up. So clearly we are not a blank canvas, with the only input coming from ourselves. Rather we are who we are from a great multitude of outside influences, all beyond our control. In this sense not one of us has 'free will'. We are all an amalgam both of inherited and acquired qualities and faults.

When I responded to the call described earlier I did so as 'me', the product of my inherited and moulding influences. I was not a puppet, but I would not have responded as I did without the contribution made by human agents, and - I believe - the wooing from God's Holy Spirit.

Let me suggest a metaphor, or a sort of parable. There is a man who has fallen into a river. He cannot swim and as things are he will drown. On the bank of the river is a man with a rope. He throws the rope to the man in the river, who grasps it and holds on tight while the man on the bank pulls him to safety. Who or what saved the man? Without the rope he would not have been saved. Without the man on the bank throwing it then hauling it in he would not have been saved. But also without the man in the river grasping it and holding on tight he would not have been saved. You get the point. God is like the man on the bank. The rope is like what Jesus achieved on the cross and by his resurrection. I do

not boast that I was smart enough to grasp and hold on to the rope. I only am filled with gratitude for the rope, and to the man who threw it to me and pulled me in. By grace I have been saved, and that not of myself; it is the gift of God, received by faith, and I certainly do not feel I have anything to boast about. I grasped it because I knew I needed it. (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9)

God's Knowledge

How does God know anything? We will never be able to answer this question, but we nevertheless believe that God does know everything. There is nothing hidden from him, and any lesser view of God's knowledge would be imperfect.

Somehow God's predestining is linked to knowledge. Paul is quite clear about this:

For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:29)

I cannot pretend that I understand how God could – can – know all the events of my life, but since I know that nothing is hidden from him I have to accept that even the things of my life that are to my perspective future are equally known to him as what I call my present and my past.

There is one interesting event in the life of Jesus that may help us understand all this:

Jesus therefore, being tired from his journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman therefore said to him, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would

have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. So where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father, Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself, as did his children, and his livestock?” Jesus answered her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never thirst again; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I don’t get thirsty, neither come all the way here to draw.” Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You said well, ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands; and he whom you now have is not your husband. This you have said truly.” The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. (John 4:6-19)

How could Jesus know of someone he had obviously never met before just how many husbands she had had, and who she was living with now? If this is the kind of knowledge that Jesus possessed, then this kind of knowledge must be a possible thing.

Does this mean that if God knows the things that I have not yet done as well as those I have done then I am some kind of robot, set into a predetermined set of actions? Am I a tram unable to go anywhere other than the preset rails will take me?

My answer to this question is a simple No. I am happy that all my actions in what I call my past were autonomous: the real me doing the things I chose to

do. And God has seen them all. No problem with that. So I can make the mental jump to the view that God will see all my future actions too in the same way. God is not bound by what I deem to be the present.

God knew that I would respond to the invitation to follow Jesus given to me at a particular time (February 1960) and that this would be one event in the whole collection of events that would follow his creation of the universe. By creating the universe, the planet we live on, the race of creatures we call human, God included this one event that would become part of the script of human history.

This is how I understand that God predetermined this event by the act of creation, because he was able to see it happening. My choice was still a real choice. I had not been turned into a puppet. But as I have made clear the choice could not have been made without God guiding other followers to do certain things, and the Holy Spirit of God to speak to my inner being in the way he did. So I have nothing to boast about. What I have received was and is truly a gift I could never earn.

All my thinking here is very personal. You, dear reader, can survey your own experience of God and apply to your life the same logic that I have applied to mine.

God's Plan

The concept of predestination implies a plan, a determination that certain things will happen. So is it right to address the question: what is God's overall plan for the cosmos?

It is a huge question, of course. Central to God's creative activity was the making of beings 'in our [God's] own image' (Genesis 1:26). They were to be the guardians and carers of the planet they were placed on. But the guardians rebelled and disobeyed. So from the descendants of the disobedient and sinful guardians God chose a family with whom he would have a special relationship – a covenant. This word 'covenant' has a deep meaning: a pact, a binding contract, with duties and obligations on both sides.

How this covenant worked out is the story one reads in the Old Testament, 'testament' being just another word for 'covenant'. The family God chose, which in time became a nation, the Israelites, were intended to be 'a light for the nations'.

I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness.

I will hold your hand. I will keep you, and make you a covenant for the people, as a light for the nations.

(Isaiah 42:6)

I will not attempt to summarise the account of the rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the occupation of the land promised to them, the appointment of kings, the work of prophets, the defeat at the hands of more powerful people, the exile, and the eventual return of some from exile.

Suffice it to say that this was only part of God's plan, as we read of a New Covenant.

“Behold, the days come,” says the LORD, “that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which covenant of mine they broke, although I was a husband to them,” says the LORD.

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the LORD:

“I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will no longer each teach his neighbour, and every man teach his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD;’ for they will all know me, from their least to their greatest,” says the LORD: “for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

When Jesus was sharing a final meal with his disciples before his arrest, he made it clear that his death would usher in this new covenant. Paul reminds the Christians of Corinth as follows:

For I received from the Lord that which also I delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread. When he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “Take, eat. This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in memory of me.” In the same way he also took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink, in memory of me.” (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

This is why the particular ceremony shared by all Christians is the regular rehearsal of these words and actions. So we are now within this promised new covenant, and this is not the finality of God's plan. There is to be a new age, a new heaven and a new earth.

To get the part of God's plan right we need to look at a couple of Greek words: *ἄων* (aeon) and *ἄωνιος* (aeonios – the adjectival form of aeon). The simplest English translation of the noun aeon is age, or period of time, and we use aeon as a transliteration of the Greek word meaning just that. The difficulty of preserving the original meaning comes when we use the adjectival form. We do have the word 'aeonic', but it is just so unfamiliar in common usage that most translations of the word *ἄωνιος* use 'eternal'. Let us look at one of the most well known verses:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

The Greek word here for 'life' is *ζωή* (zoe) which is always used in contrast to mere biological life, which comes from a different Greek word for life – *βίος* (bios). Zoe means life in a much deeper way than bios. And where most translations have 'eternal' here, this is a misleading implication of everlasting or unending. Really we need a better translation of *ἄωνιος*, as is recognised by the translation made recently by Professor Tom Wright. He gives us: “. . . so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age.”

I now use Tom Wright's translation, called 'The New Testament for Everyone', for my own devotional reading. He uses this, to my mind, obviously better way of translating *ἀἰώνιος* as referring to the promised new age, the new heaven and earth that Jesus spoke of as the final part of God's plan. Here are just two examples from the first letter of John:

God has given us the life of the age to come, and this life is in his son. (1 John 5:11)

I am writing these things to you so that you may know that you, who believe in the name of the son of God, do indeed have the life of the age to come. (1 John 5:13)

All told the expression comes 24 times in The New Testament for Everyone where other translations have usually 'eternal life; or 'everlasting life'.

The prophet Isaiah had spoken of 'new heavens and a new earth:

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. (Isaiah 65:17 – see also 66:22)

Peter reminded Christians:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore since all these things will be destroyed like this, what kind of people ought you to be in holy living and godliness,

looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, which will cause the burning heavens to be dissolved, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? But, according to his promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:10-13)

And the Book of Revelation has:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, and the sea is no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice out of heaven saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with people, and he will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more. The first things have passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)

Jesus himself had said:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. (Matthew 24:35)

So in citing these passages we have examined what the Bible tells us of God's plan for his creation, from Genesis to Revelation. Inevitably this has been very selective, with much omitted. But we need to understand that God has a plan, which was in his mind from the very beginning. And he knew and knows those who have wished to be included in that plan.

God's Family

As we have seen, God's special relationship with humans was initially described as a covenant. You became included in this covenant by natural birth, if you were a descendant of Jacob (Israel), the grandson of Abraham. Male members of the covenant were signified as such by being circumcised on the eighth day after their birth.

The new covenant brought into being by what Jesus accomplished is now entered in a different way, and is now called God's family. Speaking generally, one can become part of a family either by birth or adoption. Both ways are referred to in the New Testament.

In the prologue to his gospel, John writes of Jesus as the Word. Note this passage:

He came to his own, and those who were his own didn't receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, to those who believe in his name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:11-13)

And in conversation with a man called Nicodemus, who was a scholar of Jewish theology, Jesus said:

"Most certainly, I tell you, unless one is born anew, he can't see God's Kingdom." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" Jesus answered, "Most certainly I tell you, unless one is born of water and spirit, he can't enter

into God's Kingdom. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wants to, and you hear its sound, but don't know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:3-8)

By 'being born of water' Jesus obviously means one's natural birth from the womb. There is another birth needed to be part of God's family, and that is being 'born of the Spirit'.

Peter encourages the Christians he is writing to:

. . . love one another from the heart fervently, having been born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God, which lives and remains forever. (1 Peter 1:22-23)

John rejoices that we Christians have become part of God's family:

See how great a love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God! (1 John 3:1)

Paul exchanges the metaphor of 'birth' as a way of becoming part of God's family to the metaphor of 'adoption'. To the Roman Christians he says:

For you didn't receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15)

To the Galatians on a similar line:

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent out his Son, born to a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of children. And because you are children, God sent out the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!" (Galatians 4:4-6)

And in another passage we have already noted because it includes the idea of predestination:

. . . having predestined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his desire. (Ephesians 1:5)

So as Christians we can rejoice that we have received the ultimate privilege: we may address God as Father. When Jesus was asked to give teaching on how to pray to God, as we all know, his answer begins with the words 'Our Father'. For the Jewish followers Jesus was talking to this was a massive innovation. Let us not treat this privilege lightly.

Some Words of Jesus

Luke records that on his way to Jerusalem, knowing what lay ahead for him, Jesus said:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, like a hen gathers her own brood under her wings, and you refused! Behold, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Luke 13:34-35)

And as Jesus made the entrance just days before he was arrested, we read:

When he came near, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had known today the things which belong to your peace! But now, they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come on you, when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, surround you, hem you in on every side, and will dash you and your children within you to the ground. They will not leave in you one stone on another, because you didn’t know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41-44)

These two passages speak volumes to me about the issues we are thinking about here. See how much Jesus loved the people of Jerusalem, as a hen does her chicks. Among them was the crowd that shouted 'Crucify him!' when Pilate offered them a choice between Jesus and a known criminal called Barabbas. Jesus loved them even though he foresaw their rejection of him, following the pattern of

regular rejections of those whom God had sent to them.

It seems clear that God can predict even those things that would be contrary to his will, such as the rejection of prophets sent to warn people of their misdoings. Jesus somehow knew in advance that he too would be rejected by the people of Jerusalem. He also knew that this pattern of behaviour would in the end be their total downfall. Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, some 40 or so years later, when the Romans finally lost their patience with the rebellious occupants of that city. The temple which had been so splendidly rebuilt by Herod was pulled down, and what is on that site today is an Islamic shrine, the Dome of the Rock.

Applying these principles personally I draw the conclusion that God desires my wellbeing totally; that he knows what I am doing, sometimes doing things that grieve him, and that he can foresee all the consequences of all my actions.

I know that I need forgiveness, and I dare to hope that when I truly regret my misdoings I may expect to be forgiven. Let us look at forgiveness as a whole new topic.

Forgiveness

In an earlier chapter, looking at Romans 8:28ff, we saw what we could take as a sequence: that God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified. We have thought about the first three verbs in this sequence. Let us now think about 'justified'.

In this word the setting is that of a court of law. Possibly a criminal case, possibly a civil case. Either the accused (say in a criminal case) or a plaintiff (say in a civil case) is deemed to be not guilty or in the right, respectively. The root of the Greek word means right or just.

The whole Bible makes it clear that the only basis on which we humans can come into a right relationship with God is through forgiveness. As we saw in Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant (31:31ff), God promises: "*I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*"

Forgiveness is a theme that is central to the good news proclaimed by Jesus and his followers. As he was being nailed to the cross Jesus prayed *'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.'* (Luke 23:34). In the model prayer which Jesus presented to his disciples when they asked to be taught how to pray, we have: *'Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.'* (Luke 11:4). In John's first letter we find: *'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.'* (1 John 1:9)

Jesus was so adamant about forgiveness in his teaching that one of the disciples asked how many times he was obliged to forgive.

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I don't tell you until seven times, but, until seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22)

Jesus clearly meant that there should be no limit.

So there we have it, crystal clear: those of us who are foreknown, predestined, called, and justified are a community of the forgiven, with obligations resting on us to forgive unconditionally. The word 'forgive' comes well over fifty times in the New Testament.

Very early in his ministry Jesus made what to those who heard it was an astonishing claim:

When he entered again into Capernaum after some days, it was heard that he was in the house. Immediately many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even around the door; and he spoke the word to them. Four people came, carrying a paralytic to him. When they could not come near to him for the crowd, they removed the roof where he was. When they had broken it up, they let down the mat that the paralytic was lying on.

Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you." But there were some of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak blasphemies like that? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they

so reasoned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you reason these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to tell the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Arise, and take up your bed, and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" – he said to the paralytic – "I tell you, arise, take up your mat, and go to your house." He arose, and immediately took up the mat, and went out in front of them all; so that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (Mark 2:1-12)

It was in this way that Jesus established at the very beginning of his ministry what he had come to do.

It is because I know that my relationship with Jesus is through his gracious forgiving that I cannot possibly boast. The best way to summarise all this is from John's first letter:

This is the message which we have heard from him and announce to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie, and don't tell the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we haven't sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

How can we forgiven sinners manage to 'walk in the light?' Another chapter is needed.

God's Spirit

Let us remind ourselves of the prophecy of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31ff. Here is a key promise:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," says the LORD: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart.

In the new covenant God will do something inside us: he will change our hearts, meaning our will and our emotions. Jesus explained how to his followers:

If you love me, keep my commandments. I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, that he may be with you forever: the Spirit of truth. (John 14:15-17)

And in the same passage:

I have said these things to you while still living with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things, and will remind you of all that I said to you. (John 14:25-26)

And as he finally left them:

"Don't depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which you heard from me. For John indeed baptised in water, but you will be baptised in the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Therefore when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, are you now restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It isn't for you

to know times or seasons which the Father has set within his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.”
(Acts 1:4-8)

This is the key to living as a Christian. Jesus now indwells us through his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit changes our 'hearts', and makes it possible for us to become the person God wants us to become.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-3)

Paul contrasts the spirit with the flesh, meaning our natural humanness, in the sentences that come immediately before this:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you won't fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, that you may not do the things that you desire. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the deeds of the flesh are obvious, which are: adultery, sexual immorality, uncleanness, lustfulness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, strife, jealousies, outbursts of anger, rivalries, divisions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these; of which I forewarn you, even as I also forewarned you, that those who practise such things will not inherit God's Kingdom. (Galatians 5:16-21)

I can tell you that in my nearly sixty years as a Christian I have continually experienced the tension these verses speak of. There has been, and no doubt will continue to be, a spiritual battle at the very centre of who I am. I share the experience that Paul himself wrote about:

For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing. For desire is present with me, but I don't find it doing that which is good. For the good which I desire, I don't do; but the evil which I don't desire, that I practise. But if what I don't desire, that I do, it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the law that, to me, while I desire to do good, evil is present. For I delight in God's law after the inward man, but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord!
(Romans 7:18-24)

Who will deliver me, Paul asks, and then supplies the answer: it is Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In just a few pages, and citing just a few passages, I have opened up a subject on which books may and have been written. God's agenda is clear: I am to become like Jesus (1 John 3:2).

I am sure that this state of perfection will not be reached by me during my lifetime on this earth, although I must strive for it. It is the journey I am on, which brings us to think about the destination.

The Destination

We saw earlier this sequence in God's dealings with us humans: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified. It seems clear to me that justification, being declared in the right, is both a present as well as a future concept. Paul certainly speaks of it as a present experience:

Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; through whom we also have our access by faith into this grace in which we stand. (Romans 5:1-2)

In many of his letters he emphasises that this status is a gift received through faith.

But there is also a future aspect, when one thinks of the eventual judgment we shall all face after our life on this earth. Jesus often spoke of his own actions as judge. Here is just one example:

“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will tell those on his right hand, ‘Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and take you in; or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?’

“The King will answer them, ‘Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

Then he will say also to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you didn’t give me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you didn’t take me in; naked, and you didn’t clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’

“Then they will also answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and didn’t help you?’

“Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Most certainly I tell you, because you didn’t do it to one of the least of these, you didn’t do it to me.’ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

It is obvious that the status of justification should also result in actions consistent with that status.

This parable also refers to *‘the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’* We are reminded that God has a plan for all the events of this cosmos that spans the whole of time. We also find that there is to be a division between those for whom it has been prepared and for those who will not be given an entrance to it.

Frankly this is an uncomfortable idea. It is at the very heart of why predestination is such a difficult doctrine. How can the God of love assign some to 'eternal punishment'? And was this judgment built into the very act of creation?

We will address these concerns after first of all considering 'the eternal kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world'.

The Future

The big word for Christian teaching about the future is eschatology, a study of the last things. We have reviewed the first four of the sequence 'foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified', and now we come to the fifth and last: glorified. We have observed that the first three of our list are, from our perspective, in the past. We can also say that 'justified' is both present and future. We must now understand that the word 'glorified' clearly refers to the future.

We cannot think about the culmination of God's plan for the whole cosmos without gaining a clear view of what is meant by resurrection. Christians believe that on the third day Jesus rose from the dead. This belief is unique to Christianity. Though Christianity shares much with Judaism, and a little with Islam, this doctrine is the crucial separator. To quote Wikipedia: *'Unlike the Christian view of the death of Jesus, most Muslims believe he was raised to Heaven without being put on the cross and God transformed another person to appear exactly like Jesus who was crucified instead of Jesus.'* Orthodox Jews cannot accept that Jesus was the Messiah precisely because he was put to death, as well as not believing in his being raised to life.

All thinking about God's plan for the future depends on the reality of Jesus' resurrection. He really did die on the cross; on the third day the tomb really was empty; the body that had been wrapped in burial cloths had been transformed, leaving the cloths behind; Jesus, now transformed, appeared to many followers, some women first and then the

disciples; his transformed body could be mistaken for a gardener or a fellow traveller on the road; he could eat food; and Jesus in this transformed body was taken out of this physical world into the place of God's dwelling. If all this is not true, then, to quote Paul:

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith also is in vain. Yes, we are also found false witnesses of God, because we testified about God that he raised up Christ, whom he didn't raise up, if it is so that the dead are not raised. For if the dead aren't raised, neither has Christ been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then they also who are fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable. (1 Corinthians 15:14-19)

The resurrection of Jesus ensures resurrection for those who believe in him.

If we ask when will this take place, since clearly for those of us alive today it has not yet happened, we are really also asking what happens to us when we die. I recommend a reading of 'Surprised by Hope', by Tom Wright. This has been for me - and I have read the book more than once - the clearest way the question may be answered. What follows here is very much indebted to this book.

Paul is clear that when he dies he will be with Jesus:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I

live on in the flesh, this will bring fruit from my work; yet I don't know what I will choose. But I am hard pressed between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. (Philippians 1:21-23)

Where does Paul think he will be when he is 'with Christ'? The best way to think about this is to review what Jesus said to one of the criminals who was next to him on the cross:

One of the criminals who was hanged insulted him, saying, "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us!"

But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Don't you even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." He said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

Jesus said to him, "Assuredly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

The correct name for the place where the dead who believe in Jesus are is 'paradise'. Often people think of this as 'heaven', but in the middle ages there grew up a doctrine of two places: purgatory and heaven. Purgatory was for most folk, but specially devout Christians could be transferred from there to heaven. Such were called saints, and there grew up special investigations resulting in canonization, declaring them to be saints. Tom Wright points out, perfectly correctly in my view, that there is no distinction between the Christian dead. All Christians in the New Testament are called 'saints'. It was this false doctrine of purgatory that was the actual stimulus for the Reformation in the sixteenth

century, when transfer from purgatory to heaven was offered for sale, by means of what were called 'indulgences'. Pay this money to the church and you, or your loved one, would escape from purgatory. Rich people left money to the church for masses to be said for the same purpose. It was this teaching, first and foremost, that Luther, and then many others, said was a dreadful parody of Christian teaching about salvation.

The New Testament teaches simply that there is an intermediate state of being 'with Christ' for all Christians, and that this applies to us all. The metaphor of sleep is often used for death, implying an eventual waking. And this waking is the resurrection promised to all Christians, modelled on the transformation that happened to Jesus when he rose from the dead. The material of his original body was used up (the tomb was empty) and transformed into something glorious. Paul writes about this transformation:

So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown perishable; it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body and there is also a spiritual body. . .

Now I say this, brothers, that flesh and blood can't inherit God's Kingdom; neither does the perishable inherit imperishable.

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. For this

perishable body must become imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable body will have become imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then what is written will happen: "Death is swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:42-54)

Once again we are straying into territory where whole books are needed to do full justice to the topic. So we need to revert to the word 'glorified' from the list we started with. This glorification is what is promised as the destination of God's plan for the cosmos. Christ will return; there will be new heavens and a new earth; the new Jerusalem; those Christians alive at this point in time will be caught up to join Jesus as he returns; those Christians who have died will be raised to join this throng, along with the angels.

Paul makes it clear that our knowledge is not sufficient for us to fully understand these things. The nature of the bodies we will possess is beyond our capacity to imagine, so it best not to try to.

The Obvious Concerns

If God has preordained some for eternal happiness, has he also preordained some for eternal misery?

We need to think about God's judgment, which we are told has been allotted to Jesus. First we need to note that it will be applied to God's own people. Using the metaphor of building, Paul thinks about how his and every Christian's life work will be judged:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another builds on it. But let each man be careful how he builds on it. For no one can lay any other foundation than that which has been laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or stubble, each man's work will be revealed. For the Day will declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself will test what sort of work each man's work is. If any man's work remains which he built on it, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burnt, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

God's judgment will be applied within the family of God's people, and some will find themselves deemed to have failed to live as they should have done. But they will still remain part of the family.

Does God reject some? What kind of justice would there be if mass murderers like Hitler and Stalin were exonerated somehow, even if they actually did not want to be? We know that God desires all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), but there may be some who

resist God absolutely and will not respond to his love. What of them? It is possible that ultimately God will say to them: 'thy will be done.'

Paul refers to their fate in these terms:

eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (2 Thessalonians 1:9)

Those whose life has actually been an exclusion and deliberately chosen separation from God, may achieve this separation irrevocably. This is what they will have chosen. For God to overturn their choices would be to turn them into puppets, thus ceasing to recognise that they are in fact human.

Again I am aware that I am giving very little space to what is in fact a huge topic. I believe God does not want any to be lost. His appeal is given to all. Jesus said:

“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
(Matthew 11:28-30)

The yoke is a lovely metaphor: a yoke joins together two draught animals so that they can pull together. We are invited to join ourselves to Jesus. But it seems that those who do not wish to be joined, who prefer separation, will ultimately be separated.

I am concerned that some of the people I know well and care for as much as any human can may end up

on the outside. The only way this becomes tolerable is to remind myself that only God knows what is truly in their hearts. Only God knows completely who is a member of his family. It is wrong for me to try to make this judgment myself.

I do not believe that God will arrange for this 'eternal exclusion' to be some kind of painful torture carefully designed and organised by himself. But what might conscious eternal regret be like? Will all humans go on being conscious even though their bodies have turned to dust? Final extinction would be an act of mercy. The expression 'second death' comes four times in the Book of Revelation.

He who overcomes won't be harmed by the second death. (2:11)

Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over these, the second death has no power. (20:6)

Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. (20:14)

But for the cowardly, unbelieving, sinners, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their part is in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death." (21:8)

Perhaps this 'second death' expression gives us a clue, taking 'the lake of fire' to be a metaphor for total destruction. But it is, I am sure, wisest not to presume we have a perfect answer.

Limericks Again

We began with the tram limerick in its original form, which I found using Internet searching. I had actually in mind for that search a version which I had seen somewhere. It went like this:

There was a young man who said: “Damn!
At last I perceive what I am:
A creature that moves
In predestined grooves,
Not a car, nor a bus, but a tram.”

After all my thinking, as recorded in these pages, I have come to the conclusion that there is an answer to the 'tram question'. I will express it in yet another variation of the original limerick.

There was a young man who said: “Good!
At last I can think as I should:
I'm sure that I am
A car, not a tram;
There's a steering wheel under my hood.”

Every day we make a myriad of choices, some trivial, some profound. This is what it means to be human. And our choices have an aeonic dimension.