

"GOING TO EXTREMES"

(Romans 9:1-11:36)

(Chuck Swindoll)

In Romans 8:28-39, Paul assured his readers that, despite our feelings to the contrary, the salvation of believers is secure—not because we are faithful, but because God is faithful. This, of course, begs the question: "So if God is faithful to preserve His elect, what about nonbelieving Jews? God's unconditional covenant with Abraham's descendants appears to be in jeopardy." Paul's response (9:1-11:36) begins with a defense of God's character. It explains the doctrine of predestination, which establishes four truths:

- Predestination begins with the sovereign choice of God (9:6-13).
- Predestination upholds the perfect character of God (9:14-18).
- Predestination shows us the mercy of God (9:19-22).
- Predestination defends the fairness of God (9:23-33).

Paul's teaching can be boiled down to the following couplet:

*God is faithful to save His chosen remnant;
the condemned have condemned themselves.*

We are wise to allow the couplet to stand on its own without succumbing to the temptation to resolve any perceived contradictions. Unfortunately, some cannot leave well enough alone and have taken the doctrine of predestination to one of two extremes.

The first, and most common, is to say that salvation is entirely a "freewill choice" made by an individual. While this sounds reasonable on the surface, the implications have little or no biblical support. This extreme

- places the burden of salvation squarely on the shoulders of the individual,
- denies or minimizes the depravity of the human heart,
- suggests that one can lose his or her salvation, either by choice or by sinning, and invariably leads to legalism (an emphasis on keeping laws to retain salvation).

The second extreme is to say that humanity plays no part at all in salvation or condemnation. Many go to this extreme to uphold the sovereignty of God and to avoid giving any glory to an individual for his or her salvation. While this is a noble end—one I appreciate—it nevertheless leads to equally nonbiblical conclusions. This extreme

- places the liability for an individual's condemnation entirely on God,
- leads to the conclusion that God is culpable for evil,
- suggests that humanity has no stake at all in God's plan to redeem the world, and
- invariably leads to fatalism (an underemphasis on human responsibility) and paralysis.



History is replete with examples of people who took this issue to one extreme or another, causing evangelism to suffer as a result. Those who emphasized God's sovereignty and neglected human responsibility concluded that those predestined to believe would come to Christ whether Christians proclaimed the good news or not. Foreign evangelism remained idle for decades until William Carey, who upheld the Calvinist emphasis on God's sovereign election of believers, took his brothers by the theological lapels and shook some sense into them.

Those who emphasized the responsibility of humanity and ignored God's sovereign choosing adopted every means of manipulation imaginable to coerce individuals into trusting Christ. Now we have entire denominations unwittingly proclaiming, "God helps those who help themselves." They add deeds to grace and saddle members with the responsibility to preserve their justification.

As an intern under the tutelage of Ray Stedman at Peninsula Bible Church, I served alongside a fellow intern. If the man cleared his throat, it was because God led him to clear his throat. If he spit, God led him to spit. If he belched, God led him to belch. And if he sinned, somehow God was even in that!

I, on the other hand, was more comfortable with the Wesleyan emphasis on human free will. Living honorably and obediently was all about what I do. So I ran on the spiritual treadmill like a dutiful Christian, certain that I could become more and more spirit minded by my efforts. And since the man lived with us the entire summer, oh, how we argued. Cynthia finally asked, "Can we please have supper rather than solve the mysteries of the universe?"

Eventually my dear friend balanced out, and Ray helped me dig deeper into the Scriptures to find the right perspective. He got my attention by asking a surprising question. "Chuck, what are you so afraid of? Why are you so afraid of the doctrine of God's sovereignty?"

I blinked, looked out the window, down at my feet, and then back into Ray's eyes. "I'm afraid I'll lose my zeal for the lost. I'm afraid that if I really do believe this, I'll become passive as a minister, that I'll leave everything to God to sort out the elect, and I will do nothing."

Ray said, "You need to remember Spurgeon, the sovereign-grace Baptist, who said, 'If God had painted a stripe down the back of the elect, I'd spend my days walking up and down the streets of London lifting up shirttails. But because He said, "Whosoever wills may come," I preach the gospel to everyone. And I rely on Him to lead those to faith who are His.'"

That was a great help. The longer I serve God in ministry, the more comfort I find in the doctrine of God's sovereign choosing. Rather than making me passive, confidence in God's complete control has freed me to proclaim the good news with even more zeal and greater freedom. And I am less burdened with whether I am "successful" or not. My responsibility is to be faithful; He's responsible for the results.

To God be the glory!