

Foreknowledge and Predestination

Romans 8:29b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

“What makes him tick?” You know the expression? Usually you mean, what makes him talk the way he talks? What makes him live the way he lives? What makes him think the way he thinks? You really mean, what is the idea or the opinion that motivates him in everything in his life? Is it the desire to be rich? Is it a dreadful fear of people? Is it a desire to be successful? Normally, that's what we mean when we ask the question, “What makes him tick?”

In 57 AD, Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome. In three chapters of it he described three different kinds of people according to what made them tick. In chapter six he described a human being that lives for himself -- or for herself -- that lives to get their own way, to defend their own rights, to do what they want to do. In chapter six he describes a group of people who are dominated by the power of sin. The middle letter of the word 'sin' is what makes them tick.

Next, in chapter seven, he described a group of human beings who live not to get their own way, but to do good. They just live to do good. They live to achieve certain goals and to meet certain standards that they have in their minds. They're dominated not by the power of sin, but they're dominated by the power of law.

Then in chapter eight, which is the chapter that we're studying these months, he describes a group of people who are driven not by the desire to defend themselves, and not for the desire to do good, but they are governed by an invisible Spirit within them that tells them what to do moment-by-moment -- and gives them a desire to do it. This Spirit is just called, “the Spirit”. It's the same Spirit that guided Jesus of Nazareth, and it's the very life Spirit that energizes our Creator. Those human beings are led by this Spirit. As they are led by this Spirit -- rather than dominated by a desire to live up to certain standards, or by desire to get their own way -- this Spirit gives them a love for their Creator that is beyond anything they've ever had in their lives. At the same time, their Creator works with them in their lives to bring about good. So as they respond to this Spirit within them, so the Maker of the universe himself works with them and works to bring about every event and circumstance in their lives so that it works good for them.

Paul says, “We know that this happens not simply because of the past experiences of people who have been guided by this Spirit, but we know it also because of the fact that this great Maker knew how they would respond to his Spirit. Before they ever did he knew how they would respond to it and he therefore, predestined them to be conformed to the image of his Son.” He's working ahead of the game all the time. That's why Paul says, “You can know that this Maker is working together with these people for good in their lives, because he has predestined them to be conformed to his Son's image. He knows what's coming up in their lives and so every event, however stray it may appear, every circumstance, however unexpected it may seem, has been foreseen by this Maker. He's using it to bring about conformity to his Son Jesus in their lives.” And so, their lives take on an order and a meaningfulness that most human lives lack.

Now loved ones, I think it's important to grasp that. It's the plain simple meaning of the heavy,

heavy verse, Romans 8:29. That's the plain simple meaning of it. Now maybe we should look at the verse itself, and then I'll just repeat it so that we're clear on it before we get into the difficult stuff. Romans 8:29, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren." Now that's a simple encouragement to all of us who live in submission to this Spirit that we've talked of. It's a simple encouragement to us from God: "I knew you would be where you are this morning. I knew you would be as you are this morning. I knew that and I know what's going to come to you this afternoon. I have predestined you to be conformed to my Son's image -- and whatever it is, be assured of this, I'm going to show you how it can be used to make you more like Jesus." That's the simple encouragement.

Before we get into all kinds of theological issues, it's just a very simple encouragement to all of us here who live in submission to the Spirit of Jesus. God is saying, "I knew you would be here this morning. I knew you would be as you are this morning. Moreover, I know what's going to happen to you this afternoon, and I know what's going to happen to you 20 years hence, and I am working it all to make you like my Son Jesus -- so no event is stray for me. No circumstance is unexpected for me. I know how I'm going use it when it comes up. Just listen to me and I'll tell you what to do." I think that's just the simple message of the verse. I think that we can all grasp that. Even a little leaguer could grasp that.

Now let's go into the old twilight zone where these miserable little finite minds find before them a huge gulf that separates them from the infinite mind of the Creator. Let's see, loved ones, that if you're a creature and he is the Creator it is reasonable to expect that there are some things that you might not understand. It is reasonable to expect that there will be partial insight by our little minds.

Now I said "a little leaguer" purposely, because every little leaguer knows that there are dumb dads and there are sharp dads. Every little leaguer knows that a sharp dad watches his little son throw the ball, pick the first ball up and throw it. And the dad sees, "That fella has potential. I'm going to arrange my Saturdays and his Saturdays so that we can have some time practicing together on the baseball diamond." That's a sharp dad. A dumb dad is one who sees the little fella look at the ball and pass it by, not want to lift it all and have no interest in baseball bats. But the dad says, "He's gonna be a little leaguer should it kill me, whether he wants to or not." The dumb dad doesn't use his foreknowledge at all. He doesn't read the little guy and see what his potential is. He just does what he wants to do with his little son. We all know the result.

In other words, even the youngest one here knows that you can't make people what they don't want to be. You can't make people do what they're not capable of doing. Our whole educational system is built on the basis of foreknowledge. That's why we have to suffer the old ACT tests and all the rest of it. The whole educational system is built on the principle that you can look at a person and you can foreknow, in some sense, the kind of people that they could be, or the kind of people that they couldn't be. Then you pre-design their education so that you develop those capabilities that you've seen within them. Indeed, you would admit loved ones, that here in our own lives foreknowledge is very basic to everything we do. You look at a thing and you size it up as best you can, and then you design your own plan in the light of that.

Now loved ones, I think that's the first basic fact to get very clear in our minds when we talk about predestination. Here in Romans 8:29, you can see that God is not a dumb dad. He does not look at us and say [pointing to different people in the audience], "You will be a child of mine.

You won't. You will be a daughter of mine. You won't. You will be a son of mine. You won't." He doesn't. The Bible plainly says in Romans 8:29, "Whom God foreknows he predestines." So here it's stated very plainly that there is no predestination apart from foreknowledge. God looks and he foreknows what is going to take place in a person's life, or what a person is going to be like and he predestines in the light of that.

Now maybe it's good just to see that. Would you look at Romans 8:29, loved ones, and just let it burn itself very clearly into your own mind, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to conformed to the image of his Son." So there is no predestination apart from foreknowledge. Foreknowledge comes first and then predestination comes in the light of that. God is not a domineering dictator. He is not out to make us "Skinner-type" robots, or to make our lives utterly dominated by his will. He is a loving Father who looks at his dear children and sees what way they're going to respond to his Spirit, and then he acts in the light of that.

Loved ones, just before going into the details of it, I would ask you to look at the reasonableness of it. If we can invent computers that can calculate all the possible permutations, variations, and variables in a certain situation, then surely the One who has created everything from which we even make our computers is able to calculate an infinite number of variables, an infinite number of contingencies in our lives and foreknow what is going to happen.

Now let's engage in an exercise in futility. This is what it is. This is part of the foolishness of preaching I think that we're about. [Pointing to hand-drawn pictures.] There is infinity. But that's dumb because eternity is not just endless time. Eternity is timelessness. So, really you can't say that that's eternity, that's eternity, or that's eternity. You can't picture eternity so what we're involved in here is using anthropomorphisms of all kinds. Using men's and women's picture language to talk about things that we cannot really talk about. We're really on the edge of the twilight zone -- so just be patient and understanding.

Here [pointing] is eternity appearing. Now at this point, this is pre-creation. At this point God exists in love with his Son and the Holy Spirit. God exists in love in a loving family with his Son and with the Holy Spirit. It's silly -- even to talk this way -- because God does not think in sequence. He does not execute in sequence. He does nothing in sequence. He sees everything in one great eternal moment because he is the great eternal Person himself. So for him, there is no past, and there is no present and there is no future. There are no points in time, let alone points in eternity, which is a contradiction. But for the sake of our own understanding, let us think of it that way. God exists in love with his Son and the Holy Spirit.

At this point, he conceives his plan to share that loving fellowship with other persons who will be free like him and to whom he will offer the Holy Spirit, his own life. At that point he conceives of that. I'd just remind you that it's foolish even to talk in those terms because the whole thing occurred in one great moment in the great mind of our Maker. But he conceives his plan to share the loving fellowship that he enjoys with his Son and the Holy Spirit -- to share it with other beings who will be free like him (and that's key) and to whom he will offer the Holy Spirit his own life. That Holy Spirit will make them like himself and enable them to share love with him.

At this point, God conceives that they will be capable of refusing the Holy Spirit and rebelling against him. Certainly, we can see how our infinite Creator could conceive that these free beings that he would make would be capable of refusing the Holy Spirit and rebelling against him. At this point, he conceives the need to put their rebellious hearts in his Son Jesus and destroy them there.

His Son at once accepts the cross in his Father's heart. (From time-to-time, I'll put Bible quotations which are hard verses or difficult verses and those will be explained by these paragraphs.) So at that point he conceives the need to put their rebellious hearts in his Son Jesus and destroy them there, and his Son at once accepts the cross in his Father's heart. So God saw the need to do something about this rebellion that he saw could take place -- and his Son agreed immediately. Because they are one with each other in will, he agreed to do it.

At this point, God conceives that he can give the Holy Spirit only to those who accept their position in his Son. In other words, God sees, "The power of this Holy Spirit is so great that I cannot give it anyone who refuses to let their rebellious heart be destroyed in my Son Jesus." So he sees that he can give the Holy Spirit only to those who accept their position in his Son Jesus. At this point he conceives that he must withdraw the grace of light and a penitent heart from those who refuse his Son's Spirit. So, he sees he must do the opposite. Those who don't accept the position that he's offering them in Jesus, he must withdraw from them the grace of light in a penitent heart. That will help to explain some of those heart-hardening verses in connection with Pharaoh.

At this point, he conceives the plan for the first two free moral agents, Adam and Eve. He knows them better than they know themselves. He foreknows what decisions they will make but refuses to compromise their free wills by preventing those decisions. You see that? God conceives the plan of making two free moral agents, Adam and Eve and conceives the fact that will make decisions that may frustrate his purpose. But in order to preserve the key characteristic of himself, freedom and self-determination, he determines not to prevent those decisions. That explains why often things happen that aren't God's best will, but he's trying to preserve free will, and let those things happen. At this point, he foreknows all the people that will be born, how they will bring up their children, and how they will all respond to his Spirit.

See loved ones, if you once allow that there is an infinite eternal mind, you have to see that that is possible. You have to see that God is not one who has to play the game out before he sees how it will work. He is capable of conceiving the infinite number of variables in your life, the infinite number of contingent decisions that you will make. He is capable of doing that. If we with our computers can do it in some sense for our machines, certainly the Father can. That helps to explain names written in the book of life, remember, "from before the foundation of the world". And then, "Whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." Then in Genesis 1:1 time begins. He creates the heavens and earth.

Now you need to think of it a little. But loved ones, I think that's part of what Romans 8:29 means, that God is able to foreknow everything that happens -- and then he is not able to prevent it happening, but he is able to work with it one way or another. Those whom he foreknows will respond to his Son's Spirit. He predestines them. He pre-designs them. He designs them to be conformed to the image of his Son. He says, "If they will respond to my Spirit, I will work to conform them to my Son's image." But loved ones, the Father cannot do anything. He cannot use anybody who will not exercise their own free will. He can only use even people who oppose him in accordance with their free wills.

Now it might be good to look at an example of that, loved ones. It's in Isaiah 10:5-7. It's one instance of God using an evil king to discipline the Israelites because of their hypocrisy. Isaiah 10:5, "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread

them down like the mire of the streets.” But then you see that God is not making Assyria do that, “But he does not so intend, and his mind does not so think; but it is in his mind to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few.” And so God only uses Assyria because Assyria, the king of Assyria himself wanted to do that.

And then in Verse 12 you find God confirming that, “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride.” So God will then actually punish Assyria for their very pride that God used against his people Israel, to discipline them, but God cannot make you do anything that you do not want to do.

So honestly loved ones, it is difficult to read the Bible any other way except to see that God knows where you are at this very moment. He knows how you are going to decide things this afternoon. He knows what you will be doing in 20 years’ time. That is good for all of us who submit to him. But some of you may be sitting and saying, “Well, how will we know whether we are among those who are foreknown as responding to Jesus Spirit, and therefore are predestined to be conformed to his image or are not?”

Loved ones, you’ll know only one way: by the present disposition of your will -- by the present disposition of your will. You can know this very moment whether you’re heading towards life or death by the present disposition of your will. It is absolutely your free decision and responsibility. He says, “Behold I set before you life and death, choose life that you may live.” So loved ones, really everything depends on our own free will, and the exercise of our own free will. If you say to me at this moment, “Yeah, but God foreknows what I’m going to do this afternoon.” Yes, if you exercise your will in the best way you know how -- he foreknows that. But he cannot make that happen. You alone can make things happen in your life. He only reads you. That’s all he does. He’s able to read you.

So loved ones, will you think about it a little? I think it would be better to think about it then to have questions this morning because you need to let some of that sink into you. We’ll talk a bit more about it next Sunday -- but you must admit it is quite shattering in a way, isn’t it? To think that some of you have already decided how you’re going to live your lives and there’s someone in the universe who can see that? I would urge you loved ones there – really. I know there’s only attitude I have in my own heart and I’m saying to myself, “I’m going after every little piece of light he shows me. I’m going to set my will his way, whatever.” And I pray you’ll feel the same way.

Let us pray: Almighty God, our own minds just stumble as we think of you being able to foreknow everything that we will do. And yet Lord, we see in our own lives that we can foreknow without making a person do anything. So we see, Lord, that foreknowledge is not fore-ordination. It is not you making us do the thing. All you can do is read us. But Lord, it seems shattering to think even now, that we can be read that clearly. So Lord, we would pray now for each other this morning. Our mind is just in awe when we think of this whole truth, and our mind is just baffled by the mystery of it. But Lord, we do know that we want to fulfill the purpose that you’ve made us for.

Lord, we want to please you. We do want your dreams to be made real in our hearts. And so Lord, all we can say is that we cannot deal with 20 years hence. We cannot waste our time trying to plumb your infinite mind to find out whether we are among those who respond to your Spirit or not. Lord, all we have control of is this present moment. All we can do is say, “Father, you’ve been showing me something in my life for some time and I’ve been evading it. I don’t want to be a person who evades it forever and is lost. I want to stop evading it this very morning. Father, I want to put myself on

your side. I want to begin to respond to this Spirit of Jesus that makes life have meaning and have value.”

Father, we would give ourselves to you now. We would ask you to give us your Holy Spirit so that we may live our lives this coming week and in the coming months in submission to this dear Spirit so that you could begin to use every event in our lives to make us like Jesus.