

S T U D Y   G U I D E



# Predestination

by R.C. Sproul



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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# Introduction

In the Book of Ephesians, Paul explains that God chose us before the foundation of the world and that He did so on the basis of the good pleasure of His will. Elsewhere in Scripture it is revealed that election is not based upon the works of any man but simply upon God's choice. God is compared to a potter who has power over the clay to make from the same lump one vessel for honor and another for dishonor.

There is perhaps no theological concept with which human beings have more difficulty than the biblical doctrine of predestination. Many Christians will say that they believe in the sovereignty of God, but they will implicitly or explicitly deny the sovereignty of God in our salvation by denying this electing work of God. It is claimed that the Augustinian-Reformed doctrine of predestination is unfair and that it means God is unrighteous. The objections are not new. The Apostle Paul faced and answered the exact same objections to his doctrine.

As we examine this difficult topic together, may this series enable you to grow in your knowledge of the sovereignty of God, and may it encourage you to live and worship in light of that understanding.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R.C. Sproul". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "S" at the end.

R.C. Sproul

# The Inevitable Question

## MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of predestination engenders more theological debate than virtually any other doctrine in Christianity. Christians not only debate the meaning of the doctrine itself, but also debate when and if and how it should be taught. In this lesson, Dr. Sproul introduces this difficult doctrine and explains why it is not peripheral but central to our understanding of Christianity.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to explain some of the controversial stands taken on the doctrine of predestination
2. To be able to explain why extreme care must be used when discussing the doctrine of predestination
3. To understand why every church that takes the authority of Scripture seriously has a doctrine of predestination

## QUOTATIONS

*Let them remember that when they inquire into predestination they are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit.*

—John Calvin

*We think that this doctrine should be neither wholly suppressed from a preposterous modesty nor curiously pried into by a rash presumption. Rather it should be taught soberly and prudently from the word of God so that two dangerous rocks may be avoided: on the one hand, that of “affected ignorance” which wishes to see nothing and blinds itself purposely in things revealed; on the other, that of “unwarrantable curiosity” which busies itself to see and understand everything even in mysteries. . . . Against both, we maintain (with the orthodox) that predestination can be taught with profit, provided this is done soberly from the word of God.*

—Francis Turretin

## LECTURE OUTLINE

### A. Introduction

1. One book reports that the average life expectancy for lieutenants leading Marines in the South Pacific island battles of World War II was approximately five and a half minutes.
2. According to Dr. Sproul, it seems that the average time it takes a seminarian, newly arrived on campus, to get embroiled in a debate over predestination is also approximately five and a half minutes.
3. No doctrine engenders more debate than the doctrine of predestination.
4. People are not only divided about their views on predestination, but are also divided about how the doctrine should be treated.
  - a. Some are convinced that the doctrine should never be discussed because it inevitably ends in godless controversy and useless debate, and because it has no spiritually edifying value.
  - b. Others say that the doctrine is so profoundly important to our understanding of salvation that it would be a matter of wicked neglect to ignore or to denigrate in any way the importance of this doctrine.
5. Martin Luther called the doctrine of predestination the *cor ecclesium*—the “heart of the church.”
6. The doctrine of predestination is not peripheral; instead, it belongs at the very heart of our understanding of Christianity.
7. Great care must be taken when discussing the doctrine of predestination because it is so easily distorted.
  - a. The misunderstandings surrounding predestination can lead us into such a distorted view of God that God becomes almost demonic.
  - b. This doctrine can also lead us into such an exalted view of man that man becomes demonic in his quest to become God.
  - c. It would be better to say nothing at all than to give such a superficial response that it could lead to more serious confusion.

### B. Every biblically based church has a doctrine of predestination.

1. Historically, virtually every denomination and virtually every church that has had a confession of faith or creed has developed some doctrine of predestination.
2. Every Christian who has ever lived has had some doctrine of predestination.
3. Every church has some doctrine of predestination, but not every church has the same doctrine of predestination.
4. The reason every church has a doctrine of predestination and every Christian has a doctrine of predestination is that the Bible has a doctrine of predestination.
5. Any church body or individual who is trying to take the content of the New Testament seriously must struggle with the doctrine of predestination at some point.
  - a. The word “predestination” itself is found in the New Testament; therefore, those who are persuaded of the authority of Scripture must have some understanding of the doctrine.

- b. The Bible teaches the doctrine of predestination openly, frequently, and clearly.
- C. Ephesians 1:1–14
1. Imagine that you are a first-century Ephesian Christian hearing this for the first time.
  2. In verse 4, Paul says that God “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.”
  3. In verse 5, Paul says that we have been “predestined” to adoption as sons.
  4. In verse 11, Paul says that we have been “predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.”
  5. At the very outset of this epistle, Paul plunges into the depths of the doctrine of predestination, and he makes it central to his teaching.
  6. Paul is not talking generally about God’s providence here in Ephesians 1; he is talking about salvation.
  7. From before the foundation of the world, we who are believers were ordained by God to be saved.

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. No doctrine engenders more debate than the doctrine of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. God
  - b. Predestination
  - c. Repentance
  - d. Hell
2. Some are convinced that the doctrine of predestination should never be discussed because they believe it inevitably ends in \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Godless controversy
  - b. Bloodshed
  - c. Heresy
  - d. Ecclesiastical abuses
3. Others say that the doctrine is so profoundly important to our understanding of salvation that it would be a matter of \_\_\_\_\_ to ignore or to denigrate in any way the importance of this doctrine.
  - a. Incompetence
  - b. Wicked neglect
  - c. Profound ignorance
  - d. Mental instability
4. Who called the doctrine of predestination the *cor ecclesium*—the “heart of the church”?
  - a. John Wycliffe
  - b. Cardinal Cajetan
  - c. Desiderius Erasmus
  - d. Martin Luther

5. The misunderstandings surrounding predestination can lead us into such a distorted view of God that God becomes almost \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Demonic
  - b. Anthropomorphic
  - c. Unapproachable
  - d. Incomprehensible
  
6. It would be better to say nothing at all about predestination than to give a response so \_\_\_\_\_ that it could lead to more serious confusion.
  - a. Comprehensive
  - b. Augustinian
  - c. Superficial
  - d. Theological
  
7. What churches have a doctrine of predestination?
  - a. Calvinist churches
  - b. All churches
  - c. Lutheran and Calvinist churches
  - d. All Protestant churches
  
8. Why do churches and individual Christians have to deal with predestination?
  - a. Because the Bible speaks of predestination.
  - b. Because a correct understanding of this doctrine is essential to salvation.
  - c. Because controversy is good.
  - d. Because arguing about predestination is a Christian tradition.

## BIBLE STUDY

Carefully read Ephesians 1:1-14, and answer the following questions.

1. How many times is “in Him” or a related phrase used in this passage of Scripture? What is the significance of this phrase in this text?
2. According to verse 3, what has God done for us? What are the blessings named in verses 4-14?
3. According to verses 4-5, when did God choose us? On what basis did God choose us? To what end did He choose us?
4. What is God’s ultimate goal, according to verse 10?
5. In verse 11, what does Paul say is the basis of predestination?

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it necessary to exercise the greatest care when discussing the doctrine of predestination? What are some of the dangers involved?
2. How should the doctrine of predestination be treated? Is it a peripheral issue? Is an understanding of the doctrine necessary for salvation?
3. Why must every church and individual Christian eventually deal with predestination? Had you explored the doctrine before taking this course? Will you give it more or less attention now? Why?

## APPLICATION

1. Reread Ephesians 1:1–14 several times during the following week. Ask yourself whether you have given the same amount of weight to God’s sovereign purposes in election as Paul did. If you have neglected this aspect of New Testament teaching, determine to study it more and to do so in a balanced manner.
2. Meditate upon the blessings and the inheritance for which God has chosen you in Christ. Thank God for these immeasurable benefits.
3. In Ephesians, Paul does not discuss predestination as an abstract theological concept. God chose us “that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (v. 4). Reflect on what this means. Is an unholy, unloving life consistent with the doctrine of election?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

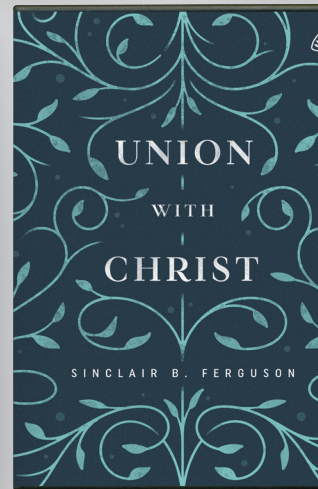
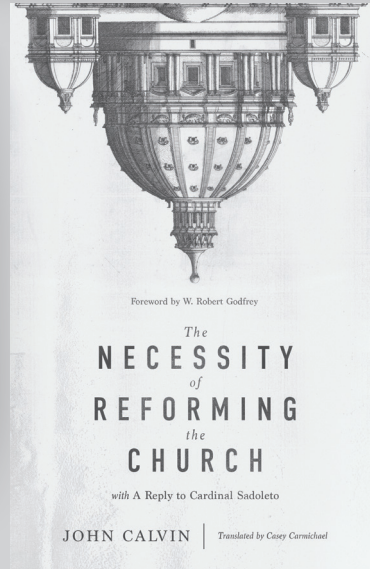
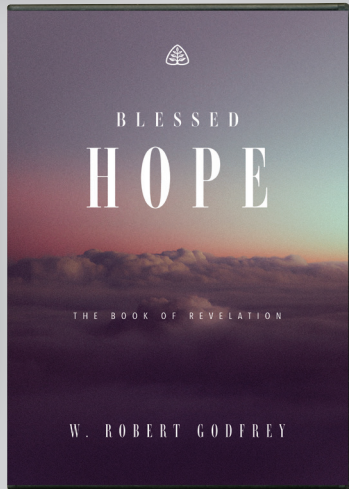
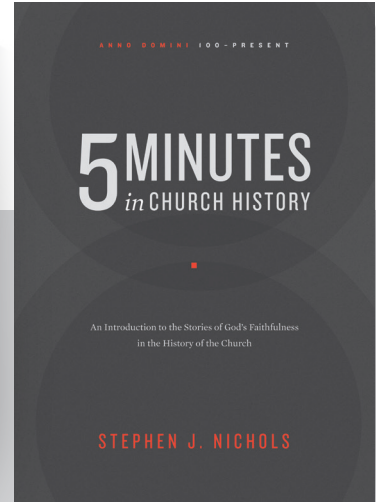
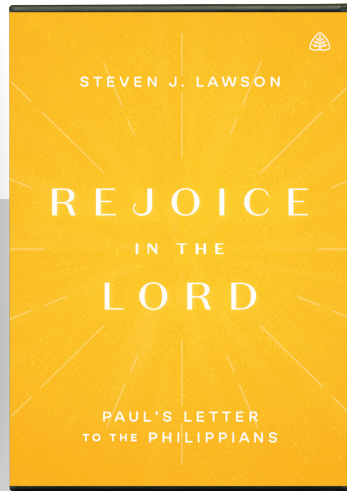
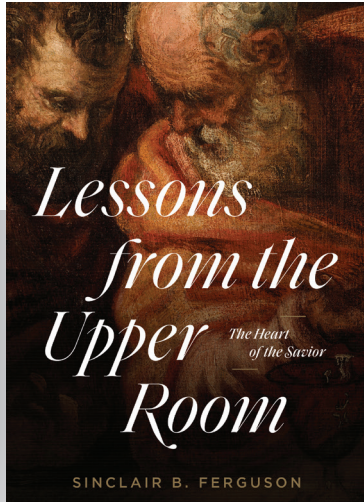
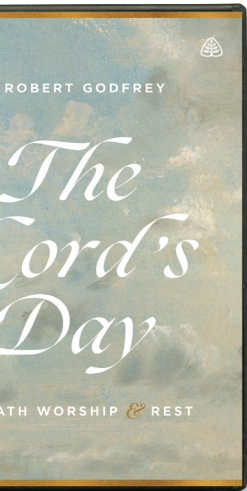
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