

Are Only 144,000 Saved?

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

Julia and Joe leaned against the front grill and bumper of her car on the large parking lot of a grocery store. It was 10:20 on a Friday night, and Julia's friend, Danielle, had gone with Joe's friend, Tom, for a cruise down the avenue in the train of forty other cars driven by their high school peers. When Joe looked across four lanes of traffic, he noticed the marquee at the church across the street: Sunday's Message: "Will You Be Among the Saved?"

"I wonder what the preacher will say about that on Sunday morning?" he wondered aloud.

"Are you interested enough to go?" Julia asked.

"I don't think so," he replied, "but it's an interesting question."

"Yeah," Julia said, "maybe it has more angles to it than even the preacher thinks."

"How do you mean?" inquired Joe.

"My grandmother once told me that in the book of Revelation somewhere it says that the number of those saved will be 144,000. I figure that's two good-sized college or pro football stadiums' worth. And, if you only take the two thousand years since Jesus, that's an average of seventy-two people per year, not to mention the fact that the average will be decreasing for every year that time goes on."

"Hmmm . . ." murmured Joe. "Worldwide that's not very many."

"Not too many," said Julia.

"Think about a million people sometimes turning out to see the Pope when he travels out to visit different countries," Joe suggested.

"Less than one out of five, and that's if no one else from any other century is saved," Julia wryly noted.

"Just think," Joe calculated. "If that preacher takes Revelation literally, maybe no one he'll be preaching to on Sunday will be saved in the end."

"Odds are," Julia responded. "Hey! That Toyota almost hit that Honda!"

When Julia's grandmother said that the book of Revelation says somewhere that the number of those saved will be 144,000, she was referring to Revelation 14:1-5. We'll specifically consider the book of Revelation in the next chapter, but Julia and Joe (and the preacher of the sermon advertised on the marquee), whether they were aware of it or not, were considering what theologians call the "inner workings" of God as God goes about the processes of creating and accomplishing salvation.

Looking at the "inner workings" of God is tricky business. After all, "who has known the mind of the Lord?"¹ But let's be bold and try "to go there." Let's do so, though, aware of the difficulty and conscious of the limits in such an effort.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN PREDESTINATION?

The church marquee Julia and Joe saw read "Will You Be Among the Saved?" This could imply that there is a fixed, predetermined number of "the saved." Julia's grandmother had heard that the Bible fixed the number of the saved at 144,000.

Do Presbyterians believe in a fixed, predetermined group of "the saved"? Sometimes people say, yes, Presbyterians do believe this because they believe in "predestination." Well, do Presbyterians believe in predestination? The short answer is that Presbyterians don't *believe in* predestination; they *believe only in* God. The longer answer is more complex,

though, because Presbyterians believe God always knows more than we can know.

At the heart of Reformed and Presbyterian faith-tradition is the understanding that God is always greater than we can ever imagine. (Some would use the word "sovereign" to describe this greater-than-creation aspect of God.) God, then, is the One who has "the first word and the last word" (Genesis 1:3 and Revelation 1:8) and who is present for all the words and actions, all the developments and lives in between.

Therefore predestination is not a notion that anyone needs to avoid, as if accused of witchcraft or polygamy or illicit sex. We do need to say that predestination is not a definite answer to a question like, How does God know who's saved? Predestination is, rather, one explanation of God in God's relational greatness that does not ignore God's great gift of human freedom.

Presbyterian-types believe that God has given humanity the tremendous gift of freedom. It simply would be a mistake, though, to argue that human beings are "absolutely free 'moral agents'" as some groups in the church (such as the Pelagians and Arminians) have wanted to argue across the centuries.² This somewhat philosophical interpretation historically has differentiated Presbyterians from our Baptist (and, later, our Methodist) cousins more than any other element of the faith we share (though there are more such "sovereignty-of-God-inclinations" among some Baptist-types than others).

Predestination does not mean that God has preprogrammed every action or that God necessarily even knows or has a purpose ahead of time for every development and action. (Although it is often said, especially in the aftermath of a horrific occurrence: "Everything happens for some purpose God has in mind." What mindless phrases we say when no words would be better than the words we end up saying! Remember Luke 13:1-5 mentioned in chapter 2.)

If God knows "the first and the last," God may well have decided to allow circumstances and genetics and randomness to constitute and play a major role in the universe. God may even have decided to set certain boundaries on God's own involvement in creation or with people. God may have chosen never to "manipulate" circumstances or may have chosen to become involved in circumstances only in a limited fashion. Or just the

God is a great surgeon.

opposite: God may, when God chooses, always manipulate situations and circumstances.

In what ways has God chosen and does God choose to be involved with God's people? These are open-ended questions, the answers to which lie "in the mind of the Lord" only. According to the biblical witness, though, it's unmistakable that God is capable of knowing "the first word and the last word"; and God is insistent on drawing near to God's people in judgment and with mercy, all for the health and the wholeness of those people.

A next question might well be:

DO PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE THAT SOME ARE SAVED AND SOME ARE DAMNED?

This question is similar to the question asked in chapter 2, "Do Presbyterians believe the Bible is the literal word of God?" Much like what was said in response to that question, Presbyterians through the centuries have believed differently from one another on the question of "some being saved and some being damned."

In the 1500s, the theologian John Calvin, gathering clues particularly from certain New Testament passages (such as Romans 8:28–38 and Ephesians 1:3–14), argued that God had chosen some people to be saved (the phrase used then was "elected some to salvation").³ These people who had been chosen for salvation were called to live out that salvation as witnesses to God's glory in their earthly lives. This is the original meaning of "predestination," that some have been chosen by God from the beginning to live as witnesses to God's saving power. Because the emphasis of this view falls on one side of the equation—on salvation and those who are chosen to be saved—this is sometimes called "single predestination."

But, if some people are chosen for salvation, does it not logically follow that some other people are chosen *not* to be saved? Calvin, and especially students of Calvin who lived after him, began to develop this two-sided logic: God has chosen some for salvation, and others (logically speaking) God has damned.⁴ Because this deals with both the "saved" and the "damned," this is called "double predestination," and a key Presbyterian creedal statement, the Westminster Confession of 1647 (a hundred years after Calvin, and from England rather than Calvin's Switzerland), affirms this theological perspective (some "saved" and others "unable to be saved") as the wisdom and will of God.⁵

However, not all Presbyterians have rested easy with either the single or the double predestination ideas. In 1903, the Presbyterian Church of the

United States of America wrestled with this whole business of predestination, finally arriving at something like a modified "single predestination" affirmation.⁶ Even though this affirmation claims that it is God who saves and it is God who chooses those who are saved, it also leaves room for human freedom and decision-making in the "living out" of that election. This more flexible and free interpretation allows for a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit, mission outreach, and evangelism as crucial parts of the church's ministry in Jesus' name.

In recent years, more and more people—including possibly a large number of Presbyterians—have expressed a view of salvation that can be called "biblical universalism." "Biblical universalism" is distinct from "relativistic universalism," which says "everybody is saved because everybody is okay as a human being." "Biblical universalism" says, rather, that all fall short of God's intentions and are sinners (Romans 3:23). Everyone is, in fact, damned by the nature of being human and the way each lives out that humanity in sinful and destructive ways (more about this in chapter 8 on "sin" and "repentance"). The "flip side of that coin" is that God's saving activity in covenant with Israel and known in Jesus has an extremely far-reaching (even "universal"! effect. This could be so far-reaching that, in the mystery of God's love, which cannot be earned, all will be saved because that is God's will!

Literalists, of course, argue, "What then do we make of biblical references to the 'fires of hell' (Matthew 5:22; 7:19; 18:8; 25:41; Revelation 29:14)?" We've already noted that literal interpretations of many scriptures are problematic. However, we've also recognized that there are parts of everyone's character that we prefer not to have illuminated by the mind and character of God, before whom (the prayers of the church tell us) "no secrets are hid" (paraphrasing Psalm 44:21).

Speaking of the secrets of our character and this debate of "saved to heaven" and "damned to hell," there are attitudes within us that God can diagnose long before we have a clue. Put another way, some of our attitudes and their consequences are secrets to us, even though God fully knows how we stand (or fall!) in those matters.

A Presbyterian minister by the name of John Danhof was visiting a church as a guest lecturer. During a question-and-response time following the lecture, a member of the congregation puzzled over whatever Danhof had suggested. "Dr. Danhof," the man said, "if I sit down at the banquet table in heaven and have, sitting across from me, someone with whom I strongly disagree politically and have, sitting to my left and right, people I never wanted to live next to on earth, I don't think I'm going to like that very much."

"You could be right," Dr. Danhof responded. "That could just be hell for you!"

Are we saying here, then, that there is no literal hell or literal heaven? We are saying that if one means that a literal hell and literal heaven have a literal location on the map of the universe, then, yes, there is no such spatial location either for punishment or reward. We are not saying without a doubt that there is no spiritual hell or heaven, but that there are at least unanswerable questions about how these realities exist.

Many Presbyterians, in good conscience, believe it's helpful to speak of God's judgment and mercy as two sides of the same saving sword (or scalpel!) in God's relating to God's people (Isaiah 49:2; Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 1:16; 2:12,16; 19:15). All "fall under" the surgery of God who is "operating" on us all through life (and beyond?!) with the gracious "scalpel" of judgment and mercy.

Of course, this is a matter of faith. You can't prove God is this way, nor can anyone else; yet "biblical universalism" takes God's saving nature and people's sinful nature with absolute seriousness, including the notion that our personal decisions (even our decisions "accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior") do not and cannot save us.

ELECTED TO WHAT?

If, then, God mysteriously and graciously elects or chooses us for salvation because God loves us so much and is so passionately willing to seek us out in life with that salvation, we may well ask, what are we elected to?

Moving away from the heaven and hell afterlife categories, most Presbyterian-types would concede that there's plenty of hell to worry about and, we hope, plenty of heaven to celebrate in the earthly here and now.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order* states that God elects God's people both "for service and for salvation,"⁷ which means that God freely chooses God's people both (1) so they may receive grace in life for healing and wholeness and (2) so they will serve God among God's people, this for upbuilding the larger community which is God's world.

In spite of the givenness of human limitations and sin in areas such as ability, emotion, character, actions, and relationships, there is apparently no place God is unwilling to go in order to comfort, strengthen, encourage, and save God's people.⁸ If there is no place God will not go to save God's people, surely there's no place God will not accompany God's people who are serving others as God calls them to serve.

Yet there's a distinction we need clearly to make. It's between serving others and living with an agenda for others. Living with an agenda for others is self-motivated and self-serving. Serving as the Lord of heaven and earth calls us to serve demonstrates an openness that is not manipulative but rather leads each one to be available for serving others respectfully and for serving with others respectfully. We're called to serve in this way, realizing that such others may, or may never, recognize God's grace blessing in whatever ways God's grace does bless them. Such others may, or may never, respond publicly to God with gratitude. Such others may, or may never, change their lives to be "more Christian" in our judgment. Such others may, or may never, culturally be "as we are" or in agreement with us on matters of faith and practice.

And if God is truly sovereign, it also can be said that God works where there is no naming of God's name, that God works among those who don't "know God" as we have experienced God, and that God works where we believers do not perceive or understand God to be working. This understanding of God who is truly sovereign allows God to be truly God on God's terms, not according to our understanding of God. It does not take away our freedom of choice in life-decisions, nor does it take away the component of human choice from the complex makeup of the universe. This understanding does deny that we humans ever have the power to "save" ourselves with our own choices.

WHY WE SERVE IN GOD'S WORLD!

For Presbyterians, even before there was such a name, some of God's people have understood themselves as called to honor a God who . . .

- knew them before they knew God;
- is known through the revelations of God's self, particularly through Israel and in Jesus, but who still remains mysterious and at the deepest level incomprehensible;
- goes anywhere for the health and salvation of God's people; and
- is passionately "for" human beings with the destiny of their salvation and wholeness ever in mind, even when having that destiny in mind can only be thought of as a "pre-destiny" or "predestination"!

Julia and Joe are on target to think it is rather limiting for God to save only 144,000 people. The question for Joe and Julia and each one of the

rest of us is more than a speculative question of whether God knows ahead of time about our salvation or not, or whether our salvation depends on our choice exercised decisively at one definable moment or not. The question of importance for all of us every day is, How will we honor the God who has created life as holy, as worth redeeming, and as worth loving from its best moments to its worst?

Even if Joe and Julia choose not to be excited about the preaching or the biblical interpretation at the church across the street from the grocery store parking lot, Presbyterians would hope they become excited about serving God who knows them and passionately desires their discipleship. For God also knows their destiny as people of God to be healed and made whole in and by God's grace.

So What Do *You* Think?

1. Can you remember a time when you clearly and definitely thought that God directly caused something to happen—like a change in the weather, a recovery from illness, or a history teacher *not* giving a pop quiz? Do you still believe as you did at that time? Why? Or why not?

2. If you were God and you knew how much trouble and suffering are in the world, would you intervene to stop all the pain? Why? Or why not?

3. If we are too certain about our "rightness" (or righteousness) in God's eyes, we may presume we know what's best for others. Can you think of a time when someone "meant well" in trying to do something for you, but as the situation turned out, you did not appreciate what was done?

When Will the World End, or Did It End in the 1960s?

WHERE WILL YOU BE WHEN THE RAPTURE OCCURS?

SAM AND THE BUMPER STICKER

Sam was driving down the road when he saw a bumper sticker on the car in front of him: "Warning: When the Rapture Occurs, This Car Will Be Driverless." He wasn't quite sure what it meant. When he asked his dad later on that day, his dad just shook his head and said something about the end of the world some kooky religious people believe will happen soon. This only confused Sam more. So when he visited with some friends he had heard say something about the end of the world, they were surprised he wasn't ready for the end times. "Don't you know the world is coming to a fiery end soon? Aren't you ready for Jesus to come back and punish the sinners of the world and those opposed to God who are aligned with the Antichrist? Don't you know if you will be taken up in the rapture to be with God into God's glorious kingdom?"

Sam wasn't sure how to respond to their questions. His youth group had never talked about the subject, and when he had asked his youth leader if they could read Revelation, she got a panicked look in her eye and said defensively, "I think we will study that book when Jesus returns, so he can explain it to us." Sam was even more confused than ever.