

“You wish to know all the truth about salvation before you begin with it—an impossibility! You have been disobedient. You have not renounced the world, nor repented of your sins, nor trusted in Christ to save your soul. You have studied the Bible, but you have stuck to your sin. Therefore, God has not led you out of your perplexity and given you peace.”

“But,” he said, “if I am not predestinated to salvation, all of my striving to be saved would be in vain.”

“That is a strange thing for you to say! You have just told me that you did not believe in predestination; and now, when I am persuading you to do what God bids you, you very strangely bring up the doctrine of predestination as an excuse for your disobedience!”

He appeared very much confused and ashamed. He remained entirely silent; and I left him to his silence as long as I could with politeness. I then said to him, “I advise you to let the doctrine of predestination alone, if you can; you have more important duties than studying it now. If you will leave it entirely for the present and seek God with all your heart, you will be far more wise. It is one of the deep mysteries of God; and you will not likely have your ideas clear upon the subject, till you become a sincere penitent for sin.

“The Bible presents this doctrine of predestination, as I think, only for three purposes. *First*, to teach men the character of God—His grandeur, wisdom, and incomprehensibility; and thus lead them to render to Him the homage which belongs to Him. If the doctrine is deep and mysterious, so is God. Whoever believes in the existence of God at all, believes in an infinite mystery. And since He is Himself such a mystery, we ought to expect mystery in His plans and providence, and not quarrel where we ought to worship and bow before Him, filled with awe at His amazing grandeur.

“The *second* purpose is, to repress the audacity of the wicked. God would have the wicked know that they cannot outreach Him—that with all their malignity, they cannot even sin but He will foil them. ‘He makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and the remainder of wrath He restrains’ (*Psalms 76:10*). He lets them know that His eternal counsels are deeper than their malignity. If they will sin, He leads their mind back behind the curtain which veils His eternal majesty, and lets them know that His eternal plans will not be frustrated by the wickedness of man or malice of devils. He shows them that His plans encompass them as with a net; that He has His hook in their nose, and His bridle in their mouth; and that if they will sin, their

malice will be foiled—they shall not sin an item but God will overrule it all for His glory, and all their disobedience and hardihood shall only defeat their own purposes, and bring just judgment on the heads of the willing perpetrators.

“You have an instance of this solemn and instructive use of the doctrine, when Peter addresses the crucifiers of Christ: ‘Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain’ (*Acts 2:23*). Their ‘wicked hands’ could only carry out His ‘determinate counsel.’ The counsel was His—the wickedness was theirs. This doctrine shows the wicked that there is a plan which lies back of their wickedness—that they cannot overreach God, that they are hemmed in on every side by the plan and the predestination of the Eternal One.

“The *third*, and main purpose of this doctrine, is to comfort God’s people. The grand trial of a life for Christ is a trial of the heart. We have sins, weaknesses and temptations, which tend to be a dreadful discouragement. Sin easily besets us. We easily wander from God. Holiness is an up-hill work. Our feet often stagger in the path of our pilgrimage, and tears of bitterness gush from our eyes, lest such weak, and tempted, and erring creatures should never reach heaven. The world presents its deceitful allurements. Devils tempt us. What cheers us when our heart sinks within us? Where shall we fly for comfort, when our hearts are bleeding, when our sins are so many, when our gain in holiness is so little, when our light goes out, and the gloom of midnight settles down upon our soul?

“We cannot, indeed, mount up to the inner sanctuary of God, open the seven-sealed book, and read our names recorded in it. But we can know that such a book is there; and that the pen of our Father has filled it with His eternal decrees, not one of which shall fail, as surely as His own throne shall stand. And when we find in ourselves, amid our tearful struggles, even the feeble beginnings of holiness, we know that God has begun His work in us—a work which He planned before the world was—and that He who has ‘begun a good work in us, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ’ (*Phil 1:6*), carrying into effect His eternal plan.

“Just as well as we know our likeness to God, we know our election of God. We know that our holiness is His work, a work that He purposed from the beginning. If He had purposed it only when He began it—if it were a work undertaken from some recent impulse,

then we should have good reason to fear that some other impulse would drive Him to abandon it. But when we know it forms a part of His eternal plan, and is no sidework, no episode, no interlude, or sudden interposition not before provided for—then we are assured that God is not going to forsake us; and deep as is our home-bred depravity, and many and malignant as are our foes, we are cheered with the assurance that God will bring us off victorious, and ‘the purpose of God according to election shall stand’ (*Rom 9:11*).

“We love to see our salvation embraced in the eternal plan of God; and we know it is embraced there, if we are indeed His own. We cannot read His secret counsels; but we can read His spiritual workings within us. We know the counsels by the evidence of the workings; and then we are cheered and encouraged amid our trials, by the idea that God will no more abandon us than He will abandon the eternal plan which His wisdom formed before the world began. ‘Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect?’ (*Rom 8:33*). He had their names in His book before they shed a tear, before a devil existed to tempt them.

“If you examine the order of the Scriptures, you will find that they never break ground with predestination. Predestination comes in afterwards. They do not present it to the mind of a sinner at the outset. Indeed, they seem to avoid it. And I believe a sinner should avoid it also, because he should follow the manner of the Bible; and because predestination contains nothing in itself which can interfere with the plain and practical duties of Christianity; and because, if he will go out of the way of his duty, to meddle with what God intends about his destiny, he will be very apt to stumble in his first starting, and never take one safe or satisfying step in the path of true discipleship.

“See how the order of truth stands in the book of Romans—the most orderly, methodical, and demonstrative of all the sacred writings. Paul goes over sin, the fall, the law, Christ, repentance, justification by faith, the atonement, holiness, hope, the Holy Spirit, depravity, the resurrection; and after all these, and not till he gets into the eighth chapter, does he preach the doctrine of predestination. He then presents it to comfort and encourage believers, not to direct unbelievers. The comfort is simply this: if they have an item of holiness, they may know that their names are in God’s eternal book; that He has begun to do for them what He purposed to do from all eternity; and that they are just as safe as He is unchangeable. ‘For whom He did

foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son. Whom He did predestinate, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified’ (*Rom 8:29,30*). Not a link is left out. The whole chain is finished, and lifts to glory. ‘If God be for us, who can be against us?’ (*1 Cor 3:1*).

“Thus the apostle comforts believers by leading them to know that the whole matter of their salvation was a matter of plan, purpose, and provision, before they were ever born; that it is not an affair which comes in amid any uncertainties and fluctuations of time, but stands above time, as it stood before time, in God’s book. Predestination is recorded for the comfort and confirming of Christians—for the gladsome cheering of way-worn and struggling believers, trying to get the mastery over sin. It is not preached for the direction of impenitent sinners. I beg of you, therefore, not to meddle with God’s eternal decrees.”

My young friend listened to all this most attentively. He occasionally asked a question, not necessary to be recorded here; and I thought he appeared inclined to follow my advice. When I had finished all that I wished to say, he replied in a pensive and half-musing manner: “I do not know what to think. What am I to do, if I am to dismiss God’s foreordination?”

“Obey the gospel call!” I said. “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Christ. To this you ought to attend. This is your duty. You may mistake the decrees, but you cannot mistake the duty. If the counsel of God is dark, the call of God is clear. Therefore, give ear to this call, and meddle no longer with the counsel. If you can do this, you will be much happier. If you cannot, if your foolish mind will keep running off into predestination, then, go into the subject to your sickening over it, and till you have found by experience that you have mistaken your beginning-spot. And remember, you will have to come round to this at last.

“As long as you neglect God’s call, and grapple with His counsels, you will only plunge deeper and deeper into things that you cannot unravel. Let God wield His own thunder. You have only to hear it, and tremble. You cannot employ it. It was not made for an arm like yours. Lay aside your captiousness, and employ your conscience. Leave the decrees, and take to the duties. The decrees are God’s rules for His own action, not for yours. Let me hope, when I shall see you again, to find your heart fixed to do as God bids you. Be wise enough to mind your own business, and let God mind His.”

He left me. I felt confident that he would follow my advice. The next Sunday evening he called on me again. There were about ten other persons present. I conversed with each one for a few minutes, commencing with the one most distant from him, that he might be influenced by their thoughts, and the truths of God which I should utter for their direction. I felt nothing could have been more happily adapted to do him good than some of the testimonies of these persons.

As the young man listened to these expressions, and the replies which were made to them, he became very uneasy. He changed his position often. He became impatient. Before I spoke to him I determined not to allow him to utter any cavils about election in the ears of those who were present. As I asked him whether he had obeyed the gospel or not, he answered with an abruptness and in a tone which surprised us all, "If God foreordains everything, I can't see why we are to be condemned for sin."

"Paul," I said, in a solemn manner, "has given an answer to that, and I have no other to give. When one said to him, 'Why doth God yet find fault? who hath resisted His will?' Paul answered, 'Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?' " (*Rom 9:19,20*). And without giving him time to speak, I addressed myself to the next person. I said no more to him. And after prayer I bade him good night at the door; taking care that he should leave the house with the others, having no further opportunity to speak with me.

Two evenings later he came to see me again. He said he had tried, but he could not expel election from his mind. He believed the devil had put it there, for it would occur to him constantly. He said he could not make up his mind about it. He said that he believed in God's foreknowledge, but decrees troubled him—he could not reconcile predestination and free-will. He would think, if he was to be saved, he would be; if not, he had no hope. Sometimes he thought the doctrine discouraging, and he felt opposed to God, as if He were a hard master. At other times he felt vexed with himself. So he was tossed about, and often tormented with fear that he may never be saved. And he wanted me to speak to him further about the matter. After he had said all that he wished, I replied to him,

"Thank you for coming. I am glad to see you. I am sorry you find yourself in so much unnecessary trouble; and I am perfectly willing to tell you all I know about the doctrine that troubles you. But before I enter upon the subject, I wish to tell you again that probably

I cannot satisfy your mind at all. I can drive you from some of your errors, but I cannot satisfy you."

"Why not?" he said anxiously.

"Simply because you are not satisfied with God. You are opposed to Him. There lies your whole difficulty. The idea of His eternal sovereignty brings Him clearly to your mind; and you dislike God. Your head may be wrong in many things, but your heart is wrong in everything. You need a new heart. If you were truly reconciled to God, you would be reconciled to predestination—not as you have mis-stated it, but as it is in truth. And I wish you to remember this; and remember what I told you before, that after all your studying, and questioning, and battling about the divine decrees, you will be obliged, at last, to come round to the divine call to begin with—a call which bids you to repent, and bids you welcome to God's full and free salvation.

"Let me tell you a fact. Not long since a pastor came down from the pulpit in the city of New York, after he had been preaching on the sovereignty of God, when a woman of excellent mind and education came up to him, and thanked him very warmly for that sermon. 'O sir,' she said, 'it has done me good. All my life I have been troubled with the doctrine of election. I know what has been the matter—I have never been entirely willing that God should be God.' And when you are entirely willing that 'God should be God,' election will trouble you no longer.

"The doctrine of predestination is not mine. It is God's. He put it in His sacred book, and neither you nor I can put it out. He put it there because He wanted it there; and whatever men may think of its uselessness, God does not need their instructions, and He frowns upon their criticisms. Such words as 'election, purpose, predestination,' are in the Bible. They mean something. We should know what they mean, and love their meaning. Predestination and God's Word will stand or fall together.

"Predestination is God's eternal purpose to rule His universe just as He does. If any man is satisfied with God's ruling as He does, I cannot understand why he should have any dissatisfaction with God's predetermination to rule as He does. His predetermination is only the eternal plan of His government—His eternal decree.

"The decrees of God are His own wise plans, eternal and unchangeable. If He had no such plans, He could not be wise; He would be acting at mere hazard, not knowing why He made the world, or what

was going to be the result! If He has formed His plans or changed them since time began, then He is a changeable Being, His divinity is sunk, and all security to the universe is sunk with it. For He may change again, and what will come yet, or what He will become, no one can imagine!

"God must have a plan before He acts, or else He is the least wise of all intelligent beings in the universe! Until He acts, you know nothing of His plans, His predestination; and therefore, so far as plan or execution of it is concerned, it matters not to you whether He forms the plan for His day's work every morning, or from all eternity foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. His decrees are not laws for His creatures, but rules for Himself. They are not statutes addressed to will, or demanding obedience. They are only His wise, holy, and eternal purposes, wherein He has determined before what He will do, and how He will do it.

"You may not like the method by which He makes the sun shine or the ocean heave, by which He directs the earthquake and storm, or manages His angels, men, and devils—but He has a way of His own; He has considered it well. He has not asked your advice, and you will do well to pause a little before you venture any more criticisms upon 'that high and lofty One who inhabits eternity!' (*Isaiah 57:15*). Just consent to let God be God!"

He left me. I did not see him again till about a month afterwards, when he called on me and shared with me the peace that he had found in Christ. He did not mention the subject of election at all, till I asked him about it. He said, "I dismissed it from my mind entirely. I found that my wicked heart was resorting to the doctrine of election as an excuse for my continuance in sin. But since I have trusted in God's mercy, I am glad that He reigns as He pleases. Election troubles me no more."

There are things not a few, among the doctrines of God, to which we shall labour in vain to make a sinner reconciled, until he is reconciled to God Himself.■

— Adapted from the writings of Ichabod Spencer (1797-1854)

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE #6

by Ichabod Spencer

ELECTION

At the close of an evening Sunday service, I gave an invitation to any persons who were seriously considering becoming a Christian, to call and see me at my home at an appointed hour. A young man about twenty-three years of age called on me. Adverting to my invitation, he directly let me know why he had come. He told me that for several months he had been very much dissatisfied with himself and his present course of worldliness; that he was fully convinced that he should be a Christian, and had come to a determination to put off the duty no longer.

But he said he had difficulties which he "could not get over." The more he tried, the more his thoughts became perplexed. He said there were some doctrines that troubled him; that he could never agree with me in respect to them; and that he must have his own way of thinking, and had a right to it. "Yes," I said, "if you think right; but you have no business to think wrong. If a man thinks wrong, he is wrong; and no man can have a right to be wrong. God tells the unrighteous to forsake their thoughts, for their thoughts are wrong; and their thoughts are not His thoughts (*Isaiah 55:7,8*)."

"I know that," he said, "but I mean my way of thinking about predestination, and all those doctrines that are so hard to swallow, and that make man nothing but a mere machine. I do not believe in election and foreordination, as it is called. Such things have done me no good, and in my opinion, never will. They only confuse me, and for my part, I do not believe them. I wish ministers would never preach them."

In this manner he went on for some minutes, till he appeared to have no more to say. There was no deep seriousness about him. He did not seem to have any real concern about being lost. Evidently he was annoyed and perplexed, but he hadn't said a word about his being a sinner against God, in danger of His wrath, and unfit to meet Him in judgment.

I spoke with him for awhile about his neglecting of the truths which he did understand—his being a sinner, and his need of reconciliation to God. I said,