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## God's Sovereign Foreknowledge and Anticipatory Work

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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*"He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).*

*"And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him (that is, the beast), whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).*

It is not my intention to touch upon the context of this passage in the book of the Revelation - the story of the beast. I am simply taking this fragment as a statement of a fact - the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world - and as briefly, concisely, and simply as I can, I want to say two or three things in that connection which I believe the Lord has given me to say.

### **The Lamb Slain from the Foundation of the World**

"The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world". Of course, we are not taking that as a statement of a literal fact, but outside of time and outside of the material, so far as God who dwells in eternity is concerned, the thing was an accomplished fact long, long before Calvary. Calvary was not something which just sprang up as a necessity, an emergency or a tragedy in time; it was something already accomplished where God was concerned, long, long before the foundation of the world. Yes, accomplished in all its meaning, in all its value, in all its potency, in all its universal range - an accomplished fact with God before the foundation of the world. In His foreknowledge of its necessity, its requirement, of all that would make it necessary, in His foreknowledge of everything that would result in Calvary, the thing was an accomplished fact. With God, the Lamb was already slain before the foundation of the world.

It is something which, by the very word used, is placed in association with, or alongside of, the very election of the church. "Before the foundation of the world". We were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world. Now, that carries a very great deal with it, but for the present just one or two things may be pointed out.

### **God's Eternal "No"**

First of all, in the light of what we now know to be the meaning of the cross, what God has later disclosed through His servants, the apostles and the writers of the New Testament, in the light of what has now come to view it is a tremendous statement that all that was an accomplished thing before the foundation of the world. Take one of the various aspects of the meaning of the cross which we call identification with Christ in death and burial and resurrection, and we say of that that the cross was God closing the door upon the old creation, upon man as he now is by nature, saying by the cross, "That is finished, that is done with, that is dead and buried; I have no place for that". We understand that as one of the great aspects of the meaning of the cross, but taking all that we know, put it into this statement - "before the foundation of the world" the Lamb was slain. With God we were all born crucified. "Born Crucified" is the title of a book by Mr. Maxwell of the Prairie Bible Institute. He used that phrase to indicate that new birth is upon the basis of the cross. I am carrying it further than that. I am saying that everyone born of sinful Adam was born crucified. Every child of Adam, from the first to now and onward is, in the sight of God, dead at birth, has no place in the eternal purpose, has no place as a child of Adam, as a part of that creation, that fallen creation; he is dead and buried already. That is the negative side.

God foresaw and God foreclosed. God took action that that should not come within the compass of His holy things, His glory; the utter impossibility of that kind of man and race being glorified was a settled thing before the foundation of the world. You and I, from our birth here, are born crucified. God says "No" to that race. That is negative, but it is very utter, that God has never made any provision for us in the flesh, God has never let us have a breath so far as He and His purposes are concerned; we are dead from birth by the cross of the Lord Jesus.

The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world bears right down upon the very first seed of fallen Adam and everyone after - but only with a positive object. God's "No's" are never annihilations; God's forbiddings are never intended to result in nothing. When God closes the door in one direction, it is only to make possible the opening of a door from the other side. So the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world was in order to secure unto God all that upon which His heart had been set, and just at that very point - whatever the point was, "the foundation of the world" (I do not think we can fix it) - but whatever that point was, the Lamb was slain and the church was chosen or secured, and the church is secured because the Lamb is slain. The church takes its rise out of Calvary, but not the Calvary of so many centuries ago, but that spiritual Calvary in the heart of God before the foundation of the world. God, even as far back as that, made the cross the basis of the church, made a "No" the ground of the mightiest "Yes". The marvellous destiny of the church that in the ages to come the fulness of God's Christ should be displayed and mediated by the church, to be the fulness of Him that filleth all in all and the vehicle of glory unto Him by Christ Jesus unto all ages for ever and ever - that springs out of a mighty "No".

### **God's Eternal "Yes"**

While we must recognise how utter, how complete, the forbidding of Calvary is to our natural life, to the whole fallen creation, we must always keep uppermost and foremost the fact that the cross was intended by God to be a way as well as a closed door; that the other side of the cross is God's

immense positive. And the immensity of the positive is to be recognised in this, that there is more secured by the cross than was lost by Adam. God's answer is in the positive always. So you find that what looked like the loss of everything, the end of everything, a catastrophe, a tragedy when He was crucified and the men around Him felt that all their hopes and expectations and visions were gone, were ashes, they found that out of the ashes arose something far more glorious than they ever had expected or imagined. "From the ground there blossomed red life that shall endless be." The Lord by the cross seems to produce a lot of ashes. Let us remember that it is not to leave a desolation.

There is a glorious prospect when the cross does its work. If only we would adjust ourselves to this, we should cease to be miserable in contemplating the activity and operation of the cross. Peter, I suppose, perhaps more than any of the others, felt that everything had gone when Christ was crucified. He had to have a special message sent to him by the risen Lord to save him from the utterness of his despair. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter..." (Mark 16:7). He who knew in his soul the desolating work of the cross more than anyone else, could presently cry, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible..." (1 Pet. 1:3-4). He had lost everything, was completely bankrupt - "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away" - not stored up here in some place where the thief, the robber, can break through, but - "reserved in heaven for you, who by the power of God are guarded through faith unto a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time". The cross became the way to the great hope.

### **God's Anticipating Action**

But note - before there ever was any loss, God had secured it all. This is the wonderful thing about this statement - "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world". Man was going to fall; he was going to capitulate everything into the hands of the enemy. It looked as though God was going to lose His purpose at the hands of man, that His creation was going to be taken from Him. In His foreknowledge, He took that action, that kind of action, that special action, which frustrated all the counsels of hell, defeated all the activity of the enemy, and secured His inheritance by the cross right there.

There are those who have translated this "foundation of the world", because of a literal meaning which the words hold - "the casting down of the world". There are two words in the New Testament translated "foundation". One does mean what we always mean when we speak of the foundation of a building, the laying of the foundation. But that is not the word here nor in Ephesians 1:4. It is another word which means casting down or laying down. Some have translated it literally - "from the casting down of the world", and they take that to the beginning of things and say that, because of the sin of Satan in heaven and the casting down of Satan and his angels from heaven and the resultant complicity of Adam bringing his trust, his custodianship of the creation into that complicity with Satan, God cast the whole thing down; cursed the creation and said, "That can never answer to My thought and purpose". And at that casting down the Lamb was slain to secure it according to His mind. Whether that is right or not, we need not argue, but it may be.

It is perfectly true that there was that ruin, that wreckage, that disruption, and God at that time, in His own heart and mind and purpose and intention slew the Lamb to bring out of the ruin a creation according to His own mind. That is true. But the point is this - God has secured it so far ahead in anticipation of every emergency, and the apostle Paul brings the church in there, and says, "This securing antedates the very fall. God has, in anticipation and foreknowledge, got behind the very thing that would speak of loss and ruin, and has met the whole situation", and the apostle says, "That is the kind of foundation you have under your feet, not something that is subject to the

variations and contingencies of time. It is something that God has done before the world was; all the Lord's purpose stands under your feet as your ground of confidence". We do need to enlarge our hearts concerning our God!

### **Chosen in Him Before the Foundation of the World**

We have become very scared of this word - predestination. I confess that I am afraid to talk about it. You can get so entangled immediately you get on to that word, to try to reconcile two opposites - God's foreordaining and man's free will, a purely theological argument. We are afraid of the word for that reason. I believe that, while remaining sane and sound and not being foolish and carrying the word or the thing into the wrong realm, keeping it in its right relationship to purpose and not to salvation, there is room for a great enlargement of our hearts concerning God securing His end. We take on too much the burden which is God's. We need a more simple faith. We need to take this position - "God determined this before ever I had a being, and the fact that He has called me by His grace carries with it something eternal. The fact that I did not choose Him but He chose me carries with it something eternal. All that is left for me to do is to obey the light He gives me, to trust Him to see the thing through, and He will do it because it is done through the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. He has secured it all. It is only the Lord Who can do it; it is a secured thing. I cannot reconcile all the arguments about it, but there it is, it is done. He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." If the interpretation I have just given you should be true - before the casting down, the disruption, He secured us in Christ even before the wreckage - we should take all that we can out of it. That is the positive side.

We have touched the negative. God, from of old, from eternity, said "No" to a certain kind of man He knew would arise; but He said a mighty "Yes", an effective "Yes", with all the effectiveness of the accomplished work of the cross - death, burial, resurrection. He said that "Yes" to His purpose which cannot be frustrated.

The only word that I am going to add to this, which is, after all, not an exposition, not a discussion, hardly what you would call a message, it is simply an emphasis or an affirmation of wonderfully strengthening, assuring facts. The only thing I am going to add to that is that, if this is true, then all that is impossible with us as related to Adam is now made possible in Christ where we are concerned. In order to come into the good of God's eternal purpose with its many-sided meanings, we have to have revelation of it; it has to be revealed in us. But then it is no use presenting things where there is no faculty for apprehending. If there is no faculty for seeing, it is no use presenting an object. Something has to be done inside to make possible the apprehending, the grasping, the seeing. We cannot by nature see. If we are born crucified, born dead, then we are born blind: it is hopeless. Calvary has dealt with that, the cross has made possible a seeing, and it is just there that we come on to one of those things that we are so often trying to emphasise - that it is the crucified man or woman who comes into the good of things. It is by way of the crucified life that we enter into all God's values and meanings. Try to handle the things of God by your own natural abilities and capacities of mind and will, and you know you get nowhere, you fumble in the dark: it is a hopeless thing. But God has dealt with that hopeless situation in the cross, and long, long since secured by the cross the very faculty for apprehending the purpose unto which He has chosen. And in time, in our time, in our lifetime, a right apprehension of the cross and our identification with Christ will open the heavens to us, will result in an open heaven, will result in a new faculty for apprehending things impossible for the human mind and heart to grasp.

Now, that is a matter on which one would like to dwell more fully. There is all the difference of two worlds between talking about things as things, as subjects, as themes, as Scriptural truths, though

they be these profound things, these deep things of God; there is all the difference between talking about them as things and speaking out of a revelation of them. You know the difference when someone has worked up a subject and given you the results of their studies, perhaps a very wonderful discourse on the subject, you know the difference between that and the impact which comes through God having done something in a man, and therefore, having done that thing, is pouring His Life through that man. Between those two worlds lies the cross. The vessel, to give revelation, must have had the revelation broken in, and broken in by a crucifixion of the natural life. "The natural man" says Paul, "cannot..." (1 Cor. 2:14). I have only illustrated what I mean. In all sorts of directions and matters we naturally are incapacitated; no matter how greatly and earnestly we want and desire and mean, and struggle and work, we just cannot. In any real spiritual way that has fruit and impact, we just cannot, until the heaven is opened to us and we see as no natural man can see, and then it is more than a theme, it is Life. But that never happens except on the ground of a deep inwrought work of the cross.

But I am saying that the cross opens the door to everything that was shut out for Adam after his fall. It makes possible that which was made impossible then. It brings everything in that was lost in Adam. It is a very positive thing. God took action to see that eventually and ultimately, nothing would be lost. The Lamb was slain with Him there and then, and the end and all the possibilities were secured from the foundation of the world.

It is good and blessed to know that God knew all about it before the foundation of the world. We stumble up against things, and find that we just cannot. Oh, how we would like to, but we just cannot. Moses stumbled up against an inability to speak. God commissioned him to go and speak, but he said, "I am slow of speech" (Ex. 4:10). The Lord said, "I know all about that, but who made man's mouth?" Have you a natural handicap? Are you limited by nature? Or has something happened to you in the course of your life which closed a whole world of prospect and possibility? God knows all about that, He anticipated that long since. "God chose the foolish things... the weak things" (1 Cor. 1:27). It is the same word as "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world". Moses stood out against God; he failed in his faith in the all-knowing, anticipating God. He said, "Oh, Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send"; and he had Aaron attached to him, and Aaron became more or less a nuisance to him later on. If only Moses had stood in the faith that God knew how he was made before he was made, he would have made a tremendous discovery of divine resources for making him capable in a way in which it was impossible for him to be capable by nature.

Take Jeremiah. God commissioned Jeremiah to a very hard life. Jeremiah said, "I know not how to speak; for I am a child." The Lord did not say, "All right, I excuse you; I had forgotten what sort of a man you are, I have made a mistake, Jeremiah, I will go and look for someone else!" He said, "To whomsoever I shall send thee thou shalt go. I have put My words in thy mouth." What had God said to Jeremiah? "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee, and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee; I have appointed thee a prophet unto the nations." Oh, this sovereign foreknowledge of God! How deep and wonderful it is!

There are no accidents, no mishaps. God knows what He is doing; He has gone behind everything for His elect. Can we believe that seeing God has now laid His hand upon us and called us into the fellowship of His Son, it is a proof that He did choose us in Christ before the world was? Leave the others if you like, but so far as we are concerned, this is a fact. We have been apprehended by Christ Jesus, and not by a pitying God Who saw our plight in our own lifetime, but by an anticipating God before ever there was a plight to pity. If this is true, that God has called us into the fellowship of His Son, proving His foreknowledge and His choosing, do you think, must we believe, that these natural

handicaps, these accidents, as we call them, these tragedies, are really from God's side not anticipated? Can we not believe that really, by means of them, there is going to be some gain for God? Yes, there is something because of all that which would never have been otherwise, and in the end - oh, let us anticipate our own glorifying and justifying of God at the end - in the end we will say, "Lord, at one time in my life I used to believe that these handicaps were unfair, that it was not righteous that I should have that, that I should suffer in that way, but I see now it was the best thing; You knew what You were doing, it was the way of spiritual increase". Can we not have a faith like that in God Who has anticipated everything from eternity in relation to His elect? "He hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world."

What did He choose? "Behold your calling, brethren, that not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God chose the foolish things of the world, that He might put to shame them that are wise; and God chose the weak things of the world, that He might put to shame the things that are strong; and the base things of the world, and the things that are despised, did God choose, yea and the things that are not, that He might bring to nought the things that are: that no flesh should glory before God" (1 Cor. 1:26-29), but all the glory should be to Him. "Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever" (Eph. 3:20-21), and that is the glory of His grace, the glory of His sovereign grace, for it is all of grace. He has chosen things which could never embellish Him as they were, could never add to His glory as they were: it is the glory of His grace in vessels of fragile clay.