

Sharpley & Son

FAMILY GROUP PIC – in front of house. Family stand in front of car in drive. Mountain bike in the way on ground. Dad and mum stand pleasantly – dad holds lead of dog, whose back end is at edge of pic cocking leg against car. Daughter looking 13 or so and enthusiastic smile: hormones not quite kicked in yet, ALMOST trendy gear, etc. Son in rebellious tee-shirt, arms folded, trying to look bored.

talk

PREDESTINATION

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

by Jon Garvey

Illustrated by Sue Ducat

The family at no. 12, Heather Close, are perfectly ordinary, churchgoing people. Well, perhaps that's not so ordinary nowadays, in itself. But sometimes, Deep Things are discussed behind its bland exterior, usually by Doug Sharpley and his son Paul, who have nothing better to do with their time and love to wrestle with important things...

Publishing details etc

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Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

I – Sunday

The March of the Robots

“Hi, Dad!”

“Hullo, Paul. Did you have a good time at the Youth Meeting?”

“Yeah, OK. Well, to be honest, no. Pastor was on about his predestination thing. He said that God’s will is what ultimately decides everything – even who will be saved. I’m afraid I lost my rag a bit, and I told him so.”

“Woops. I’d better not try to stand as a deacon.”

“Sorry – but honestly dad – he obviously doesn’t realise the implications. If God decided who would be saved, we’d be no better off than robots. It would destroy our free choice. He hasn’t thought it through.”

“No, possibly not...so what do *you* believe?”

“Well, God foresees the people who are going to believe in him, and then he helps them along a bit to make sure they do. After all, doesn’t it say somewhere that ‘those God foreknew he also predestined’?”

“Yes it *does* say that – Romans 8.29. But let me ask you something. Do you think that God can see the future clearly, or does he get it wrong sometimes?”

“No, he obviously doesn’t get it wrong. Otherwise he couldn’t make promises about the future – he’d never be sure Satan wasn’t going to pull one final trick out of his hat and spoil it. ‘He makes known the end from the beginning.’¹ That’s Isaiah – I’ve read that. And here’s another thought – isn’t it one of the tests of a prophet of God that his predictions always come true²? God would hardly make that the test of a prophet if he couldn’t pass it himself. So God must foresee the future infallibly – but he doesn’t decide who’s going to believe or not.”

“Yes, but supposing human beings louse it up? I mean, supposing you or I decided to spite God, and deliberately turn away from him even though we’ve decided to follow him up to now. Wouldn’t that put paid to his foreknowledge?”

“That can’t be right. He must know in advance that we were going to do that, if he knew we were going to believe in the first place. And anyway, there’s not much point in knowing the future only if nobody decides to *do* anything – it’s only what people do that’s worth predicting.”

¹ Isaiah 46.10

² Deuteronomy 18.21-22

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

“I can’t argue with that. But do you know what you’re saying? You’re saying the future is fixed, and can’t be altered.”

“No, I’m not saying that. I’m just saying that God knows the future.”

“Don’t you see that’s as good as the same thing? If I *know* it’s Tuesday, then it can’t be Wednesday as well. If I *know* something will happen in the future, then that’s what’s going to happen, and not something else I didn’t know about. If God knows the future, then it’s fixed – it can’t alter.”

“I’m not too keen on the idea of that. But I have to admit it – you’re right. Otherwise he’d just be guessing, which is a bit worrying if we’re relying on him to put the world right in the end. Even so, that doesn’t mean we can’t make free choices about whether we believe, and so on.”

“I’d agree with that, only you have to be careful how you define ‘free’. Looked at from our viewpoint, we make choices freely. But from where God is sitting foreseeing the future, then what we choose is going to happen anyway. As you said before, we can’t buck the future, because God sees it infallibly. And remember, God could see the choices we were going to make before he made us – even before the beginning of time. So in that sense, our little choices were determined from the start of creation.”

“You’re backing me into a corner a bit. But I can’t deny what you say. Even so, I still think that at the time we make the choice we’re free, although in the big picture the choice is what you’d call inevitable.”

“Of course. That’s an important distinction. Our choices aren’t an illusion, they’re real. But they are subject to a bigger reality of some kind. But tell me this: if the future is determined in a way that’s even bigger than the free choices we make, what do you think determines it?”

“I don’t know. Something like destiny, or fate, perhaps? What do you think?”

“What do *you* think? You started off by telling me that God doesn’t determine everything that happens, and now you tell me that *fate* determines everything that happens. We both agree that what happens *is* determined by something. So what do you prefer? That the future is dictated by some blind force of destiny, or by a just and loving Father God? Your choice.”

“Ah. You’ve caught me, I think. Put like that, there isn’t really a choice, is there?”

“Not as far as I can see. And there’s more, too. Let’s suppose the future were determined by this impersonal force of destiny, rather than by God. If what *we* will do in the future is fixed, but not ultimately by us, then what *God* will do in the future is fixed, and not by *him*. God would look into the future and see that it was inevitable that he would do A or B, whether he liked it or not. In fact he’d have less free choice than us, because we don’t know in advance what choices we’re going to make, whereas he does. So God would be subject to Fate – there’d be two forces in the Universe, called God and Fate, and Fate would be greater because God would have to do what it said.”

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

“You’re not as stupid as you look, are you Dad? You’ve made me feel *more* free, not less, to have God determine my actions than to have him simply foresee them.”

“All part of the service, son. Always helps to think things through. You *ought* to feel happy that God determines everything, because that’s what the Bible says³. Oh yes, and incidentally it’s what the Pastor says, too.”

“Uh-huh. Point taken. I’ll phone him up and apologise for shooting my mouth off.”



³ Psalm 115.3, Psalm 135.6, Daniel 4.35, Ephesians 1.11

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

II – Monday

Getting What You Want

“Hey, Dad! I’ve thought of a problem about that thing we were discussing last night.”

“What! A problem about predestination? How on earth can that be?”

“All right – no need to be sarcastic. You know where it says, ‘God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth’?”

“Yes, 1 Timothy 2.4 – my Sunday School memory verse. What’s your problem?”

“Just this. If God decides everything that’s going to happen, and he wants all men to be saved, why doesn’t he just make it happen? How come everybody doesn’t believe?”

“That’s certainly a problem verse, I admit. But let’s turn it round, and see what it would mean if we’d decided to go with *your* idea yesterday, and say that God doesn’t determine the future, but just foresees it. What would happen then?”

“OK, let’s see. God would want everybody to believe and be saved, but would foresee that actually zillions of people weren’t *going* to believe in him. He’d get a bit frustrated after a few thousand years, I would think.”

“Yes, I agree. If the Pope stood up and said he wanted all the wars in the world to stop tomorrow, you’d say he was mad if he believed it would happen. And if he didn’t believe it would happen, he shouldn’t stand up and say he wanted it. And common sense can see that not everyone comes to believe in Jesus, even without being able to see the future like God does. If God foresaw that what he wanted wouldn’t happen, he’d be foolish to keep wanting it. In fact, if he foresaw it even before he created the world – and he must have done, because he sees the end from the beginning⁴ – then you’d have to ask why he made that particular world at all.”

“So that doesn’t work either. You do make things awkward. But of course, there’s a third possibility we haven’t really talked about.”

“And what’s that?”

“Supposing God *can’t* foresee the future, except in a vague way? Suppose the future isn’t determined, and it all depends on human choice which God can’t predict? He might realise that some people won’t believe, but he could still want them all to be saved in the sense that he’s determined to do his best to save as many as he can.”

⁴ Isaiah 46.10

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

“God sends Jesus and hopes for the best! ‘The cross is a pretty weird idea,’ he says, ‘but you never know, it might just work.’! I’m sorry – I shouldn’t laugh. I think you’d be pretty lonely as a Christian in believing that God doesn’t know the future. Especially when he pretends he does. There have been some who’ve believed that. And actually, a good number of theologians nowadays teach that the future is undetermined. But the idea certainly has a fatal flaw as far as this verse is concerned.”

“I don’t want to be lonely *and* fatally flawed! What’s the catch?”

“The verse says God wants all men to be saved *and to come to a knowledge of the truth*. Now, if being saved depended entirely on human free-will (for the sake of argument), then he couldn’t obviously guarantee *that*. But he could certainly make sure that everyone came to a knowledge of the truth, by publishing it world-wide from the start. Yet for 2000 years most of the world has been ignorant of the Gospel. Why didn’t God send angels with the message, or at least teach the apostles satellite broadcasting? He could certainly have done more to publish the message than he actually has done.”

“True. Well, if I’m honest I can’t say I liked the idea much anyway. I can’t believe God *doesn’t* know the future – it contradicts too much of the Bible. But we’re in trouble, then, because that verse seems to be untrue whichever idea we have about God’s power and knowledge.”

“No, it’s not untrue. But it obviously can’t be taken in the way that people often do take it: that God absolutely wills every human being to be saved, in the same way that he willed the world to come into being. If he’s in control (as we concluded yesterday) it would simply happen. If he foresees what he can’t have, he’s a fool to keep wanting it. If he can’t foresee it, he could do more to make it happen. But there are other meanings to the word ‘want’. The Pope could reasonably say he wanted wars to end tomorrow if by that he meant that people *ought* to stop fighting straight away. In the same way, God can want something, in the sense of commanding it, whilst being very aware that sinful human nature will prevent it.”

“I see what you mean. God can say he *wants* all men to obey the 10 commandments, even if he doesn’t do absolutely everything he could do to make sure they do. And he could say, ‘I’ve provided a Saviour and a Gospel for everyone in the world, which they ought to accept, because I want them to. If they refuse it, it’s their hard luck.’ He could want their obedience in that sense, and it wouldn’t be affected by the fact that he knows about those who won’t accept.”

“I think it has to be something like that. After all, he tells us to give the good news to everyone, even though we agree he already knows those who won’t listen. You’d think it would be more economical for him to send us only to the ones he knows will believe. But if we tell the stubborn ones too, then they’ve got no excuse.”

“That brings me back to where we started yesterday. It still seems to me that if God has decided from the beginning who’s going to believe, they *have* got an excuse. They’re being condemned for unbelief through no fault of their own. God’s to blame for willing their unbelief. How do you get out of that one?”

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

“That’s easy. By telling you it’s time for me to take mum to her evening-class. But if you’re interested, we could look at it again tomorrow evening.”

“Not tomorrow. There’s too much on telly. But the day after, you’re on. I want to make sure I can escape being predestined to fall away.”

“Paul, sometimes I think you don’t listen to anything I say.”

“You’re not wrong. Who wants to listen to a retired hippy anyway? Seeya.”



Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

III – Wednesday

Fair's Fair

“Paul! Are you in for your metaphysics class?”

“What’s metaphysics?”

“It’s like Sunday School, only for people who think they know everything. You wanted to know why predestination isn’t unfair.”

“I love you too. Speak, O wise one – I’ll just switch off *Big Brother*.”

“If you watch that, perhaps you *are* predestined to damnation. I think you suggested a lot of the answer yourself in our first conversation. At the time you were saying that destiny determines the future, but you still insisted that the choices we made could be free at our own level. I thought that was quite clever of you, because a lot of people never understand that distinction. Then we decided it was better for God to decide the future than destiny. So why shouldn’t our choices remain freely our own, even though it is God who paints the big picture rather than fate?”

“Such flattery! But you can’t get round me that easily. Surely there’s some difference between an impersonal force influencing our choices and God deciding what *we’re* going to decide?”

“I don’t think there’s that much difference, actually. If the future depended on blind fate, then that fate would be working through our intelligent decisions. Greek tragedy’s all about that. The hero does his best, but he sees disaster happening anyway. He mourns and laments, and that’s an intelligent response too – it just doesn’t do him any good. So the audience has a good cry and feels better about their miserable lives.”

“What happens if God’s in charge, then?”

“Well, at the very least there’s no more reason to deny the reality of our will than there is with fate. God decides the future, and uses our free decisions to contribute to it, because he knows what they’ll be and plans with that in mind. Nero plans to destroy the church, and God makes sure that he dies before he can do it, that Christians escape elsewhere, and so on.”

“That’s all very well, but we’re not just talking about God manipulating circumstances here. Pastor was clearly implying that God influences our *wills* to believe, and that he doesn’t do it with everyone⁵. That’s not fair. People are being condemned through no fault of their own, simply because God doesn’t convert them.”

⁵ Acts 16.14, Philippians 2.13

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

“Through no fault of their own’? Doesn’t the Bible teach something about universal sin⁶? If someone is a sinner, don’t they deserve to be condemned? Wouldn’t it be fair for God to punish them by leaving them in their sin? Or even by hardening them, like he did Pharaoh⁷, if he wanted to?”

“Maybe – but only if he did it to everyone. If he condemns some sinners, and converts others just as bad, that’s not just.”

“You’re wrong there. Justice has to do with what we *deserve*, by our works. If we are all sinners, then we all *deserve* the same sentence. And God provides it – we’re all condemned to death. But *mercy* is something different. You don’t have to distribute it equally all round. If I generously decide not to beat you to death for watching *Big Brother*, even though you deserve it, that doesn’t mean your sister can expect to be let off too. If I give all your inheritance to the *Mission to Seamen*, all the other missions have no right to insist they get some too.”

“No, but *I’d* have a right to complain! I do see what you mean, though. I remember when I was small reading the parable of the labourers⁸, where they all get the same pay even though some didn’t work so long. I thought that was most unfair, but I can see now that it wasn’t unfair for the employer to give the ones who came late the same, just because he was generous. But at least he employed everyone who was looking for work. Is it right for God to choose some sinners for eternal life, and leave others to be condemned? Why would God choose some and not others?”

“Why indeed?”

“Oh, it’s back to me, is it? Well let’s see – it’s not because he foresees they’ll believe, because they *won’t* unless he makes them believe. It’s not because they’re better people, because that would be salvation by works. It must be because people are praying for them...no, I give up. What’s special about them?”

“Have you heard of ‘grace’?”

“‘God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense’. How does that help?”

“Dear me, is that all they taught you in Sunday School? That’s true as far as it goes, but it hardly does justice to the word. The whole point about grace is that it’s undeserved, free, and particular. Israel was just a bunch of ungrateful slaves, but God

⁶ Romans 3.9-18

⁷ Exodus 4.21

⁸ Matthew 20.1-16

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

made them his chosen people. All the other nations got left out⁹. And he pointed out that he didn't do it because of them, but because of his love¹⁰."

"But why did he choose to love *them*, rather than anyone else?"

"You'll have to ask God that. And he's not telling. He just says, 'Can't I do what I like with what I've made¹¹?' You can be sure that, if we knew why he chose Israel, it would be compatible with his justice and love. But you know, the hardest thing for us to do is to let God's ways be higher than ours¹² without arguing with him. That's why so many people get angry about God's grace."

"I don't think I'll get angry. I think I kind of knew about that anyway, because I could never see why God let someone like me get saved, though I'd never admit it to you, of course. I just feel grateful, actually."

"Me too. That's what we're supposed to feel. Otherwise we'd find some reason to pretend we were special to be a Christian. We find reasons anyway, when Satan gets us with our guard down."

"Just one thing, though – an intellectual thing, I guess. If God makes us believe, through grace, isn't that denying our free-will?"

"If it were, who's complaining? But he doesn't *force* our will. He *re-creates*¹³ us with a new one, which is free from rebellion, just like Adam's was before he sinned. And unlike Adam, he promises to keep us obedient. That's what the Holy Spirit does. If we're 'dead in sins and trespasses'¹⁴, it's hardly destroying our freedom if he resurrects us, is it?"

"I guess not. Is that 'metaphysics', then?"

"I don't know. What's metaphysics?"

"Pig."

⁹ Deuteronomy 4.7-8

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 7.6-8, 9.6

¹¹ Romans 9.21

¹² Isaiah 55.8-9

¹³ 2 Corinthians 5.17, Ephesians 2.10, Ephesians 4.24

¹⁴ Ephesians 2.1

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION



Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

IV – Saturday

Once Saved, Always Checking the Pulse

“Dad! Dad!”

“In the garage!”

“Oh, there you are. Listen, how do I know I’m predestined?”

“Do you believe and trust in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord?”

“You should know – you were in the front row at my baptism.”

“Then you’re predestined. Could you pass me that Mole wrench?”

“OK, I’m predestined – so I can do what I like; I don’t even have to believe in Jesus at all, and I’ll still be saved. Beat that, Clever Clogs.”

“Ah, but you’ve forgotten one vital thing.”

“What’s that?”

“The Mole wrench – thank you. And you’ve also forgotten that we’re predestined *in Christ*, and not is some kind of abstract lottery. You can no more separate Christ from predestination than you can separate heat from a fire. It says that God chose us *in Christ* before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight¹⁵. It says he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ¹⁶.”

“That seems a bit mystical to me. What does ‘God chose us in Christ’ mean?”

“Basically, that God didn’t just choose people to get to heaven. He chose them to share in everything that Jesus came to bring: repentance, faith, holy lives, obedience and, eventually, eternal life in glory. He predestined them to be loved by Jesus, to love Jesus, and to become like Jesus¹⁷. So if you want to know if you’re predestined, you don’t start looking for some secret sign that God has chosen you. You just ask, ‘Do I believe the gospel of Jesus? Am I in Christ?’ If you want to know if Harry down the road – or your dad, for example – are predestined, then all you need to know is whether they truly believe. Only you can’t know that about someone else for certain.

¹⁵ Ephesians 1.4

¹⁶ Ephesians 1.5

¹⁷ Romans 8.29

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

And even if they don't believe, you certainly can't know they won't accept Christ in the future. So that's why the Bible tells us to tell the gospel to everyone¹⁸."

"What's the point of knowing I'm predestined, then, if it's effectively just another way of saying I'm a Christian?"

"Work it out yourself, Paul. If God chose you to belong to Christ before the world was even created, how does that make you feel about being a Christian?"

"I guess in the first place there's a feeling of privilege – it's a bit of a gobsmacking thought, isn't it? On the other hand, since it doesn't depend on anything about *me*, but just on what God chose to do, then it's a bit humbling. I don't feel snooty about being predestined, but grateful for being spared. Will that do?"

"Very nicely, I should think. Right then, if on that basis you know you've been predestined to be holy and blameless¹⁹, and to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus²⁰, then how does it make you feel about your future?"

"Well, it's certainly not going to make me take my salvation for granted, because it seems what I'm predestined for is to be like Jesus, which means loving people, praying a lot, and suffering all the time. Thanks a bunch – I was hoping I could just pray the sinner's prayer and then get on with the riotous living."

"Fraid not, son. But your point does show up the nonsense of the 'Once saved, Always saved' debate. You get people on one side saying that once you've gone forward at the meeting, God will save you whatever you do. Then the other side says no, you've got to continue to be obedient to be saved. Neither lot really understand God's predestination, which means God chooses us to become more and more like Jesus, not just to get to heaven when we die. Both faith and obedience are actually part of the same salvation²¹, which is why faith without works is dead²²."

"Yes, that's the other thing I thought of. If my relationship with Christ comes from God's predestination, and not just my choice, then it makes me more confident I won't lose it through my own stupidity."

"Yes – that bit in Romans 8.39 that says 'nothing can separate us from the love of Christ' is a tremendous promise, but would be totally meaningless if it meant 'nothing can separate us unless it's too strong for us.'"

¹⁸ Matthew 28.19

¹⁹ Ephesians 1.4

²⁰ Romans 8.29

²¹ Hebrews 8.7-13

²² James 2.17,26

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

“Ah, that’s interesting, because somebody once told me that the only thing that could separate me from Christ was if I chose to desert him, which isn’t included in that passage.”

“It certainly would separate us from Christ if we deserted him, but why would we want to if it weren’t for some temptation or trial? And the promise says no temptation or trial *will* separate us, which is really saying that he’ll make sure it doesn’t, in fact, happen.”

“That’s pretty reassuring, then. And it also gives me some hope that I’ll actually become a better Christian, which I tend to doubt when I look at the way I live.”

“Yes, me too.”

“What do you mean, ‘Me too’? Do you mean you feel the same way, or are you trying to imply something about your beloved and excellent son?”

“Look, there’s a new oil filter on the bench there – you couldn’t just reach out and get it for me, could you?”



Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

V – Another Sunday

Prayer Changes – Me...

“Are you still up, Dad?”

“Yes. It might look as though I’m getting these papers ready for work tomorrow, but actually I’ve stayed up so you can ask me more stupid questions about predestination.”

“No, it’s all right. We weren’t talking about that this evening – it was Chris Manning talking about prayer.”

“Oh yes? What was he saying?”

“The usual stuff – about how it changes things, how we ought to do more of it, all that kind of thing. It was good. But, do you know, now we’ve been talking about God being in charge of everything it seems to creep in everywhere. All the way through this evening I kept thinking, what’s the point of praying if God knows what’s going to happen, and he’s fixed the future already? And if he knows the future, how can he change his mind about it when we pray?”

“Ah, so you *do* want to ask me more stupid questions!”

“They’re not stupid – they’re very good questions.”

“You’re right, they are. People get themselves tied into all kinds of knots over it. Sometimes they stop praying, or else they throw overboard all the stuff we’ve been discussing this last week and see God as someone who needs his arm twisting to change the future.”

“I can see their point.”

“Quite. But we’ve got to deal with a few ‘givens’. First, God *does* know our prayers before we pray them²³. Secondly, he *has* decided the future already, as we’ve already seen. And thirdly, he *doesn’t* change his mind²⁴.”

“There doesn’t seem much point in praying then. But are you sure you’re right that God doesn’t change his mind? Didn’t he repent of making Saul king²⁵, or something?”

²³ Psalm 139.1-4, Matthew 6.8

²⁴ Numbers 23.19, 1 Samuel 15.29, Job 36.5, Psalm 33.11, James 1.17

²⁵ 1 Samuel 15.11

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

“Well remembered, Paul. You’ll get your Scripture Knowledge prize yet! I remember that passage, and it’s interesting that in the very same chapter God says that he doesn’t lie or change his mind, because he’s not a man²⁶. I think that shows that he’s using a figure of speech when he’s talking to Samuel. Not only do we know from God’s nature that he must have foreseen how Saul would act, but there are prophecies about the royal house from David’s tribe, Judah, earlier in the Bible²⁷. And of course, we know that God ordained Jesus to be king way back²⁸, and in fact even before the world began²⁹.”

“That just goes to show the problem, then. Everything was sorted before the world began, so what’s the point of praying?”

“Well, here’s one thought. If you, for example, thank God for getting you through your A levels, what are you saying to God? Apart from “Thank you for getting me through my A levels,” of course.

“That’s a toughie. I suppose at least you’re saying it was him as well as your brainpower that got you through.”

“Yes – and we’re supposed to give thanks for everything.”

“Then that’s got to be because God gives us everything.”

“And if God wasn’t there?”

“Then I guess we wouldn’t have anything.”

“So thanksgiving is reminding us that we depend on God for absolutely everything. So what if, instead, you were *asking* God to get you through your exams? In other words, asking for a miracle?”

“Your lack of trust in my abilities is shameful, but I forgive you, Father. OK let’s answer this – from what we said before, if you ask for something, you’re accepting your dependence on God again, only before the event rather than afterwards.”

“Quite right. Do you remember when you were small, how mum and I taught you to say please and thankyou for meals and presents and so on. Yet you knew you’d get them anyway, because we were your parents.”

²⁶ 1 Samuel 15.29

²⁷ Genesis 49.10

²⁸ Galatians 3.16

²⁹ 1 Peter 1.20

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

“What presents? You never did give me that X-box I asked for. But I can see your point. You were making us see that things didn’t just come, they came through our parents. So that made us appreciate you, thank you and ...”

“And love us, you were going to say?”

“Well, I might not go *that* far. But I can see how prayer would build our relationship with God, and our trust in him. And how we depend on him.”

“Quite true. And I depend on a night’s sleep to get to work in the morning, so goodnight.”



Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

VI – Tuesday

...but it changes things as well

“Dad, you know we were talking about how prayer changes our attitude of dependance, and doesn’t alter events around us?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, I’ve f... Didn’t you? I thought that’s what you said. I was going to say I found a passage that shows God *does* change circumstances when we pray. What about Elijah when he prayed for rain and God ended the drought?”³⁰

“I know that story, which was why I didn’t say prayer doesn’t change events – it just doesn’t change God’s mind. But the Elijah story, incidentally, does underline what we said yesterday about our dependance on God. Elijah had been specifically told by God to end the drought, and his reputation as a prophet – as well as God’s reputation – depended on the rain coming. But he still had to pray seven times and keep sending his servant to do a weather report before anything happened.”

“I reckon he was sweating a bit before the end!”

“I think you’re right. But in the New Testament James specifically uses him as an example to follow in keeping on with prayer for things to happen³¹.”

“So how does that work, then, if the future’s been fixed from the beginning?”

“I don’t think the Bible actually spells it out for us – it just tells us to accept it and keep on praying by faith. But there is some Scriptural teaching that helps give us an idea. I don’t think we’ve talked about eternity and time yet, have we?”

“No, but I can see we’re going to. Is that metaphysics again?”

“Well, it’s certainly not *Big Brother*. Some people teach that God has to go through time just like we do, though obviously he lives forever. That enables them to avoid denying that we have free choice. But I think the best fit for what the Bible tells us is that God is actually *outside* time. That would explain his titles like *the Beginning and the End*³², and *the First and the Last*³³ and so on. And his Hebrew name, of course – ‘*I am*’. It would incidentally fit in with science, too, which says that time is a physical

³⁰ 1 Kings 18.41-46

³¹ James 5.13-18

³² Revelation 21.6, 22.13

³³ Revelation 1.17, 22.13

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

thing just like space. So to God, the past, present and future are all the same: he's in every time at once, just like he's in every place at once."

"That must be very confusing for him."

"It isn't if you're God. It is if you're us. But think about what that means for prayer. If you're praying on Wednesday, God is listening on Wednesday. But he's also listening in a year's time, or whatever time your prayer gets answered. And he's also listening before the creation of everything. So it would be easy for him to make a note in his pre-creation diary to do a miracle on the same Wednesday the year after you pray. It would be equally easy for him to design every cause and effect in the history of the Universe so that the natural order of things turned out right to answer your prayer."

"Let me try and get my head round this. You're saying that God hears the prayer I'm going to make before the creation of the Universe, and designs the whole thing to answer it?"

"Yes, your prayer and all the other prayers of his people down through time."

"So if I pray for something that might very well happen naturally – like not having flu for my exams – then you're saying it's still a direct answer to prayer, even though nothing special seems to have happened?"

"Yes, quite so. We said earlier that we depend on God for everything, and that includes how the so-called "laws of nature" operate. In the good old days, Christians got into the habit of thanking God that they'd woken up in the morning. Even that is something he does personally."

"If my boring prayers affect the way the Big Bang happened at the start of time, it sounds even more miraculous than if a flash-bang miracle happened. I've never even dreamed of anything like that."

"Well, it certainly blurs the line between the miraculous and the ordinary, doesn't it? And it makes a nonsense of those attempts to show that if we knew enough about natural laws, we'd understand how miracles happen. Even if we explained them, we'd still know that God's activity was behind them, just as it is for the things we *do* understand through science or just common sense. And I hope we'd still keep praying for them."

"I think I'll pray a little bit more enthusiastically in future. It really means I could pray for absolutely anything, and it would happen."

"Yes, but let's not forget what Scripture says about praying according to his will. Part of the purpose of prayer is to get us thinking the same way as God. That means studying the Bible to know what kinds of things he wants us to pray for, and of course taking notice of when the unexpected answers we get show we were doing the wrong prayer."

"We got into this talking about predestination, didn't we? I always thought that was one of those subjects everyone avoids because it only causes arguments. But I don't

Sharpley & Son talk PREDESTINATION

think that's true – it's opened my mind to all sorts of things about God I never understood. And it's increased my faith too."

"It's helped me to discuss it with you too, Paul. Perhaps we should write an article about it for the church magazine."

"No, you'd better do it, Dad. I wouldn't want people to get the idea I spend my spare time talking to my father about religion."

"So it's back to *Big Brother* for you, is it?"

"Well, maybe."

