

# Biblical Election

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The Scripture teaches that, out of a fallen, spiritually dead humanity, separated from God in sin and, to a one, would never seek him on their own, God graciously chose to save a people for himself in order to reveal his glory. The fact that God would choose *anyone to be saved*, let alone millions from every tribe, tongue, nation and language, is grace beyond amazing. Eternal judgment *for all* would be justice, because all have sinned. Salvation *for anyone* would be a gift of great mercy (**Romans 3:23; 6:23; 1 Peter 1:3**).

The doctrine of election is revealed throughout Scripture to encourage discouraged believers with the knowledge that their salvation is infinitely greater than their present personal experience. Our salvation rests, ultimately, in the sovereign grace and choice of God.

## The Meaning and Timing of Election

The Greek word *εκλογεν* (election), translated "*choice*," simply means selection. There is nothing magical about it. It was a word used commonly by ancient Greeks to describe the selection of certain portions of ground to own or baskets to use. But the New Testament writers used it to describe an idea that has its roots deep in the Hebrew Scriptures; i.e. God has sovereignly chosen, out of this world, a people for Himself, whom He loves and would save for His own glory.

The Bible teaches that long before we were born, God had already prepared for our arrival on this earth. We were not an accident and neither was our coming to Christ. God chose, called, and saved us according to His own purpose and grace which was granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity (**Ephesians 1:4**).

To see election from an eternal perspective, we go to **John 17**. Here we stand on holy ground. God the Son prays to God the Father the night before He is crucified. Notice what Jesus prays in **verse 2**. He says that the Father gave him authority to save all those the Father gave to him out of the world. Then in **verse 6** he says that those the Father gave to Jesus to save already belonged to the Father!

From our perspective, we viewed our coming to faith in Christ as our doing. It appeared that we sought Him out and found Him. Our hearts struggled within us as we weighed all the issues of the gospel. Then, finally, our soul came to rest as we trusted Him and surrendered to Him what, in the heart of our hearts, we knew belonged to Him all along. But the Bible teaches us that God was the one who initiated our relationship with Him, and He planned this before He even created the foundations of the world.

In **Romans 9** Paul uses God's election of Israel to illustrate what he taught about the New Testament believer's security in Christ in **chapter 8**. In uncompromising terms, he declares that God's sovereign election was done apart from human merit in order that His *"purposes according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls"* (**9:10**). For the same reason, New Testament believers can rest secure in His grace. His word will not fail, even though we may fail, because, ultimately, His promise in Christ is based on His character and choice, not ours. **9:16** - *God's election does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.*

In **Acts 13:48**, God's appointment to salvation is stated as the basis for people believing the Gospel. Faith is a *necessary* cause for salvation (**Romans 5:1; John 1:12; Acts 16:31**), but it is not a *sufficient* cause. God's choice and the Spirit's work in the human heart must precede one's ability to believe. See Jesus' teaching in **John 6:37-40, 44, 65-66** and **15:16**, Paul's conversion in **Acts 9**, and the Thessalonian's conversion in **1 Thessalonians 1:2-4** and **2 Thessalonians 2:13**.

In **2 Timothy 1:9**, Paul does not merely speak of a divine appointment to ministry. The idea of salvation is clearly stated and Paul introduces his particular appointment to ministry two verses later, suggesting that he is not speaking of ministry in verse 9. Paul also affirms here that God's choice was not according to our works or anything impressive about us. (cf. **Deuteronomy 7:6-8a**)

## The Basis for Election

**1 Peter 1:1, 2** - *"elect...according to (on the basis of) the foreknowledge of God"* Some believe that God's choice was based on His foreknowing who would choose Him. However, there is no evidence indicating that foreknowledge is limited to a knowledge of mere factual data, such as a person's decision. In fact, in the following verses, this meaning is simply impossible.

**Acts 2:23** - The Granville Sharp Rule of Greek grammar equates the idea of God's predetermined plan and His foreknowledge. God's predetermined plan concerning His Son is not merely a knowledge of the Son's decisions, so His foreknowledge of Christ cannot merely mean this. This foreknowledge is personal and intimate. What is more, the word "knowledge" in foreknowledge speaks of an experiential, personal knowledge, as a husband "knowing" his wife in their physical oneness.

**1 Peter 1:1, 2** - There is nothing here to indicate that foreknowledge must mean a foreknown decision. In fact, Peter's use of the word later suggests otherwise. Later, in verse 20, he clearly speaks of an appointed type of foreknowledge regarding Christ and His work of redemption.

**Romans 11:2** – This verse is one of the most convincing arguments against the idea that foreknowledge means God elected certain people on the basis of Him foreknowing who would choose Him. Note the above comments on **Romans 9**. In spite of Israel's disobedience in rejecting Christ, God will fulfill His promises to them. Paul affirms in **Romans 10** that Israel's setting aside is neither full nor final. In spite of Israel's disobedience in rejecting Christ, God will regather Israel and fulfill His promises to them.

This affirms that the object of God's foreknowledge was NOT Israel's acceptance of and holding fast to the Gospel. They were His people by His initiative and sovereign choice (**Romans 9**) and they would remain His people by His sovereign intervention in their lives (**Romans 10, 11**). God's foreknowledge is personal (fore-love) and according to the counsel of His own will, not the will of His people.

So, the believer's security in Christ rests on God's promise (**Romans 8**). If this is true, one might ask, then what about Israel? If God has set aside Israel after making specific promises to them, then how can we be sure His promise will stand concerning us?

Finally, as we saw earlier in **John 17**, verses 2 and 6, those whom the Father gave to Jesus to save, already belonged to the Him. The Father placed his love on those he gave to Christ, long before they ever believed in Christ. That's what the Bible refers to elsewhere as God's foreknowledge, his fore-loving us from eternity past.

## The Necessity of Election

God's election does not mean our choice is not important. Personal faith is a crucial factor in one's salvation, but it's preceded by the Holy Spirit's work of preparing us to believe, because God chose the person from eternity past according to his gracious love.

As pointed out above, belief in Christ is a *necessary* condition for salvation, but it is not a *sufficient* condition for salvation. Even though believing and receiving Christ as Savior is necessary for salvation, we could have never chosen to trust Christ on our own. Apart from God preparing us by His Spirit, we would have never desired to seek Christ and trust Him as our Savior. Paul affirms this in three key passages: **2 Thessalonians 2:13** - "*God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification (setting apart) by the Holy Spirit and belief in the truth.*" **1 Thessalonians 1:4** *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.* **Titus 3:5** *He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*

Because of mankind's sinful nature, Paul quotes the Psalmist and declares this verdict on the entire human race in **Romans 3:10-12**, "*There is none righteous, no, not one; no one understands, NO ONE SEEKS FOR GOD, all have turned aside; together they have become worthless, no one does good, not even one.*" Without the initiative of God's great mercy, no human would choose the true and living God of creation. Without His prior work in their hearts, they would not seek Him or believe in Him. That's why I can say with absolute confidence that no one in this world who really wants to know God will ever be turned away from heaven, because that desire to know him is only possible if the Father "draws" him/her (**John 6:44**). And Jesus said that whoever the Father draws, he will save.

The word "draw" Jesus uses in **John 6:44** (note also what Jesus teaches in **vv. 37-40** and **64-65**) is the same word used of Paul in **Acts 16:19** when he was "dragged" before the magistrates and in **21:30** when he was "dragged" out of the temple. It is also the word used by Jesus when He promised to give His disciples the words to say when they are

"dragged" before the courts. This "drawing" is like what a magnet does to metal filings. The word speaks of a powerful drawing, not merely persuasive.

The doctrine of election affirms that our coming to Christ was not something we orchestrated ourselves, but, in fact, was the result of the gracious call of God's loving Spirit as He tugged on the cords of our hearts and supernaturally prepared us, so that we would trust Jesus for what He did for us.

Bottom line: Election is all about how believers are saved by the sheer mercy of God, who caused them to be born again to a living hope in Christ (1 Peter 1:3).

If you don't believe in the doctrine of election, then consider this question: ***Why are you a Christian, and your neighbor is not?*** You might say, "Because I believed and my neighbor did not." Okay, then why did you believe and your neighbor did not? "Because I repented. I changed my mind about Jesus." Then, why did you repent and your neighbor did not? "Because I was open to the truth." Why were you open to the truth and your neighbor was not? "Because I was willing to listen." Why were you willing to listen and your neighbor was not? We could go on, but what all this leads to is this: If I reject the doctrine of election, I end up saying the difference between me and my neighbor was the mercy of God, PLUS SOMETHING IN ME. I was more open. I was more willing. I was more *something*. That nullifies God's great mercy and flies in the face of what the Bible teaches about our complete inability to seek Him as spiritually dead individuals.

### An Objection to Election

Some object that this approach to election contradicts God's command that everybody believe in His Son. However, this objection assumes that, if God commands something, then it must be possible.

This is not true in **Matthew 5:48**. Christ commands us to be holy as God is holy. Obviously this is impossible for us, but nevertheless it is commanded. God commands all to believe in Christ and will hold man accountable for that command, but that does not mean everyone is capable of obeying it. Man's situation in sin is, indeed, tragic.

God does not desire that any perish (**2 Peter 3:9**). It's true: "Whosoever" desires may come to take the water of life freely (**Revelation 22:17**) but the sad truth is, no one desires God, unless God draws him/her (**John 6:44**). Left to ourselves, we neither want or seek the true and living God (**Romans 3:10-12**).

So, the question is, why doesn't God draw everyone, if he does not desire that any should perish? Great question! Some would answer that he doesn't, in order to avoid infringing on free will. But this can't be. For starters, to say this would mean that God infringes on the free will of those he does elect. Also, would any one object to God infringing on their free will, if it meant keeping them from everlasting hell? I doubt it!

We have to conclude that, for whatever reason God does not draw everyone to Christ equally so that Christ saves everyone, it is because of the infinite wisdom of both his mercy and justice. Something we either do not have the capacity to ever fully understand or God has chosen not to reveal it to us at this time.

We also have to ask the question, "*Does not the doctrine of election discourage evangelism and missions?*" First of all, there is no way we can know who is the elect, until a person responds by faith to the gospel, as Paul witnessed with the Thessalonians (**1 Thessalonians 1:4-5**). So, we are to share the gospel with everyone, indiscriminately, until the opportunity for conversion is no longer possible—that is, the person has died.

Also, and even more profoundly, election is the lifeblood of missions. As one missionary confessed, when he left for the mission field as a young man, he rejected the notion of divine election. However, after spending years on the field seeing the hardness of the human heart, he said he would have never returned to the field without believing fully in the doctrine of election. To know, against the fallen nature of man, that God has chosen people from every nation was what gave him the courage and stamina to remain on gospel mission. The Apostle Paul had the same experience, when he arrived in the city of Corinth on his second missionary journey. He was deeply discouraged and vulnerable after his disappointing reception in Athens (**1 Corinthians 2:3**). But Jesus came to him in a vision and assured him, "*Don't be afraid...I am with you...I have many in this city who are my people.*" (**Acts 18:9-10**)

## The Wonder of Election

If we allow the biblical doctrine of election to sink into our hearts, it's overwhelming. It strips us of all our pride, of all our presumption, of all our self-sufficient attitudes, and it leaves us with our hands wide open to God in humble thanksgiving for what He has done for us. Is it any wonder why it's so thrilling to hear Christians share their testimony as to how they came to know Christ? It testifies to the plan of God in their lives. Each of us who knows Christ can look back and all we can do is shake our heads in wonder, as we consider our salvation from the perspective of God's eternal election, and we see, even though we never knew it at the time, how God was at work drawing us to Himself our entire lives.

People who believe the doctrine of election realize there's a lot we don't understand. However, the one thing we do understand is, it teaches us that the reason we're a Christian is because of the sheer mercy of God. Nothing **in us** that gave us one little tiny inch above, one little leg up, one little advantage over anybody else. It's the pure mercy of God alone, so we have no cause for pride of any sort. It is the sheer mercy of God that serves as the ground for anyone's salvation, and that is all the doctrine of election really teaches. That's the heart of it.

A final word about election: **1 Peter 2:9** says we are chosen/elect people for the purpose of *proclaiming the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light*. Ultimately, God elected us in Christ from eternity past to serve his glory—for the display of his splendor (**Isaiah 61:3**) and a key part of that is to bear witness of his gospel grace to people yet lost in sin. Of course, this particular aspect of election doesn't resolve the unfathomable reality that God would choose some for himself, but it does reveal another dimension of the great mercy he extends to us in Christ.

The doctrine of predestination is related to, but distinct from election, in that it has to do with the ultimate destiny of those whom God foreknew (fore-loved) in Christ from eternity past. Their certain destiny is to be conformed to the image of Christ (**Romans 8:29-30**).

The biblical doctrines of election and predestination, based on God's eternal foreknowledge, are hard to grasp, but even harder to dismiss. Both are assumed or clearly proclaimed throughout the Scripture by the Spirit-inspired authors. Here we must join Paul in **Romans 11:33**, when he concluded his thoughts on the electing purposes of God in lives of His people with these words of doxology, "*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!*" The words of Moses also come to mind in **Deuteronomy 29:29**, "*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.*"