

THE GOSPEL LESSON 15

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 3

TULIP – Unconditional Election

Ephesians 1:3-5 - Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

REVIEWING THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION

Last lesson, we took up the first petal, Total Depravity, and drew a line through the middle of it. Two claims are fused in the doctrine, and they have to be pulled apart. The first, that the natural man is dead in his trespasses and can do nothing to save himself. Scripture states everywhere, and we affirmed it without softening a word: he is a child of wrath (Ephesians 2:3), his mouth stopped and the whole world accountable (Romans 3:19), unable to please God in the flesh (Romans 8:8), and, left to himself, not seeking God at all (Romans 3:11). The second claim, that the dead cannot even be persuaded by the gospel until God has first regenerated them, so that regeneration precedes faith, Scripture states nowhere. That second claim is not read out of the texts; it is deduced by the framework and then read back in. Remove the imported link and every affirmation that remains is Biblical: the word of truth is heard, faith answers, and the Spirit seals the believer the moment he believes (Ephesians 1:13; Romans 10:17).

We closed by gathering a positive doctrine of our own from the whole of Scripture, from Noah to Isaiah, and it stood in one sentence: man is absolutely unable to save himself, and that inability to save himself is not an inability to respond to the grace of God when God comes to him in the gospel. Grace moves first; the ruined are summoned to answer; and the answer of faith is not a work (Romans 4:5).

We read each text literally in its normal sense, in its grammar, and in its historical and cultural setting, asking first who wrote it, to whom, when, and why. We move from the text toward conclusions (theology) and revise the conclusions when the text resists them. We hold ourselves to what the text states and to the author's intent, and we do not grant a doctrine standing because a system requires it "by good and necessary consequence" (WCF 1.6).

Total Depravity settled a doctrine of man. The second petal, Unconditional Election, settles a doctrine of God's choice, and it is built directly on the first: if the dead cannot believe until they are regenerated, then God alone must decide who is regenerated, and that decision is unconditional election. So, the two are joined. This lesson first clarifies what is and is not being asked, then states the doctrine in its own words, then takes up the three primary texts in turn, John 6, Ephesians 1, and Romans 9, and answers Acts 13:48 where it is most often pressed alongside them. At the end, as before, we do not merely refute; we gather a positive doctrine of election from the whole of Scripture.

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I. INTRODUCTION – KEY DISTINCTIONS

Before we read the primary texts, four distinctions keep the discussion honest and stop the two sides from talking past one another. None of them settles the question; each clears ground the argument will need.

1. Election to Salvation and Election to Service. Scripture uses the language of choosing in more than one way, and the senses must not be blurred. God chose Israel as a nation for a role in redemptive history (Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Isaiah 41:8-9). He chose the twelve for an office (John 15:16; Acts 9:15). He chose His Servant, the Son (Isaiah 42:1). These are elections to a purpose or a task, and none of them is an election of a private individual to eternal life. No text states that a person was chosen to believe. When a text speaks of God's choice, the first question is always, chosen to what.

In Reformed Theology, it is conflated that when a person (people) is chosen for a purpose that they are also chosen for individual salvation.

2. Corporate Election and Individual Election. Many of the key passages speak of a choice made "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:4) or of a people God has taken for His own (1 Peter 2:9). The emphasis in these texts is corporate: God has chosen a body, a people united to His Son, and the individual enters that chosen people by faith in Christ. Whether the New Testament also teaches a separate, secret choice of particular individuals to salvation, apart from their faith and before their existence, is precisely the question this lesson tests. We hold the question open until the texts answer it.

3. Election in Christ, not Election on Foreseen Faith. It is a mistake to think the only alternative to unconditional election is the Arminian one, that God chose those He foresaw would believe. That view concedes that election is in reference to salvation. Our position is neither. Election in Christ is about what believers are elected to, what believers' destiny is, and what the benefits of being a son of God are. Keep that third option in view, because both systems will try to force us into one of the other two.

4. Reprobation and Double Predestination. Unconditional election raises at once the question of those not chosen. Some Reformed writers hold a strong double predestination, in which God actively decrees both the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the reprobate; others speak more carefully of God "passing over" the rest. Either way, once salvation is made to rest on an unconditional decree, the destiny of the non-elect becomes the direct result of that same decree. Set beside this the Scriptures that say God desires all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9) and takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11), together with the gospel offered to whoever will (Revelation 22:17). The tension is real, and we will return to it.

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II. UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION - DEFINITION

We want to answer what they teach, not a caricature, so we let the confessions and a living teacher speak first. The doctrine was fixed at the Synod of Dort, and the Canons give the definition (First Head, Article 7):

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, He hath, out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will, chosen from the whole human race ... a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect and the foundation of salvation.

The Westminster Confession states it in the form most often quoted, and it is the sentence that makes the point sharpest (Chapter 3.5):

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his free grace and love alone, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto.

The load-bearing phrase is the explicit denial of “any foresight of faith.” The choice is grounded in the good pleasure of God’s will and in nothing in the person, faith included. In the modern pulpit, R. C. Sproul states the same substance, preferring the label “sovereign election”: election means that God does not look ahead to any act or condition in us that moves Him to save us, but saves according to His own sovereign pleasure (Ligonier Ministries). Calvin had put it centuries earlier in the *Institutes*: God determined by His eternal plan whom He would receive to salvation, and with respect to the elect this plan rests on His freely given mercy, with no regard to human worth. Across the confessions and the living teachers the claim is one: the deciding factor is God’s free will alone, and nothing in the person, not even his faith, is a condition of it.

III. UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION – ARGUMENTS AND BIBLICAL RESPONSES

We take the primary texts in order, John 6, Ephesians 1, and Romans 9, add Acts 13:48 where it is most often pressed, and then draw the threads together. In each case we grant the doctrine its strongest form before we answer it.

1. John 6 – The Ones the Father Gives.

The Reformed Claim. John 6 is the strongest single position the doctrine holds, and in this chapter it does more than one job. Last lesson, we answered the drawing, “no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (6:44), and showed from the chapter itself that the drawing is the Father’s teaching, heard and learned (6:45), and that

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its manner is the lifting up of the cross (12:32–33): persuasion through the Word, not an operation on a passive object. We held one thread for this lesson, the thread that bears on election, the giving.

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out ... This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. (John 6:37, 39)

The claim is that the Father gives a definite number of particular persons to the Son before time; that all of them, and only they, come; and that none of them is ever lost. The giving is read as unconditional election, the certain coming as irresistible grace, and the losing of nothing as the perseverance of the saints. Three petals hang on this one clause.

Biblical Response. John defines his terms in the same breath, and we let him. The ones who come are the ones the Father gives (6:37); and the ones the Father gives are named eight verses later:

It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught of God.” Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. (John 6:45)

The giving and the coming and the hearing-and-learning describe one group, and the group is not defined by a bare decree but by a response to the Father’s teaching. Jesus even names the Scripture He is standing on, And they shall all be taught of God, drawn from Isaiah 54:13, a promise that God will teach His people, not a notice that a secret few are taught while the rest are barred. The Father gives to the Son those who hear and learn from Him, and the hearing and learning come through the Word, whose content is finally the Son lifted up. Take the giving together with the drawing, as the chapter does, and one answer covers both: this is the Father teaching, persuading, and bringing, through the gospel of His Son.

The certainty in the passage is real, and we do not blunt it: all whom the Father gives do come, and of them the Son loses none but raises them up at the last day (6:39). But the very next verse names who those raised-up ones are:

For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:40)

Verse 39 raises up “all that He has given Me”; verse 40 raises up “everyone who beholds the Son and believes.” They are the same people, and the guarantee is fastened to faith. The passage promises that those who come to Christ are kept, which is exactly the assurance we teach, resting on the Son’s promise and not on the believer’s performance. It does not prove that the giving was an unconditioned selection of individuals fixed before creation; that is added to the text, not found in it. The Son secures that no believer is lost; the Reformed reading needs that the believers were an unconditionally chosen roster to begin with. The text says the first without saying the second.

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The same holds for “no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father” (6:65). To be granted to come is to be taught by the Father, to hear and to learn (6:45); the grant is genuine, and it is God’s, but the chapter has already told us how it is given, through His teaching and His Son lifted up. Jesus speaks these words because “there are some of you who do not believe” (6:64), the crowd that had followed Him for bread and would not receive His testimony (6:26, 36). He is accounting for their unbelief by the priority of the Father’s gift, not announcing that a hidden list shut them out before they were born.

So, the giving, read where John places it, describes the Father bringing to the Son, through His own teaching and the cross, all who hear and learn and believe, and keeping every one of them to the last day. Grace has the initiative from first to last. What the text does not supply is the unconditional, pre-temporal selection of particular individuals; that is the framework’s conclusion pressed back onto the clause.

2. Ephesians 1 – Chosen in Him.

The Reformed Claim. Ephesians 1:4-5 is the most frequently cited text:

just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will. (Ephesians 1:4-5)

It is read as God selecting particular individuals for salvation before the foundation of the world, on the sole basis of His will.

Biblical Response. Everything turns on two words the claim hurries past, “in Him.” The choice is made ἐν αὐτῷ *en autō*, in Christ, and Christ is not the mechanism of the choice but its sphere. He is the Chosen One (Isaiah 42:1; 1 Peter 2:4), and the church is chosen in Him, the way the members of a body are in the body, or a people are in their king. Read the passage for what it actually predestines people to. It does not say God chose certain persons to become believers; it says He chose those who are in Christ “that we would be holy and blameless,” “to adoption as sons,” to an inheritance (1:11), “to the praise of His glory” (1:12). Every object of the choosing is a benefit that belongs to those united to the Son. The election is corporate and Christ-centered: God determined before the foundation of the world that everyone in His Son would be holy, adopted, and glorified, and a person becomes one of that chosen the only way the letter allows, by hearing the message of truth and believing it (1:13). “Chosen in Him” names the elect by their union with Christ; it does not name a set of individuals selected apart from Him and then supplied with faith.

This is not the Arminian claim that God chose those He foresaw would believe. No one was a believer before the foundation of the world, so the choice cannot rest on a faith that did not yet exist, and it does not rest on foreseen faith as its ground. The point is that the

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choice was located in Christ from the beginning, and the sphere of the choice is entered by faith. The ground is God's free purpose; the sphere is His Son; the entrance is belief.

3. Romans 9 – Nations, Mercy, and the Potter.

The Reformed Claim. Romans 9 is treated as the clearest proof of unconditional individual election. The weight falls on the twins:

for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Romans 9:11-13)

It falls also on the mercy and hardening of verses 15-18, "He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires," and on the potter and the clay of verses 20-21, God's right to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor.

Biblical Response.

a. The whole chapter is about national Israel and the faithfulness of God's word. Paul opens in grief over his "kinsmen according to the flesh" (9:3) and lists the privileges of Israel as a nation: the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the Law, the temple service, the promises, the patriarchs (9:4-5). His question is not how a private sinner is saved; it is whether the word of God has failed now that most of ethnic Israel has rejected the Messiah. His answer sets the terms for everything that follows: "The Word of God has not failed" (9:6). Then Paul goes into a clarification of who he is talking about. Ethnic Israel. Not just the sons of Abraham, but the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The subject is corporate and covenantal from the first verse.

b. The oracle to Rebekah is explicitly about two nations.

Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger. (Genesis 25:23)

The word given is "two nations," "two peoples." It is not a statement about the eternal destinies of two men.

c. The love and the hatred are quoted from Malachi, about the nations. "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" is taken from Malachi 1:2-3, written a thousand years after the patriarchs, where the Lord speaks of His historical dealings with the nations of Israel and Edom and names Edom's territory by name (Malachi 1:3-4). The Genesis narrative nowhere records that God hated the man Esau; the individual Esau was met with kindness, given land and family and a future. The language of love and hatred is covenantal and national: one nation set in the line of promise, the other passed by.

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d. “The older will serve the younger” was fulfilled between the nations, not the men. It was not fulfilled in the brothers’ own lives; Esau never served Jacob, and it was Jacob who bowed to Esau (Genesis 33:3). It was fulfilled when Edom came under Israel’s dominion (2 Samuel 8:14; 1 Kings 11:15–16), later rebelled (2 Kings 8:20–22), and came under judgment as a nation (Obadiah; Jeremiah 49:7–22). The point is historical and corporate throughout, not a template for assigning individuals to heaven or hell.

e. Mercy and hardening: Moses and Pharaoh are figures in the Exodus, not specimens of private election. The mercy and hardening of verses 15–18 are proved from the Exodus. “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy” is spoken to Moses (Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15), and the hardening is Pharaoh’s, with the purpose stated in the very text Paul quotes: “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth” (9:17; Exodus 9:16). Pharaoh is not a sample of an unconditionally reprobated individual; he is a national ruler raised up so that God’s power would be published to the earth in the deliverance of a people. And the Exodus account itself presents Pharaoh hardening his own heart before the Lord is ever said to harden it (Exodus 8:15, 8:32, 9:34), so the hardening of verse 18 is God’s judicial confirmation of a rebellion already chosen. “He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires” asserts God’s freedom to deal with a people according to His purpose; it does not make private individuals the units of the transaction.

f. “Not of the one who wills or runs” concerns the ground of covenant mercy. When Paul writes that it depends “not on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (9:16), he is denying that membership in the true Israel is secured by descent or by works of the Law, the very things his kinsmen were counting on. The mercy that constitutes God’s people rests on God’s free choice, not on Jewish pedigree or effort. This is not a denial that the people so constituted are believers; it is a denial that they are constituted by anything they can boast in.

g. The potter and the clay are drawn from Jeremiah 18, where the clay is a nation and the shaping is conditional. The objection “why does He still find fault?” (9:19) and the potter’s answer (9:20–21) come straight out of Jeremiah 18, where the potter reworking the marred clay is God’s dealing with “the house of Israel” (Jeremiah 18:6). And the passage Paul reaches for is openly conditional: if the nation turns from its evil, God relents of the calamity; if it does evil, God reconsiders the good He intended (Jeremiah 18:7–10). The image Paul chooses to answer the objector is one in which the nation’s response moves the potter’s hand. To lift the potter and clay out of that setting and make it a proof of unconditional individual predestination is to read against the passage Paul is quoting.

h. Even the vessels of wrath and mercy resist a symmetrical decree. The language of verses 22–23 is deliberately uneven. The vessels of mercy are those “which He prepared beforehand for glory” (9:23), with God the plain subject of the preparing. The vessels of

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wrath are “prepared for destruction” (9:22), and God is not named as the one who prepared them; the form leaves room for what the whole chapter has said, that they fitted themselves for destruction by unbelief. And these vessels of wrath God “endured with much patience,” the patience that leaves room for repentance (compare Romans 2:4), which is not the posture of a decree that has already and unconditionally fixed their ruin. Paul’s own conclusion interprets the chapter: the Gentiles attained righteousness “by faith,” and Israel did not attain it because they pursued it “not by faith, but as though by works,” and stumbled over the stone (9:30–32). The chapter made to prove an unconditional decree ends by naming faith and works as the dividing line.

Read whole, Romans 9 vindicates God’s freedom to constitute His people as He promised, a believing remnant of Israel together with the Gentiles He has called (9:24), rather than by physical descent or law-keeping. The units are nations and the boundary is faith. It is not a doctrine of two eternal rosters drawn up before creation.

4. Acts 13:48 – Appointed to Eternal Life.

The Reformed Claim. One more text is pressed so often it must be met: “and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). It is read as a plain statement that a fixed number were ordained to life, and that these and only these believed.

Biblical Response. The first part is straight forward the Gentiles heard the proclamation from Paul and were rejoicing (perpetual in the past) and were glorifying (perpetual in the past) the direct object is “the word of the Lord.” The people heard the proclamation of Paul and the quotation from the Hebrew text and considered all the word of the Lord.

“...and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”

Key words:

As many as - ὅσος hosos – pertaining to an extent of space or time that is of the same extent as another extent of the same order (as great, as far, as long, as many). The same amount as **X** was also **Y**

Had been – εἰμί eimi – Imperfect Indicative

Appointed - τάσσω tassō (Perfect Passive Participle) – to put in order, to place, to arrange, to designate, establish, determine (Matthew 28:16; Acts 15:2; Romans 13:1)

Syntax – eimi with a Perfect Participle makes this a Periphrastic; this relative clause is an overstatement. It is unnecessary to the text but adds an additional material that is pertinent.

Being “established, determined, designated” to eternal life is not the main idea. The main idea is that they believed. The “hosos” means that those who believed were also designated to eternal life.

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Rendering: And they believed (these also were designated to eternal life).

Why is this here. It is to contrast these Gentiles to the Jews in verse 46 who did not believe and judged themselves unworthy of eternal life. To make this about predestination forces the text.

The Problem with This Synthesis

Set the texts side by side and the pattern of the last lesson repeats. In each case a truth we affirm is fused to a claim the text does not make.

John 6: the Father truly gives, draws, and keeps, through His teaching and His Son lifted up, and loses no one who comes. He affirms that grace has the initiative and that believers are secure. He does not state that the given were an unconditionally chosen roster fixed before creation; the chapter defines them as those who hear, learn, and believe.

Ephesians 1: God truly chose, before the foundation of the world, in Christ. The choosing is corporate, its sphere is the Son, entered by faith, and its objects are holiness, adoption, and glory. It does not say God chose particular persons to become believers apart from Christ.

Romans 9: God is truly free to constitute His people by promise and not by descent or works. The units are nations, the examples are drawn from Israel's history, the potter is Jeremiah's national and conditional potter, and Paul's own conclusion names faith as the line. It is not a decree assigning individuals to two eternal ends.

Acts 13:48: God truly opened eternal life to the Gentiles and positioned them for it by His word. The verb is one of arrangement, and the context sets Jewish self-exclusion against Gentile reception. It is not a register of the unconditionally elect.

The single move underneath all four is the one Westminster names and authorizes: a conclusion the framework requires, established "by good and necessary consequence" (WCF 1.6), is treated as though the texts had stated it. Remove that imported step, and every text still stands, and still says what it says.

IV. BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF ELECTIONS

We have refused their conclusion, and we owe a doctrine of our own, gathered from the whole of Scripture. It can be put in two sentences that must be held together.

God has a chosen people, chosen before the foundation of the world, by grace alone and by no merit, and He will most certainly save them. And that people is chosen for a purpose or to a destiny in Christ, the Chosen One, and is entered through the gospel by faith.

Election is first about the Son, not about us. He is the One the Father names "My chosen one in whom My soul delights" (Isaiah 42:1), the stone God calls "choice and precious" (1 Peter

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2:4, 6), the beloved on the mountain of whom the voice says, “This is My Son, My Chosen One” (Luke 9:35). Before Scripture calls any sinner elect, it calls Christ the Elect. This is why the church’s election is always “in Him” (Ephesians 1:4): to be chosen is to be found in the Chosen One, and a person is found in Him by faith. The order is not that God selects individuals and then joins them to Christ; it is that God has purposed to bless everyone who is in His Son, and the sinner comes to be in the Son by believing the gospel.

Scripture also chooses men to service, and this must never be collapsed into election to heaven. Israel was chosen as a nation to carry the promise (Deuteronomy 7:6–8; Isaiah 41:8–9); the twelve were chosen to an office, one of whom was a devil (John 15:16; 6:70); Paul was chosen as a vessel to bear the name (Acts 9:15). These are real choices to a real purpose, and none of them is a decree of personal salvation. To read every “chose” as an unconditional election to eternal life is to flatten the very texts that distinguish them.