

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Election

“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” — Romans 8:29-28

Review & Introduction

The study of the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) begins with a proper understanding of the nature and extent of sin. If the *need* for salvation is not properly established, the *provision* of salvation will not be fully appreciated. Two concepts related to sin that must be understood include:

- **Original Sin:** The effect of Adam’s sin on all his descendants. As the first man and representative of humanity, Adam introduced guilt, corruption, and death to all his offspring through his transgression (Rom 5:12-21).
- **Total Depravity:** The devastating impact of sin on humanity, including: (1) the pollution and corruption of all aspects of a person’s existence (intellect, will, affections); (2) the complete inability of a person to do what pleases God (any moral or religious works he does are wrongly motivated); and (3) the universality of sin’s reach, in that all of Adam’s descendants are conceived and born as sinners (Rom 3:10-18, 23).

These concepts do not teach that every human being acts as evil as he or she could. God has instituted restraints to mitigate against the full experience of depravity. Sinners can be relatively “good” people and live according to human standards of morality. But when human beings are measured against the standard of God’s righteousness, all are found to be guilty, comprehensively corrupt in their thoughts, intentions, feelings, and actions, and unwilling and unable to seek God. All have gone astray. Left to themselves, no one *wants* the salvation that God provides.

It is against this backdrop that the doctrine of *election* gains its importance and necessity. The doctrine of election explains how God *arranged* to save sinners from their *unwillingness* and *inability* to be reconciled to Him.

AN OVERVIEW OF SALVATION		
Its Arrangement	Its Accomplishment	Its Application
Before Time	An Historical Event (the cross)	Relative Time
Election	Atonement	Regeneration, etc.

Most discussions about the doctrine of election are not easy. This is not because the concept is untouched by Scripture. To the contrary, the Bible clearly addresses the concept. Rather, the concept is difficult because:

- It is difficult for man’s limited and faulty intellect to comprehend the motivations and decisions made by an infinite God in eternity.
- The Bible does not provide an exhaustive treatment of the concept, meaning that aspects of the doctrine are mysterious and require trust that what God has revealed is sufficient for us. The unanswered questions must be covered by the conviction that “the Judge of all the earth will deal justly” (Gen 18:25).
- Because of the difficulty of the topic, the doctrine of election is neglected, leading to ignorance. Many believers attempt to compensate by relying on intuition whenever the topic is raised. The result is that many notions about election come from personal opinion, tradition, and bias, rather than from the Bible.
- Most notably, the doctrine of election is an inherently humbling doctrine. It confronts human pride directly, revealing even in believers a “natural allergy to divine sovereignty” (Barrett, *40 Questions about Salvation*, 47).

The doctrine of election “is an important measuring rod for someone’s theology, since an acceptance or rejection of this doctrine reveals at once whether a person is biblically correct on such other doctrines as the nature and extent of sin, the bondage of the will, the full grace of God in salvation, and even the presentation of the gospel.” — Boice & Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 91

A. Key Terms and Definitions

1. Election. “God’s choice of certain persons for his special favor” (Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 849).

Fuller definition: “the free and sovereign choice of God, made in eternity past, to set his love on certain individuals, and—on the basis of nothing in themselves but solely because of the good pleasure of his will—to choose them to be saved from sin and damnation and to inherit the blessings of eternal life through the mediatorial work of Christ” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 493).

**Key idea:
Choice**

The concept is applied to various objects of choice: Jesus Christ is “the Chosen One” (Luke 9:35; 23:35); holy angels are “chosen” (1 Tim 5:21); the nation of Israel was a “people whom God has chosen” (Ps 32:12); the city of Jerusalem was “chosen” by God (1 Kings 11:13; 32); Israel’s king was to be “chosen” by God (Deut 17:15); Jesus disciples were “chosen” (John 15:16); etc. Most importantly, the term “chosen” or “elect” is applied to those whom God has selected for eternal life (e.g., Rom 8:33).

2. Reprobation. “God’s sovereign decision to pass over others and not to save them” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 684).

Fuller definition: “the free and sovereign choice of God, made in eternity past, to pass over certain individuals, choosing not to set his saving love on them but instead determining to punish them for their sins unto the magnification of his justice” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 504).

**Key idea:
Passing over**

It is vital to note that “election” and “reprobation” are not the same *kind* of action. They are not strictly parallel nor two sides of the same coin. They are notably *different*. The following differences can be observed:

- a) **Different causation:** God does not have to save anyone. All are worthy of condemnation. However, when God chose to save certain sinners, He chose to implement the actions that would *cause* saving faith in those who were chosen. He becomes the *author* of their faith. The doctrine of reprobation is different. When God decided to pass by certain sinners, He *did not cause* unbelief in them. He is not the author of their sin. They are fully responsible for their own sin, guilt, and condemnation.
 - b) **Different operation:** When God elected certain individuals to salvation, He determined to work in them to *transform* them into what they were not. He chose to make sinners into saints—to transform them into the image of His Son (Rom 8:29). Election therefore is *active*. The doctrine of reprobation is different. When God chose to pass by certain sinners, He did not choose to transform them into what they were not, to make saints into sinners. The non-elect would remain what they were—sinners. Reprobation therefore has a *passive* sense.
 - c) **Different foundation:** When God elected certain individuals to salvation, He determined to save them *apart from* anything they would do. Election, therefore, is not based on what is deserved. The doctrine of reprobation is different. When God chose to pass by certain sinners, He determined to judge them *according to* everything they would do. Reprobation, therefore, is based on what is deserved.
 - d) **Different motivation:** When God elected certain individuals to salvation, He determined that in them He would put on display His *grace* and *mercy*. The doctrine of reprobation is different. When God chose to pass by certain sinners, He determined that in them He would put on display His *justice*. Thus, contrary to what is often argued, the non-elect are *not* victims of any *injustice* on God’s part.
- ### 3. Predestination. “Generally, God’s eternal, uninfluenced determination of all things; specifically, God’s eternal choice of those who will be saved and those who will be passed over and condemned for their sin” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 935). Thus, predestination encompasses both *election* and *reprobation*.

An important clarification is again needed. While both election and reprobation are aspects of predestination, the term “double predestination” is to be avoided. The term “double” can communicate the wrong idea that election and reprobation are parallel acts, or two sides of the same coin. Indeed, God is *equally sovereign* in both His decision to extend mercy (election) and in His decision to withhold mercy (reprobation). But as noted above, a distinction must be maintained between these two sovereign acts of God.

C. Biblical Evidence

There is an abundance of texts that speak of election. The most definitive related to election unto salvation include:

- **Ephesians 1:3-6.** Election is described as:
 - *Unilateral* – “He chose us ... He predestined us” (vv. 4, 5)
 - *Mediatorial* – “in Christ ... in Him ... through Jesus Christ ... in the Beloved” (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6)
 - *Eternal* – “before the foundation of the world” (v. 4)
 - *Individual* – “adoption as sons” (v. 5)
 - *Purposeful* – “that we would be holy and blameless ... to adoption as sons ... to Himself ... to the praise of the glory of His grace” (vv. 4, 5, 6)
 - *Merciful* – “blessed us with every spiritual blessing ... in love ... the kind intention of his will ... His grace” (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6)
 - *Unconditional* – “according to the kind intention of his will” (v. 5)
- **2 Thessalonians 2:13.** Election is described as:
 - *Unilateral* – “God has chosen you”
 - *Individual* – “you, brethren”
 - *Merciful* – “beloved by the Lord”
 - *Eternal* – “from the beginning”
 - *Purposeful* – “for salvation”
 - *Mediatorial* – “through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth”
- **Acts 13:48.** Election is described as:
 - *Individual* – “as many as”
 - *Unilateral* – “had been appointed”
 - *Purposeful* – “to eternal life”
 - *Effectual* – “as many had been appointed . . . believed”
- **Romans 8:29-30.** Election is described as:
 - *Individual* – “Those”
 - *Unilateral* – “whom He foreknew, He also predestined” (v. 29).
 - *Purposeful* – “to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren” (v. 29)
 - *Efficacious* – “these whom He predestined . . . He also glorified” (v. 30)
 - *Note:* The verb “foreknew” does not refer to “foreseen faith,” as if God looked through time to see what a person would do. True, when the verb “foreknow” is used about impersonal objects or events, it does refer to what is known beforehand. But when the verb is used with respect to a person (as here), it refers to the establishment of an intimate relationship (see 1 Peter 1:20 and the verb applied to Christ, “foreknown before the foundation of the world”). Thus, God’s predestination of some to glory—according to Romans 8:29-30—is based on a determination to establish a special, personal relationship.

The most extensive treatment in Scripture on the topic of election unto salvation is **Romans 9**. A few observations:

- **Romans 9:11-13.** This text refers both to God’s act of *election* (“Jacob I loved,” v. 13) and to God’s act of *reprobation* (“Esau I hated,” v. 13). These acts have an unconditionality to them: “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” (v. 11).
- **Romans 9:14-16.** God does not *need* to save anyone. He is just in condemning all sinners. The exercise of mercy is neither demanded by justice nor deserved by the guilty. The exercise of mercy is the sole prerogative of the Law-giver. If mercy was required, mercy would no longer be mercy. It would be justice. Thus, the emphasis here is that predestination is God’s sole and unconditional prerogative: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy . . . it does not depend on the man who wills . . . but on God who has mercy” (vv. 15-16).
- **Romans 9:19-21.** Paul anticipates opposition to divine sovereignty and provides his ultimate answer in the form of an analogy about clay and a potter. All human beings are part of “the same lump” of clay—i.e., they are sinful (Rom 3:10-18, 23). In the same way that one would expect that clay be made into common vessels, one must also assume that sinful human beings must receive the judgment they are due. However, it is the

potter's right to do something special with some of that clay by making it into something extraordinary—a vessel of honor. In the same way, it is God's prerogative to do something unexpected with some from among sinful humanity, making them objects of his grace and mercy, rather than leaving them to experience justice.

D. Practical Implications

- 1. The doctrine of election enables our evangelism.** If we really believe in the severity of total depravity, we would conclude that evangelism would be utterly hopeless if God had not determined to intervene to draw specific sinners to Himself. Consider Jesus' words to Paul in Acts 18:9-10.
- 2. The doctrine of election eliminates our pride.** Election slays our pride by showing that salvation is entirely "of the Lord" and entirely "by grace alone." It eliminates any human merit from the gift of salvation, and leads all believers to an inescapable question: "Why did God choose to show mercy to *me*, a sinner?"
- 3. The doctrine of election energizes our worship.** The answer to the question, "Why did God choose to show mercy to me, a sinner?" leads to one simple answer: "Because He loves me." (Note how Paul specifically connects the concept of God's "choice" with the title, "beloved by God" in 1 Thess 1:4 and 2 Thess 2:13.) This connection between election and undeserved love leads to the most heartfelt, sincere worship.
- 4. The doctrine of election establishes our hope.** Read Romans 8:28 in light of Romans 8:29-30. The reason we can affirm that God causes "all things to work together for God" is given in vv. 29-30.

"I am persuaded that the doctrine of predestination is one of the 'softest pillows' upon which the Christian can lay his head, and one of the 'strongest staffs' upon which he may lean, in his pilgrimage along this rough road." —Charles Spurgeon

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: Romans 8:29-30

Recommended Reading:

- John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 493-511.
- R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*.
- Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (advanced).

Homework:

- What makes it difficult, even for believers, to accept the doctrine of election?
- Why is a proper understanding of the doctrine of *total depravity* important for a proper understanding of the doctrine of *election*? How are these two doctrines related? How does a misunderstanding of total depravity affect one's understanding of election?
- Explain how the doctrine of election removes any possibility for human pride in understanding salvation.
- Study Romans 8:28-30. Notice how Paul connects hope to the doctrine of election. How can the doctrine of election bring hope to your own circumstances?
- Read through Romans 9 five times over the coming week. After reading through the text several times, read the commentary provided in the *MacArthur Study Bible*.
- Those who affirm God's absolute sovereignty in election should be the humblest people on the face of the earth. Why? Why is this not always the case?

Hymn: "My Lord I Did Not Choose You" (*Hymns of Grace* #54)

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: October 9 – "Atonement"