



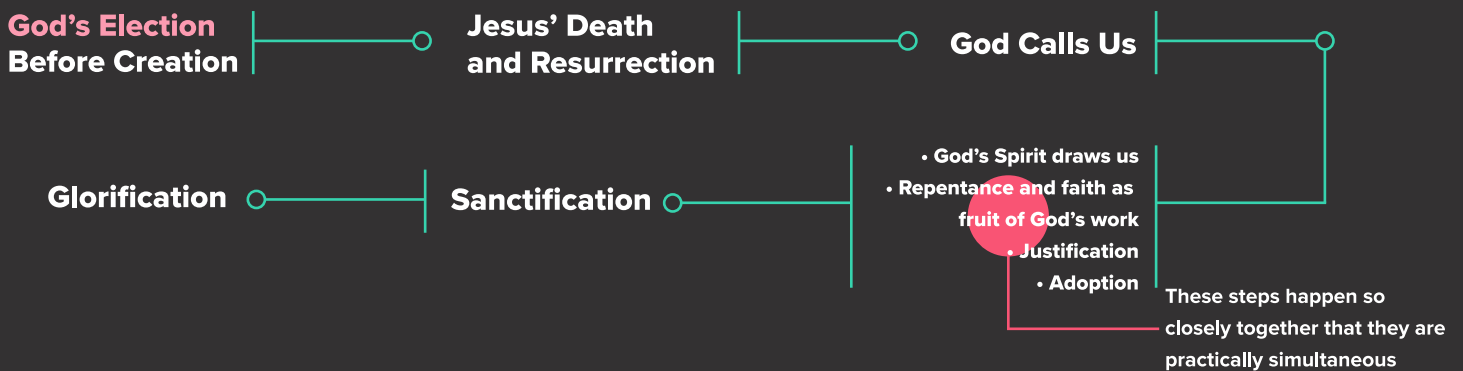
EXPLAINED

God's Election in Salvation

Explained: God's Election in Salvation

God's sovereign choice for salvation is an important, but difficult, aspect of the Christian life to understand. If God is sovereign, why are not all people saved? To what extent are our choices actually our decisions? God's Word speaks to two simultaneous realities. The first is that God is the sovereign Ruler over everything that happens in the universe. However, at the same time, some believe and some reject the gospel. This visual explanation highlights some of the primary theological truths to help us understand God's election.

The Sequence of God's Saving Work



God's election is...

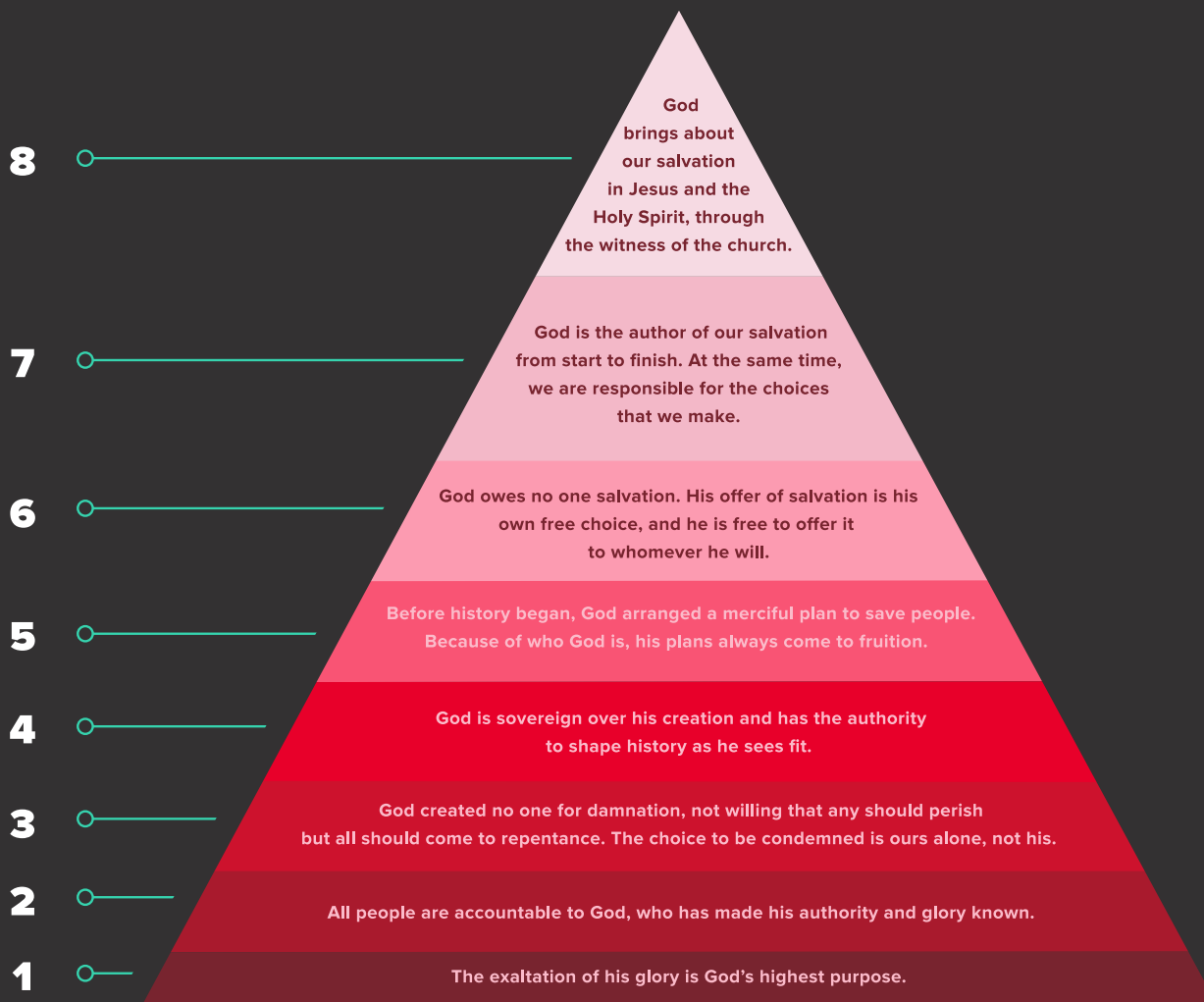
- 1. Acknowledgment** that salvation from start to finish belongs to God.
- 2. Recognition** that no one deserves heaven, but God saves us anyway.
- 3. Praise** to God that his desire for our salvation overcomes our desire to be rebellious.

God's election is not...

- 1. Fate.** God gives us free will and wants us to make choices.
- 2. An escape** from personal responsibility for our choices.
- 3. An excuse** to not evangelize. Whether or not we evangelize makes an actual difference in the eternities of others.

The Basics of God's Election

God's election is God's sovereign choice of whom he redeems and his unrelenting pursuit to accomplish our redemption.



For Further Study:

1. Exodus 24:15–16; 33:17–34:9; Deuteronomy 5:4; 28:58; 2 Samuel 7:23; 1 Kings 8:10–11; Psalm 8:1; 19:1; 57:5; 79:9; 145:11–12; Isaiah 6:3; 12:5; 35:2; 43:6–7; 48:9–11; 49:3; 60:19–21; Ezekiel 20:8–9; 36:22–23, 32; Luke 21:27; John 1:14; 11:40–44; 12:27; 13:31–32; 16:13–14; 17:4–5; Acts 7:55; Romans 1:20–23; 1 Corinthians 10:31–33; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:6; Ephesians 1:3–14; 3:21; Philippians 1:9–11; Colossians 1:27; Hebrews 1:3; 2 Peter 1:17; Revelation 19:1; 21:23
2. Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 9:7–8; Matthew 25:31–46; John 12:48; Acts 17:30–31; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 9:27; Revelation 19–22 (20:11–15)
3. John 3:16; Romans 1:18–32; 2 Thessalonians 2:8–12; 1 Timothy 2:3–6; 5:11–12; Titus 2:11–14; 3:10–11; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 7:9
4. 2 Chronicles 20:6; Job 42:2; Psalm 135:6; Proverbs 16:4; Isaiah 43:13; Acts 4:24–30; Romans 8:28–30; 9:20–23; Ephesians 1:4, 11
5. Numbers 23:19; Joshua 21:45; 23:10, 14–15; 1 Kings 8:56; Proverbs 16:4; Isaiah 42:9; 54:10; 55:10–11; Lamentations 2:17; Ezekiel 12:28; Luke 1:35–38; Acts 4:27–28; 13:48; Romans 1:2; 4:13–21; 8:28–30; 9:1–13; 15:8–12; 1 Corinthians 2:7–9; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Ephesians 1:3–14; Titus 1:2; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 1:9–10
6. Romans 3; 5:8–11; 9:14–33; Ephesians 2:1–10
7. Romans 10:9–15; 14:10–12
8. John 3:16–17; Acts 4:8–12; Romans 1:1–6; 3:21–26; 5:1–21; 8:1–39; Ephesians 1:3–14

Implications

- A.** Election shows us that **God is in control** of all of history. His Word never fails and his plans are always completely fulfilled.
- B.** Election gives us **complete assurance**. We know we are saved because our sovereign God is faithful to do what he has promised for his people according to his Word. In other words, God always finishes what he starts. So if he has started a work in you, you can be confident he will finish it (Philippians 1:6).
- C.** Election encourages us to **proclaim the gospel** frequently, with joy and expectation—not with fear, worry, or despair, even when people reject the gospel (Acts 18:5–10).

The Doctrines of God's Sovereignty and Election

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In Romans 8 - 11, Paul teaches about the sovereignty of God over all the affairs of human history. Here, we take time to consider in more detail than in the earlier chapters in this book both what the Bible teaches about God's sovereignty and his election, and some objections to and questions about these doctrines. This is not everything that can be said about these truths, and they are often unsettling for believers as they wrestle with them. As with all doctrine, these things are best discussed and thought about with other Christians, so it is well worth using this appendix as the basis for a discussion with others at your church.

What the Bible Teaches

The Bible holds together two truths:

A. Everything that happens is under God's direction

"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). Though this verse only makes reference to the way in which God controls the circumstances of believers' lives, Ephesians 1:11 tells us that he also does this for everyone: God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." In both Ephesians 1:11 and Romans 8:28, the Greek words are the same. God "performs" (*ergon*) "all things" (*panta*) that happen. In Romans 8:28, we are told he directs all things to "work together" (*sunergei*), meaning that God not only brings his power to bear on every circumstance, but he conforms all events to be part of his master plan. If we take the word "all" seriously, it means that:

1. His plan includes "little things." Ultimately, there are no accidents. Proverbs 16:33 says: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." Even the flip of a coin is part of his plan.
2. His plan includes "bad things." The evil of the world was not God's original design. Death, disease, sin and decay are a temporary result of sin (Romans 8:18-23). God is distressed by

our distress (Isaiah 63:9) and grieved by our pain (Psalm 56:8). Therefore, he is weaving into his plan even those troubles, sorrows and pain, because his plan in the end will result in glory for him and “good” for his people (Romans 8:28). “Not one [sparrow] will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Matthew 10:29). “When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?” (Amos 3:6). “I am the LORD, and there is no other ... I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:6-7).

3. His plan includes sins. This must be the case, for our sins and the sins of others are a very major part of “all things.” (If our sins were left out of the plan of God, there wouldn’t be much left!) Psalm 76:10 says of God: “Surely the wrath of man shall praise you” (ESV), meaning that God will overrule and control things so that even wicked and violent events come out for the good of his people and his glory. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph says to his brothers: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” His point is that his brothers’ evil action of selling him into slavery was used by God to do great good.

B. All choices are free acts for which we are responsible.

Romans 9:16 says: “It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.” Then in verses 31-32 Paul states that: “Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.”

Many readers find Romans 9 contradictory. In the early part of the chapter, Paul says that many Jews do not believe the gospel because they are not chosen, and God chooses his people regardless of their deeds or works (v 10-18). But at the end of the chapter, he says that they don’t believe because of their stubborn refusal to accept grace (9:30-33). It may seem like a contradiction, but everywhere in the Bible this same balance is maintained.

Put another way: God’s plan works through our choices, not around or in spite of them. For example, God sets his plan by rendering our choices certain and yet doing so without destroying our responsibility. The Greek notion of “fate” or the Islamic notion of “kismet” are quite different from the Christian doctrine of God’s sovereignty. The Greek myth of Oedipus reveals “fatalism.” Oedipus is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Though he and all around him do all they can to avoid this fate, he ends up accomplishing it. He and his parents make every effort to avoid it, but it occurs despite his choices. The Christian concept is quite different. Our choices have consequences and we are never forced by God to do anything other than what we want. Yet God works out his will perfectly through our willing actions. It is a marvel!

Martyn Lloyd-Jones expands on this:

“Why does man act as he does? ... Well, there are only three ultimate explanations. One is called contingency—that there is no rhyme or reason in anything; it is accidental and haphazard. The second is the doctrine of [determinism] ... ‘you cannot help it ... you are like that.’ Everything is determined and [you are] not free at all ... There is ... the biological view ... They say that what a man is, is determined by various glands in his

body ... There is ... psychoanalysis. [One Freudian said,] ‘Psychoanalysis has undermined our confidence in the reality of free will ... by showing how often our apparently deliberate actions are in fact determined by motives of which are unaware.’

“So there it is. [Those are] the alternatives to the teaching of the Apostle Paul. [Either we are determined by natural forces, or things happen randomly by chance] but the third explanation is the biblical doctrine of certainty [that we make responsible choices but all under the sovereignty of God].”

(*Romans Chapter 9*, pages 204-205)

Here are some biblical examples of how God works in people’s lives:

1. *Judas*. Acts 2:23 tells us that Jesus was crucified according to God’s plan, yet by “wicked men.” The actions of the people who killed Jesus were wicked and they were liable for them, yet God used their wicked intentions to carry out the crucifixion exactly how and when he wanted it. So Peter says that: “The Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus” (Acts 1:16).
2. *Jacob*. Jacob deceived his father and robbed his brother. As a result he had to flee his homeland and experience suffering and injustice in a foreign land (Genesis 27:1 – 28:5). Yet there he met the love of his life and had the children through whom Jesus was descended (Genesis 29:16 – 30:24—plenty of sinful motives and actions are involved here, too!). Now it is clear that his sin did not put him into a “Plan B” for his life. It was all part of God’s perfect plan for him. Ultimately God worked his sin out for good. Was he therefore not responsible for his sin? Yes, he was. Did he suffer the consequences of his foolish behavior? Yes, he did. But God was infallibly in control, even as Jacob was completely responsible.
3. *Paul in the storm*. In Acts 27, when Paul was in the storm-wracked boat, he prophesied to the passengers: “Not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed” (v 22). By revelation he revealed God’s plan. Their preservation was certain. Yet in verse 31, Paul warned that the sailors must not get into the lifeboat. “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved!” Despite the certainty of God’s plan, it was equally true that the men were responsible to act and choose wisely. Paul did not say: *Well, God predestined you all to survive this storm, so it doesn’t matter what you do*. When God appoints a result, he also appoints the means—our choices and efforts. Paul did not have the Greek notion of fate—such statements make no sense in the fatalistic framework!

As J. Gresham Machen writes:

“[God] brings to pass the actions of personal beings in a way that preserves their freedom and their responsibility to the full. [Is that] inconceivable? We persuade our fellow men, yet their freedom is preserved when they do what we persuade them to do of their free will. Shall not then God be able to do with certainty what we with our little power do with uncertainty? Does not God who made the soul know how to move it

in accordance with its own nature so that its freedom shall not be destroyed?”

(*The Christian View of Man*, page 100)

The answers to his last two questions must surely be: *Yes, God will* and *Yes, God does!*

Therefore, when it comes to salvation, the Bible teaches that:

C. People who choose God do so strictly because God has opened their hearts; people who fail to do so strictly because they closed their hearts.

Let us take each part of that statement in turn.

Only God is responsible for our salvation. Romans 3:11 says: “There is no one ... who seeks God.” (For comment on what this means, see *Romans 1 – 7 For You*, pages 69-71.) Romans 8:7 says: “The sinful [natural] mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (see this volume, page 20). Romans 9:11-16 states: “Yet, before the twins [ie: Esau and Jacob] were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls ... as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’ ... It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy” (see page 61).

Paul teaches that, through sin, we have lost the ability to see the truth and the desire to serve God. “No one ... seeks God.” Paul is not saying that the human will is not free to do what we want. We are free in that sense. *But*, he is saying, *we cannot ever want God. We aren’t free to choose him.* Our mind does not submit; indeed it cannot. To put it a different way, our human will will never freely choose God.

We will never want God; we are incapable of choosing God, unless God breaks in. And that is what he does. “It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.” We don’t initiate our salvation—we don’t even want it. God wakes us up from a helpless sleep; he unlocks us from a helpless state. As this prayer from the collection of Puritan prayers *Valley of Vision* puts it:

*I was dead in iniquities, having no eyes to see thee,
no ears to hear thee,
no taste to relish thy joys,
no intelligence to know thee;
But thy Spirit has quickened me,
has brought me into a new world as a new creature ...
thou hast drawn me with cords of love.*

Only we are responsible for our condemnation. In Romans 9:21-24, Paul asks: “Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for [honor] and some for [dishonor]? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for

destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?”

In these three verses in Romans 9, we have the important and crucial “asymmetry” of the biblical gospel, namely this: God alone prepares any person for spiritual glory, but we alone prepare ourselves for spiritual destruction. There are two basic, competing views. (They correspond somewhat, but not completely, to “determinism” and “contingency.”)

1. “Hyper-Calvinism.” Fatalism is found in Greek thought, Islam, and Eastern religions, but some Christians over the years have adopted it as well. In this view, God equally and symmetrically prepares all people for their fate. God in his sovereign will has determined to have some people lost and some saved, and he goes about directing each group down each path in the same way. In other words, God prepares us for glory *or* God prepares us for destruction.
2. “Pelagianism.” (The name is taken from Pelagius, a fifth-century monk.) This view is also found in ancient and modern thought, though it has been very prevalent in the west in the last two centuries. In this view, every person has the ability to choose good or evil, to serve God or self. This ability is equal in every individual. Thus every person who is saved is saved in the very same way that every person who is lost is lost—by his or her exercise of the ability to choose. We prepare ourselves for glory *or* we prepare ourselves for destruction.

In Romans 9:22-24, Paul very carefully refuses to take either view. Paul says “he” (God) prepared some vessels for glory, but he does not say that God prepared vessels for destruction. Paul says they were “prepared” for condemnation, but that God chose to endure them with great patience. It therefore appears that their preparation is not his doing; meaning that all human beings have freely chosen sin and deserve condemnation. God could allow us all to perish as we have chosen, and he does allow some to go to the destruction they have prepared for themselves. But he breaks in and opens the eyes of some, whom he prepares for glory.

This is the only way to understand Paul. If you take a fatalistic view, you cannot explain Paul’s reticence to say that God prepared the vessels for destruction. But if one adopts the view that every individual is equally capable of choosing God, that leads to the conclusion that God does nothing more for saved people than for lost people, and thus salvation is not by grace. The vessels prepare themselves for glory!

Here are two commentators on Romans 9:21-24, explaining how Paul’s view “threads the needle” between these two mistaken views:

“Paul’s picture is that of a potter making various utensils and implements for household use and so on ... Now ... ‘creation’ ... means ‘creating out of nothing’ ... [but] the potter does not create the clay ... It is there in front of him on the bench and he is now going to do something with it ... [So] the Apostle is not dealing here at all with God’s purpose in the original creation of humanity. [This] is an account of what God does with fallen humanity.

“[Many think] God deliberately made some people that they might go to hell. That is a lie! It is not taught anywhere in the Scripture ... God created all things good. No one has ever been forced to sin. [Humanity] rebelled against God and sinned ... And what the Apostle is dealing with here is what God does with humanity in the light of that, and he says he has an absolute right to do as he wills in his own sovereign will and Lordship. With such a hopeless mass, which could be all consigned to perdition, he has nevertheless, because of his grace and glory and his purpose, chosen and elected and formed some out of that mass unto glory and honor ...

“What we all want to ask at this point is: ... Why [and] how does God decide to make one unto honor and one unto dishonor? There is only one answer to that—I do not know! Nobody else does ... I cannot go beyond the Scripture, and all the Scripture tells me is that God does that and that he has a right to do it, and that if I raise the question ... I am trying to contend with my Maker ...

“So let me put the teaching to you like this: If anyone is saved it is entirely because of the mercy and choice of God ... but I add this: if people are lost, it is entirely their own responsibility.”

(Lloyd-Jones, *Romans Chapter 9*, pages 199-203)

“If ... anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God’s. This antinomy contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve; but it is consistent with Scripture, history and experience.”

(Stott, *The Message of Romans*, page 270)

Objections and Questions

1. Isn’t “election” just a Pauline doctrine?

No. Though Paul does teach it in Romans and elsewhere (see also Ephesians 1:3-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 2 Timothy 1:9), the doctrine permeates the rest of Scripture. Here are three examples:

Jesus’ teaching in John

John 6:36-39: “But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.”

John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

John 10:25: “Jesus answered, ‘I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.’”

Here Jesus twice says, first, that if someone doesn't believe, it is because God has not "given" them to him; and second, that everyone who is given to him will come to him and will never be lost. Why can Jesus make these two statements? Because of a third principle that is a premise for the first two: no one is capable of coming to God unless God is drawing him. (This accords with Paul in Romans 3:11, that no one seeks God.) Therefore, if anyone is seeking, it is because God is drawing. If God is drawing, they will be saved and kept.

Peter's teaching

1 Peter 1:1-2: "To God's elect ... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood."

Luke's teaching

Acts 13:48: "When the Gentiles heard this [gospel preaching from Paul and Barnabas], they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed."

Acts 16:13-14: "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."

Notice that Luke does not say: "All who believed were appointed to eternal life" but rather: "All who were appointed for eternal life believed." Thus the belief is a result of the appointment; the appointment is not the result of the belief.

2. But election just complicates the simple gospel! I wish it hadn't been brought up!

No, election establishes the simple gospel. The main reason (the strongest argument) for the doctrine is that rejecting it creates far more problems than it solves. Why? Unless you embrace the doctrine of election, you are forced to hold that salvation is not by grace alone and God alone, but is due ultimately to something better in those who believe.

Here is a penetrating line of reasoning from Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

"There is one final argument. People seem to think that if you reject this doctrine [of election] you are in a happy position. [But] let me show you where you are if you reject this doctrine of Paul as taught here. Take Acts 28:24 ... 'Some believed the things which were spoken and some believed not.' [Now] why do some believe and some not? Those people were ... all of them the same: same background, same everything, but some believed and some did not ... What decides it?

"Ah," says somebody, 'it is quite simple. Free will!' Very well, one chooses to believe, the other chooses not to believe. [But] why? What is it that makes some want to believe and others not? 'Oh well,' you say,

‘one saw things in one way, and the other ... in a different way. ‘Yes, but ... why does one see it like this, the other one like that? ... Let us go further back ... ’

(Romans Chapter 9, pages 207-208)

If we keep asking why one believes and the other doesn't and reject the idea of election, we are forced eventually to say that one person was humbler, more open to the truth, or more virtuous than the other in some way. In other words, the real differentiating factor, and the critical cause of one person's salvation over others, is *something better in them*. In other words, you are back into justification by works!

Paul makes this point: that the doctrine of election is necessary to preserve the doctrine of justification. God chose Jacob “before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls” (Romans 9:11-12).

Therefore, the final case for the doctrine of election is that it reminds us of what we already know—that we are saved by sheer grace alone, not on the basis of anything in us. Yes, “election” causes many difficulties. But, aside from the fact that Scripture teaches it, the best reason for accepting the doctrine is that every alternative creates even more problems and difficulties. Without “election” you compromise the central teaching of the Bible, that we are saved by grace alone, not our works. If the difference between the unbeliever and the believer is ultimately in us (a greater humility, a greater openness, etc.), then we are the real authors of our salvation.

3. If you believe in election, doesn't that leave you with the problem of why God doesn't choose to save everyone?

Yes, but the same is true for Christians who don't believe in election. Election doesn't create the problem, it only leads us to think about it. To deny the doctrine of election does not help you escape the issue. All Christians have this problem, and so we cannot object to election by appealing to it. The person who does not believe in election has the same problem:

- (a) God wants everybody saved.
- (b) God could save everyone.
- (c) God does not.

The question still remains, therefore: *Why not?* That is the ultimate mystery, but abandoning the doctrine of election does not answer it.

Someone says: *But I believe that though God doesn't want us to be lost, some are lost because they choose wrong and God will not violate their freedom of choice.* But why is freedom of choice sacrosanct? I try to honor my child's freedom of will, but not if I see he is about to be killed by it! Why can't God “insult” our freedom of will for a moment and save us for eternity?

No, regardless of whether you think we are saved by our choice or by God's election, you still have the same

question: *Why wouldn't God save us all if he has the power and desire to do so?* It is a hard question, but it cannot be used as an argument against the doctrine of election.

We can go further. Suppose election is not true. Suppose that aeons ago, God set up salvation on this system: Every person will have an equal ability to accept or reject Christ, who will die and be raised and be presented through the gospel message. The moment God determined to set up salvation on that system (assuming for the moment that he did), he would have immediately known exactly which persons would be saved and which would be condemned on that basis. So the minute he “set it up,” he was *de facto* electing some and passing over others. We come out to the same place. God could save all, but he doesn't.

So why doesn't he? We can only know two things. First, the answer must have something to do with his perfect nature. He is perfectly loving and perfectly righteous and neither can be preferred over the other or he would not be God. Somehow the answer has to do with his being consistent with himself. Second, we cannot see the whole picture. Why? If we can conceive of a more merciful system of salvation than God has, we must not see it rightly, for God is more merciful than we can even imagine. When we finally see the whole plan and answer, we will not be able to find fault with it.

4. But it isn't fair for God to elect some and not others.

It is one thing for a doctor to see five patients and only choose to treat two. That would be unjust, because as a doctor he owes care to all, and all have a right to be treated. But if a judge condemns a number of criminals and pardons some, it is merciful, for he owes nothing to any of them. (Of course, this would raise questions about the justice of that judge's decision; Paul takes care to explain how God is both just and merciful in Romans 3:21-26—see *Romans 1 – 7 For You*, pages 82-84.)

The real question is not why God doesn't take all, but why he takes *any*. It is well worth quoting D. James Kennedy's illustration again:

“Here are five people who are planning to hold up a bank. They are friends of mine. I find out about it and I plead with them. I beg them not to do it. Finally they push me out of the way and they start out. I tackle one of the men and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead, rob the bank, a guard is killed, they are captured, convicted, sentenced ... The one man who was not involved in the robbery goes free. Now I ask you this question: Whose fault was it that the other men died? ... Now this other man who is walking around free—can he say, ‘Because my heart is so good, I am a free man’? The only reason that he is free is because of me; because I restrained him. So those who go to hell have no one to blame but themselves. Those who go to heaven have no one to praise but Jesus Christ. Thus we see that salvation is all of grace from its beginning to its end.”

(Truths That Transform, pages 39-40)

5. But it makes God seem arbitrary.

No, it makes God gracious. The Bible doesn't say that God's election has no reasons for it. We know that God always does what is right (Genesis 18:25) and wise (Romans 11:33). There is no indication that God chooses us at (what we would call) "random"—eeny, meeny, miney, moe! He has reasons, but all we know is that the reasons are not in us. 1 Corinthians 4:7 says: "Who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive?" To say that we don't know on what basis God chooses is not the same as saying that his choice is arbitrary.

There is one hint as to why God seems to choose some over others, but it is not flattering! 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 says: "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly ... and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." It is possible that God chose you and me because we are foolish or weak or despised!

Again, as mentioned above, the only alternative is to believe that we are saved by something in us that makes us better than those who are lost. That is a complete contradiction of the biblical gospel.

6. But if everything is fixed and certain, why pray, evangelize or do anything at all?

This objection is short-sighted. First, if everything were not planned by a holy and loving God, we would be absolutely terrified by the prospect of even getting up in the morning. Our actions (always done with very little understanding) could have horrible consequences. Everything would depend on us! If everything were not planned by a holy and loving God, there would be enormous pressure on Christians when we evangelize. We would know that our inarticulateness could result in a person missing his or her one "chance" for salvation. It would be a horrible prospect.

Second, we evangelize and pray because of the privilege of sharing in God's work with him. For example, a father might be able to chop wood for the stove himself, but he asks his children to learn to chop the wood and stoke the fire as well. What if the children say: *We have no incentive to chop the wood. We know that if we don't cut it, our father will do it anyway—he won't let us freeze!* But the father would say: *Of course I could do it myself, but I want you to share the work with me.* The authority and the privilege of working with our heavenly Father is surely plenty of incentive! He wants to work with us and for us.

Also, we are not supposed to second-guess God. We are never to try to guess who is "elect"—ever! God calls all to repentance and so should we. In fact, the doctrine of election should give us far more hope about working with people. Why? Because no one is a hopeless case! From a human point of view, many people look totally hard and lost, but since salvation is by God's election, we should treat everyone and anyone with hope, since God calls the dead to life through us.

Therefore, God's sovereignty is a motivation to evangelize, not a discouragement. In Acts 18, Paul is in Corinth

and the gospel has been rejected by the Jews there. How does God encourage Paul not to be afraid, to “keep on speaking [and] not be silent” (18:9)? “I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (v 10). God assures Paul of his presence, his protection, and his *election*. And Paul responds by staying “for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God” (v 11). The teaching is this: the next person you pray for and/or share the gospel with may be one of God’s elect, and you may be part of the way God has ordained to bring them to faith.

7. Doesn’t this lead to a superior attitude—to think that you are “elect”?

With all due respect, such a question would show that the asker really doesn’t understand the doctrine of election! The doctrine has the completely opposite effect. As we said in response to Objection Two, it is the denial of election that will lead you logically to feel superior to those who don’t believe. If we deny election, believers will be strongly tempted to say to unbelievers: *Why can’t you see this as I can? You must be more stupid or proud than I was!* The doctrine of election says that believers are chosen people, not choice people. We are not chosen for our superior qualities. The reasons we are chosen are not in us. There is no superiority of believers over unbelievers.

8. I believe the Bible and I see all the teaching about election, but why do I still dislike it so?

My theory is that the biblical gospel is so supernatural that it always combines qualities that by natural reason and culture we cannot keep together. The doctrine of justification is one way of looking at the gospel. It combines both law and love in ways that no one could have thought up. We are saved apart from the law so that now we can obey the law. All other philosophies are either law-ism (legalistic) or law-less (antinomian). Now, the doctrine of election is just the gospel looked at from another perspective. It combines the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of human beings. Here too, we find that human cultures and philosophies cannot combine these things.

So, whoever you are, you come from a culture that has saturated you in some view that is so unbalanced that you will see the doctrine of election as something more simple and extreme than it really is. Eastern philosophies and religions have always been more fatalistic. They believe individual autonomy to be an illusion. When people from that background come to the gospel, they may see it as being “just individualism.” On the other hand, western secularism believes strongly in the right and power of individuals to determine their own course and destiny. When people from that background come to the gospel, they see it as being “just fatalism.”

Thus, no matter which “side” we come from, no matter what our culture or temperament, we must make an effort to discern the carefully nuanced balances of the gospel of free justification and election. We must remember the prejudices we bring with us to the Scripture. We must be willing to learn to balance out our own views.

Practical Applications

In the end, the Christian concept of God’s sovereignty is a marvelous, practical principle. It is mysterious but not confusing. It brings security and confidence in ...

1. *The difficulties of life.* It means we have great incentive to use our wisdom and our will to the best effect, knowing God holds us to it and knowing we will suffer consequences from foolishness and wickedness. At the same time, there is an absolute promise that we cannot ultimately mess up our lives. Even our failures and troubles will be used for God's glory and our benefit. How profoundly comforting!

"God ... fulfills his purpose for me!" cries the psalmist (Psalm 57:2). We develop a sweet inward spirit, a quiet delight in every disposal of God's will. Even wickedness and tragedy, which we know come from the evil of this world and the human heart—evil, which God did not design or create—are nonetheless woven into a wise plan.

But the promise of Romans 8:28, that "God works for the good of those who love him," is a promise to believers. It is a guarantee to those who are adopted into God's family through faith in Jesus as Savior. If you are not in the family, even good things in your life may not work to your benefit. They may harden you to make you proud and blind to your need and dependence. But for God's children, his sovereignty is always exercised in a way of love and mercy.

2. *The intimacy of praise and worship.* Electing love is ultimate love. If God loved us because he found something better in us, we'd always be afraid of losing his love. And we'd never find his love a total miracle. But God does not say: *I love you because you are serviceable to me or: I love you because you are more humble than others.* He says: *I love you simply because I love you.* That is perfect love. This understanding is a fountain of endless praise, gratitude and thanksgiving.

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