

Week 19

Salvation: Election

Key Verse

Ephesians 1:10-12 In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.

NOTE TO TEACHERS: This is a highly sensitive and potentially divisive issue; please tread prayerfully and carefully. If you have any questions or concerns about presenting this lesson, contact your Division Pastor on your campus.

+ Introduction

Controversy, conventions, debates, attack ads, pollsters, fatigue. Say the word “election,” and it conjures a whirlwind of ideas in the American mind. Elections are the mechanism by which this nation exercises a collective will to choose its leaders. Like everything in this fallen world, it’s never perfect. Fortunately, that kind of election has nothing to do with today’s lesson. As we will see, the biblical doctrine of election is not about human votes but a divine choice, and the result is a match made in heaven.

For hundreds of years, the church has disagreed on the doctrine of election, specifically regarding man’s will and responsibility and God’s justice with regard to human choices. There are two main views. One is the Arminian perspective, which focuses on the importance of man’s free will in salvation. The Reformed or Calvinist perspective focuses on God’s sovereign will in salvation.

Both Arminians and Calvinists agree that God’s commandments in Scripture reveal to us what God wants us to do. Both views further agree that His commands invite us, mankind, to repent and trust in Christ for salvation. Theologian Wayne Grudem states, “in one sense both agree that God wills that we be saved – it is the will that he reveals to us explicitly in the gospel invitation.”¹

Dr. Young explains it like this, “God is for you, Satan is against you, and its up to you to break the tie.”

“Predestination” is typically defined as “God’s choice of some to eternal life and others to eternal damnation.” For the purposes of this lesson, we will only deal with God’s choice of some to eternal life, which is called “election.” The reason for separating the two ideas is because they are not

symmetrical operations. If God predestines some for eternal damnation, He clearly does not do so in the same way that He predestines some for eternal life.

The Baptist Faith and Message provides, "election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility."²

✦ God's Choice and Human Choice

God created everything (Genesis 1; John 1), and in doing so, God made choices. He chose to create rather than not create. He chose to separate light from the darkness. He chose to separate land from water. He chose to make fish swarm, beasts creep, and birds fly. He chose humans to be "*in His own image*" (Genesis 1:26-27).³ These "sovereign choices" identify God as ruler of the universe and set the agenda for everything He has made.

As God's "image bearers," humans make choices too. They are not "sovereign choices" like God's, but they are "real choices" with real consequences. Humans cannot choose to separate light from darkness, but they can choose to live in the light or hide in the dark (Genesis 3:8). Humans cannot create plants or animals, but they can choose what plants to eat and what to call animals (Genesis 2:16;19). Most importantly, humans cannot choose whether God exists, but they can choose whether to honor Him as God (Romans 1:21).

We see a difference in quality between God's choice and human choice. God's choices are sovereign and free. Human choices are limited by the options available. God always chooses what is good (Genesis 1:31). Humans, on the other hand, have a capacity for making devastatingly bad choices.

The most devastating choice comes when a person rejects or ignores God and His ways (Genesis 3:6). This is the essence of sin, and no human choice can undo the consequences of sin. As we have already seen, all are guilty of it. All are corrupted by it. All of us are unable to overcome our rebellion against God unless God does something to change us.

This is exactly what God chose to do.

✦ Election is God's Choice of Some People for Eternal Salvation

Just as God made sovereign choices to create everything, the Bible shows that He also made sovereign choices to redeem people after they fell into sin. In fact, most of the Bible is the story of people God chose. For example:

1. **Abraham** (Genesis 12; Joshua 24:2-3)
2. **The Israelites** (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6; Deuteronomy 14:2; Deuteronomy 26:18; Psalm 33:12; Psalm 135:4; Isaiah 43:20; Isaiah 45:4; Isaiah 65:9, 22)
3. A **"remnant"** of faithful Israelites (Isaiah 10:20-22; Isaiah 46:3; Jeremiah 31:7-9; Micah 2:12; Zephaniah 3:11-13)
4. People with **"circumcised hearts"** (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4)
5. **God's own Son, Jesus**³ (Isaiah 42:1; Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 12:18-21; Matthew 2:35; Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 3:13-19; 1 Peter 2:6)
6. **The Church** (Romans 8:33; Colossians 3:12; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:27; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:1-2; 1 Peter 2:9-10).

All of these passages speak of God "choosing" certain people or acting in such a way to separate them from the rest of fallen humanity. God does not leave all humanity to rot in their sins and suffer eternal punishment; He chooses to save us for eternal life. This is what we call "election."

Different theological definitions of election may be helpful to understand the scope of viewpoints:

1. "Election is an act of God before creation in which He chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of His sovereign good pleasure." Wayne Grudem
2. "That those who freely come to God are those whom God has freely chosen." Timothy Keller⁵
3. "Election is God's eternal choice of some persons unto everlasting life - not because of foreseen merit in them, but of His mere mercy in Christ - in consequence of which choice they are called, justified and glorified." Abstract of Principles (nineteenth century)
4. "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 mere free grace and love; without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving him thereunto." London Baptist Confession (1689)
5. "God, by an eternal unchangeable purpose in Jesus Christ His Son, before the foundation of the world, hath determined out of the fallen sinful race of men, to save in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, shall believe on this His Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end..." Five Arminian Articles (1610)

6. "a kind of type of the ordering of some persons towards eternal salvation, existing in the divine mind. The execution, however, of this order is in a passive way in the predestined, but actively in God." Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica I*, 23 (thirteenth century)

These definitions are from across the centuries and from Christians of different nationalities and theological systems. But, based on the Bible, they all agree that election is **God's choice of some people for eternal salvation**.

+ God's Reason for Choosing Some

Scripture teaches that **only those who repent and trust in Jesus Christ will be saved**. So, anyone who does this can confidently say they are chosen by God for salvation. Those who do not repent and trust Christ are not chosen by God for salvation.

The tricky part of the doctrine of election has to do with **when and how the election takes place**. Ephesians chapter 1 helps answer these questions:

EPHESIANS 1:4 *"He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world."*

That makes the "when" clear enough for Christians. The question of "how" God chooses to save a person "before the foundation of the world" has led to speculation, controversy, and even division among Bible-believing Christians.

Without going into the controversial bits⁶, if we stay with Ephesians 1, we get some clues on "how" God made His choice:

EPHESIANS 1:5-6 *"In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace" (emphasis added)*

EPHESIANS 1:11 *"having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will." (emphasis added)*

Apparently, God chose ("predestined" means "chose in advance") some for eternal life **because it was His will** to do so. This does not explain God's thought process, but we can say a few more things about the "how" of election based on this passage:

1. **Nothing forces God's choice.** Because the decision was made according to God's will "before the foundation of the world," there was nothing acting on God to incline Him one way or another. The choice of who to save is completely His.
2. **We do not need to question God's motives.** Ephesians 1:5 says, *"In love He predestined us to adoption."* The Greek word is "Agape" which is the same word used in John 3:16 when *"God so loved the world, He gave His only Son."* It is a sacrificial love that is intentional and proactive. Ephesians 1:5 also describes God's will as having

a *“kind intention.”* This points to God’s grace toward sinners. He did not have to save anyone, but He is kind, and He always chooses well.

3. **We do not need to question God’s wisdom.** Ephesians 1:11 describes God’s will as having a *“counsel.”* This points to God’s perfect wisdom. He not only chooses the good thing; He chooses the right thing – every time.

In Romans 9, Scripture speaks directly to any of us who would question God’s good, wise will by saying: *“On the contrary, who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?”* (Romans 9:20, CSB). Our pursuit of *“how”* God chooses to save must rest on the perfections of His will.

+ Application: God’s Choice does not Eliminate Human Choices

The doctrine of election does not deny that we have voluntary choices and we make willing decisions in accepting or rejecting Christ. Below are common objections explained.

1. **Doesn’t election deny human choices and remove human responsibility?** Actually, election affirms that people will choose to repent of sin and believe the Gospel *if* they have been chosen by God. Just because God made a prior choice does not negate human choices and responsibility. In a fully-orbed Biblical understanding of the universe, God’s sovereign choices are compatible with human responsibility. The Apostle Paul had one of the most unusual of salvation experiences (Acts 9) yet believed completely in evangelizing wherever he went. In Acts 17:16-34, Paul lays out clearly that God is creator of all things and all people. He reinforces God’s sovereignty and predetermined purpose of nations and boundaries. When Paul talks about the hope we have because of the resurrection of Jesus, the people respond individually and freely. They all heard the same message of truth. Some laughed and rejected the message. Others were curious to hear more about this message. And there were those who believed the truth presented.
2. **Doesn’t God say He is *“not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance?”*** (2 Peter 3:9) God’s will is undivided, but there is some mystery about how His will is revealed and understood by humans. Deuteronomy 29:29 is helpful on this point: *“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, so that we may follow all the words of this Law.”* Christians can faithfully say that God never wishes for the unbeliever to die in his sins. We can also say that God chose believers in Christ before the foundation of the world.
3. **Doesn’t election make evangelism unnecessary?** No. Evangelism is the God-ordained human means to accomplish God’s ends (Romans 10:14-15). The first Christian missionaries were very convinced of divine election and predestination.⁷

+ Conclusion

The famous American Bible teacher Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895–1960) often used an illustration to help people make sense of election. He asked them to imagine a cross like the one on which Jesus died, only so large that it had a door in it. Over the door were these words from Revelation: *“Whosoever will may come.”* These words represent the free and universal offer of the gospel. By God’s grace, the message of salvation is for everyone. Every man, woman, and child who will come to the cross is invited to believe in Jesus Christ and enter eternal life.

On the other side of the door a happy surprise awaits the one who believes and enters. From the inside, anyone glancing back can see these words from Ephesians written above the door: *“Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.”* Election is best understood in hindsight, for it is only after coming to Christ that one can know whether one has been chosen in Christ. Those who make a decision for Christ find that God made a decision for them in eternity past.⁸

God would be perfectly just to punish all of us eternally for our sin (this is how He apparently deals with fallen angels, who have no means of redemption, see Revelation 20). But going back to Romans 9-11, Christians can always trust in God’s ultimate goodness, wisdom, and justice. After all, He paid for our sins with His own blood, so we can say along with Scripture:

ROMANS 11:33-36 *“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴ For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? ³⁵ Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? ³⁶ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”*

All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ and sanctified by his Spirit shall persevere to the end. Through election, He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies His children, ultimately calling them home.

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¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI., 1994, p. 684.

² Baptist Faith and Message, June 14, 2000, p. 12

³ Most theologians recognize that the human will – or ability to make choices – reflects the *imago dei*. Other creatures do not possess such an ability. See, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994, p. 443-444.

⁴ Clearly God’s choice of Jesus is different than his choice of any other human since God the Son exists in eternal relationship with God the Father. Jesus knew no sin, so he did not need to be redeemed. He is the *redeemer*!

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-objections-to-the-doctrine-of-election/>

⁶ An even-handed resource is Chad Brand, ed., *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006. Please note that two of the views in this book are not orthodox Christian views (“Universal” and “Corporate, Open, Vocational”).

⁷ Particular Baptists like Andrew Fuller (India), Congregationalists like Adoniram Judson (Myanmar), and Presbyterians like Robert M. M’Cheyne (Egypt, Israel) were convinced double-predestinarians.

⁸ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/two-views-of-the-same-door/>