

DOCTRINES OF GRACE 3

Unconditional Election

Blessed is he whom thou dost choose and bring near to dwell in thy courts!

(Ps 65:4)

God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess 2:13-14)

This doctrine is absolutely critical in the Christian life. If we fail to understand this we will misunderstand a great deal. Many unnecessary doctrinal problems will arise if we are not clear on this.

As with the other doctrines of grace, the key is a high view of God's sovereignty. If you believe that God is God then election poses no real problem to your understanding. Those who have a high view of man cannot cope with this doctrine.

This is a hard doctrine to accept. It strikes right at the heart of man's pride and understanding. It touches the heart of God's decrees. We should also tread carefully here, it is an awesome doctrine. We must not allow ourselves to be either complacent or dismissive. To accept this doctrine gives us continual cause for praise and thanksgiving, not smug satisfaction. To reject this teaching puts us at odds with God.

(The larger doctrine that God predestinates all classes of events in history will not be examined here. Unconditional election forms a part of the greater teaching. The word *predestine* in the NT always means election.)

THE DOCTRINE SIMPLY STATED

We saw in the last lesson that man cannot save himself. Left to his own devices, man would be doomed, certain of damnation. God, in his great love, determined (decreed) to choose (elect) a portion of the human race to be saved. The word *election* means: to pick out, to choose out, to select from a larger mass. God did this out of his own mercy. He was under no compunction to do so, neither does he need us to praise him; we add nothing to his greatness.

He did this out of his own sovereign good pleasure (Eph 1:11); it was not due to any foreseen goodness or faith in the recipients (the elect). He did not look into the future to see who would respond to his gospel, he chose them before time began. This indeed is grace; totally undeserved favour given to people before they were born, who only deserved hell.

This means that some were not chosen, called the reprobate. In choosing the elect, God passed by those not chosen who will be punished for their sins. He was under no obligation to choose any. His justice would have been satisfied if he had left us all in our sins; yet he chose us to show his mercy. The remainder are left in their sins to show his wrath and justice.

This is what unconditional means, the choice is not conditioned or determined by our potential responses. It is unconditional. An act of God's will alone.

CHOICE

In the systems of men, eg Arminianism, human responsibility is prominent; God provides a general atonement available for everyone (universal) and leaves it up to men to choose. But is this Biblical? If man can accept or reject salvation, man is stronger than God; he can comply with or resist God's offer of grace. It is also unbiblical in that scripture says that man is dead, not only unable to choose God, but unwilling to as well. A corpse cannot resurrect itself. (See last lesson.)

If election was based upon what men are foreseen to be able to do (ie accept grace, believe) then God isn't doing the choosing, man is. Yet the Bible everywhere ascribes the choice of the elect to God eg:

*You HAVE NOT chosen me but I HAVE chosen you ...
I have chosen you out of the world. (Jn 15:16,19)*

There are scores of passages that teach this clearly, some of these we will look at shortly; but there are many more passages that state this doctrine, which we would usually miss as we casually read. So deeply woven into scripture is this truth. For example:

*God is our salvation. (Selah)
Our God is a God of salvation;
and to God, the Lord, belongs escape from death. (Ps 68:20)*

In these two short sentences, God is named four times as well as stating that he is the Lord, he is in control. Salvation is clearly shown to belong to God, not man. He is a God of salvation and he is our salvation. Not only that, but escape from death belongs to him alone, whether that is rescue from dire circumstances of life or the resurrection of a person out of the spiritual death of sin's control.

Let's take another example from the book of Jonah, at the end of Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish he says:

*Salvation is of the Lord (AV)
Deliverance belongs to the Lord (RSV)*

and immediately God commands the fish to spit Jonah out, not into the sea, but on to dry land (Jon 2:9-10).

If salvation is of God, and if faith is a requisite of that salvation, then faith must be given by God; and so it is (Eph 2:8). If salvation belongs to God and repentance is also necessary, then God must also give repentance; and so he does (2 Tim 2:25, Acts 5:31). Now, if God gives these to us, how can he chose on the basis of foreknowing one will believe or repent? Spurgeon says: 'To say that God elected men because he foresaw they would have faith ... would be too absurd for us to listen to for a moment. Faith is the gift of God. Every virtue comes from him. Therefore it can not have caused him to elect men, because it is his gift.' (From a sermon on 2 Thess 2:13-14.)

Salvation belongs to God. We cannot deliver ourselves. If God is God, then all of salvation

must be his. This not only makes sense but it is the clear teaching of scripture, as we will see. Any attempt to suggest that man makes the choice, makes the decision on his own, detracts glory from the God of salvation.

WHO ARE ELECTED BY GOD?

Angels

... the elect angels. (1 Tim 5:21)

Part of the angelic host fell as they joined Satan in his rebellion against God. Those that did not were given the ability to resist and were thus elect angels able to remain faithful to God.

Israel

Because the Lord loves you ... the Lord has brought you out ... and redeemed you from the house of bondage. (Deut 7:8)

Israel my chosen, I call you by your name. (Isa 45:4)

The God of this people Israel chose our fathers. (Acts 13:17)

Israel is an object lesson in election for the church. In Israel we see the basic principles of God's choice at work. It helps us understand our election. The election of Israel continues in the idea of a remnant (Rm 9:6-6, 27, 11:1-7). The Bible shows us clearly that Israel was not chosen for any merit of her own, far from it, she was the least of the nations (Deut 7:7, literally the offscrapings) and failed completely (read God's damning words in Ezek 16).

The Messiah (Christ)

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. (Isa 42:1 see also 1 Pt 2:4-6; Lk 23:35)

This points to the unique office which the Son accepted from the Father in redemption, it also points to the special delight of the Father in the Son.

Christians

For the sake of the elect, whom he chose. (Mk 13:20)

You did not choose me, but I chose you. (Jn 15:16)

For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you. (1 Thess 1:4)

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. (Col 3:12)

The word chosen = the Greek word *eklektos* meaning elect, chosen, favourite. It is from a root word meaning: to select. In Isa 45:4 it is the Hebrew word *bachiyir*, same meaning. In 2 Thess 2:13 the word *haireomai* is used meaning to take, choose for oneself, elect to something.

GOD'S COVENANT

The origin of our salvation springs from the Covenant of Redemption made within the Godhead in eternity. All other aspects of covenant flow out of this, especially the Covenant of Grace which we experience in Christ.

In this covenant (contract, pact, agreement), the three persons of the trinity each took a specific role in accomplishing salvation:

Election

- The Father elected a number of individuals to be saved and gave them as a gift to his son (1 Pt 1:2; Jn 17:6).

Redemption

- The Son agreed to be a substitutionary sacrifice to pay for the sins of these people.

Sanctification

- The Holy Spirit accepted the role of applying the benefits of this salvation to the elect and bringing them through to the end.

Salvation could not, therefore, be achieved without the prior choosing of the elect for whom, and only for whom, Christ died. Predestination of these individuals was necessary and is a key constituent in this covenant.

TEXTS

The Elect

God's counsel is sovereign:

I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. (Ex 33:19, Rm 9:15)

I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel (plan) shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.' (Isa 46:9-10, see whole chapter)

(See further: Acts 2:23, 4:27-28 17:24-26; Lk 22:22; Prov 16:1, 21:1; Isa 19:17; Eph 1:11; Job 14:5)

Man cannot contribute:

It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy. (Rm 9:16 AV)

God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago. (2 Tim 1:9)

Chosen in Christ in eternity:

He chose us in him (Jesus) before the foundation of the world. (Eph 1:4)

The election of Jacob and reprobation of Esau:

Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call ... Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated. (Rm 9:11-13)

All the elect believe because they are elect

(Jn 6: 37-39, 10:16, 27-29, 17:2,9,4; Acts 2:47, 13:48)

The Reprobate

Esau I hated. (Rm 9:13)

Vessels of wrath made for destruction. (Rm 9:22)

... some who were long ago designated for this condemnation. (Jude 4)

They disobey the word, as they were destined to do. (1 Pt 2:8)

You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. (Jn 10:26)
You shall die in your sins. (Jn 8:22,24)
(Prov 16:4; Rm 9:18,21; Rev 13:8; Mt 11:25)

It should be remembered that God is totally just, he will always do right (Gen 18:25). God is not obligated to rescue anyone and his judgment must be effected. Also the reprobate do not want to be saved, do not want to be holy, and have no desire to honour Christ. Unregenerate men have no claim upon the blessing of God, therefore, there can be no injustice.

What does hardening mean? (Rm 9:18; Jn 12:40)

It is best understood as God withdrawing from sinful men (whom has not been elected to eternal life, for the just punishment of their sins) all gracious influences, and leaves them to the unrestrained tendencies of their own hearts, and to the uncounteracted influences of the world and the Devil. (A A Hodge)

The natural tendency of human depravity is that the heart grows harder under the general mercies God gives to creation unless he adds the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit to change the heart. (J L Dagg)

THE MEANING OF FOREKNOW IN RM 8:29

those whom he foreknew, he also predestined'

Election of grace is personal. It is not an election of nations (Rm 11:5) but is specific: 'God has from the beginning chosen you' (2 Thess 2:13). It is a foreknowledge of persons meaning more than mere knowledge (Rm 11:1-2). God gave us as individuals as a gift to his son (Jn 17:2,6). We are personally called by name and are known individually by God (Jn 10:14-15).

The word foreknow is used in the Biblical sense of known in a loving relationship, just like Adam knew Eve (Gen 4:1, ie had an intimate relationship). It is those whom God knew, loved, that were predestined. The verse does not say it was those who God knew something about (ie would have faith). To make the verse mean this you have to add a phrase like: those whom he foreknew would believe. The example of Israel is pertinent here; she was not chosen for what she would do, but in spite of it (ie act faithlessly). Israel was chosen because God chose to love her.

There are many cases in the Bible where the word know is used to refer to a loving relationship, eg: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth (Amos 3:2). Obviously God knows all families, all people, his knowledge is perfect; but Israel was known to God as a lover, a bride (that is why resorting to idols is called spiritual adultery in the prophetic books). See also Jer 1:5; Mt 7:22-23; 1 Cor 8:3; 2 Tim 2:19.

Eminent commentators see no reason in the Greek construction of the words to add qualifying words to the sentence. They translate it as 'whom he set regard upon' (John Murray) or 'whom he selected' or 'whom he particularly loved' (Charles Hodge).

God knows all people, but these predestined people are known in a special way differently to others, they are loved by God.

To, therefore, suggest that this passage teaches that God predestines those whom he foreknew would believe is wrong because:

- It cannot be made to mean that from the Greek words used
- It is a thought alien to the context
- It is a doctrine alien to Paul's express teaching elsewhere
- It opposes the clear Biblical teaching everywhere
- Faith is the fruit of predestination (Acts 13:48), therefore, it cannot be the cause of foreknowledge

ANALOGY

As so often in the Bible, God gives us a picture to learn the truth from as well as clear teaching. In Rm 9:21-23 we are shown election in the figure of a potter and the clay. From one lump the potter makes a vessel for glory and mercy and another for wrath and destruction. It is up to the potter what he does with his own clay. The clay has no rights in this. Obviously the potter here stands for God and man is the clay (after all he is made from dust of the earth). Note that the clay will get harder and harder if left on its own and out of the hands of the potter. The hardening of man's heart does not have to be a positive act of God. The vessels fitted for destruction are not said to be fitted specifically by God in this. The clay hardens on its own. It is the work of natural depravity.

CONCLUSION

All Christians become Calvinists when they pray. They ask God to make men repent and believe. If there is sufficient grace for men to choose salvation and some choose while others do not, then praying is futile, it is up to each individual. Yet everyone agrees that it is right to ask God to intervene and to thank him when he has.

It should be added that God did not make men (or angels) in order to damn them. They were made to glorify him. Those that fell did so due to their own evil. God in his mercy decrees to rescue some. In these his love will be glorified, in the others, God will be glorified in his justice against sin.

PRACTICAL

- God's purpose in electing a certain people was that they should represent him in the flesh. This means that holiness results. This was supposed to be true of Israel (Deut 7:6) and is certainly true of the church of Christ (Eph 1:4). How has this doctrine affected you?
- Another response to this teaching is worship. What better reason is there for giving God all the thanks and praise possible if not this?
- Election gives us no grounds for presumption or license to do what we like, rather we are to make our calling sure (2 Pt 1:10) ie show that our election is real by living right.

QUOTES

As long as that remains in the Bible (Rm 9) no man shall be able to prove Arminianism; so long as that is written there, not the most violent contortions of the passage will ever be able to exterminate the doctrine of election.

C H Spurgeon, (From a sermon on Election 2 Thess 2:13-14)

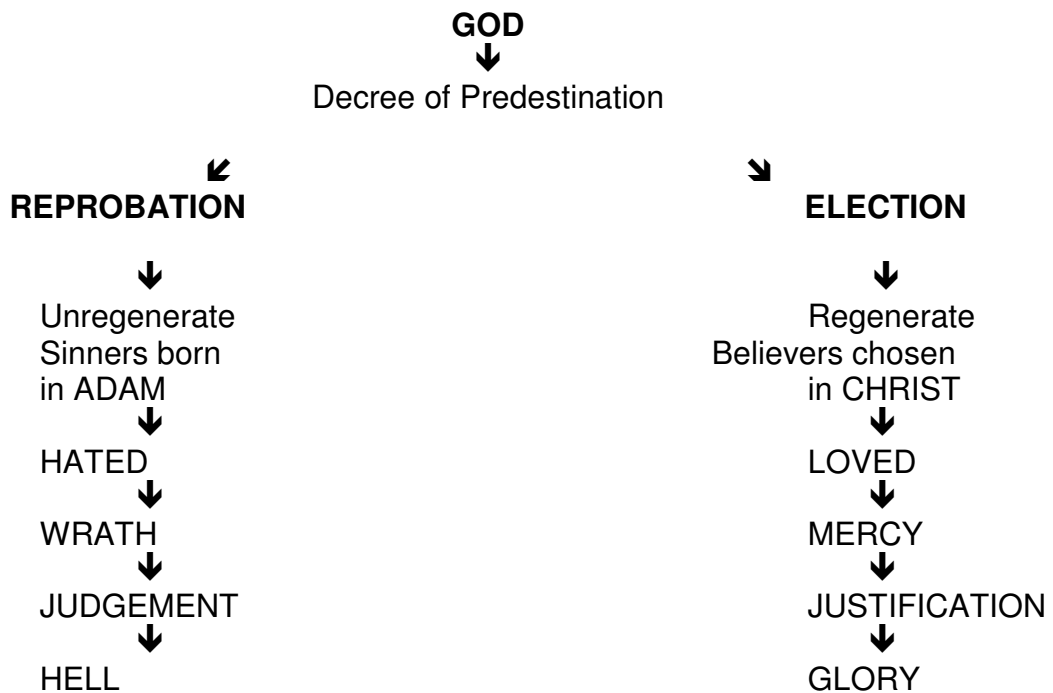
We ... maintain that God elected those whom he foresaw would believe (some say). I answer, this is a total denial of election. And it is dishonesty or ignorance to call this by such a name. God elects those whom He foresaw would believe, you say? And who were they? None! Absolutely none! He foresaw that none would believe , not one. And because He foresaw this, He elected some to believe. Otherwise not one would have!

Horatius Bonar, The Five Points of Calvinism

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OVERVIEW OF ELECTION



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