

# Election

Election is one of the most complicated and troublesome ideas in Christianity. Many Christians misunderstand what election really is (biblically), and struggle understanding the various aspects of it. Included prominently in the confusion is the teaching of Calvinism, which says that certain people are chosen by God to be saved (the "elect"), and everyone else is chosen by God to spend eternity in hell. And there is nothing either the "elect" or the "non-elect" can do to change God's sovereign decision regarding their eternal destiny. While Calvinism's teaching is wrong and unbiblical, it often confuses believers who are trying to understand what election (or predestination) really is, and how it affects them and their loved ones. Hopefully this will clear up what the Bible says about election/predestination.

Before you can understand election, you first have to have a foundation of knowledge in which to build your understanding. Below are a few distinctions that MUST be understood before understanding election:

First, we must understand the difference between national election and individual election.

**National Election:** the Bible states clearly that God "elected" (sovereignly chose) Israel (the descendants of Abraham-Isaac-Jacob) as His "chosen people." This is outlined all over the Bible, and also described in Romans 9.

**Individual Election:** the action by God in choosing those who will be saved as members of the body of Christ.

We're not going to deal with National Election here, but rather Individual Election...the decision by God to choose those who will be saved.

One of the dangers in studying the doctrine of election is that many do so without understanding or also studying the totality of God's character. You can't understand election unless you first understand God's character. What will happen if you study election in isolation is that you become bitter and you question God because of this seeming unfairness.

When the doctrine of election is revealed in the Bible, it's never revealed in isolation from God's other attributes. It's also brought forth in harmony with God's character. This is clearly brought out in Eph 1:3-14, which is a single run-on sentence in the Greek. This is significant because it links our election ("He chose us in Him" v4) with all of God's other attributes (love, v4; glory, v6; according to His purpose, v11). ***The way the Holy Spirit reveals the doctrine of election in the Bible is that He wants us to understand that***

**God, when He exercises His prerogative of choice, does so in harmony with all of His other attributes.**

When discussing the issue of election, we must be careful against using one set of verses to rewrite another set of verses. This strategy is used by both the people who favor election and those who favor free will:

### **Those Who Favor Election**

People on the election side use these verses to override free will and develop a doctrine that says that you can't believe on your own, God has to believe for you. This Calvinist doctrine is called "Regeneration Precedes Faith." When you question them about this doctrine, which is not found anywhere in Scripture, you find that it's a desire to protect the sovereignty of God.

### **Those Who Favor Free Will**

People on the free will side like to say, Well, God has seen the movie. He knows how its all going to turn out, and He picks winners. God knew that I would trust Christ, so He picked me. This makes God's choosing of me conditional, not unconditional. This view is called the Prescience (pre-knowledge) View.

People like to say that those He foreknew, He predestined. They camp on "foreknew" (*proginōskō*) which they think means that through His omniscience, He know that I would pick Christ so God picked me because God has seen the movie. This is their understanding of "foreknowledge."

The problem is that *proginōskō* as used in Rom 8:29 is also used in Rom 11:2, which describes God's program with the nation of Israel. Everyone agrees that God chose Israel not because He saw in the end that they would choose Him, but ***He chose them unilaterally, unconditionally.*** So the Prescience View is reading meaning into *proginōskō* that is foreign to what Paul is teaching.

The third extreme to avoid is using election to remove human responsibility. What this means is that we cannot and should not avoid the command to evangelize the lost because we are camped out on the term "foreknowledge" and because of that we remove all human responsibility in salvation. God's people are responsible to preach the gospel to every human being...we don't preach the gospel to just the elect because we have no way of identifying them. If I don't know who they are, how can I preach only to them? Our job is to get the gospel to everyone.

Under the subject of election, we have to understand that there are things God does and there are things we do. The Bible reveals things like foreknowledge, election, calling, etc., but it never tells us to worry about them or rely on them for evangelism. As believers, we

need to just get down to our own responsibility, which is to preach the gospel, and let God handle His responsibility.

God has His responsibility, we have ours. Anytime someone uses a biblical doctrine as an excuse, or getting you to escape some type of responsibility, you know you've gone to an extreme, the doctrine is being abused.

So with these things in mind (God's ways are higher than my ways, His thoughts higher than my thoughts), let's look at what the Bible says:

Col 3:12: So, as **those who have been chosen of God**, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience;

Titus 1:1: Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith **of those chosen of God** and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness,

Eph 1:4-5:

4 just as **He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world**, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love

5 **He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ** to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

Rev 13:8: All who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose **name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life** of the Lamb who has been slain.

One of the dangers in studying the doctrine of election is that many do so without understanding or also studying the totality of God's character. You can't understand election unless you first understand God's character. What will happen if you study election in isolation is that you become bitter and you question God because of this seeming unfairness.

When the doctrine of election is revealed in the Bible, it's never revealed in isolation from God's other attributes. It's also brought forth in harmony with God's character:

Twice the NT states that God wants ALL to be saved:

1 Tim 2:4: who wants **all people to be saved** and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9: The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, **not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance.**

## The Case for Divine Sovereignty

### Pre-Temporal Choice

"Pre-Temporal" means "ahead of time"; before time existed (before the foundation of the world), God made a decision to unilaterally make a move of grace toward you. It's a pre-temporal choice that God made to choose some to be saved, while others are passed over.

### God's choice was Unconditional

God did not look at me and say, that guy is going to be a good guy, so I'm going to choose him. God didn't choose us because He knew we were going to have some admirable qualities, be "good people," do great things, or for any other reason within ourselves. Doing this would make God's choice based on something within me, which would make it a conditional choice.

John 6:44: **No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me **draws** him; and I will raise him up on the last day.**

- "...draws" - *heilko*, to draw by inward power, to drag (literally or figuratively)
- The same word used in John 21:6,11 regarding the miraculous catch of fish by the disciples, after the resurrection. The disciples were dragging (*heilko*) the fish into the boat, with resistance.
- God has drawn us to Himself, despite our resistance. If God did not exercise His grace toward us and draw us near to Him, we wouldn't come (Luke 19:11; Rom 3:11).
- So under God's election of our salvation, what is our role? Our role is that we resisted, we fought Him. Yet in His compassion, He drew us to Himself.

John 6:65: And He was saying, **"For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."**

John 6:69-70:

69 We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."

70 Jesus answered them, **"Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?"**

- The disciples told Jesus that they made a choice to choose Him, but Jesus answered that He made the choice to choose them first

The next passage is John 15:16, but to set it up, first look at Matt 4:19-20:

Matt 4:19-20:

19 And He \*said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

20 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

- Notice that the action is on the disciples...Jesus spoke, and the action was that the disciples "immediately" followed Him

John 15:16: **You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.**

- Three years later, in the Upper Room just before Jesus' death, Jesus tells them that they did not choose Him, but instead He chose them.

— So the disciples thought they chose the Lord, and they did, but we learn here that the Lord first made some type of move toward them by choosing them ahead of time.

Matt 16:15-17:

15 He \*said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

- Jesus asked a question, and Peter gave the correct answer. Peter probably thought pretty highly of himself after giving Jesus the right answer, then Jesus burst his bubble.

— Jesus told Peter that he had the right answer because My Father first made some type of move toward him through revelation and allowed you to have that particular thought

Acts 13:48: When the Gentiles heard this, they *began* rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and **as many as had been appointed to eternal life** believed.

- A bunch of Gentiles believed...because they had been appointed to believe

Acts 16:14: A woman named **Lydia**, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and **the Lord opened her heart** to respond to the things spoken by Paul.

- "...Lydia" - Paul's first convert in Philippi (the first believer in Europe)

— Normally Paul would go first to the synagogue, but there was no synagogue in Philippi, so he went by a river and found Lydia

- "...the Lord opened her heart" - this is how a conversion takes place: Paul gives the gospel, the Lord opens hearts, and the person whose heart is open believes

— Had the Lord not opened her heart, you get the idea that Lydia would not and could not believe

Rom 8:29-30:

29 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;

30 and these whom He predestined, He also **called**; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

- Before we're justified, God is involved in three acts: foreknowledge, predestination, and calling. These three steps have already been executed by God in eternity past.

The main passage on divine sovereignty in all of Scripture is Rom 9...

Rom 9:11-13,18-20:

11 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,

12 it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger."

- In the ANE, it never worked this way...the older never served the younger. It was always that the younger served the older.

— God decided that He was going to switch things around, to give His favor to Jacob rather than Esau, who was the firstborn

— If you go through Genesis, God bypasses the firstborn ~11x

— This bypass was not for any reason other than divine sovereignty; the verse says that the twins were still in their mother's womb, and had not done anything good or bad, so God's election of one over the other was not based on works.

13 Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I **hated**."

- This verse is troubling if read without context or understanding of the underlying Greek words

— "...hated" - this doesn't describe the emotion that God felt, but rather the action that He carried out

— "Hate" oftentimes in the Bible describes a non-choice; for example, in Luke 14:26 Jesus says that the requirement for discipleship is to hate your mother and father. So obviously we're not called to hate our parents if we're going to be disciples as that violates the 5th commandment.

— What He's saying is that if you have to make a choice between mom and dad's will and God's will to be His disciple, you should choose God's will. This is what "hate" means in this context.

— The contrast between "love" and "hate" is a Hebrew idiom that simply means that God selected or preferred Jacob over Esau

— The “love” equals “elect” equation is also clear in Gen 29:30-31 describing Jacob’s “love” for Rachel and “hatred” of Leah

18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

- Paul is referring to Pharaoh; God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. God used Pharaoh as an instrument of oppression against the Jewish people so that God could judge Pharaoh.

— When you look at this whole story, you see that Pharaoh hardened his own heart against God about 6x. The narrative reads Pharaoh hardened his heart a number of times, then finally in His sovereignty, God gave Pharaoh over to what he wanted all along.

19 You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?”

- Based on v18, Paul anticipates an objection...his response to it is in v20

20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it?

- People making moral objections to how God runs His universe is like a coffee mug that you created objecting to the type of coffee you choose to put in it

— This is what we’re doing when we question God’s fairness...it’s like a small human, with limited intelligence and a corrupted human nature, speaking against a perfectly righteous, omniscient, omnipotent God. So we have to look at our motives when you get into the position of challenging God.

Rev 13:8: All who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been

written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.

- People during the Tribulation are making a decision to reject Jesus and to worship the Antichrist

— Then what we discover from this verse and also Rev 17:8 is that they are making that decision because their names were not written in the book of Life since before the foundation of the world.

Rev 17:8: “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will wonder when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come.

Those *included*...

Individuals:

Jer 1:4-5:

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."

- Before Jeremiah was born, before he was even conceived, God knew him and appointed him to be a prophet to the nations

— This was not based on any good character trait or quality within Jeremiah, because he had not been born yet

— Why did Jeremiah become a prophet? Because God made a move toward him before he was even born

Gal 1:15-16:

15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased

16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood,

- Same thing happened to Paul as happened to Jeremiah...God made a move toward him before he was even born, and called him through His grace

— Why did Paul become a prophet and teacher of the Gentiles? Because God made a move toward him, a sovereign choice, before Paul was born

Rom 16:13: Greet Rufus, a **choice man** in the Lord, also his mother and mine.

2 John 1,13:

1 The elder to the **chosen lady** and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth,

13 The children of your **chosen sister** greet you.

Groups:

1 Peter 1:1-2:

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, **who are chosen**

2 **according to the foreknowledge of God** the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

- It's talking about Jewish believers located in north central Turkey...they are believers because they were chosen according to the foreknowledge of God

Sometimes God's sovereign election involves those who will be passed over...

John 13:18: **I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but *it is* that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.'**

- Jesus is speaking about Judas...

— Jesus is quoting from the Psalms, written 1000 years earlier, which cover Judas' life like a script because that's how God set it up

Rom 9:22: What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

- In this context, Paul is speaking of Pharaoh, and how God used Pharaoh's already hardened heart, and God hardened it more so, to prepare him to be an instrument of destruction

1 Peter 2:8: and, "A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense"; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and **to this doom they were also appointed.**

- Peter is speaking to Jews who stumbled over Christ...

— These unbelieving Jews stumbled over Christ, but this verse states that they were appointed to do so

Sometimes the choosing of God involves our good works...

— Jeremiah was chosen by God to be a prophet (Jer 1:4-5)

— Paul was chosen by God to be a prophet/teacher of the Gentiles (Acts 9:15-16)

Eph 2:10: For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

- We are engaged in teaching, ministry or evangelism because they are good works that God prepared in us to do before we were ever born

### **The Case for Human Responsibility**

As much as election is a biblical doctrine, as has been demonstrated in the above verses, the Bible equally teaches the notion of human responsibility and free will. There are just as many passages on human responsibility/free will as there are on divine sovereignty:

Gen 15:6: Then **he believed** in the LORD; and **He reckoned** it to him as righteousness.

- Abraham believed, God reckoned his belief as righteousness

— This passage does not say anything about God foreordaining salvation for Abraham...it just notes that Abraham believed, so he was saved

— It is narrating the passage from the human point of view...it doesn't say anything about God moving toward Abraham

John 3:16: **"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."**

- Nothing mentioned about receiving eternal life because of God's sovereign election. Other passages may say that, but this one only says that we receive eternal life once we make a free will decision to believe.

Acts 16:30-31:

30 and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

**31** They said, **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved,** you and your household."

- Paul and Silas put the decision of salvation up to the Philippian jailer's free will, not on God's sovereign election

Acts 17:30: Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent,

- From Paul's sermon on Mars Hill...speaking to unbelieving Gentiles

— Paul puts the onus on his hearers to exercise their volition (free will) to repent (change their mind about Christ)

Rev 22:17: The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; **let the one who wishes** take the water of life without cost.

- According to this verse, who can come and have their thirst quenched with the water that Jesus provides? Anyone who wants it...a clear argument for free will

One thing that helps us understand this whole issue of free will is understanding that human beings are image bearers of God...

Gen 1:26-27:

**26** Then God said, **"Let Us make man in Our image**, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

**27** God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

- Created in the image of God means that we share God's communicable attributes (not all His attributes, such as omniscience, omnipotent, etc.)

— However, there are many attributes that we share with God, such as free will. This is why God put a tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden.

Gen 2:16-17:

16 The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely;

17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

- We often wish God would just have decided to not put a tree of knowledge in the garden, because then there wouldn't be an opportunity for Adam and Eve to sin.

— But there had to be a tree of knowledge in the garden...if there wasn't, people really don't have a choice. A choice means you have to have an avenue for rebellion should you choose to go that direction. If that choice was not there, God would not be respecting how He made Adam and Eve in His image.

— Some say that our image-bearing and choice were "pre-fall" and since the fall, that has been erased. But God never erased or revoked our image bearing status. Theologians like to say that our image bearing status as been "effaced" by the fall, but not "erased" (Cf. Gen 9:6; James 3:9).

Gen 9:6: "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed, **For in the image of God He made man.**

- After the flood, God still considered mankind to be His image bearers

James 3:9: With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have **been made in the likeness of God;**

- Even in our fallen state, we still retain the dignity of being God's image bearers, so when God orchestrates salvation, He has to factor in the free will of individuals.

— If the free will is not factored in, God is not respecting how He created mankind

### **The Bible Teaches Both Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility**

From the passages above, it's clear that God teaches both divine sovereignty and man's free will. Election, or God's choosing of us, does not obliterate man's free will or responsibility. Somehow in God, these two ideas exist.

The foolishness that we put ourselves in is trying to logically understand this. It doesn't make sense as both ideas, in our minds, are mutually exclusive. To an all-knowing God, who is outside of time, this makes perfect sense. But to a time-bound person of limited

knowledge and a sinful nature, it appears to be an obvious contradiction. This is us looking at it from a human point of view, not a divine point of view.

John 13:18: *I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.'*

- So back to the Judas passage...did Judas exercise his free will to betray Christ? Yes. But at the same time the moment he exercised his free will to betray Christ was prophesied in the Psalms 1000 years earlier.

— So somehow God used the free will of Judas to execute a plan written 1000 years in advance. Only God can pull something like that off.

Acts 2:23: this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death.

- This verse contains both foreknowledge and human choice...

— Who killed Christ? The first part of the verse says that God the Father killed Christ (election); the second part of the verse says that godless Jews killed Him (human choice).

— Which is right? Both.

So the danger is when we try to use election to somehow obliterate free will, or use free will to somehow obliterate election. This has spawned a disagreement between two factions within the body of Christ, where each side picks their verses and slings them at the other side like a snowball fight. In reality, both doctrines are accurate, it just depends what part of the Bible you're reading at that particular time.

Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, pg 118: "There are unsaved elect people alive today, though the elect are now lost and will not be saved until they believe."

— He's saying that election does not override the human responsibility to believe  
Norman Geisler — "Chosen but Free" - he describes how God has chosen believers, but at the same time He never overrides their free will.

An analogy that is very helpful in understanding the tension between election and free will is the husband and wife analogy (Eph 5:22-33). We are called the Bride of Christ, we are the Bride, He is the Groom.

When you got married, did you choose your spouse or did your spouse choose you?  
Usually a guy sees a girl and puts on the full court press to get her attention. But no matter how much wooing a guy does, at some point she's going to have to choose him. This is the same way God works on us...He woos us and works, but He never is going to override our free will decision to believe in Him. He wouldn't do this any more than you'd want to marry someone who hasn't made a free will decision to marry you.

## *Who chose Whom?*

**I chose her.**

**I chose him.**



**We chose each other.**

When you talk about free will, people get nervous and ask if you're overriding God's sovereignty. There are some in the Church who are so eager to protect God's sovereignty that they don't want to allow any room for free will. The fact is, God can use the free moral choices of His creatures to accomplish His sovereign plan. That's what He did with Judas, with Cyrus. That doesn't diminish God in any way...in fact that enlarges God. It makes me want to glorify God even more because He can use either good or rebellious choices of people who are free to accomplish His will.

### (F) Extremes to Avoid

Using one set of texts to rewrite another set of texts. This strategy is used by both the people who favor election, and those who favor free will:

People on the election side use these verses to override free will and develop a doctrine that says that you can't believe on your own, God has to believe for you. This doctrine is called "Regeneration Precedes Faith."

— When you question them about this doctrine, which is not found anywhere in Scripture, you find that it's a desire to protect the sovereignty of God.

John 16:8-9 describes what the Holy Spirit does prior to our salvation...

8 And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment;

9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me;

- So the Holy Spirit does not override the free will of an unbeliever, He does not believe for them, He does not regenerate them...He convicts them of sin so that they see their need for belief.
- Regeneration is the result of faith, not the cause
- The Holy Spirit convicts us, He doesn't override our free will. If God were to override our free will, he wouldn't be respecting His creation of us as His image bearers.

All things being said...just let God do His thing, and make sure that we do ours. Recognize that there is a tension in the Bible that our minds can't reconcile, between election and free will. But at the least, I know this...I know what my responsibility is...to preach the gospel to all creatures.

And so the bottom line in understanding the doctrine of election is that you can't. If we take all of the verses that talk about God's sovereign choice, along with all of the verses that talk about man's free will, our human minds cannot reconcile the two. The doctrine of election, how God sovereignly chose those who will be saved ahead of time, but how man also has complete free will in making the decision to believe in Him by faith, is outside of man's comprehension.

It's kinda like the Trinity...I understand that God is three Personages in one Being, but I can't understand the depth or intricacies of the relationship between the Three. I just take the Bible for what it says, and am fine with my inability to completely understand it. Same goes for election vs free will.

So this is a good lesson for us...when I encounter things in the Bible that I don't understand, or that seem unfair, I need to rest in who He is because He is good. He is the very definition of goodness. And if we can get to this point in our understanding of God, I don't have to understand everything.

As a young Christian, you may want all the loose ends batted down, but as you grow in your knowledge of Scripture and who God is, you understand that it's not necessary that you know everything because I know at the end of the day God is a good, loving God.