

Unconditional Election

Last week we began to think of God's salvation a little more deeply and we thought about why we might need to be saved in the first place. We said the good news of the gospel is that God sent His Son into the world to save those who are dead sinners, willing slaves of sin, and therefore unable to save ourselves from God's wrath against us.

These are big and important issues to consider and what we think of them makes a practical difference in how we think about God, gospel ministry and ourselves.

Therefore, following on from last week, I want us to answer the question, *"If this is what we're like in our sin, how is it that anyone is saved?"*

That brings us to the topic of election or predestination. First we're going to pray and then read Romans 9:6-24 and then 11:33-36.

Prayer (Lord grant that we might consider the mysteries of your heavenly wisdom with humility and increasing devotion – for your glory and our building up).

Introduction:

What do the words election and predestination mean? **Election** is a biblical word and simply means to choose. **Predestination** is another bible word that means the same thing, "choosing", but it also contains the idea of when the choice is made – "pre" or beforehand.

In a general election we'll choose to vote for who we think will make the best government based on their past or promised future performance. In the Bible electing or predestining are always things our Sovereign God does, but importantly we want to ask, on what basis God makes His choice. Before we go further here's a definition of God's electing or predestination:

"Before the foundation of the world God chose to save a fixed number of individuals. He chose them purely for his own glory, because of his loving mercy, and not because of their foreknown faith, good works, or perseverance."

Questions about predestination

Questions about predestination fit into the wider issue of God's Sovereignty in all things – that is He is sovereign to do all that He wants, or as Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:11, God Sovereignly

works all things according to the counsel of his will

If God is Sovereign over all things, then we'd expect His sovereignty to extend to who gets saved – praise God there are no gaps in His Sovereignty, Let's read

I'm aware that for many of us what the Bible says about election and predestination raises a whole host of questions and that's fine. Intellectually as *"we're transformed by the renewing of our minds"* we'll need to strive to work things out and that doesn't all come at once. But whilst there's mystery about the things of God, there's no contradiction or nonsense.

But perhaps our questions are more personal and emotional, things that we feel deeply. Where that's the case we're to remember that our Lord is good and all His ways and deeds are righteous.

So a little caution as we begin, there's a right and a wrong was to ask questions about our Lord and to ask question of our Lord. Whatever we think on these issues we need to remember we speak about and to the Sovereign Holy Lord our maker as small and sinful creatures.

Predestination in church history:

Some of us will be aware that the areas we're touching on this morning have figured large within the history of the church, especially over the last

400 years or so, with two understandings – the Calvinist or Reformed and the Arminian view.

As a church it's necessary to decide which stream of historical theology we're located in and I want to be up front in saying I think the Calvinist or Reformed view is where the teaching of Scripture takes us.

Predestination Explained

Let's then consider what the Bible says about God's electing and predestining, by working through that definition I gave at the beginning.

Before the foundation of the world God chose

The simple point to notice here is that it was God who chose. He does the choosing.

Eph. 1:3-5 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will*

Paul's clear here isn't he, it's God who does the choosing. Indeed, Paul God is praised for doing the choosing – it must be God who does it otherwise the praise would belong elsewhere. It would belong to us.

John 6:37-39 - ***All that the Father gives me*** will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of ***all that he has given me***, but raise it up on the last day.

See in John 6, Jesus says the Father has **given** Christians to Him the Son. We as Christians are a gift from the Father to the Son. If WE are ultimately responsible for being in Christ then we can't be a gift from the

Father to the Son – the Father's love for His Son is lessened and the glory goes to us.

But notice also that if we are totally unable to save ourselves as we've said that requires that God must choose us if any are to be saved. There could be no faithful response for God to foreknow. If we really are willing slaves to sin, dead in sin, if total depravity is right salvation must be down to the free choice of God.

The Bible evidence seems to show that before the foundation of the world God chooses or elects or predestines. Let's look at the next part of the definition

God chose a fixed number of individuals

Does God just choose a certain number of people to save – (a million billion for example), but doesn't actually specify who those people will be? No, God chooses to save individuals.

Just think, if God is sovereignly in control of all things then of course He must chose individuals. Otherwise individual Christians would be responsible for their own salvation. And the Bible speaks of the election of specific individuals in many places. So

- In the reading from Romans 9 we saw that Rebecca's children – real individuals, Jacob and Esau were distinguished by God before they were born
- We also saw Pharaoh a real man, who is contrasted with "those on whom I will have mercy" – real individual people
- In Romans 11:4-5 we're told Elijah's day God reserved 7,000 specific people for Himself
- Romans 8:29-30 speaks of "those God foreknew," referring to God knowing people, and not about knowing their decisions.

- And in Revelation we're told of the Lamb's Book of Life, which contains "names" written in it (Rev. 13:8, 20:11-15, 21:27)

So the Bible evidence seems to support the fact that God chooses individual people

God chose some for salvation

We want to say that when God sets His electing love on someone, it's for the purpose of salvation. We can say, *"Those whom God applies the blessing of salvation to IN TIME, are those He has chosen BEFORE time."*

Listen again to some of the passages we're already looked at:

Rom. 9:23 - *in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory*

God's elect are "prepared in advance for glory"

Eph. 1:4-5 *In love - he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will*

And then listen to 2 Thess. 2:13 - *But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because **God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved**, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*

In Acts 13:48 as Paul and Barnabas are preaching the gospel and some Gentiles become Christians; it's described in this way

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

These Gentiles become Christians, they receive eternal life, why? Well because they were "appointed" – they didn't appoint themselves. God had decided before time that on that day they would hear the gospel and believe the Gospel.

The Bible clearly states God chooses some for salvation, but if God is truly sovereign then we'd also expect the opposite to be true

God purposes not to save others

God elects people to life, but He also eternally purposes **reprobation**. This is an awesome truth and makes us see and feel the Godness of God.

Reprobation speaks of God's eternal decision concerning sinners whom He has not chosen for life. It's a decision not to change them, but leave them to sin as they already desire. Giving them over to their sins and finally judging them.

We might find this a hard teaching to receive, but it is how God has spoken about Himself in the Bible,

Rom. 9:22 – speaks of those God has "prepared for destruction."

1 Peter 2:8, Peter refers to Jesus as "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

Proverbs 16:4, The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.¹

This teaching of the Bible particularly can be something we wrestle with, and because we don't know who God has chosen we should view all people we meet as possibly being numbered among God's chosen elect. (Packer)

Now the Bible teaches that judgment is God's "alien" or strange work (Is. 28:21). We're told God shows love and grace to a thousand generations and judgment to the third and the fourth generation (Exodus 34). So it's right to view God's work in reprobation and salvation asymmetrically.

¹ Proverbs 16:4 – Also see John 6:64-65, 12:40, Rom. 1:24, 11:7-8, Mark 4:12, Deut. 2:30, Acts 2:23, 4:27-28, Luke 22:22

But, the Lord is 100% Sovereign over those who reject the gospel – we need to remember that when the gospel is rejected – the Lord is never outwitted or surprised by unbelief.

God chose for His own glory

Why then has God determined to work like this, why does God chose? The answer must be He does it for His own glory.

We might find that hard – after all if I glorify myself “look at me,” that’s sinful, but if God is God then it’s right for Him to work all things for His glory. If God is good then he must delight in what’s excellent and majestic – He must delight in Himself. A God who didn’t seek His own glory as the highest end would be evil.

Eph. 1:5-6 – “*he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved*”²

God chose because of His loving mercy, not because of anything in us.

It’s hard to deny that the Bible teaches that God chooses to elect. Where Christians are not agreed is **why** God chooses some and not others. That’s been a big dispute in the church historically and there are basically two groups – Arminians and Calvinists (Reformed).

We all naturally tend towards being Arminian and the majority of the Protestant church today is Arminian in its understanding of God’s election, but it’s our belief that a Calvinist or Reformed view most faithfully reflects the teaching of the Bible.

Arminians do believe that God elects, it’s there in the Bible. But the Arminian view is that before time God looked into the future and saw who

would have faith in Him and responded by choosing them. He looked into the future and foresaw something in us that obliged Him to choose us.

In other words the Arminian view says God’s choosing of some and not of others is conditional on something in us.

In contrast the Reformed Calvinistic view is that God’s choosing is unconditional on anything outside of Himself – He did not look into the future and see our faith or anything in us that would oblige Him to choose us. He didn’t have to elect ANYONE – His election is unconditional. Positively, God chooses to elect simply because of His mercy, So

Rom 9:15, *For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*

Negatively, God does not choose because of anything in us. How could that be?

- If by nature we are in bondage to sin, no-one can believe God on their own³
- Scripture excludes human reasons – it tells us God doesn’t choose people because of something in us (numerous, wise, influential, noble birth – Deut. 7:7-8, 1 Corinth. 1:26-31)
- Scripture excludes human boasting – it says there’s no room for human boasting (Eph 2.9, 1 Tim), because it’s God’s work
- Arminianism makes man’s choice and work THE thing that makes the difference between a Christian and non-Christian. There is something about me, that means I’m saved. That means I’ve got something to boast of, that there’s something in me that causes my salvation.
- It’s hard to see what the texts that speak of God’s electing, choosing, predestining mean if it’s ultimately us who made the choice.

² Ephesians 1:5–6

³ Classical Arminians believe in “universal prevenient grace” : although bound in sin, God liberates all people such that they can freely choose to believe or reject the Gospel. There is no Scriptural warrant for this.

- God's election causes holiness, not the other way around – so

Eph 1:4 – *“he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him”*

Election > holiness
Not Holiness > election

Answering Questions:

i. How is this fair?

Paul himself answers that question in Romans 9:14-18. God is God and we are not. Time and again we're told in Exodus that Pharaoh hardened his heart and rejected God's word. But Exodus 4:21, and Paul confirms it here states that Pharaoh's heart was hard because God hardened it. And that's fair because God can have mercy on whomever He chooses. The amazing thing is that some are not condemned but saved. God is free to have mercy on anyone He wants. If God were operating solely on fairness then we all deserve to go to hell with Pharaoh.

For God's mercy to be mercy it must be not what we fairly deserve but His undeserved love.

ii. Don't we have free will?

I hope it's clear from what we've seen in Scripture that left to ourselves outside of Christ, we DO NOT have free will – certainly as people think about it today. People who are bound in sin, spiritually dead are NOT free – we are not able to choose Christ left to ourselves.

But that doesn't mean that outside of Christ we are robots. Why? Because unbelievers enjoy sin, they choose sin and desire to sin – even if they aren't free to choose the opposite. Remember John 8:44

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires

The unbeliever is unable to choose to follow Christ, but they willingly choose to go the other way.

When we become Christians it's because God takes our bound will and frees it, and causes us to willingly choose Christ. Once God has freed my bound will I see Christ as beautiful and choose Him, but I can only do that because God has given me a new heart.

iii. Why does God chose A and not B?

We don't know and God doesn't tell us. Deuteronomy 29:29 says

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

God has told us all we need to know, but not all we might like to know.

So what: God's predestination is something we can't ignore in Scripture without misunderstanding who God is and what He is doing. And God wants us to apply what He's told us about His electing work

(a) It gives hope to the evangelist – we don't know who is among God's elect so we preach promiscuously to everyone.

Acts 18:9-10 *And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.”*

There are many chosen people in the town, so Paul stays and preaches the word.

(b) It's the basis for godly living – If I'm a Christian God's chosen me to live a holy life

Col. 3:12 *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, I am chosen by God so I need to live like I'm chosen.*

(c) We should be both humbled and encouraged – Election shows me God is God and I am not. Naturally I want to achieve and contribute, but God's election shows that salvation is completely of His grace.⁴

Rom. 9:20, *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"*

I should be humbled, but I should also be comforted to know that of all those God has freely chosen, He will lose none (Jn. 6:37)

John 6:37, *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*

(d) God is exalted – We should follow Paul's example of praise and worship of God.

Questions & Discussion

Prayer

⁴ The doctrine corrects how I think about my conversion. It's natural to think "I chose to become a Christian – it was my decision." But the illustration from Pilgrims Progress is true. At the time of conversion I walked through the door labelled "I chose God." But now with Scripture informing my mind I look back and see over the door "God chose me."

We teach predestination to God's people for all the reasons given above: to humble us, move us to holiness, move us to praise and worship. But Jesus goes further and deploying this truth evangelistically! This shows that preaching predestination can't hinder the call which is itself grounded on election:

- Matt 11:25-30, but issues general call to "come" in v28 and v7 suggests a public context
- Jn 6:35-44 speaks of election and preservation to non-Xns (see vv24-25, 64-66)

Supplementary Reading

- R. C Sproul Unconditional Election, www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-unconditional-election/
- J Piper, Five Reasons to embrace unconditional election, www.desiringgod.org/articles/five-reasons-to-embrace-unconditional-election
- M Barrett, Chosen by grace alone, in Credo Magazine online at www.credomag.com/the-magazine/archives/may-2012/

Objections raised in Romans 9 only work on a Calvinistic reading, with Arminian reading there is no problem

Prevenient (universal) grace – All were dead in sin (in Adam), slaves to sin (John 8:44) but then in Christ's death He frees **all** from their bondage and gives ability for them to turn to God. From that, some will turn to Christ and some won't.

Does that work:

- Jesus says of the Pharisees – "you are of your father the devil", speaks of them in the present tense, they are still slaves to sin

- With universal grace we all are capable of turning to Christ – why do some turn and others don't? Is it something in them, in which case they have something to boast of (contra Eph. 2:9, 2 Tim. 1:9), if not in them then from whom?
- Where is the scriptural support for the idea of universal grace to all?
- What does it mean in the Arminian view for God to elect – seems to be reduced to God merely foreknowing what we would do (without him)

Corporate but not individual election (Barth) – God only elects a group, but not the individuals within that group

In what way is that choosing – when a manager picks his football team, if he says we'll be putting out 11 players on Saturday against Arsenal but doesn't know who, has he in any way chosen his team?