

What Is Unconditional Election?

Summary: *The Scriptures teach that God elects individual persons to salvation irrespective of any conditions of will, effort, desire or ability. He is absolutely free to save whomever He so desires and He is absolutely just in His right to do so (Romans 9:14-15).*

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him in love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Ephesians 1:4-6

“Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, 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, has chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto; and all to the praise of His glorious grace.”¹

This doctrine is founded upon an understanding of total depravity. Please read our article on “What is Total Depravity?” before this in order to introduce yourself to the material. As that article concluded, we found that man is evil and unable to respond positively to God. We, like Lazarus, lie daily in a spiritual tomb, with nothing to contribute but corruption and decay.

However, the gospel is good news; that Christ came to die for sinners. But how is it that we appropriate the truth of the gospel. Do we exercise faith to which God responds or does God grant us faith that we may respond? The order is integral! Do we do that which is contrary to our very natures (trust God) or does God first regenerate our natures so that we may believe?

The Bible clearly outlines the latter understanding. Though this is neither popular nor easy for the spiritual newborn, the Bible commands that we preach the full counsel of our God and we have not the option of picking and choosing which Scriptures we agree with and which we do not.

As the Bible lays out the plan of redemption, God has freely and unconditionally decided those whom He would save. This decision was based not upon God’s knowledge of future choices or any conditions within man, but was purely conditioned upon His pleasure in election. Those who are saved were sovereignly and surely elected to salvation.

While a list of a few relevant Scriptures will be included below, let us first look at one passage in particular. We will focus upon the flow of Romans 9 as the clearest exposition of this truth in the Bible. Read through the entirety of Romans 9 now for an introduction into the discussion.

First, it is to be maintained that this chapter is not dealing merely with Israel’s status as a chosen nation, but also with salvation. Why else would Paul be nearly willing to cut himself off from the blessings of Christ if eternal destinies were not at stake? Furthermore, chapter 10 begins in this way, “Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation” (italics mine).

Second, we should recognize that the passage is dealing with individuals and not merely the nation as a whole (or the church as a whole). Paul is concerned with the election of individuals to salvation. This is made clear in verse 6 which speaks of the distinction within Israel (a distinction which is based upon election as subsequent verses will profess), as well as the use of the singular in verse 16. In addition, the use of specific individuals throughout the passage, including Jacob, Esau,² Abraham, Isaac, and Pharaoh, points decisively in favor of this interpretation.

Lastly, we must point out that the election (“choice” according to vs. 11) which is in view is unconditional. By unconditional, we mean that God’s choice of us is not conditioned upon anything in us or anything we do. This choosing is said to occur before Jacob and Esau were even born (vs. 11), not because of works (vs. 11), not on the basis of the flesh (vs. 8), and not on man’s will nor his efforts (vs. 16). The most that the Scripture says of the matter within this text is that it is based upon “God’s purpose according to choice” (vs. 11), and His mercy (vs. 15-16). In other contexts, we see that election occurs “according to the kind intention of His will” (Ephesians 1:5) and the “counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11).

To sum up the doctrine of unconditional election, the Scriptures teach that God elects individual persons to salvation irrespective of any conditions of will, effort, desire or ability. He is absolutely free to save whomever He so desires and He is absolutely just in His right to do so (Romans 9:14-15).

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith

² I realize that some would take Jacob to reference all of Israel and Esau to reference all of Edom, but such seems to be mere speculation. The clear testimony points to the use of individual persons.

This truth is naturally difficult to hear. We have certain expectations of God and, to be honest, certain beliefs about our own merit and goodness – beliefs which are contrary to the Scriptures. Where this doctrine appears to us ugly and cruel, perhaps the problem lies not in the truth itself, but rather in our ability to perceive and embrace it. God is good and everything He does is good and lovely and right. At the same time, our hearts and minds are still greatly affected by the reality of sin. Instead of rejecting God's revelation, we are encouraged to confess our own pride and confusion and beg God for not only the ability to understand, but also embrace His sovereign rule over all things.

Pertinent Scriptures

- *For many are called, but few are chosen*
Matthew 22:14
- *...And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved*
Acts 2:47b
- *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*
Acts 13:48
- *So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy*
Romans 9:16
- *In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; just as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day."*
Romans 11:5-8
- *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*
Ephesians 2:8-9
- *But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
2 Thessalonians 2:13-14