

GRACE AND ELECTION

The word “election” simply means “choice”. Did God elect believers or do believers elect God? The emphasis of Scripture is on God’s election, and it is always an election of GRACE (cf. Rom. 11:5). This is the God-side of things. Left to ourselves, there is “none who seeks after God” (Rom. 3:11). God is always the SEEKER. Yes, people respond, but only in relation to God’s GRACE initiative.

A key verse on election is found in 1 Thess. 1:4.

1 Thessalonians 1:4 (NKJV)

4 knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.

The NASB is more literal here, translating this: “knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;”. The idea is that the love of God is behind His sovereign choice of them. Here is the doctrine of election. The word election means “to pick” or “to choose” (cf. Rom. 9:11, 11:5, 7, 28; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Pet. 1:10). As believers, God picked us – He chose us. This is the doctrine of election. The reason why the elect were chosen is not specified in Scripture other than it is according to God’s grace and His good pleasure (cf. Deut. 7:6-8; Rom. 9:11, 11:5; Eph. 1:5, 11).

Election is a doctrine that has been debated for centuries. Ironically, it is a doctrine that no one can completely fathom.

I find it interesting that sometimes people fight most intensely over things they don’t fully understand or know. No one who takes the Scripture seriously denies the reality of God’s sovereign election, and yet no one can completely comprehend it. Election emphasizes that salvation is ultimately of God. It was His idea – not ours. It is based on His initiative – not ours. Election reminds us that salvation is God’s work and that He who has begun this good work in us will complete it. He has chosen to do so.

“This sovereign act of God chose some to experience the blessings of salvation. The **REASONS OR CRITERIA** for His choice have not been told to us, except that it was according to His own good pleasure (Eph. 1:9). – **Homer A. Kent Jr.** (emphasis mine)

When it comes to the doctrine of election people often get out of biblical balance. There are tensions here regarding God’s sovereign choice and the responsibility of human response. I want to go wherever the Scripture leads me. I want to hold to an inductive view that brings all the verses to the table. That is why I call myself a “Biblicist” versus merely being a

Calvinist or an Arminian – although I emphasize a God-centered theology. After all, “of Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom. 11:36).

“The difficulty in putting divine election and human responsibility together is understanding how both can be true. That both are true is taught in the Bible. How both can be true is apparently incomprehensible to finite human minds; no one has ever been able to explain this antinomy satisfactorily.”

– **The Bible Knowledge Commentary**, p. 691

Three things that must be kept in biblical tension...

1. God has **chosen** some for salvation (cf. Eph. 1:4).
2. Whoever **desires** may come (cf. Rev. 21:17).
3. Everyone is **responsible** for what they do with Christ (cf. Jn. 3:18, 36).

Part of the mystery involves mankind being made in the image of God and how choice is involved with this reality. From the very beginning in the Garden of Eden the issue of “choice” was a centerpiece issue (cf. Gen. 2:15-17). Election is God’s choice and yet that does not cancel out human responsibility or human choice.

In Genesis 4:7 Cain as a fallen man was responsible for his choices in regard to sin. In Romans 1 people are shown to be without excuse and thus responsible for the choices they make regarding God (Rom. 1:18-21). All the lost at the Great White throne will be judged “according to their works” meaning they are ultimately responsible for their choices (Rev. 20:11-15).

There are a whole host of Scriptures that underscore the reality of God’s election. Some key references are as follow: (Exodus 33:19; Deuteronomy 7:6-8; 10:14-15; Psalm 33:12; Psalm 65:4; Psalm 106:5; Haggai 2:23; Matthew 11:27; 20:15; Matthew 22:14; Matthew 24:31; Mark 13:20; Luke 18:7; Jn. 15:16; Acts 13:48, 18:27, Romans 8:28-30; Romans 8:33; Romans 9:10-24, 10:20, Romans 11:4-6, 11:7, 11:28; 11:33-36; 1 Cor. 1:27-29; Eph. 1:4-5, 2:10; Phil. 1:29, 2:12-13; Colossians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, 5:9; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9, 2:10; Titus 1:1; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:1-2; 1 Peter 2:8-9; Revelation 13:8, 17:8, 17:14).

The tension between God's sovereign election and human responsibility is a mystery that we can't completely figure out (cf. Rom. 11:33). Each side has their “proof-text” verses and using those cherry-picked verses can make a strong case. However, the idea is to consider ALL the verses and base our theology on the WHOLE counsel of God. My conclusion is that the God side of things (election/predestination) is beyond what we can

comprehend - but we take it by faith. In some way that we can't figure out this does not conflict with human responsibility - the manward side of things. In the end you want to end up with a God-centered theology and not a man-centered theology, but you want to be Biblically balanced.

God's sovereign election and man's exercise of responsibility in choosing Jesus Christ seem opposite and irreconcilable truths – and from our limited human perspective they are opposite and irreconcilable. That is why so many earnest, well-meaning Christians throughout the history of the church have floundered trying to reconcile them.

“Since the problem cannot be resolved by our finite minds, the result is always to compromise one truth in favor of the other or to weaken both by trying to take a position somewhere between them. We should let the antinomy remain, believing both truths completely and leaving the harmonizing of them to God. It is not that God's sovereign election, or predestination, eliminates man's choice in faith. Divine sovereignty and human response are integral and inseparable parts of salvation – though exactly how they operate together only the infinite mind of God knows.”

– **Dr. John MacArthur**

“The whosoever wills are the elect and the whosoever won'ts are the non-elect.” – **D.L. Moody**

Over the door of heaven: “Whosoever will can come” – once inside you look back and discover “chosen before the foundation of the world”. – **H.A. Ironside**

Consistently in Scripture, we find God's sovereign choice dealt with side by side with human responsibility.

Matthew 11:27–28 (NKJV)

27 All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

28 Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

In Matthew 11:27, the Lord's sovereignty is emphasized, and yet immediately in the very next verse, Jesus goes on to speak in terms of human responsibility as He extends the invitation to ALL to come to Him. We see this interwoven tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility throughout the Scriptures. Both are true, and the combination thereof is inscrutable.

Philippians 2:12–13 (NKJV)

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

“.... In verse 12 Paul sounds like a pietist: ‘Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.’ In verse 13 he sounds like a quietist: ‘God is at work in you.’ We are working in verse 12; God is working in verse 13. There is a perfect balance there, but it is admittedly difficult to understand fully. ... The biblical teaching about salvation contains a similar paradox. The gospel demands that we turn from sin and embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior or be forever damned. It demands an act of the human will in which the sinner repents and places faith in the Person and work of Christ. Yet Scripture says salvation is all God’s work...” – ***John MacArthur***