



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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Just 'Cause (The Doctrine of Election)

Imagine *nothing*.

I'm not asking you to not imagine anything; that is to stop imagining. That is hard enough. I want you to get busy and imagine *nothing*. Are your eyes closed as an aid to conjuring up the image? Is your mind large enough to grasp this tiny little thing?

Nothing is perhaps one of the three great brain teasers in our world. We usually find ourselves tied in knots or with a charley-horse between the ears when we think on infinity, eternity, or *nothing*. But while infinity and eternity are too big for our finite minds, *nothing* is too small.

We get in trouble with it as soon as we call it an *it*. There is an *it to it*, but it's not

a nothing, it's a something. That is, we can talk about something that we call *nothing*. But it is *something*, a concept. The thing itself isn't anything, it is nothing. But even though *nothing* is nothing; there is something we can glean from it—*ex nihilo, nihil fit*; from *nothing* nothing comes.

What does *nothing* have to do with unconditional election? Everything. There are any numbers of approaches to defending the Biblical doctrine of unconditional election. There are several strong proof texts we can use. There are implications, arguably necessary ones, we can draw from other texts. We can take the Edwardsian view of the will and work from there. Or we can start from the beginning, which is *before the beginning*.

Once there was God and nothing else. This, too, stretches the mind. We first try to imagine vast expanses of nothing, a sort of infinite sea of black. But there was no expanse and no black. Then we try, treading on dangerous ground, to envision the triune God, who is invisible. Nevertheless, the **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit** were, and nothing else was. There was no time when **They** were not, though there was a *They* when *time* was not. **If we really understood this, there would be no doubters as to the sovereignty of God in His works of providence or of election.** Because there was God and nothing else, there are no conditions of which He is not the ultimate cause. Because the Bible begins with “**In the beginning God,**” the Bible teaches unconditional election.

When we deny this truth, we deny one of the most fundamental of truths: **the law of causality**. This law recognizes that every effect must have a sufficient cause. If something happens, it happens because something causes it to happen. That's a fancy way of saying that you get **nothing from nothing**. **There never was nothing**. We know this for two reasons. **First**, the Bible doesn't begin with **"In the beginning nothing,"** but **"In the beginning God ..."** **Second**, if there ever was *nothing*, there would be *nothing now*. You can't get something from *nothing*. Even in metaphysics, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that the elect are in fact made such conditionally. The most common view is that God elected those, whom He saw, down the corridor of time, would choose Him. But in this argument, anything could serve as God's condition for election. He might have elected all those with odd-numbered shoe sizes. Both shoe size and the choice of God look like conditions. They serve as measurable ways of separating the elect and the reprobate. The trouble is that, in both of these instances, and indeed, with any such condition, part of the equation is hidden. If we push the cause for the condition back far enough, eventually we get to **"In the beginning God."**

What, for instance, would God have foreseen if He had peered down the corridor of time? Only those things of which He was the ultimate cause. Thus, if He foresaw that I would choose Him, we are left asking why I would choose Him. Our Arminian friends try to squirm away from giving any kind of meritorious answer for that why, knowing that we're not supposed to have reason to boast. But it doesn't help. Whether I chose Him in this make-believe unplanned future because I was smarter or dumber, more or less pious, begs the same question again: How did I get that way? I can't make myself smarter or more pious unless I am already smarter or more pious than the reprobate. Not even Cinderella's stepsisters could choose, or change, their shoe sizes. The trail will lead back to God. If He foresaw that I would choose Him because of my piety, He was foreseeing the necessary fruit of the piety that He gave me in the first place.

Even assuming that the difference is not merito-

rious doesn't help. Suppose God looked down the corridor of time and saw that I would choose Him. The reason, the thing that would separate me from the lost, would be the godliness of my parents, their faithful work to raise me in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. I certainly didn't choose my parents, and so cannot take any credit. But who did choose my parents? God did. And who gave them the godliness to raise me in such a way? God did. **The final answer is always, "God did."**

In short, if there were conditions for election, then God determined who would meet those conditions. Asking how He made the choice as to who would be given the conditions simply moves the question back one step. He must have unconditionally elected those who would be elect. Naturally, causes are rarely if ever so individual. Effects usually come about because of the convergence of several causal factors. We can rarely, if ever, pinpoint those causes. But God can. If there were some sort of secret recipe of causes that would bring the faith that saves or the hypothetical faith that God foresees in election—even if it takes a combination of godly parents, personal piety, and hearing the ad for the Billy Graham crusade on the radio—God still makes the soup. He wrote the recipe and mixes the ingredients.

Unconditional election is simply another way of saying that God is the sovereign one, and that He alone is the ultimate cause of whatsoever comes to pass. To be sure, He uses secondary causes: the faithful proclamation of the Word, the heartfelt prayers of the saints, the work of apologists and preachers, ads on the radio, even the consciences of the yet-unregenerate elect. But it is He who uses these things to bring about what He purposed from before all time, when there was God and nothing else.

Supernatural Selection

As a young pastor, I heard the charge every Reformed pastor has heard: "If God ordains all things, choosing some for eternal life and rejecting others, He is an arbitrary God." With zeal and confidence, (remember that I was a young pastor with very little experience but I had read the Bible from cover to cover several times) I took the one who made this charge to [Matthew 20](#), to the parable in which the vineyard workers who began at the 11th hour got the same wages as the men who began at the first hour. Since the one mak-

ing this charge affirmed the authority of Scripture, I assumed he would have to yield to the correctness of God having mercy on whom He will have mercy.

But the premise Jesus took as axiomatic was denied by my opponent. He agreed with the complaining workers, saying it was unfair for the landowner to do what he wanted with what was his. My opponent even intimated that if his employer were to give other workers more than their contract stated, he would sue the employer for not giving him his fair share.

But if Jesus said the landowner was justified, we know that it is wrong to conclude that he owed more to the earlier workers. Thus, God may say to the saved as well as the unsaved: **“Friend, I am doing you no wrong.... Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?”** ([Matthew 20:13–15a](#)).

God does not owe any of us His mercy and His gifts. If He is gracious to others, we may not conclude that we have a **“right”** to His grace. **Sovereign grace is not an entitlement!**

But is God arbitrary in choosing to save some but not all? Before we address that question, we need to see the starting point. All men are dead in sin. **“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins”** ([Ephesians 2:1](#) (NASB))

That God saves some and leaves others to perish may be understood only against the background of sin and its just wages. **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”** ([Romans 6:23](#) (NASB)). What we deserve, if God is just, is damnation. If He saves you and me, an unsaved man may not argue that he therefore should be spared punishment, too. God does not owe him salvation just because He saves you and me.

When it comes to the word *arbitrary*, dictionary definitions give inadequate guidance. The primary meaning of *arbitrary* is **“depending on the will or discretion of an arbiter or judge.”** There is no inherent problem there, but the second and third meanings for *arbitrary* are **“fixed or arrived at through will or caprice”** and **“despotic.”** Every

believer knows God is neither capricious nor despotic, as the words are commonly understood. Yet the word *despot* also has a benevolent meaning, and could well describe God as sovereign and gracious. Therefore, to say yes or no to the question of an arbitrary God is too simplistic.

The Bible commands us not to impugn the holiness of God. In [Acts 10:34](#), Peter declares, **“I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality.”** Paul likewise says, **“For there is no partiality with God”** ([Romans 2:11](#)). This does not mean God treats all people alike; simply that He is not partial to someone because he is a Jew or a Gentile, rich or poor. In [Romans 3:1–2](#), we are told that the Jews have a distinct **“advantage.”** In [Matthew 11:25](#), Jesus thanks the Father because **“You have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”** God, therefore, exercises discrimination with His gifts. **“I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy”** ([Romans 9:15](#); cf. [Exodus 33:19](#)).

Is this the same as saying God is arbitrary? Dutch theologian G.C. Berkouwer is very uneasy with attributing arbitrariness to God. He has a chapter of almost 50 pages on **“Election and Arbitrariness”** in his book *Divine Election*. Yet he recognizes the difficulty in defending his aversion **“when we attempt to distinguish sovereignty from arbitrariness.”** In fact, no less a giant than Jonathan Edwards has no hesitation about using the word. **“We are dependent on the goodness of God for more now than under the first covenant.... We are now more dependent on God’s arbitrary and sovereign good pleasure.... It is from mere and arbitrary grace”** (Sermon on [1 Corinthians 1:29–31](#)). And in his famous sermon **“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,”** Edwards says with respect to sinners suspended over the pit: **“All that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance, of an incensed God.”**

The key point is that men have no right to censure God in the free distribution of His grace. Sinners have forfeited any claim of mercy. Damnation is a debt due sin, but grace is free and unmerited. To sinners, election is unconditional; there is no reason in anyone for God to choose him or her. Thus, one may decide for prudent reasons not to use the word *arbitrary* with its negative baggage, but it may be used, as Edwards does, to point

out the unconditional nature of God's grace.

But saying there is no reason in man for God's choice *is not the same as saying* there is no reason. God's choice reveals His reason—to **“show His wrath and to make His power known ... and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy ... whom He called” (Romans 9:22–24a)**. This is no despot who unjustly deals with us, but one who is willing to show mercy to undeserving sinners.

There are some important lessons we need to grasp from all this. Regarding the charge that our God chooses men arbitrarily, we may not simply reply **“yes”** or **“no.”** To agree to the charge is to run the danger of being understood as using the pejorative definition. If we simply say **“no”** to the charge, there is the danger of implying that God's election is in some way **“conditional”** and the reason for it is in us. The **“yes”** or **“no”** must be qualified. God is indeed partial; He freely and sovereignly chooses whom He pleases. But there is no hint of injustice in His choosing.

Furthermore, whatever *unconditional* means (whether or not the word *arbitrary* is used), it must never be seen as contradicting the explicit words of Jesus: **“Whoever believes in [Christ] should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16)** and **“The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37)**. If any sinner hears the Gospel and is not saved, it is because he will not come. Sinners perish because of sin. When they sinfully reject the Gospel offer of mercy, God with perfect justice declares, **“He who does not believe has been judged (condemned) already” (John 3:18)**.

God will not force a person to believe against his will, though He may, if it pleases Him, graciously, unconditionally give that person a new will with which to believe. But for a sinner to blame God for his damnation is not an excuse; it is an aggravation of his sin. He thereby throws contempt on the precious blood of Christ. That God graciously, unconditionally chooses to save some is only cause to praise His matchless grace. It is no cause to condemn God's choice as arbitrary in a pejorative

sense. To hate God for such love and grace shows the depth of personal sin. Praise God that in His mercy and grace He saves even those who once despised His mercy as **“arbitrary.”**

There is one more lesson we need to learn in the haste with which we are prone to suggest that God might be unfairly arbitrary in choosing some, but not all, to salvation. Any pastor who has ever rushed to the hospital or a home in response to a sudden and tragic event has heard something like this: **“What did he do to deserve this?”** or **“It's just not fair; he was such a saint.”** And many will think, if not outwardly express, **“What did I do to deserve my particular plight?”** Surely this is one of the most ungodly responses that can come from the lips of someone who professes to be a Christian. If I have any presence of mind at all, this much I know: I do not want what I deserve! If God gave me what I deserve, I would be without any hope. Wrath, hell, damnation, curse, eternal punishment—those are the words that describe what I deserve. They describe what you deserve as well.

To say, as our critics do, that eternal punishment is not what they deserve, that sovereign grace is an entitlement, is dangerous. But if you think carefully about this blasphemous opinion that God owes you grace, that God in condemning you is not giving you what you deserve, you may have a helpful framework in which to understand the glorious truth of unconditional election as the heart of the Gospel.

Think of it this way: There is salvation for those, and only those, who get what Christ deserves. God did not lower His standards in order to save you; He sent a substitute to meet those standards. If God chose you and gave you a new heart and working faith, Christ is your substitute. If Christ is your substitute, praise God you get what He deserves even as, on the cross, He got what you deserve. And if God let's all or some of me human race get what they deserve, **“the wages of sin,”** that simply glorifies His perfect justice.

We might have grounds to question God's justice in unconditionally choosing some to eternal life and not punishing them had Christ not received what they deserved in His substitutionary death. Arbitrary? Jesus put it this way: **“Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15 (NASB))** Do you

want to try to charge God with injustice, or would you not rather rejoice in the infinite mercy of receiving what Christ deserves?

Witness to History

The promise of [Romans 8:28](#)—that God will work all things together for the good of His people—stands as a remarkable verse in a remarkable chapter of a remarkable book. Everything in the believer’s past and present has a place in God’s great scheme. What good news for those who love Him!

But what exactly does Paul mean when, in the next verse, he places foreknowledge behind predestination? Does he mean that God’s election of sinners in Christ was on the basis of something He foresaw them doing? Did He choose His people because He saw that they first would choose Him? This view virtually equates foreknowledge and predestination by making God’s eternal decree of election contingent upon what God foreknew about us and His electing love conditional on our having chosen Christ.

This idea falls on five counts. **First: *It fails to appreciate the primacy of election in God’s purposes of salvation.***

If election is conditional, it means that it is on the basis of and flows from our choice of Jesus. God foresaw us believing in Christ and placing our trust in Him, the argument goes, so He sealed our redemption by electing us in Christ.

But in the New Testament, election is always *to* something in us, not *on the basis* of something in us. In [Ephesians 1:4](#), Paul says that God chose “**just as He chose us [indicating purpose, design, and consequence] in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.**”

In [Ephesians 2:10](#), we discover that all that God did beforehand, in a plan of salvation stretching into the depths of eternity, was “**for [again indicating purpose and end] good works.**” Election is primary and foundational in salvation; **it cannot be secondary and conditional.** God did not choose us because He foreknew that we would do good things; we do good things because God elected us for that

very purpose.

Second: *It fails to appreciate the relationship between election and foreknowledge.*

What does foreknowledge mean? It does not mean that God gazes into some crystal ball that enables Him to read the future. God can see the end from the beginning, because to Him one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day ([Isaiah 46:10](#); [Psalm 90:4](#); [2 Peter 3:8](#)). John Calvin defines God’s foreknowledge as the fact that all things are under God’s “**immediate inspection**” (*Institutes*, III.21.5).

When Paul talks of God “**foreknowing**,” he means that those whom God predestinates and chooses in Christ are known to Him. Their whole lives are known to Him. Their sins, shortcomings, and failings are known to Him. And in grace, mercy, and love, He makes them the object of His electing, predestinating decree. [Romans 8:29](#) **does not mean** “**those whose acts He foreknew, He predestined**” *but* “**those whose persons He foreknew, He predestined.**”

Far from teaching that God elects because He sees people choosing Him, Paul’s teaching is that God elects sinners whom He sees rejecting Him!

Third: *It fails to reckon with the power of sin in human life.*

Jesus made it clear in His preaching of the Gospel that all men are invited to come to Him, and if they do come to Him, He will satisfy them with His salvation. But He also said, “**No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him**” ([John 6:44](#) (NASB)). Thus, while a Gospel opportunity affords men the possibility of coming to Him, **a moral incapability prevents them from doing so.**

This is exactly what Paul registers when he says that “**But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised**” ([1 Corinthians 2:14](#) (NASB)) Without the power of God in human life, man not only does not come to Christ, he cannot come to Christ.

Precisely for these reasons, the whole notion of conditional election is an absurdity. It requires us to believe

that men who are spiritually dead can make spiritual decisions, that they can choose Christ by their own volition, and that they can have faith in Jesus. The glory of election lies precisely in the fact that those whom God ordained to eternal life are made willing by His power ([Psalm 110:3a, KJV](#)) to come to Christ, their faith in Him the result, not the cause or condition, of God's divine decree. It is those whom the Father gives to the Son who come to Him ([John 6:37](#)).

Perhaps these three points are not enough to convince you. Let me give two final points that demonstrate the failure of this doctrine to conform to Scripture.

Fourth: *It fails to appreciate the close relationship between election and grace.*

When men reject Jesus, they do so willingly and freely, because of the power of sin in their lives. When men accept Jesus, they do so willingly and freely, because of the power of grace in their lives. And that grace is of the essence of election. In [Romans 11:5](#), it is because of **“the election of grace”** that a **“remnant”** serves Christ. Grace lies behind election, is at the heart of election, and is praised in election as seen in ([Ephesians 1:5–6](#)) **“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.”** God's sovereign, electing decree flows out of His unmerited love and undeserved favor.

The moment we make such a decree conditional, we rob salvation of grace. We make it dependent on our works, and **“if it is of works, it is no longer grace”** ([Romans 11:6](#)). **The faith that saves is itself the gift of God** ([Ephesians 2:8](#)). God commands us to believe and gives us the grace to believe! Election humbles us and causes us to marvel, because it shows us with abundant clarity that our salvation has God, and not ourselves, as its cause. Grace, not foreknowledge, is the spring out of which election flows.

Finally: *Conditional election robs God of His sovereignty.*

God created the world so that He might rule over it in love and grace. Man was designed to honor, fear, and serve the Creator. Instead, man rebelled against God and set himself up as master of his own life and creator of his own destiny. But in sovereign, electing love, God provided a salvation and a Savior. He remains sovereign at every point of the salvation process and throughout redemptive history, preparing the world for Christ, offering Christ up as a sacrifice, drawing men by the Spirit to follow and serve the Lord, **and working in us the willing and the doing of His pleasure** ([Philippians 2:13](#)).

On the other hand, conditional election means that God's sovereignty is not absolute; it is compromised from the beginning, because it is dependent on the will and choice of man. But if God is not absolutely sovereign in salvation, He is not sovereign anywhere. All things work together for our good, under God's almighty hand, because He is the electing, purpose-driven God of salvation. Creation and providence are His servants in the execution of that purpose. Take away God's absolute supremacy in election and you have removed the moral foundation of the whole universe. All of grace!

One by One

The biblical doctrine of election and reprobation is found early in the Scriptures, long before God ever chose a people and called them **“Israel.”**

One of the clearest cases of election and reprobation in Scripture involves Noah and his family. They were chosen by God to pass safely through the curse of the flood, which was sent upon the whole of the human race. But all the rest of the human race was passed by, then fell under the judgment of the flood. Another such case is that of Abraham, who was an idolater in Ur of the Chaldees ([Joshua 24:2](#)) before God chose him and called him to separate himself from his family and move to Canaan. He heard, believed, and obeyed the call of God. But virtually all of the rest of the human race was passed by and left in its sins.

At times, Scripture presents election and reprobation as both individual and national. The case of Isaac's sons in Genesis indicates that God had made the choice of Jacob over Esau before these twins were born ([Genesis](#)

[25:23](#)). It was a case of the election of Jacob, the individual person, over his brother Esau, another individual person. But as this verse makes clear, the nations that would come from these two individuals would reflect the divine discrimination. Malachi opens his book by reminding the Israelites that God loved them and not Esau's descendants. **"I have loved you,"** says the LORD. **"Yet you say, 'In what way have You loved us?'"** Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" says the LORD. **"Yet Jacob I have loved; but Esau I have hated"** ([Malachi 1:2-3a](#)). As in Genesis, the nations that proceeded from these two individuals are set over against one another.

Thus, it appears that election and reprobation are, at least at times, both personal and national in character. And we must strive to maintain this balance against those who would characterize election and reprobation as corporate matters only. For instance:

The apostle Paul, in presenting the sovereignty of God in the matter of salvation in [Romans 9](#), cites the case of Abraham's sons, contrasting God's election of Isaac and His passing-by of Ishmael. This is certainly a reference to the individual persons. But because the announcement to Rebecca in [Genesis 25](#) had to do with the nations that would spring from the two sons in her womb, and because Malachi's reference also speaks of the nations of Israel and Edom, it is argued by some that Paul's citation must refer not to personal election and reprobation, but only to national election and reprobation.

However, the fact that both Genesis and Malachi speak of the nation's descending from Jacob and Esau does not mean that there was no personal reference to Jacob and Esau. As we have already observed, there is both a personal and a national reference in both of these Old Testament references.

Also, a careful examination of Paul's passage shows that his reference to Isaac and Ishmael is personal and not national. The question that Paul is seeking to answer is: How can God's covenant promise be regarded as inviolate when the mass of those belonging to the elect nation of Israel remain in unbelief? An appeal only to the collective elect nation fails to deal with the question before us. Paul's answer is to speak of the differentiation of individuals within Israel. He says, **"they are not all Israel who are of Israel"** ([Romans 9:6b](#)). Of ne-

cessity this is a reference to individuals within the nation of Israel, not a reference to the nation.

[Romans 9:11-13](#) speaks of the election of Jacob in personal terms. **"(For the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him who calls), it was said to her, 'The older shall serve the younger.'** As it is written, **'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.'**" Notice that it is the two unborn children who are in view. God chose and set His love upon one of the unborn children, and determined to pass by the other with the gift of electing love, before they were born or had done either good or bad. It was an act of sovereign election of one individual and of sovereign reprobation of the other individual.

Thus, an interpretation that regards the election in view as only the collective, theocratic election of Israel cannot stand in this context. The phrase **"that the purpose of God according to election might stand"** must thus be the electing purpose of God that is unto salvation.

This doctrine continues to be developed in other passages, such as [Ephesians 1:4-5](#): **"Just as He chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will."** Here the subject is the blessings that all Christians have in Christ. Again in [Romans 8](#), the apostle clearly refers to the election of individuals to salvation.

The phrase, **"Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated,"** must mean more than that God merely loved Esau less. The Biblical idea of God's hatred is one of positive disfavor—we have no reason other than our own squeamishness to say otherwise. It should be observed that the love and hatred of this passage are specifically based upon the sovereign will of God, and not dependent upon the character differences or the deeds of the two boys. What the apostle has in view are the ultimate destinies of the two men that the purpose of election might be made manifest.

The apostle is arguing that the covenant promise has not failed, even though much of Israel rejects the Gospel of Christ. It is the remnant of Israel who is the elect

of God unto salvation. To suggest that the reference to election in [verse 11](#) is something less than full soteric (salvific) election would fail to demonstrate that the covenant promises have not failed.

The individual character of election and reprobation is also seen in the subsequent discourse in [Romans 9](#) regarding God's differentiation between Moses and Pharaoh. In particular, there is reference to the hardening of Pharaoh by God. It is, of course, a judicial hardening. That is, God did not make Pharaoh a sinner. He was a sinner, and the hardening of his heart by God was like the giving over to a reprobate mind mentioned in [Romans 1](#). It was itself a punishment for previous sin on the part of Pharaoh. Thus, it was the sovereign act of God to harden him.

One may have the impression that Paul's representation of God as hating sinners is not in accord with the modern understanding of the nature of God. This is true. The modern man does not want to hear about a God of justice and wrath. The Bible teaches both that God is love ([1 John 4:8](#)) and that He is a consuming fire ([Hebrews 12:29](#)). To ignore or deny the justice and wrath of God is to fail to reflect the balanced teaching of the Bible regarding God.

The fact is that not one of us is righteous and thus deserving of any good favor from God. The amazing thing is not that God hates sin and the rebellious sinner, but that He has been pleased to show mercy upon any sinners. This is the comfort, not the calamity, of the Biblical doctrine of election. By His sovereign grace, before the foundation of the world, God chose some unto everlasting life in Christ; provided in Christ the redemption necessary to cleanse them from their sins; then sent the Spirit to give them new hearts, thus enabling them to come to Christ by saving faith.

So how can I know whether I am elect or not? First, do I trust in Jesus as my Savior? One can come to saving faith only by the help of God. **“For by grace have you been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God”** ([Ephesians 2:8](#)). My responsibility is to hear and accept the Gospel, to repent and believe in Jesus. If I have done this, it is evidence of the electing and regenerating grace of God in my life. Do I truly love Jesus? Am I seeking to please Him by living

for Him and obeying His commandments? ([John 14:15](#)). The free invitation of the Gospel is that **“whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”** ([John 3:16](#)).



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THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

To state that the doctrine of election is a difficult subject would be a major understatement to say the least. There are many sincere individuals who truly love God that have great difficulty in accepting the authority and force of this doctrine. And to make matters even more difficult, there are major differences of opinion surrounding the doctrine that have divided and separated Christians for centuries. It seems that the fundamental issue relative to the doctrine is in how two distinct issues can be reconciled – **God's sovereignty** and **human responsibility**. But the two issues cannot be reconciled. **John MacArthur** aptly explains the irreconcilability of these two concepts when he says,

“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 antimony remain, believing both truths completely and leaving the harmonizing of them to God.”

Everyone knows that God is the Lord of all of life and the sovereign of the universe. He is what the theologians call the “original cause”. I.e., He is both the first cause and the last end of all things. Theologians call this the “self-sufficiency” of God. God was not made, He was not born, and He never came into existence. He has always been eternal. There never was a time when He was not. “Sovereignty” means “rule”. Hence, to speak of God’s sovereignty is to refer to God’s rule, and in the doctrine of the sovereignty of God what is recognized is the supremacy of God over all things. It addresses the absoluteness of His deity, His kingship, His lordship, and it affirms Him to be God in the incomprehensible Trinity. It declares that in all of His attributes that He is perfect in all respects and that He and He alone is the sole possessor of righteousness and holiness.

So, because of the sovereignty of God, it is His will that is the key to life and history. God is free and independent of any force outside of Himself to accomplish whatever He purposes. He knows the end from the beginning, and in His sovereignty He creates, sustains, governs, and directs all things. And His marvelous design will be fully and perfectly manifested at the end of the ages. [Romans 11:36](#) puts it this way,

³⁶For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

It is a sovereign and holy will that rules and governs the universe. All of the biblical writers found their comfort in the assurance that it is the righteous, holy, faithful, loving, and sovereign God in whose hands rests the determination of the sequence of events and all of their issues. In theological terms, this is called theocentrism, or being God-centered, and is the very heart of reformed theology. To be

theocentric stresses the comprehensive, sovereign lordship of God over all things. It refers to God’s sovereignty over every area of creation, every creature, every endeavor, and every aspect of life. The ruling motif is simply **“In the beginning God....”** ([Beeke 39-41](#)). God is the center and circumference of all things.

However, within the doctrine of salvation the sovereignty of God often becomes a point of great tension and is probably the defining difference between reformed and non-reformed theology. Most every Christian will affirm that God is sovereign in all things, but when the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is pressed into other realms of theology, it is often weakened or destroyed altogether. It is often said that God’s sovereignty is limited by human freedom or human choice, or what is often referred to as “free will”. So in that declaration, the sovereignty of God is no longer absolute. It becomes limited by human choice. Reformed theology insists that a measure of freedom has been assigned to man by God, but it also insists that man’s freedom is not absolute and that man is not autonomous relative to the outworking of salvation. Reformed theology asserts and maintains that man’s freedom is always limited by God’s sovereignty. The position is simple - if man in any way can limit the sovereignty of God, then God is not sovereign.

It should be remembered that a sovereign God has the authority and the power to do whatever He chooses to do – and without any contribution or participation from any outside source. God is the sole author of His sovereignty. If God had wanted to, He could have designed a salvation in which everyone in the world would have been saved. He could have saved the entire world – but He chose not to do that. The point is simple - if God is not sovereign over all things, then He is not sovereign at all. **In simple terms, if He is not sovereign in and over everything, then He is not God.** Just the word “sovereignty” implies this truth. This is a foundational and defining attribute of God. So how we comprehend the sovereignty of God will have radical implications to how we understand and integrate all of the other doctrines into our theology, and especially that of election.

One cannot read the Bible without reading about “election”, or about being “chosen”, or about being “predestined”. It is not as if someone has made these words up. These biblical words are an integral part of the vocabulary of the New Testament and as words they have specific meaning and intent. For instance, the word “elect” is the Greek word “*eklektos*” and means to select or chose out, to be chosen. In fact, the actual word for “church” comes from this same word – “*ecclesia*”, or called out ones. Within the boundaries of its definition, the biblical doctrine of election states that long before the foundations of the world were laid that God freely chose in His own sovereign will to save a number of specific individuals – specifically the “elect”. He not only ordained who would be saved, but He also ordained the means by which that salvation would be accomplished. In theological terms, the means of accomplishing this is called the “atonement”.

It is not as if the idea of election or being chosen by God in eternity past is somehow alien to God, His character, or to the Scriptures. To the contrary, the whole of the Old Testament is a story of election and of God choosing. In the New Testament, the authors consistently used the terms “elect”, “called”, and the “chosen”. [Romans 8:33](#) says,

³³**Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.**

[Romans 9:22-23](#) says,

²²**What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, ²⁴even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?**

[Colossians 3:12](#) says,

¹²**Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering;**

In [John 15:16](#), Jesus was talking to His disciples and said this,

¹⁶**You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.**

[John 17:9](#), in Jesus’ high priestly prayer, says,

⁹**I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours.**

Paul and Barnabas were preaching in [Acts 13:48](#) and said,

⁴⁸**Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.**

Every time that the word “elect” is mentioned from Acts to Revelation, it is talking specifically about God’s effectual, electing, and sovereign choice to call someone to salvation. [I Corinthians 1:9](#) says,

⁹**God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.**

[Ephesians 1:3-6](#) says,

³**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ⁵having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.**

Salvation is all of God. [I Thessalonians 1:2-4](#) says,

²**We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, ³remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in**

the sight of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.

II Thessalonians 2:13-14 says,

¹³But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, ¹⁴to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These are only a handful of Scriptures that deal with this subject, but what is clearly understood is that the doctrine of election is there. God chose people in the past and He did so by a very powerful and effectual call, He summons them to salvation, grants them faith to believe, justifies them, adopts them, sanctifies them, and one day will glorify them. **Romans 8:29-30** is the monumental statement regarding predestination and election in Scripture when it says,

²⁹For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. ³⁰Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

All of the verbs are in the **past** tense simply because in the mind of God, it has already happened.

Now, this is no small discussion and one that has generated a great deal of theological controversy in the past. In fact, there are many people who simply have a great aversion to this doctrine. For many people, the doctrine of election violates their rationality because they deem it unfair for God to choose who will be saved. For some, they have difficulty accepting it emotionally. To others, it just appears to be a frontal assault on what they consider to be their free will. And anyone who studies this doctrine has to deal with these concerns. They have to address the fact that even though men do have voli-

tion and choice that ultimately it is not something that is independent and autonomous of God.

The doctrine of election is a very disturbing doctrine for many well-known and prominent evangelicals. John MacArthur in his preaching series on “The Doctrine of Election, Part 1” identifies the following statements by those who object to the doctrine of election. For example, the well-known author Tim LaHaye who is a part of the Left Behind series and many other books, says,

"And to suggest that the merciful, long-suffering, gracious and loving God of the Bible would invent a dreadful doctrine like this, predestination, which would have us believe it is an act of grace to select certain people for heaven and by exclusion others for hell comes perilously close to blasphemy."

One evangelical ministry writes,

"The flawed theology of pre-selection is an attempt to eliminate man's capacity to exercise his free will which reduces God's sovereign love to an act of a mere dictator."

Another pastor, author, and radio teacher says,

"This doctrine makes our heavenly Father look like the worst of despots."

The president of Texas Holiness University says,

"This doctrine is the most unreasonable, incongruous, self-contradictory, man-belittling and God-dishonoring scheme of theology that ever appeared in Christian thought. No one can accept its contradictory mutually exclusive propositions without intellectual self-debasement. It holds up a self-centered, selfish, heartless, remorseless tyrant for God and bids us worship Him."

A Calvary Chapel pastor writes,

"Five-point Calvinism makes God a monster who eternally tortures innocent children. It removes the hope of consolation from the gospel. It limits the atoning work of Christ. It resists evangelism. It stirs up argumentation and division and promotes a small angry judgmental God rather than the large-hearted God of the Bible."

Another author says,

"To say that God sovereignly chooses who will be saved is the most twisted thing I have ever read that makes God a monster, no better than a pagan idol."

A website from theological students in Canada says,

"This doctrine makes God a diabolical monster and reduces man who was created in the image of God to a mere robot."

And Dave Hunt, who has written so many helpful books, says,

"This doctrine's misrepresentation of God has caused many to turn away from the God of the Bible as from a monster."

Obviously these are not illiterate people offering these objections. These are well-known leaders in the evangelical world, pastors, and best-selling authors. However, it is important to understand that what may personally satisfy someone's reason, emotions, or sense of personal freedom to make choices are not the governing factors in determining what is true. God is the sole and decisive factor regarding what is true and what is not true. If something does not make sense to someone's reason, then they must understand that their reason is fallen. Because of the fall, the human will is perverted and clothed in sinfulness. Men cannot just make God to be the way that they want Him to be. It is surely unbiblical to fabricate God in such a way to fit our reason, emotions, intellect, or personal freedoms of choice. God cannot be designed to act how fallen man may think that He should function.

Some people seem undisturbed by the fact that because they cannot personally resolve something about God in their own mind, specifically the doctrine of predestination and election, that it is perfectly okay to just reject the doctrine. But the unfortunate result is that they have simply created a god that is not the God of the Bible. Their newly created god may be more comfortable and more reasonable to them, but the fact of the matter is that their per-

ceived god is not the God of the Bible. In order for reason, emotion, and will to function as God wants them to function, they cannot be left to themselves simply because they are defined by Scripture as being fallen and corrupted. They must be brought under the authority of Scripture. The only way to ever get an uncorrupted view of God is to go to an uncorrupted source – and that source is not man, but the Word of God.

As difficult as it may be for some to accept, God never planned for everyone to be saved. Jesus Himself declares in [Matthew 7](#) that the majority of people are on **"the way that leads to destruction"**. And if everyone was going to be saved, then Scripture would never have mentioned the Great White Throne Judgment or the Lake of Fire. Jesus said that only a **"few"** will be saved. Men cannot measure God by their understanding of what they think is fair or just. Man's understanding of virtually everything is regrettably warped, twisted, and affected by their own innate sinfulness. In [Psalm 50:21](#) God says,

²¹You thought that I was altogether like you.

The point of that statement is that men are not like God at all. In [Isaiah 55:8-9](#), God declares that His thoughts are incomprehensible, unresolvable, and inscrutable to us,

⁸"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord.

⁹"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

Who could possibly be so bold to tell God that He does not know what He is talking about, or how He should think? Who is man to think that he could be God's counselor? How could someone ever call God unjust for saving people – for no one deserves salvation? Contrary to what men choose to believe, salvation has never been an issue of fairness. Salvation is rooted entirely in the grace of God and not in the concept of fairness.

Another term that has to be addressed in the study of the doctrine of election is the term **"limited atonement"**. "Limited atonement" is not a Bible phrase, but

one that has been developed to explain a particular theological position within reformed theology. The doctrine of limited atonement, or that Christ only died for the elect, is the most disputed of the five terms in the reformed acronym “TULIP”. The doctrine of limited atonement states that the extent of the atonement is “limited” to certain individuals and that is what sparks the controversy. Did Christ die for everyone and for the sins of the whole world, or did He just die for the elect? What we are answering with the doctrine of limited atonement is whether or not **Christ is a REAL Savior for some – the elect (reformed position), or is Christ a PO-TENTIAL Savior for all – the world (non-reformed position)**. This is no small theological issue. Did the death of Christ atone for the sins of every human being, or did His death only atone for the sins of the elect ([Sproul 164](#))? If someone holds to the position that Christ’s death atones for the sins of the whole world, then by implication no one enters into eternal judgment.

If the phrase “limited atonement” could be condensed down to a simple question, the question would be “**For whom did Christ die?**” Did Christ die for everyone, or did He die just for the “elect”? Jesus said in [John 6:37](#),

³⁷All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.

Because God is just, He cannot exact a double payment for sin. He cannot charge twice for one debt. I.e., if the death of Christ paid the penalty and the debt for everyone’s sins, then everyone should be saved because their spiritual debt before God has been paid. In that case, if God condemned someone to eternal judgment, then He would be exacting a double payment for that person’s sins – Christ death on the cross and the individual’s final death in the Lake of Fire. It would be a double payment and that would be unjust.

The reformed position is that Christ only paid the debt for the elect. The only reason that God allows

men into heaven is because Christ has satisfied the justice of God with His death – what the Bible calls “**propitiation**”. The death of Christ was God’s provision to deal with His justice and with His holy demands that the debt for sin be paid for. So, for whom did Christ die? It is only for those who go to heaven. That is not a potential salvation, but a real salvation. If the death of Christ was for everyone, then God could not righteously condemn anyone to eternal judgment because He would be exacting a double payment for their sins – Christ’s payment and their payment.

The non-reformed position is that those who believe appropriate the benefits of Christ’s atonement. I.e., the potential for their salvation is always there and when accepted, the individual is saved. In this view faith is not only a condition for salvation, but it is one of the grounds of salvation. If this could be defined in a formula it would be like this: CHRIST’S WORK + MY FAITH = SALVATION. In this case, salvation is not only dependent on Christ, but it is dependent on personal faith as well. The sinner contributes to their salvation. The non-reformed position is that Christ’s atonement (His saving work on our behalf) is sufficient for everyone, but only efficient for some ([Sproul 165](#)).

Now, reformed theologians do not question the statement that the value of the death of Christ is utterly and completely sufficient to cover the sins of the entire fallen human race. The value of His sacrifice is unlimited. And the reformed theologian would also agree that the atonement is efficient only for some. In fact, that idea is integral to the doctrine of limited atonement. But the question that has to be asked is this – and this is the controversy - “Is the atonement (the death and saving work of Christ) sufficient to satisfy God’s divine justice for everyone?” If it is, then no one needs to worry about future punishment ([Sproul 165-166](#)).

But the answer to the question is obviously **NO** - the death of Christ does not satisfy God’s divine justice for everyone. How is that known? It is because most people die without Christ and enter into eternal judgment. The Scriptures are infinitely clear on that issue. God, as a just God, does not and will not exact a double payment. So, anyone who dies without Christ did not have

the atoning work of Christ accrued to them or placed on their account. I.e., it was not for them. If it had been for them, then God would have given it to them. He would not have allowed the death of His Son on their behalf to just fall to the ground.

Here is the issue. If **personal faith** is also a condition needed to satisfy the demands of God's justice for sins, then the death of Christ is not by itself sufficient. I.e., God needs man's help in order to satisfy His justice. It is Christ's work plus man's work of believing that **merits** salvation. But that is why the doctrine of "irresistible grace" is included in the TULIP, and that is why the "U" is called "unconditional election" because there is nothing conditional relative to the individual.

What makes election "unconditional" is the simple fact that God did not choose anyone because of any intrinsic goodness in them or because He looked down in history and knew that given a choice that they would believe. There were no conditions to His electing or choosing someone. He simply and sovereignly chose who He willed to choose, and that completely independent of the individual. It was completely independent of God's foreknowledge of what a person "might" do if presented with the gospel. It was a simply God's sovereign choice. The problem that consistently persists with this doctrine is that men fail to recognize both the extent of their depravity and the extent of God's sovereignty and grace. Because we are as depraved as the Bible says that we are, salvation simply cannot originate with us. [Ephesians 2:1](#) expresses it this way,

¹And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins,

The issue always boils down to the sovereignty of God - is God sovereign in salvation, or does somewhere along the process He needs man's help. The doctrine of "irresistible grace" is there to let us know that **it is not personal faith, but the faith that God gives to the individual to believe** ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). The faith to believe the gospel call, something initiated totally by God's Spirit, is a

gift given to men by God. If God's Spirit was not working on a man's behalf to bring him to Christ, he would never come. All men apart from Christ are dead in their sins and trespasses, and left up to themselves, they would never believe on Christ. That is the "T" in TULIP, or "total depravity". All unregenerate men are spiritually dead in their sins. [1 Corinthians 2:14](#) says,

¹⁴But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Now there are a number of other key biblical words that enter into the discussion of the doctrine of election. They are Biblical words like **elect, chosen, the called, foreordained, and predestined**. The word for **elect, called, and chosen** are basically the same words. The words "**elect**" and "**chosen**" are the Greek word "*ekloge*", and the word "**called**" is the Greek word "*kletos*". If a pastor who did not agree with the doctrine of election decided that he was not going to preach on the books of the New Testament that had those words in them, he would only be left with Philemon, I John, and III John. And if full consideration was given to the doctrine, surely the entire Old Testament is about election – Abraham and Israel. [Romans 9-11](#) seem to clearly indicate the reality of this observation. In the New Testament, the word "**Christian**" is only used once and the word "**Christians**" is only used once. We are called "**believers**" three times and "**followers**" twice. But believers are referred to as the "**elect**", the "**chosen**", or the "**called**" over 40 times. So, God's definition of who we are much more frequently refers to believers as the "**elect**" or the "**called**" of God.

The question of "for whom did Christ die" may very well be the most difficult issue to deal with in Scripture. There are numerous "mysteries" in the Scriptures that simply cannot be fully reconciled – and that has to be accepted as a limitation of a believer's faith and understanding. There is the Incarnation – fully God and fully man at the same time. There is the Trinity – three in One. Just the concept of God never having a beginning and of His being eternal is far beyond anyone's ability to understand. In our minds everything has to have a

beginning. These are not issues that can be easily reconciled. In like manner, the doctrine of limited atonement and the doctrine of election both have questions that may not be fully answered or understood. **But a personal lack of understanding in no way diminishes the truth.** Just because a believer does not fully understand something does not mean that it cannot be true. The truth is not dependent on anyone in any way whatsoever. And what may not be fully reconciled in our mind is fully reconciled in the mind and will of God.

Below are parts of what is known as the **1646 Westminster Confession of Faith** and it is at the heart of what is defined as reformed theology. All of the sections fall under Part 3 called God's Eternal Decree. This part of the Westminster Confession spells out what is the second part of TULIP – unconditional election, or unmerited favor. I.e., the grounds of election are **not** based on something good that God saw in us, but rather election is based on the good pleasure of His sovereign will alone.

III. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

IV. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

V. 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 free grace and love alone, 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.

VI. As God has appointed the elect unto glory, so has he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

VII. The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extends or withholds mercy as he pleases, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.

VIII. The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending to the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

Systematic theology has developed what is referred to as “**The Order of Salvation**”. I.e., what is the order of salvation, what comes first, what comes in the middle, and what comes last? Is there a defined order in Scripture? Put in other words, how is salvation applied? People often think of salvation as one simple act on their part – they were saved, they were born again. But that is only one aspect of salvation. Salvation is comprised of a series of acts and different outworkings. For instance, the Scriptures speak of calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Each one of these words are distinct and different parts of the overall salvation process. Each one has a distinct meaning and purpose in the outworking of God.

God is not the author of confusion, but rather He is the author of order. And He is the One who has defined

and established an order of salvation in Scripture. For instance, it would be impossible to start off with glorification. It has to be at the far end of God's order. In similar ways, we know that regeneration has to precede sanctification. An individual cannot begin to grow in Christ until they become a believer. There is a specifically defined biblical order in the work of salvation. Below is a list of what is often referred to as the "Order of Salvation":

Foreknowledge
Predestination or Election
Calling
Regeneration
Justification
Adoption
Sanctification
Glorification

In the Order of Salvation the foreknowledge of God is the first attribute listed. If someone believes in the omniscience of God (which they should if they have a proper understanding of God's attributes), then that means that they also should believe in the foreknowledge of God – or that God knows all things that will happen before they ever happen. In essence, they are one and the same – God's omniscience and God's foreknowledge. Because of God's omniscience, He simply knows all things before they ever happen. He knew each one of us before we were ever conceived, and in His foreknowledge and omniscience He knows what direction our life will take.

Foreknowledge does **NOT** mean that God looked down the corridors of time, saw what was going to happen, and chose individuals based on what He saw. That is what many Christians want to believe happened – but it did not happen that way. The foreknowledge of God is just a part of His omniscience. He has to know or He is not God. [I Peter 1:2](#) says that we are

²...elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

But [I Peter 1:18-21](#) says,

¹⁸knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. ²⁰**He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you** ²¹who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

If "foreknowledge" means that God looks ahead, sees what eternal choices that people are going to make, and then makes His decision based on their choice, then the use of the term "foreknowledge" or "foreordained" should be the same in [I Peter 1:2](#) and [20](#). But God did not look down in history and say, "Hey, look at that. Christ is going to give His life for the world. If He is going to do that, then I will make Him the Savior." Obviously, that is not what happened. Jesus is clear, by His own confession, that He came to do the will of His Father in heaven. The word for "foreordained" means a predetermined and deliberate choice. It was a predetermined choice that Christ would suffer and die, not something that God "saw" was going to happen, and then He made His decision as to what He was going to do. [Acts 2:22-23](#) says,

²²"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— ²³Him, being delivered by the **determined purpose and foreknowledge of God**, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;

God said that sinful man nailed Christ to the cross, but at the same time that He pre-determined it to happen. But God is just and whatever He does is right. It is the age old controversy between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. God chose, but men are responsible for their decisions. It is a biblical paradox that man cannot resolve.

So, whether someone may believe in the doctrine of election or not, they all believe that God in His omniscience still knows beforehand what will happen. Just the fact that He is God omniscient means that He knows all things and all things beforehand. The doctrine of election does not say that because God foreknew what decision someone might make that He chose them on the basis of their choice of Christ. To the contrary, the doctrine of election states that God chose us completely apart from any merit in us or any future choice that that He knew we would make. And that is exactly what creates the theological tension with this doctrine. Men like the idea that they choose God more than they like the idea that God chose them. Men want to think that there is something unique about them that makes them the “captains of their souls” and the makers of their own destinies.

Men live under the evangelical illusion that there is something wonderful about them that God simply cannot resist, but Scripture declares that to be an illusion. [Romans 3:10-12](#), which is God’s assessment of every man’s spiritual condition prior to salvation, declares,

¹⁰**As it is written: “There is none righteous, no, not one; ¹¹there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.**

¹²**They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.”**

[John 1:13](#) says,

¹³**who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.**

Those last three words are the only way that anyone can receive Christ or believe in His name. People, in and of their own fallen nature, are simply incapable of understanding the truth and incapable of repenting on their own.

In the matter of salvation, it becomes more and more apparent in Scripture that God has to overpower spiritual death and give spiritual life, that He

has to overpower spiritual blindness and give spiritual sight, that He has to overpower spiritual ignorance and give spiritual truth, and that He and He alone is the only one Who can overpower this insatiable desire that man has for sin and replace it with a desire for righteousness. If anyone is ever saved, it is because God overrules all their normal and natural inabilities. That is why reformed theology consistently states that “**Salvation is of the Lord**”. The profound unsearchable reality is that no one, absolutely no one would ever choose Christ if God had not first chosen them.

If someone wants to hold on to the notion that somehow salvation is dependent on them and dependent on something that they do, what is it that they want their salvation to be based on? Do they want their salvation to be based on their personal righteousness before God? Do they want their salvation to be based on their personal faith or their personal faithfulness? Do they want their salvation to be based on their obedience? Do they want their salvation to be based on their ability to make the right choice regarding salvation? Do they really want their salvation to somehow be based on them, on their merit, on their goodness, on their good decisions, or on their willingness to even come to Christ? Certainly that would not be the case. Jesus stated in [John 6:65](#),

⁶⁵**And He said, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.”**

The question is whether or not **someone’s individual life** has any bearing on God’s decision to choose them, to elect them, and to foreordain them into His kingdom. This is a very challenging issue that has to be approached with great care. Even though God made His choice before anyone was ever born, He still knew everything about them and everything about their lives before they even lived out those lives. This is what has been defined as the **omniscience** of God. It is this foreknowledge and this omniscience that makes Him God, and He would not be God without it.

The theological question, however, is whether or not God actually took His prior knowledge about people’s

lives into account when He made His decision regarding their election. How that question is resolved generally reveals whether or not someone is reformed or non-reformed. For various denominations salvation is not a sovereign work of God, but one that is dependent on the individual. It is almost as if God has a secondary role in salvation and not the primary role. And because salvation is dependent on the individual, many believe that maintaining their salvation is also dependent on them. That theological persuasion ultimately leads to the belief that someone can lose their salvation.

Non-reformed churches teach that God elects certain people to salvation, but He does so because “they” have met certain conditions. In this theological position, conditional election is based on God’s foreknowledge of how an individual will ultimately respond to the gospel. The idea is that from all eternity, God looks down the tunnel of time and knows in advance who will respond to the gospel and who will not. He knows in advance who will exercise faith and who will not exercise faith. He issues a salvation call and they, in and of themselves apart from a work of God in them, decide to receive Christ or to reject Christ. And so, on the basis of that prior knowledge, God chooses them into His kingdom. Simply stated, God elects them because He knows that they will believe when the gospel message is offered. But their believing was a by-product of their choice and not God’s choice.

Reformed theology, however, does not hold that position. Reformed theology understands the chain of events to mean that God predestines some people to receive a divine call into His kingdom that others will not receive. They may receive what is known as a “general call”, but not a divine call. Only the predestined, only the elect receive this call, and only those who receive this call are justified. There is a process of divine “selection” clearly involved here. And the tension immediately develops when it is realized that not everyone is predestined to receive this call, and therefore will not be saved. Only those who have been predestined will believe, and only

those who believe will be justified and adopted into God’s kingdom ([Sproul 145](#)).

The non-reformed view holds that men are elected because they believed. The reformed view states that men believe because they were elected. The non-reformed view depends on the individual, and the reformed view depends on God. The non-reformed view sees God’s election as the result of man’s faith. The reformed view sees man’s faith as the result of God’s election. The views are totally opposite. One is man-centered and the other is God-centered. One depends on man, the other depends on God.

If the entire issue could be condensed down to one phrase the issue would be the sovereignty of God. It is an issue of the sovereignty of God. Is God sovereign in salvation, or is He dependent on man in some way?

The principle is that of the sovereignty of God’s mercy and grace. By definition, grace is not something that God is required to have or to give. It is His divine prerogative to grant it or to withhold it. He does not owe grace to anyone. So the ground on which God chooses the objects of His mercy is solely the good pleasure of His will. [Ephesians 1:3-5](#) says,

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ⁵having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

The primary position of all reformed theology is that salvation is a divine work. It has been designed and ordained by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit ([Sproul 163](#)). It is a divine work initiated in eternity past, continuing in the present, and a work that will be finalized in eternity future.

The non-reformed position states that Christ died to make salvation “possible”, but not necessarily “actual”. I.e., there’s the possibility that a person can be saved,

but it is up to them to decide. So from that perspective, Jesus' death simply makes salvation possible, but the sinner makes the choice and thus makes it actual. The final decision is always the sinner's decision.

But here is the problem. According to Scripture, sinners are spiritually dead....dead in trespasses and sin, separated from the life of God. They are spiritually blind. The god of this world has blinded them as well. In their natural state they cannot understand the things of God because they are foolishness to them. [Romans 3:10-18](#) says that there is none who seeks after God and that there is no fear of God before their eyes. In essence, it is impossible for the spiritually dead double blind sinner cut off from the life of God with no desire for God, no ability to seek after God, and no fear of God before his eyes to all of a sudden just take hold of a "potential" salvation that is kind of hanging out there for him if he chooses it. [Jeremiah 17:9](#) says that the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. The Bible says that all of man's imaginations are only evil continually. The Scriptural implications are that the sinner cannot do anything on his own regarding salvation.

There is a very false doctrinal position called "universalism" which states that ultimately all people will be saved. The doctrine is based on verses like [II Corinthians 5:19](#) which says,

¹⁹that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

Their argument is very simple – if God Himself has stated that He has reconciled the world to Himself, then the barrier between God and man has been removed, and therefore ultimately everyone will be saved.

Now, Scripture does teach that there is a "sense" in which Christ died for the whole world. John the Baptist in [John 1:29](#) said,

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

[John 3:16-17](#),

¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

[John 4:42](#) and [I John 4:14](#) call Jesus "the Savior of the world".

⁴²Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world."

¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world.

[John 6:50-51](#) says,

⁵⁰This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world."

[I Timothy 2:5-6](#) says,

⁵For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, ⁶who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time

[Hebrews 2:9](#) says,

⁹But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.

[I John 2:2](#) says,

²And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

Those passages, however, cannot mean that because Christ is the Savior of the world that everyone will be saved. Why? Because the Bible just as clearly teaches that most people, what Jesus called the “many” in [Matthew 7:13](#), will die in their sins and suffer eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire. The Great White Throne Judgment in [Revelation 20:11-15](#) is clear that those who are cast into the Lake of Fire will have that happen to them because their names are **NOT** written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. ¹³The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

Here is the question then. If Jesus Christ paid the penalty for everyone’s sins, then how can God righteously sentence people to the Lake of Fire for sins for which Christ has already paid the divine punishment? So, the question then is what does it mean that Jesus Christ was “**reconciling the world to Himself**”? Put another way, what is the extent of the Atonement, or for whom did Christ’s death actually atone? In simpler words, “for whom did Christ die?”

The answer is that the universal language of the New Testament - “**world**”, “**all**”, “**everyone**” - that is used in various passages is referring to mankind in general. It can be explained this way: **Jesus Christ did not die for all men without exception,**

but for all men without distinction. The word “**world**” refers to the sphere, the place in which reconciliation takes place. It denotes the class of beings with whom God seeks reconciliation. It is everyone, people from all walks of life, from every nation, and from every racial and ethnic group.

Surely the death of Christ has infinite and unlimited value simply because He is of infinite and unlimited value. His death and sacrifice on the cross is way beyond being sufficient to pay the penalty for anyone that God saves. And likewise, because the merit of the death of Christ is unlimited, the offer of salvation is unlimited. Therefore, the “general” call of salvation goes out to all men everywhere. [Matthew 11:28](#) says,

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

[Revelation 22:17](#) says,

¹⁷And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

[Acts 17:30-31](#),

³⁰Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

It is the great commission of the church in [Matthew 28](#) and [Acts 1:8](#). It is to be the great imploring of every Christian to lost men and women that they “**be reconciled to God**”. [II Peter 3:8](#) declares,

⁹The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

John MacArthur in his commentary on [II Peter 3:9](#) states that the word “**all**” refers to Peter’s immediate readers and any who will ever come to faith in Jesus

Christ. He states that the immediate context and comments about the destruction of ungodly men in [v7](#) clearly limits the “all” to believers. In [II Peter 1:1](#) the letter is addressed to,

To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

Matthew Poole states that the “any” refers to the elect, to anyone that God has ordained to eternal life, and that the word “all” refers to all whom God has elected.

But even if someone does not interpret the verse that way, if it says that God does not want any to perish, so be it. As a parent I never really wanted to have to discipline my children, but I did on many occasions. Every sinner should consider the fact that because he is not cut down in his sins that God is in fact very forbearing with him, and is willing that any sinner should have an ample opportunity to obtain eternal life. The very patience of God towards sinners proves that He is willing that they should be saved. If He were not willing, it would be easy for Him to simply cut them off, and exclude them from any hope at once.

It is commonly taught that God the Father desires the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died with the goal of saving the whole human race, and that God the Holy Spirit is now trying to win the world to Christ. But it is just a matter of simple observation that the vast majority of people are dying in sin and passing into a hopeless eternity without Christ. And if that is the case, then in reality it would seem that God the Father must be disappointed with the results, that God the Son must be dissatisfied with the outcome, and that the Holy Spirit is constantly being defeated in His efforts. That is a fairly blunt statement, but there is no dodging the conclusion. To argue that God is “trying His best” to save the whole human race, but that most people will not let Him save them, is to insist that in the most critical area of life, or salvation, that God is somewhat impotent, and that the creature is the one

actually making the final decisions. To blame the devil, as many do, certainly does not resolve or remove the problem. For if Satan is defeating the purposes of God, then it means that Satan is stronger than God ([Pink 8-9](#)).

For instance, to assert that God’s original plan was sidetracked by sin is to dethrone God. It suggests that God was caught by surprise in the Garden of Eden, and that now He is attempting to fix an unforeseen mishap. But that is not the case at all. In fact, that kind of thinking actually disgraces God and puts Him on a level with those that are mortal and prone to mistakes. We know that is not true. To argue that man somehow retains the ability to checkmate God in the issue of salvation is to strip God of His omnipotence and sovereignty. God is the One Who is omnipotent and sovereign – not man, not Satan, not sin, not anything. And it is important to come to that settled conclusion. God is not some helpless spectator in all of this, just someone trying to recover from a very bad situation. If someone begins to deny the sovereignty of God in any area of theology and in any doctrine, it will ultimately lead them down the path to an impotent and powerless God who is helplessly trying to save people who want let Him ([Pink 9](#)). Ultimately, God becomes the victim. This is a very serious issue and has huge theological implications if not handled properly.

God is under no rules or laws outside of His own will and nature. He is accountable to no one for anything. And He is under no obligation to give any explanation to anyone at any time for why He does what He does. It must be understood that the sovereignty of God is absolute, irresistible, and infinite ([Pink 9](#)). No one and nothing can thwart or derail the purposes of God – no one! **What God chooses to do is done.** He rules the universe just as He pleases, and everyone and everything bows to His immutable person and power. [Philippians 2:9-11](#) authoritatively declares,

“Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,¹¹ and that

every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Romans 11:33, one of the greatest benedictions in all of Scripture, seems to sum up the sovereignty of God over all things when it divinely declares,

³³Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

And in the sovereignty of God over all things we rest and place our confidence.

Works Cited

(Author's Note: Below is a partial listing of reference documents utilized in developing the Talmid article on Election. It must be noted that the study of this doctrine was performed over an extended period of time in preparation for the teaching of the material in a local church setting. In that process, many references were not academically documented by this author. It is not the author's intent for this or any other article for the Talmid to plagiarize another sources comments without providing due credit for their work. However, the development of this article has utilized material from other sources which has not been formally documented. Time simply would not permit for the reconstruction of utilized resources.)

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