

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Unconditional Election

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*Foreknown before the world began,
According to his gracious plan,
God destined I must be
Conformed to Jesus Christ, the man,
Who lived and loved as no man can:
A glorious decree.*

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Election is probably not the doctrine with which a person normally would begin a biblical theology. It has been pointed out that even John Calvin, who is famous for this doctrine, does not deal with it until near the end of the third volume of his four-part systematic theology. Calvin began as a biblical theologian, teaching what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Only after that did he look back to explore the matter in its fullest perspective, showing, on the one hand, that salvation begins in eternity past in God's determination to save a people for him-self and, on the other hand, that it continues into the eternal future by God's final perseverance with his saints.

Nevertheless, election is an important measuring rod for someone's theology, since an acceptance or rejection of this doctrine reveals at once whether a person is biblically correct on such other doctrines as the nature and extent of sin, the bondage of the will, the full grace of God in salvation, and even the presentation of the gospel.

After discussing the doctrine of man's radical depravity, Loraine Boettner noted the connection between depravity and election, writing,

It follows ... from what has been said that salvation is absolutely and solely of grace—that God is free, in consistency with the infinite perfections of his nature, to save none, few, many, or all, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his will. It also follows that salvation is not based on any merits in the creature, and that it depends on God, and not on men, who are, and who are not, to be made partakers of eternal life. God acts as a sovereign in saving some and passing by others who are left to the just recompense of their sins.¹

¹ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 71.

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It is this doctrinal “measuring rod” that we need to discuss in this chapter.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PASSAGE

Throughout the Bible there are countless passages that deal with election, some of which will be noted in the course of this discussion. But the most extensive biblical treatment of the subject is the apostle Paul’s exposition in Romans 9. Here are the most important verses:

It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”

Not only that, but Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses,

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden (Rom. 9:6-18).

This is one of the most difficult sections of the entire Bible, more difficult even than those very confusing sections of Daniel and Revelation that deal with prophecy and the end times. But it is not only its treatment of election that makes this chapter difficult. What is especially hard is that it also deals with two related matters: first, the negative counterpart to election, which is the doctrine of reprobation (reprobation refers to God’s passing over of those who are not elected to salvation); and second, that God is right in electing some and passing over others.

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The proper name for this second matter is *theodicy*. "Theodicy" is composed of two Greek words: *theos*, which is the word for "God," and *dikei*, meaning what is "just" or "right." Thus a theodicy is an attempt to vindicate the justice of God in his actions. The question is, Is it right and just for God to choose some but not others?

A BASIS IN FACT

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The best place to begin any discussion of election is precisely where Paul begins in Romans 9, namely, with the fact of election itself. The reasons are obvious. First, there is no sense arguing over the justice of God in electing some to salvation and passing over others if we are not convinced first of all that he does just that. If we do not believe this, we will not waste our time puzzling over it. Second, if we are convinced that God does elect some to salvation, as Paul is going to insist he does, then we will approach even the theodicy question differently. We will approach it in order to find understanding, rather than arrogantly trying to prove that God cannot do what the Bible clearly teaches he does. To seek understanding is one thing. God urges us to seek it. But to demand that God conform to our limited insights into what is just or right is another matter entirely.

As long as we believe that God exercises *any* control over history or the lives of his people, then we must come to terms with the doctrine of election in one way or another. It is simply inescapable. Why? For this reason. When Jesus called his first disciples, he called twelve and not more. Others might very well have profited by spending three years in close association with Jesus, but Jesus chose only twelve for this privilege. Moreover, when Jesus sent his disciples into the world to tell others about him, by necessity these early preachers went in one direction rather than another. Philip went to Samaria. Barnabas went to Antioch. Then Paul and Barnabas went north to Asia Minor. Still later, Paul and other missionary companions went to Greece, then Italy, and eventually farther west. In each case a choice was involved: north rather than south; west rather than east. If God was directing his servants at all, as virtually every Christian believes that he was, then he was choosing that some should hear the gospel rather than others, which is a form of election—even apart from the matter of a determination to call some to active faith by means of an internal, Spirit-empowered call.

The same is true in our experience. If you believe that God is leading you to speak to someone about the gospel, it is a fact that you are speaking to that person rather than to another. And even if a Christian friend should join you and speak to that other person, there are still millions who inevitably are passed by. Election is an inescapable fact of finite human life and history.

Loraine Boettner distinguishes between four biblical types of election: 1) the election of some individuals to salvation, 2) the election of some nations to special spiritual

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privileges, 3) the election of some individuals to the external means of grace apart from regeneration, and 4) the election of individuals to receive different kinds of gifts. But he says rightly that these four types of election are alike in principle, namely, that what God withholds from one he graciously bestows on another: "Why precisely this or that one is placed in circumstances which lead to saving faith, while others are not so placed, is indeed, a mystery. We cannot explain the workings of Providence; but we know that the Judge of all the earth shall do right, and that when we attain to perfect knowledge we shall see that He has sufficient reasons for all His acts."²

THREE GENERATIONS OF ELECTION

This is not the way Paul presents the doctrine, of course, though it is close enough to get us thinking along the right lines. At this point in the letter Paul is explaining why not all Jews are saved, and why the fact that they are not all saved does not mean that God's purposes for Israel have failed. The reason is that God does not choose everybody ... and never has. He does not even choose all Jews, which is the meaning of Paul's opening statement: "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children" (Rom. 9:6-7). He means that not everyone who has descended physically from Israel (the patriarch who was the grandson of Abraham, who was the father of the heads of the twelve Jewish tribes, and whose other name was Jacob) is a member of the true, elected, spiritual Israel of God. In the verses that follow he demonstrates that the three fathers of the nation—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—became what they were by election, and that others were not given this privilege.

1. *Abraham*. Election is obvious in the case of Abraham, which is one reason why Paul does not discuss his case in detail, though he does mention him. Abraham had a pagan ancestry, having been born in the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia. He had no knowledge of the true God, because no one in Ur had knowledge of the true God. In fact, Abraham's family worshiped idols. Joshua said this explicitly in the sermon recorded in the twenty-fourth chapter of the book that bears his name: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods'" (Josh. 24:2). Years later, even after God had called Abraham out of this pagan environment and had instructed his son and grandson about himself as the true God, idols were still possessed and cherished in this family, for Rachel, the wife of Jacob, hid them from her father (see Genesis 31). Since God's call of Abraham is recorded clearly in Genesis 12, every

² Ibid., 90.

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knowledgeable Jew would have to confess that Jewish history began with that election.

2. *Isaac*. “But that is beside the point,” some might have answered. “God had to start somewhere.” They would have argued that the important matter is not whether God had elected the nation of Israel to some specific destiny apart from other nations. That was conceded. Paul had already written of “the adoption as sons, ... the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law” and other privileges that were granted only to Israel (Rom. 9:4-5). No one disputed the election of the nation. The real issue was whether all the descendants of Abraham (that is, all Jews) were saved by reason of their having come from him, or whether the principle of choice and rejection also applies after the initial choice of Abraham. In other words, does God continue to choose some but not all for salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, but not all from either category?

Since this is the issue, Paul begins his actual argument in verse 7 with the case of Abraham’s son Isaac. The point is that Abraham had another son, Ishmael, begotten of Hagar thirteen years before Isaac was born. Ishmael was Abraham’s son, but Ishmael was not chosen. Ishmael was Abraham’s physical descendant, but he was not a child of promise as Isaac was.

There is something else in this example: the contrast between *natural* in the phrase “natural children” and *promise* in the phrase “children of the promise” (v. 8). The contrast shows that the difference between Isaac and Ishmael was not merely that God elected Isaac and passed over Ishmael, though that was an obvious truth, but also that God’s choice of Isaac involved a supernatural intervention in the case of his conception. Ishmael was born of Abraham’s *natural* sexual powers. But Isaac was conceived when Abraham was past the normal age for engendering children and when Sarah was past the age of conceiving and giving birth.

It is the same with our spiritual conception and new birth. Our spiritual conception, which is the outworking of God’s electing choice, is likewise supernatural. We cannot engender spiritual life in ourselves, since according to Ephesians 2:1 we are spiritually dead in sins. We studied that in the last chapter. A dead person cannot do anything. In order for us to become spiritually alive God must do a miracle, which is exactly what he does. It is called the new birth, or regeneration.

3. *Jacob*. Yet there is still another objection. Paul’s opponents could have argued that Ishmael was not a pure-blooded Jew. “It is true,” they might have said, “that Ishmael was the son of Abraham. Yet he was not the son of Sarah. He was the son

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of Hagar, and Hagar was only an Egyptian and Sarah's servant. That is why Ishmael was not chosen."

In order to answer this point, Paul proceeds to the third generation of election, to the case of Rebekah's twin children, the sons Jacob and Esau. The words "not only that" show that he is continuing the argument: "Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger'" (vv. 10-12).

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This is a remarkably effective example, since it proves everything that Paul needed to make his point.

First, Jacob and Esau were born of the same Jewish parents. That is, each was "a Hebrew of Hebrews," the phrase Paul used to describe his own pure-blooded Jewish ancestry in Philippians 3:5. So this was not a case of one having been chosen on the basis of a better ancestry and the other having been rejected because of a lesser one. The possible explanation of Paul's opponents for the choice of Isaac over Ishmael was invalidated by this case.

Second, the choice of Jacob rather than Esau went against the normal standards of primogeniture, according to which the elder should have received the greater blessing. True, the boys were twins, but Esau actually emerged from Rebekah's womb first. In spite of that, however, Jacob was chosen. There is nothing to explain this except God's right to dispose of the destinies of human beings as he pleases.

Third, the choice of Jacob was made before either child had opportunity to do either good or evil. The choice was made while the children were still in the womb. This means—we cannot miss it—that election cannot be on the basis of anything done by us. Moreover, Paul argues, the choice of Jacob rather than Esau was made specifically to teach election. This is what verses 11 and 12 say: "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand ..." (emphasis added). This means that God made his choice before the birth of Rebekah's sons to show that his election is apart from anything a human being might or might not do. It is a proof of what Paul says later, namely: "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy" (v. 18).

A BASIS IN SCRIPTURE

There are countless Bible texts that teach the doctrine of election, though Romans 9 is the most extensive treatment of the subject. There are probably several hundred of these

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texts—more than we can discuss or even list—but it might be valuable to mention some of the most explicit ones:

- *Deuteronomy 7:7-8*. “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”
- *John 15:16*. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.”
- *Acts 13:48*. “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”
- *Romans 11:5-6*. “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”
- *Romans 11:7*. “What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did.”
- *Ephesians 1:4-5*. “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”
- *1 Thessalonians 5:9*. “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- *2 Thessalonians 2:13*. “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.”

MIGHT ELECTION BE “CONDITIONAL”?

The existence of numerous texts like these means that every Christian has to believe in some kind of election. The concept appears too frequently to deny it. However, some who have trouble with the doctrine accept the word but try to reduce its force by arguing for what they call “conditional election.” This means that God bases his election of an individual on foresight, foreseeing whether or not a particular individual will have faith. This destroys the very meaning of the word, of course, for such election is really not

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election at all. It actually means that men and women elect themselves, and God is reduced to a bystander who responds to their free choice. Logically and causally, even if not chronologically, God's choice follows man's choice.

Here is an even more potent objection to "conditional election": if election is based on what God foresees an individual might do, what could he possibly foresee in a spiritually dead sinner other than rejection of the gospel? To suppose that God could see something that is impossible apart from his determining will is irrational. On the other hand, to suppose that faith actually could be there denies the doctrine of man's radical depravity. We are beginning to see that the doctrines of grace are all interrelated. In Calvin's sermons on Genesis 25–27, which focus on election and reprobation, the Geneva Reformer wrote, "What could he [God] foresee, but this corrupted mass of Adam, that brings forth no other fruit but malediction. ... Take away election, and what shall remain? As we have declared, we remain altogether lost and accursed."³

There is a philosophical objection, too. Election cannot rest on foreknowledge of what might happen, because in the sovereignty of God, the only things that can be foreknown are those that are predetermined, and this means that election must be prior to faith. Boettner sees this clearly:

The Almighty and all-sovereign Ruler of the universe does not govern himself on the basis of a foreknowledge of things which might haply come to pass. Through the Scriptures the divine foreknowledge is ever thought of as dependent on the divine purpose, and God foreknows only because he has predetermined. His foreknowledge is but a transcript of his will as to what shall come to pass in the future, and the course which the world takes under his providential control is but the execution of his all-embracing plan. His foreknowledge of what is yet to be, whether it be in regard to the world as a whole or in regard to the detailed life of every individual, rests upon his prearranged plan.⁴

The verse that is most often used in support of conditional election is Romans 8:29, which says, "For those God foreknew he also pre-destined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." However, that verse is not about God's foresight, if by foresight we mean simply God's ability to predict the future. The word "know" (in "foreknew") actually indicates God's choice, just as in Amos 3:2 ("You only have I known of all the families of the earth," KJV), which the New International Version rightly renders: "You only have I chosen. ..."

³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation* (Audubon, N.J.: Old Paths, 1996), 39. Original edition 1579.

⁴ Boettner, *Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 99.

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Besides, the text does not say that God foreknew what certain individuals might do, only that he foreknew them as individuals to whom he would extend the grace of salvation.

Arthur Custance gives twelve renderings of Romans 8:29 by a variety of scholars, not many of whom are Calvinistic. Yet they all understand “foreknow” to refer to election and not to God’s foreseeing faith. Here are some examples: “For those whom he had marked out from the first he predestinated” (*An American Translation*, Smith and Goodspeed); “For those whom God had already chosen he had also set apart to become like his Son” (*Good News for Modern Man*); “They are the ones he chose specially long ago and intended to become images of his Son” (*The Jerusalem Bible*); “For long ago, before they ever came into being, God both knew them and marked them out to become like the pattern of his Son” (*The New Testament: A New Translation*, Barclay); “For he decreed of old that those whom he pre-destined should share the likeness of his Son” (*The New Testament: A New Translation*, Moffatt); “For those whom God chose from the first he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son” (*The Twentieth Century New Testament*).⁵ To summarize, when the Bible speaks of divine foreknowledge, it has in view the gracious doctrine of unconditional election.⁶

REPROBATION: THE DIFFICULT DOCTRINE

Here we have to think about the difficult doctrine of reprobation, the teaching that God rejects or repudiates some persons to eternal condemnation in a way that is parallel but opposite to his ordaining others to salvation. We have to think about it here because it is brought into Romans 9 by two Old Testament quotations: Malachi 1:2-3 (“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,” as cited in v. 13); and Exodus 9:16 (“I raised you [Pharaoh] up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth,” as cited in v. 17). Paul summarizes the teaching in those texts by concluding, “Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden” (v. 18).

The place to begin is with the fact of reprobation, regardless of any questions we may have. In other words, we must follow the same procedure with reprobation as we followed with election. Many texts teach reprobation:

⁵ On the other hand, *The Living Bible* betrays its Arminian bias by the unjustified paraphrase: “For from the very beginning God decided that those who came to him—and all along he knew who would—should become like his Son.” Happily, the *New Living Translation* has improved this to read, “For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son.”

⁶ Custance, Arthur C. (1979). *The Sovereignty of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, chapter 7. An online edition can be accessed at <https://custance.org/Library/SOG/Index.html>

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- *Proverbs 16:4.* “The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster.”
- *John 12:39-40.* “They could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: ‘He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.’”
- *John 13:18.* “I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill the scripture: ‘He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.’”
- *John 17:12.* “While I was with them [the disciples], I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.”
- *1 Peter 2:7-8.* “Now to you who believe, this stone [Jesus Christ] is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,’ and, ‘A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.”
- *Jude 4.* “Certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you.”

Each of these verses (and others) teaches that God passes by some persons, destining them to destruction rather than to salvation. Clear enough. But here we need to make several important distinctions between election on the one hand and reprobation on the other.

First, we need to ask: Does God determine the destinies of individuals in exactly the same way, so that without any consideration of what they do (or might do), he assigns one to heaven and the other to hell? We know he does that in the case of those who are being saved, because we have been told that election has no basis in any good seen or foreseen in those who are elected. Paul’s chief point in Romans 9 is that salvation is due entirely to God’s mercy and not to any good that might be imagined to reside in us. The question is whether this can be said of the reprobate, too. Has God consigned them to hell apart from anything they have done, that is, apart from their deserving it?

Here there is an important distinction to be made, as I said. It is one, in fact, that has been made by the majority of Reformed thinkers and that has been embodied in many of the church’s creeds. Take the Westminster Confession of Faith as a primary example. Here are the two paragraphs concerning election and reprobation:

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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, hath chosen in Christ, unto ever-lasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them (Chap. 3, Sec. 5).

The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, 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 (Chap. 3, Sec. 7).

Those statements teach that in some ways election and reprobation are the same: both flow from the eternal counsel or will of God rather than the will of man, and both have as their ultimate purpose the revelation of God's glory. But there are two important points of difference.

First, the Confession speaks of the reprobate being "passed by." Some will argue that in its ultimate effect there is no difference between being passed by and being actively ordained to condemnation. But while that is true of the ultimate effect, there is nevertheless a major difference in the cause. The reason why some believe the gospel and are saved by it is that God intervenes in their lives to bring them to faith. He does it by the new birth or regeneration. But those who are lost—and this is the crucial point—are not caused by God to disbelieve. They do that all by themselves. To ordain their end, God needs only to withhold the special grace of regeneration.

Second, the Confession speaks of God ordaining the lost "to dis-honor and wrath *for their sin*." That makes reprobation the opposite of an arbitrary action. The lost are not sent to hell because God consigns them to it arbitrarily, but as a judgment for their sins. "We dare not forget," wrote Abraham Kuyper, "that while God, according to the secret of his counsel, elects those who are to be saved ... this same omnipotent God has made us morally responsible, so that we are lost, not because we could not be saved, but because we would not."⁷ Kuyper's theology was based on *The Canons of the Synod of Dort*, which state: "Not all, but some only, are elected, while others are *passed by* in the eternal decrees" and these are punished "*not only on account of their unbelief, but also for all their other sins*" (Chap. 1, Art. 15). Election is active; reprobation is passive. In election God actively

⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election*, trans. G. M. Pernis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1934), 5.

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intervenes to rescue those who deserve destruction, whereas in reprobation God passively allows some to receive the just punishment they deserve for their sins.

A USEFUL DOCTRINE

If the doctrine of reprobation is as difficult as it seems, then why should we speak about it at all? One reason, as we have seen, is that the Bible itself speaks of it. This is also the primary answer to a person who says, "I could never love a God like that." Fair enough, we may say; nevertheless, that is the God with whom you have to deal. However, this is not a completely satisfying answer, and there are other meaningful things to say about reprobation:

1. *Reprobation assures us that God's purpose has not failed.* The first benefit of this doctrine is the very thing Paul is concerned about in Romans 9, namely, assuring his readers that God's word has not failed (v. 6). God has determined all things from before the beginning of creation, and his word does not fail in regard to either the elect or the reprobate. This means that if you have heard God's promises and believed his word, you can be sure that he will be faithful to you. If others are lost, it is because God has determined that they should be. Their loss does not mean that you will follow them. Nor does it mean that God has somehow failed in his plans for the evangelization of the world.

"Am I one of the elect?" you might ask. The answer to that question is easy: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. If you do that, you are among the elect. That is the only way anyone can ever discover who God's elect are. If you need further assurance of your election, examine the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your Christian experience. However, the only infallible proof of election is found in Christ himself, and in his saving work.

2. *Reprobation helps us deal with apostasy.* We all know people who seemed to believe at one time but who have subsequently fallen away from the church. It is a disturbing occurrence. Does it mean that God has failed them? No. It only means that if they continue in their unbelieving state, they are not among God's elect people.
3. *Reprobation reminds us that salvation is entirely of divine grace and that no human works contribute to it.* If none were lost, then we would assume that God somehow owed us salvation. We would think that he saved us either because of who we are or because of who he is; either way, he has to do it. But this is not the situation. All are not saved. Therefore, the salvation of the elect is due to divine mercy only. This is the chief teaching of these important texts in Romans.

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4. *Reprobation glorifies God.* As soon as we begin to think that God owes us something or that God *must* do something, we limit him and diminish his glory. Election and reprobation surround and protect God's glory, for they remind us that God is absolutely free and sovereign. God does whatever he wants with his universe. He is glorified in the damnation of the reprobate as well as in the salvation of the elect; his justice and his mercy are both glorious because they both demonstrate his divine sovereignty.

When we understand these things, we also understand that reprobation is a gospel doctrine. Why? Because reprobation highlights mercy and reduces those who hear and accept the doctrine to a position of utter suppliance. It forces us to cry, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" (Mark 10:47). As long as we believe that we are in control of our own destinies, we will never assume this posture. But when we understand that we are in the hands of a just and holy God, and that we are without any hope of salvation apart from his free and utterly sovereign intervention, then we will call for mercy, which is the only right response.

"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy," says the Almighty. If we believe that sentence, our cry will be that of the tax collector: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Who can fault a doctrine that does that?

BUT IS GOD JUST?

Still, there are people who fault God on the matter of election itself. Even if we are convinced that God does operate in this way (which many are not convinced of, but which we must be if we study the Bible honestly), we nevertheless cry out fiercely that it is not right for God to be selective. "Is God unjust?" That is the way Paul puts the question in Romans 9:14. But he answers by an emphatic denial: "Not at all!" The King James Bible has "God forbid!" which is the strongest denial Paul could muster.

That answer is not calculated to satisfy most people today, of course, and there is more to say. Paul says more in the very next verses. But this is the proper starting place. Why? Because it puts us in our proper place as fallen human beings, which is the only position from which we can begin to learn about spiritual things. The very nature of sin is wanting to be in God's place. But as long as we try to be in God's place, we will never be able to hear what God is saying to us. We will argue with him instead. In order to learn, we must begin by confessing that God is God and that he is therefore right and just in his actions, even though we may not understand what he is doing.

But how are we to understand God's justice? We can start with the fact that God is just, as well as with the fact that he elects some persons to salvation and passes by others. But

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how are we to think about his justice in doing so? This is the theodicy question mentioned earlier. Here are the essential elements of the answer:

1. *All human beings deserve hell, not heaven.* The important word here is “deserve.” We are not talking about whether people actually end up in hell, or whether only some end up in hell and some in heaven. We are talking about what all deserve, and what all deserve is condemnation. That is justice. The justice of God, if it were to operate apart from any other factor, could do nothing other than to send every human being to hell. In fact, apart from the electing grace of God and the gracious death of Christ, this is exactly what would happen.
2. *If any individual is to be saved, it must be by mercy only, and mercy falls in an entirely different category from justice.* “Deserving” has to do with what people have done. “Mercy” has nothing to do with what people have done but is something that finds its source exclusively in the will of God. Romans 9:15 quotes Exodus 33:19, where God says, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” Notice that God says nothing about his justice, but speaks only of his mercy. The two attributes belong to two different categories, and election is a matter of mercy rather than justice.
3. *Even if God should save people on the basis of something in them—faith, good works, or something else—this actually would be an injustice, since individuals and their backgrounds are unequal.* Think it through. If God saved some people and not others on the basis of good works, which is what many people expect God to do, there would never be justice, because some people have inherited kinder, gentler temperaments than others, and because environmental factors always play a part. It is easier for a person who has been raised by two loving, moral parents to follow in their way, to make wise choices, and to do good as the world thinks of good. Not all do, of course, but that is irrelevant. The point is only that it is easier for such persons to do good than it is for others who have been neglected by their parents or have been raised in a vicious, immoral environment. Or consider faith. Isn't it true that some persons are born more trusting than others, and others are instinctively more skeptical? Some people have a hard time believing anything. They have a hard time believing people, and it follows that they will have an even harder time believing God.

So election is not only just. It *is* just, and God is right in choosing some and passing by others. But—and here is the important thing—election is the *only* thing that is just. Election alone starts with all people at the same point and on the same level, all of them deserving hell. Then it saves some and passes by others, entirely apart from anything in the elect or reprobate persons themselves.

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TWO IRREPRESSIBLE OBJECTIONS

The answer to the theodicy question lies in the points just made, but objections still crowd our minds. Two objections are particularly common:

1. *Shouldn't God show mercy to everyone?* Anyone who asks that question still has not grasped the situation. The operative word in the question is "should," which means "ought" or "must," if justice is to be done. But as soon as we use that word we are back in the category of justice and are no longer dealing with mercy. If there is any "should" in the matter, the issue is no longer mercy. We are talking about justice, and as we have seen, justice can do nothing but send every human being to hell. It is not justice that we need from God; it is grace.
2. *Why doesn't God show mercy to everyone?* This question sounds like the first one, but it is really quite different. It is the question raised by a person who understands the difference between justice and mercy but still wonders why God is selective. After all, God could show mercy to everyone, couldn't he? He doesn't have to, but he could. And if he doesn't, why not? "Forget the word 'should,'" this person argues. "My question is simply: Why doesn't God save everyone?"

This is a proper question to ask because it is seeking understanding rather than demanding that God submit to human standards of right and wrong. But it is also more difficult than the questions posed so far since it asks about God's reasons for doing something, and there is no way we can know those reasons unless God reveals them to us. Does he? Romans 9:15 seems to say that God does not. We are only told that this is the way God operates: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." In other words, a perfectly legitimate answer to our question is that the "why" is none of our business! God does not owe us an answer.

There is one revealed answer, though not everyone will like it. In verse 17 Paul quotes Exodus 9:16: "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" This verse deals with reprobation, and it explains that at least one purpose of God's passing over some persons is to display his "power," so that his sovereign name might be proclaimed throughout the earth. In other words, God considers it important that we should know that he is all-powerful, especially in overcoming and judging those who stand against him, as Pharaoh did at the time of the Exodus.

A few verses later Paul enlarges on this idea, showing that God's "wrath," "power," "patience," "glory," and "mercy" are displayed in election, on the one hand, and in reprobation, on the other: "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power

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known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?” (vv. 22-24). This means that God considers the display of his attributes to be worth the whole drama of human history—to be worth creation, the Fall, election, reprobation, and everything else. From God’s point of view, the revelation of his glory—meaning the revelation of all his glorious attributes—is the grand priority.

Not everyone will be satisfied by this. It may not satisfy you. But if you do not find it satisfying, if you still ask, “But why should it be necessary for God’s name to be glorified?” here is the answer: It is necessary because it is right for God to be glorified. God *is* glorious. He should be recognized as such. And because this is a universe run by God, not by us, what is right will be done in the end. God will be honored, and all will bow before him.

Do you see where this is moving? We began with the theodicy question: Is God right to act as he does? We asked that question because it did not seem right for God to select some for salvation and to pass by and judge others for their sin. But when we examine the question, as we have, we find that the matter is exactly the opposite of what we imagined it to be. We have found that God acts as he does precisely *because* he is just. He glorifies his name in displaying wrath toward sinners and the riches of his glory toward those who are being saved because this is the only right thing for God to do. It is his very justice, not his injustice, that causes him to operate in this fashion.

If we object to this, then our objection only shows that we are operating by a different and therefore by a sinful standard. Hence Paul’s confrontational question: “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” (Rom. 9:20a).

THE BENEFITS OF THIS DOCTRINE

That would be a good place to stop, ending with the glory and justice of God. But we should also mention some benefits of this doctrine. This is because so many people think that election is useless and per-haps even pernicious. It is nothing of the sort. It is part of the Bible’s inspired teaching and is therefore “useful,” as Paul insisted all Scripture is (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

1. *Election is humbling.* Those who do not understand election often suppose the opposite, and it is true that those who believe in election sometimes appear prideful or smug. But this is an aberration. God tells us that he has chosen some by grace entirely apart from merit or even an ability to receive grace, precisely so that pride will be eliminated: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through

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faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

2. *Election encourages our love for God.* If we have a part in salvation, however small, then our love for God is diminished by just that amount. If it is all of God, then our love for him must be boundless. Sadly, today’s church frequently takes the love of God for granted. “Of course, God loves me,” we say. “I love myself; why shouldn’t God love me too?” Consider the little girl who loved the Barney theme song from television (“I love you, you love me; we’re a happy family”). But she sang it this way: “I love me, you love me; we’re a happy family.” That is how we tend to think of God’s love. We think we deserve it. Understanding that we are elected by grace alone undermines our self-centered, self-satisfied way of thinking.
3. *Election will enrich our worship.* Who can admire a God who is frustrated by the rebellious will of human beings? Martin Luther wrote, “It is not irreligious, idle, or superfluous, but in the highest degree wholesome and necessary, for a Christian to know whether or not his will has anything to do in matters pertaining to salvation. ... For if I am ignorant of the nature, extent and limits of what I can and must do with reference to God, I shall be equally ignorant and uncertain of the nature, extent and limits of what God can and will do in me—though God, in fact, works all in all. Now, if I am ignorant of God’s works and power, I am ignorant of God himself; and if I do not know God, I cannot worship, praise, give thanks, or serve Him, for I do not know how much I should attribute to myself and how much to Him. We need, therefore, to have in mind a clear-cut distinction between God’s power and ours, and God’s work and ours, if we would live a godly life.”⁷
4. *Election encourages us in our evangelism.* People suppose that if God is going to save certain individuals, then he will save them, and there is no point in our having anything to do with it. But it does not work that way. Election does not exclude the use of the means by which God works, and the proclamation of the gospel is one of those means (1 Cor. 1:21).

Moreover, it is only the truth of election that gives us any hope of success as we proclaim the gospel to unsaved men and women. If the heart of a sinner is as opposed to God as the Bible declares it to be, and if God does not elect people to salvation, then what hope of success could we possibly have in witnessing? If God does not call sinners to Christ effectively, it is certain that we cannot do so either. Even more, if the effective agent in salvation is not God’s choice and call—if the choice is up to the individual or to us,

⁷ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1957), 78.

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because of our powers to persuade others to accept Christ—how could we even dare to witness? For what if we make a mistake? What if we give a wrong answer? What if we are insensitive to the person’s real questions? In that case, people will fail to believe. They may eventually go to hell, and their eternal destiny will be partly our fault, and how could any thinking, feeling Christian live with that?

But on the other hand, if God has elected some to salvation and if he is calling those elected individuals to Christ, then we can go forth boldly, knowing that our witness does not have to be perfect, that God uses even weak and stuttering testimonies to his grace and, best of all, that all whom God has chosen for salvation will be saved. We can be fearless, knowing that all who are called by God will come to him.⁸

⁸ Boice, J. M., Ryken, P. G., & Sproul, R. C. (2002). *The doctrines of grace: rediscovering the evangelical gospel*. Crossway Books, chapter four.