

# The Doctrines of Grace

## 7 Reasons God Takes Pleasure in Election

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### THE PRECIOUSNESS OF GOD'S ELECTION BY GRACE

What [Romans 8:28–30](#) teaches is that God really accomplishes the complete redemption of his people from start to finish. He foreknows (elects) a people for himself before the foundation of the world; he predestines this people to be conformed to the image of his Son; he calls them to himself in faith; he justifies them through that faith; and he finally glorifies them. And nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ forever and ever ([Rom. 8:39](#)). This great work of salvation is rooted and grounded in the electing love of God. If that foundation stone crumbles, biblical salvation crumbles. But it cannot and will not crumble because God has pleasure in election, the unshakable ground of the glory of his grace.



I am often asked by people, “Does it really matter what we believe about election? Is it really relevant to how we live and minister?” My answer is, obviously, yes. And I think it will be helpful if I close with seven reasons why this teaching is precious to me and why I believe God has pleasure in it. In each of the following points, “this truth” refers to the truth of God’s free, sovereign, unconditional, individual election by grace of who will be saved.

**First, this truth is biblical.** It is biblical not only in being found once in Scripture but in being found throughout Scripture. George Müller said

To my great astonishment I found that the passages which speak decidedly for election and persevering grace, were about four times as many as those which speak apparently against these truths; and even those few, shortly after, when I had examined and understood them, served to confirm me in the above doctrines.<sup>1</sup>

George Whitefield, the great eighteenth-century evangelist, spoke for many saints when he wrote to John Wesley to explain why he believed in the truth of election: “Alas, I never

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<sup>1</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., in *International Critical Commentary* (T&T Clark, 1975), 1:431.

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read anything that Calvin wrote; my doctrines I had from Christ and His apostles; I was taught them of God.”<sup>2</sup> God has pleasure in election because he exalts his word ([Ps. 138:2](#)) and his word teaches that these things are so.

*Second, this truth humbles sinners and exalts the glory of God—especially the glory of his grace.* This is the point of [1 Corinthians 1:26–31](#) that we saw above: “God chose . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God . . . [but] let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” The great design of God’s way of salvation is to magnify his glory and bring down human pride. George Whitefield wrote to John Wesley urging:

that he seek the truth that shall most debase man and exalt the Lord Jesus. Nothing but the doctrines of the Reformation can do this. All others leave free will in man and make him, in part, at least, a savior to himself. My soul, come not thou near the secret of those who teach such things. . . . I know Christ is all in all. Man is nothing: he hath a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and to do his good pleasure.

Oh, the excellency of the doctrine of election and of the saints’ final perseverance! I am persuaded, till a man comes to believe and feel these important truths, he cannot come out of himself, but when convinced of these and assured of their application to his own heart, he then walks by faith indeed.<sup>3</sup>

*Third, this truth tends to preserve the church from slipping toward false philosophies of life.* History seems to show that this is so. For example, toward the end of the eighteenth century, “Calvinistic convictions waned in North America. In the progress of a decline which [Jonathan] Edwards had rightly anticipated, those Congregational churches of New England which had embraced Arminianism after the Great Awakening gradually moved into Unitarianism and universalism, led by Charles Chauncy.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that there

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2 vols. (Banner of Truth, 1970), 1:574.

<sup>3</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:407.

<sup>4</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Banner of Truth, 1987), 454. Remarkably, C. H. Spurgeon chronicles the same doctrinal moves a hundred years later in England. He notes the abandonment of the confessions and the catechisms of the seventeenth century during the eighteenth century and says, “There followed an age of drivelling, in which our Nonconformity existed, but gradually dwindled down, first into Arminianism, and then into Unitarianism, until it almost ceased to be. Men know that it was so and yet they would act it all over again. They read history, and yet demand that the old doctrine should again be given up. . . . Oh, fools and slow of heart! Will not history teach them? No, it will not if the Bible does not. . . . Surely evil days are near, unless the church shall again clasp the truth to her heart.” Quoted in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Banner of Truth, 1973), 189. I see the same kind of theological shifting (if not to the same extent) in Clark Pinnock’s pilgrimage as he revises more and more of historic theism.

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is something about the truth of God's free and sovereign election that stands guard over the mind and heart of the church and keeps her alert to tendencies and shifts that swing wide from the plumb line of God's word.

*Fourth, this truth is the good news of a salvation that is not just offered but effected.* Election is the guarantee that God not only invites people to be delivered but also actually delivers them. "You shall call his name Jesus because he shall save his people from their sins" ([Matt. 1:21](#)). God undertakes with omnipotence to save his people.

He plans it in election, and he achieves it through the work of his Son, and he applies it infallibly by his Holy Spirit through faith. The foreknown, that is, the elect, are predestined. The predestined are called, the called are justified, the justified are glorified ([Rom. 8:30](#)). The destiny of God's people, rooted in election, is unshakably sure. And that is good news.<sup>5</sup>

*Fifth, this truth enables us to own up to the demands for holiness in the Scripture and yet have assurance of salvation.* The Bible teaches that there is a holiness without which we will not see the Lord ([Heb. 12:14](#)). Dozens of passages in the Bible speak of our final salvation (unlike our election) as conditional upon a changed heart and life. The question arises then, How can I have the assurance that I will persevere in faith and in the holiness necessary for inheriting eternal life?

The answer is that assurance is rooted in our election ([2 Pet. 1:10](#)). Divine election is the guarantee that God will undertake to complete by sanctifying grace what his electing grace has begun. This is the meaning of the new covenant: God does not merely command obedience; he gives it. "The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" ([Deut. 30:6](#)). "I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes" ([Ezek. 36:27; 11:20](#); see also [Heb. 13:20–21](#); [Phil. 2:13](#)).

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<sup>5</sup> Spurgeon said, "I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what is nowadays called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel . . . unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the Cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called." Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:168.

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Election is the final ground of assurance. Since it is God's commitment to save, it is also God's commitment to enable all that is necessary for salvation.<sup>6</sup>

St. Augustine puts it like this:

I have no hope at all but in thy great mercy. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt. Thou dost enjoin on us continence. . . . O love that ever burnest and art never quenched! O Charity, my God, enkindle me! Thou commandest continence. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt.<sup>7</sup>

The assurance that God will answer this prayer in accordance with the oath of the new covenant is that election secures that "those who are justified will be glorified" ([Rom.](#)

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[8:30](#)) so that all the conditions laid down for glorification will be met by the power of God's grace. "God chose you from the beginning to be saved *through sanctification by the Spirit*" ([2 Thess. 2:13](#)).<sup>8</sup>

Election guards us from falling off the horse on either side. It guards against the error of thinking that we can earn our way into God's favor through "works of the law" since God's favor toward us is rooted in the free act of love before the foundation of the world. We cannot earn what God has chosen to bestow freely "before we had done anything good or evil" ([Rom. 9:11](#)). It also guards us from the error of thinking that in order for us

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<sup>6</sup> See *Letter to a Friend* (Desiring God Ministries, 2000) for a list of Bible passages that show God's promise of preservation in holiness for his people.

<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 40, quoted in Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 1967), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Gustav Oehler (see note 4) poses the problem this way: How can God's end in election be assured when the covenant with his people is conditional on obedience? "If Israel by breaking the covenant is exposed to God's judgment and rejected, this seems to nullify God's decree of election and the realization of the aim of His kingdom, which, though secured by God's covenant oath, is again dependent on man's action." Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 197. The answer of the Old Testament, he says (and it is the same answer given in the New Testament), is that God will so convert his people that the ethical prerequisites for eternal blessing will be secured by God himself: "The end of this conversion is attained when, by the operation of divine grace, that renovation of heart is accomplished in virtue of which the law is no longer to the people an external command, but, through the power of God, the cheerful expression of their own will and purpose" (198).

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to be loved freely and to be eternally secure, obedience must be optional, not necessary. Thus, the incentive for holiness retains its urgency since holiness is necessary ([Heb. 12:14](#)); but it does not become a legalistic burden because we serve in the strength which God supplies ([1 Pet. 4:11](#); see also [1 Cor. 15:10](#); [Rom. 15:18](#)). Both things are true: that “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life” ([Matt. 7:14](#)) and that “my yoke is easy and my burden is light” ([Matt. 11:30](#)). The truth of election preserves both the urgency and freedom of biblical obedience.

*Sixth, this truth opens us to the overwhelming experience of being loved personally with the unbreakable electing love of God.* Many people have no personal experience of knowing that they were loved by God eternally and will be cared for by him with omnipotent, all-supplying love forever and ever. Many people think of God’s love only in terms of a love that offers and waits but does not take us for himself and work with infinite enthusiasm and power to keep us and glorify us forever. Yet this is the experience available for any who will come and drink the water of life freely ([Rev. 22:17](#)).

*Seventh, this truth gives hope for effective evangelism and guarantees the triumph of Christ’s mission in the end.* Nothing I have said should be taken to imply that the urgency of evangelism is lessened. Evangelism and missions are not imperiled by the biblical truth of election but empowered by it, and their triumph is secured by it. Jesus said, “I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice” ([John 10:16](#)). This means that there are elect sheep scattered throughout the world (11:52). They will be there among “every people, language, tribe, and nation” when the missionary arrives to issue God’s absolutely essential call through the gospel ([Rev. 5:9](#)). Therefore, Jesus says he *must* bring them in. And he says they *will* heed his voice. In other words, the triumph of the ingathering of world missions is a certainty because of the truth of election: he does have other sheep.

## WHAT PAUL DREAMED IN CORINTH

Paul was tremendously heartened by this truth. The Lord came to him one night in a dream while he was evangelizing in Corinth. To encourage him the Lord said, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city” ([Acts 18:9–10](#)). The ground of Paul’s encouragement was the assurance from the Lord that there were “other sheep” in Corinth—many of them. God had chosen them, and he would call them—but it must be through the preaching of the gospel (see [Acts 13:48](#); [16:14](#)). The truth of election embraces

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the necessity of evangelism and missions and guarantees their success in God's time and God's way. This has been the strength and courage of thousands of faithful missionaries.

*This article is adapted from [The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God](#) by John Piper.*

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