

We are incapable of believing the gospel because we are hell-bent on suppressing the truth about God (Rom. 1:18). This does not deny that we do what we want to do. But what we want is to sin, not to submit to Christ. Our wills are enslaved. We would never choose God. Our only hope is for Him to choose us.

But isn't it unfair?

Some people claim that election is unfair, and that God would be unjust to choose some people and reject others. However, as Creator, and so Owner, of His creatures, God has the right to treat them just as He likes. What is more, this objection is a dangerous one. It is like a murderer standing in the dock, crying, "I demand justice!" God would have been perfectly just to condemn all people. Every time he sends someone to hell, it is exactly what their sin deserves: it is perfectly just. My only hope is that God doesn't treat me as my sins deserve, that He acts in undeserved mercy and love towards me. In this way we can see that God's choice to save some and reject others is not symmetrical. His decision to bypass some is based purely on justice; His decision to choose others is based on free grace.

Election is good news.

Although many regard God's sovereign choice of those He will save as controversial, it is wonderful news. Because salvation is God's work from beginning to end, it does not depend on my efforts. Although I am helpless because of my sin, God has acted: He chose me, and drew me to the Lord Jesus, who promises never to let me go (Jn. 6:37, 39). This should give Christians great confidence: our salvation is certain because it is God's work.

It is also wonderful because it demonstrates God's unconditional love for me. God did not choose me because I was nicer than everyone else. He did not choose me because I was more holy, or more spiritual. He chose me in spite of what I am like. He chose me because He loves me.

And that love will never change.

For further reading:

For a good introduction, see:

Article 17 of the 39 Articles, in any Book of Common Prayer.

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God J. I. Packer
(IVP, 1961)

Chosen by God R. C. Sproul
(Scripture Press, 1987)

For a more detailed treatment, see:

The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination Loraine Boettner,
(Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992)

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Truth Matters is an occasional series of leaflets published by Reform addressing issues of importance for the understanding of the church today.

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Election and Predestination

truth matters

Essential issues in Christian
teaching and practice

Election and predestination

Election and predestination are controversial subjects. They have led to many intense conversations in church home groups and university halls of residence. But, rightly understood, they are wonderful truths, offering Christians great comfort, assurance and hope.

Predestination refers to God's eternal and unchangeable will, independent of anyone else, to decide everything that would happen in His creation. Election is one particular application of predestination, and can be defined like this: Even before creating the world, God chose those He would save. He did this not because they deserved it, but out of His own free love and mercy, and for His own glory. This means that our salvation is not our doing. It is God's work from beginning to end.

In order to understand these truths, it is important to grasp what the Bible says about God as Creator.

God does whatever He pleases.

God made everything. He therefore owns all of creation, and has authority over it: "The sea is His for He made it" (Ps. 95:5). He has the right to rule creation because it belongs to Him. He does not depend upon His creation; it depends on Him.

Therefore, He also has unrivalled power to rule. History is not a cosmic tug-of-war between God and humans, or God and the devil. God is in charge. He does whatever pleases Him (Ps. 115:3).

Scripture describes many aspects of God's rule. He makes the sun rise and He sends rain (Matt. 5:45). He accounts for every sparrow that falls from the air, and each hair on our heads (Matt. 10:29-30). He rules the wind and waves (Ps. 89:9). He even controls chance events, like rolling dice or drawing lots (Prov. 16:33). And He is not just sovereign over inanimate objects; He also governs human decisions (Prov. 16:1, 9; 21:1).

In other words, as Creator, God controls everything that happens in His creation (Eph. 1:11). Nothing happens unless He wills it. This does not mean that He causes sin. Human beings remain responsible for their wicked actions. So, for example, the cross was the sinful act of evil men, and yet also the perfect plan of a loving God (Acts 2:23). God does whatever He pleases. And whatever He does is good.

But God is not only sovereign in creation. The mighty Creator is also sovereign in salvation.

God chooses whom to save

Salvation is God's work from first to last. Christians did not choose God; He chose us. And all those He chooses shall be saved.

By nature, fallen humans are helpless. We are dead in sin (Eph. 2:1). Just as a corpse could not respond if someone spoke to it, so sinful men and women are incapable of responding to the gospel. We cannot come to Jesus of our own accord. No-one can come to Him and believe in Him unless the Father draws them (Jn. 6:44).

So, our only hope is for God to act. And this is what He has done. Before He created the world, He chose whom He would save in Christ (Eph. 1:4). And those He has chosen, He gives to His Son, who will never lose them (Jn. 6:37, 39).

God did not choose these people because He saw anything good in them. Rather, election is a sign of His free, unmerited love. The Lord did not choose Israel because they were more impressive than the surrounding nations. They were not a good catch. They had nothing they could offer Him. God chose them because He loved them (Deut. 7:6-8). And as it was for Israel, so it is for the Christian believer. God's decision to save any Christian was His free choice, made because He loves them.

But what about free will?

Some people stumble over the doctrine of election because they think it denies free will – our right and ability to choose whether to believe or reject the gospel. However, the Bible nowhere says that fallen humans have this freedom. We are not free, we are slaves: slaves to sin (Jn. 8:34).