

# What does the Bible say about the doctrine of election?

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This Sunday, we consider 1 Corinthians 1:26–31, a passage that touches on an often confused doctrine—the doctrine of election. To help get a handle on what Scriptures says about election, we consider the way Scripture speaks of election.

## Election in the Bible

In the Bible, the word “election” is used in a number of ways. For instance, in Matthew 24 Jesus speaks of “the elect” (vv. 22, 24, 31); in Romans 9 Paul explains “God’s purpose of election” (v. 11); and in Ephesians 1:4–6, Paul says the Father “chose us in him before the foundation of the world,” and “in love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” These are but three examples that undergird the doctrine of election.

While debated and sometime distorted, the doctrine is plainly biblical. ‘Chose,’ ‘elect,’ ‘election,’ and ‘predestined’ are Bible words. And when they are read in conjunction with passages that speak of God’s unique relationship with his sheep (John 10:26), his children (John 11:51–52), the ones given to the Son before the foundation of the world (John 17), and his appointment of some to believe (Acts 13:48), the evidence for unconditional election is incredibly strong.

Let’s consider five ways the New Testament speaks of election.

### 1. Election prompts praise to God.

The first thing to recognize is that election is a source of praise. Jesus praises the Father for hiding himself from the proud and revealing himself to the children (Matthew 11:25–27). Paul follows suit when he praises God for the Father’s eternal purposes in salvation:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:3–6)

In both passages, election (the particular grace of God given to some and not others) is described as a reason for praise. The same is true for Peter. In the salutation of his first epistle (1:1–2), he celebrates the “elect” identity of followers of Christ.

All in all, the doctrine of election should lead Christians to praise God. Nowhere in Scripture does the doctrine incite anger. Just the opposite. Those who know the Lord, praise God for his eternal choice to bless them.

## **2. Election humbles the sinner.**

Charles Hodge once said, the doctrines of grace humble a man without degrading him and exalt a man without inflating him. Indeed, as Paul himself models, election moves a man to boast in his Lord and in his own weaknesses. While those who deny unconditional election may boast in God alone, it is the doctrine of election that eliminates any trace of man’s contribution to his own salvation.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 Paul indicates God’s grace does not depend on any human condition. In fact, God delights to choose the things that ‘are not’ to shame the things that are. In this regard, election shuts the mouths of those who trust in themselves. It silences human hubris, which so naturally leads men to glorify themselves. Election crucifies pride and leads to praise for God’s undeserved mercy.

## **3. Election motivates ministry and evangelism.**

The most explicit place where election motivates evangelism is in 2 Timothy. There, Paul reveals the hardships of his ministry are overcome by his confidence in God’s election. “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2:10).

Paul reveals a similar sentiment in Titus 1:1. Opening his letter to Titus, he says, “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Christ Jesus, for the sake of the faith of the elect.” In these words, Paul seeks to increase the faith of the elect. He does this by means of instruction (v. 2) and preaching (v. 3). But underlying these ministries of the Word is his steadfast confidence that there are people in Crete whom God has chosen before the foundation of the world.

While election is often thought to undermine evangelism Matthew 11:25–30; John 6:44–45; Acts 18:9–11; and Romans 9–10 prove the opposite.

## **4. Election increases assurance in the Lord’s salvation.**

The doctrine of election also brings assurance to believers. This may surprise many who’ve been taught election compromises assurance, but Scripture goes the other way.

For instance, 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5 unites the doctrine of election to personal assurance. Paul speaks openly about his confidence in the Thessalonians standing before God, so much so that he can speak of God choosing them. Instead of encouraging them to question their election, he looks at the way the gospel has saved them and pronounces that they are genuine believers, elect by God.

Christians who want to be more established in their faith focus on the gospel, not on the mysteries of election. As faith produces love and good deeds, we praise God for uniting us to

Christ—from eternity past to eternity future. Election, in this way, is a source of assurance and another source for praise.

## **5. Election explains why some believe and others do not.**

Finally, the doctrine of election helps make sense of the world. In a world where some believe and others don't, the question is asked: Why? Why don't all those who grow up in church remain? Why do some immoral opponents of Christ eventually submit to the Lord and believe in the gospel?

The answer: It is a mystery. But only to us. It is not mysterious to God. He knows all who are his (2 Timothy 2:19). And he explains how election is a necessary and blessed gift to bring us into a relationship with him. While many passages speak of this (John 10:26; 12:37–41; Acts 13:48; 1 Peter 2:8; etc.) speak of this reality, none are more thorough than Romans 9.

*If you've never read Romans 9 in full, let me encourage you to take time to do so.*

In that chapter Paul explains how God's promises to Israel can be fulfilled. He begins by distinguishing the elect nation, with the spiritually elect ("not all [ethnic] Israel is [true] Israel, v. 6). Building on that premise, he explains God's pattern of election in the Old Testament (vv. 7–13). In his argument, he asserts Esau and Pharaoh are guilty for their unbelief, but that those who do believe do so by his gracious choice.

All in all, what we find in Romans 9 is the wondrous reality that God chooses to have mercy on sinners. At the same time, Paul also teaches God's judgment is not due to some eternal predestination for hell. Rather, God permitted the likes of Esau and Pharaoh to pursue their own damnable desires. Succinctly, salvation is entirely from the Lord; condemnation is the just reward for sinners who refuse to believe the gospel.

Paul anticipates his asymmetrical explanation of salvation history will produce questions. So he finishes his argument by appealing to God as the potter. As Paul puts it, "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use" (v. 21).

In the verses that follow, Paul says the potter will fashion some vessels of mercy while he patiently endures those who make themselves into vessels of wrath. Notice the asymmetry of language: vessels of wrath are prepared in time by their own sins; vessels of mercy are prepared beforehand by God.

Romans 9 gives the final answer that all things happen on earth as the Lord has decreed. Though the world is filled with secondary agents—many of whom are wicked—it is the God of Joseph, Job, and Jesus who has the first and final say in all things (Ephesians 1:11). Election stands as his purpose to save a people for his own possession from a human race naturally bent to reject him (see Romans 3:10–23).

## **Praise God From Whom All Blessing FLOW...Even Election**

In sum, the New Testament never argues for election, per se. It always speaks of election in conjunction with other things that God is doing. Election is a doctrine that

- leads believers to praise;
- humbles those who know the Lord and those who don't;

- motivates missions and evangelism;
- brings assurance to those who believe the gospel;
- helps makes sense of the world in which we live.

In all these ways, the doctrine of election is not something to be hidden under a rug; it is a wondrous doctrine for which believers should praise God.

For His Glory and your joy, Pastor David