

Bible Study

Chosen: The Doctrine Of Election



Trinity Church Adelaide

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Chosen: The Doctrine of Election

The Doctrine of Election and the closely related Doctrine of Predestination are aspects of the Bible's teaching that have led to countless discussions and sometimes heated debate. Yet it is our conviction that election is not only taught in scripture, but that it reflects the majesty, holiness, justice and mercy of our great God. Article 17 of the 39 Articles of Religion of the Anglican Church boldly claims that '...the godly consideration of predestination, and our election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort...' I hope that as we explore this together we might grow in our adoration of God for his majestic glory and loving mercy, while also growing in our appreciation of the great comfort of his sovereign grace to us in Christ.

These studies are built around three questions that are often asked of Election: Is it true? Is it fair? Does it work? To be clear, these studies have been written from a conviction that the answer to all three questions is yes, but the desire is that the studies might provide an opportunity to wrestle with this together with humility under God's word. As we do this, it's likely that we're not going to answer all the questions we began with and we might even come up new questions we hadn't thought of before. Almost certainly we'll have various reactions to what we read and discuss and some of these reactions may reflect deep emotions and strongly held opinions. It is vital that as we wrestle with God and his word together we do so with 'righteousness, faith, love and peace' and 'don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments [that] produce quarrels' as Paul put it bluntly in 2 Timothy 2:22-23. In all this, may the message of Christ dwell among us richly and whatever we do, whether in word or deed, may we do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17)

Through this time wrestling together with God and his word I pray that we will grow in our knowledge and love of him and his astounding mercy to us in Christ Jesus.

Your brother in Christ,

Simon Marshman

Study 1 – Election: Is it true?

We've just spent a couple of months learning from the book of Genesis together.

- What examples come to mind of how Genesis shows us that God is in control?

- What examples come to mind of how Genesis shows us that humans are responsible for the choices we make?

Throughout the Bible we see these two realities held up side by side: that God is in control over all things (that is to say that he is sovereign); and that we are responsible for our choices. In the Doctrine of Election these two realities are shown to apply to salvation. As one author sums it up concisely, "from eternity God has chosen some for salvation in Christ, but has left others to their own choice of rebellion against him." (from Broughton Knox *Everlasting Purpose* Matthias Media, 2015, page 5)

- What is your initial *emotional* reaction to this summary statement?

- What questions do you have about the doctrine of election?

We can't guarantee that we'll answer all these questions. God has a lot to say about this, and we can't cover it all, but this series of three studies looks at three categories of questions that we tend to have about Election: Is it true? Is it fair? Does it work? Let's turn to the first of these questions now.

Among the many passages that would be fruitful to look at, consider at least the first two of these (the section in italics is worth doing if you have time, but most groups will need to leave them to be done during the week):

Read **Ephesians 1:3-14**

- When did God choose his children?
- What was the reason God chose us?
- What are the results of being chosen?
- Does Paul view God's election as a positive or negative thing?

Read **Matthew 11:20-30**

We see in verses 20-24 that Jesus speaks about those who have not repented despite his extensive ministry among them. He clearly implies their responsibility for the choice they have made about him.

- From what Jesus says in verses 25-26, what choice has God made and why?
- From verse 27, what choice has Jesus made?
- What does Jesus then call for in verses 28-29? Identify the two instructions and the promises attached to them.
- Does Jesus see any contradiction between election (as demonstrated in the choices he attributes to the Father and the Son) and the responsibility we have to respond to his call by trusting his promises?

Read Romans 8:28-30

Paul is in the middle of a long discussion about the great assurance we have in Christ, even when we fear condemnation (8:1), experience suffering (8:18), or worry that the future seems uncertain (8:38-39).

- *How do verses 28-30 sum up the basic reason for confidence in the face of all these concerns?*

- *How does this passage shape our confidence and hope in the face of various threats to our faith in Christ?*

Read John 6:35-44, 60-69

We've skipped a block of text, but that's not because it is unimportant. It's just that the 15 verses we've skipped are unpacking Jesus' massive claim in verse 35, and it is that claim that is referred to as 'a hard teaching' in verse 60. At this point we're more interested to see how people respond to that claim than how Jesus illustrated it in verses 45-59.

- *What enables people to believe that Jesus is God's ultimate provision for our ultimate satisfaction (to paraphrase verse 35)? (see verses 37, 39, 44, 65)*

- *What does Jesus promise to do for those who believe in him?*

- *What two responses do we see from his disciples? (see verses 66-69)*

- *What impact do you think the Apostle John intended for this account to have on us as his readers? What response do you think he is aiming for?*

- *Near the end of his Gospel, John tells us that he recorded this 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31). So based on what we've read from John 6, as someone reads John's gospel what needs to take place for them 'to have life in his name'?*
 1. *God needs to draw them to Jesus.*
 2. *They need to choose to come to Jesus and believe in him.*
 3. *Both 1 and 2.*

Read Acts 13:46-48

In Acts 13 we read a detailed account of Paul and Barnabas preaching the gospel in the Jewish Synagogue in the city of Pisidian Antioch (see 13:13). They receive a mixed response, but the Jewish response is mainly negative (13:43-45).

- *How does Paul's answer in verse 46 demonstrate our responsibility for whether we accept the gospel or not?*
- *How does Luke's summary statement in verse 48 demonstrate the reality of God's election of some to eternal life?*

This brief survey likely raises many questions heading in various directions. Take a moment to jot them down to consider across the next few weeks rather than trying to tackle them all now.

Setting those questions to one side for now, from the passages we've just read:

- Who makes the first move in salvation?
- What contribution do we make to our salvation?

- Did the writers of the Bible seem to see any contradiction between God's election on the one hand and our choice to accept or reject Christ as Lord on the other?

Each time the Bible mentions God's election it is presented as a good thing.

- Do you find this easy or hard to accept?

- How can we respond in thanks and praise to God in light of this, as Jesus did in Matthew 11 and Paul did in Ephesians 1, for example?

It can feel like the doctrine of election is quite abstract compared with daily life.

- Consider one thing you've learnt from this study and ask yourself the basic question "What difference will this make if it is true?" Perhaps it will be something that you want to pray about, something you want to trust, or an action you need to take. Share this with someone and pray for each other in light of what you've learnt.

- Re-write Ephesians 1:3-14 into your own prayer to use each day this week, asking God to keep shaping our hearts as we meditate on his word.

Study 2 – Election: Is it fair?

Share with one or two people how you'd like to be praying in the pattern of Ephesians 1 this week.

- Has this impacted any of the questions you have about this doctrine or any of the emotional reactions you have about it?

For many people, the Doctrine of Election raises questions of fairness. Is it fair for God to choose some to save and not others? Is election unjust? Is election unloving? The Bible states repeatedly and the cross shows undoubtedly that God is both just and loving, but the Bible also has a fair bit to say about the Doctrine of Election (in fact, what we looked at last week is just the tip of the iceberg). In one of the longest passages on the topic the question 'is this fair?' is exactly what Paul discusses. Let's look at Romans 9:10-25 together:

Read **Romans 9:10-25**

To help us grapple with this passage, before we respond based on our gut reaction, it is really worth taking the time to set it in context using the Biblical events Paul refers to in this passage. For those wanting to look further afield, the comments in italics below are suggestions for pre-reading, because time constraints mean that most groups will need to skip this part.

Read the descriptions of the human condition that Paul set out in Romans 1:18-20 and 3:9-18. (If you like, you could compare these descriptions with the global statement of Genesis 6:5 and 8:21, or the very personal portrayal of Psalm 51:1-5)

How would you summarise these descriptions of humanity?

Where does that leave us if God is justice without mercy?

You might also like to note Romans 3 began with a question that is very similar to the one raised in Romans 9. In 3:5-8 the question could be paraphrased: "If our sin makes God look good by contrasting with his holiness and by giving opportunity for him to be gracious – then isn't God being unfair to bring his wrath on us as condemned sinners?" Paul's response to that question was very clear: certainly not! After outlining the universal reality of our innate sinfulness, Paul introduced the great message of hope in contrast to our human condition in sin in 3:21-26.

Who is the offer of salvation for?

What makes salvation possible?

How does this underline God's justice?

*To give some more immediate context to what Paul's dealing with, read **Romans 8:38-9:3** to see how Paul concludes chapter 8 with such great assurance of the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, but then faces the terrible reality that so many of his fellow Jews do not share this assurance because they are not in Christ.*

To get our heads around Romans 9 It is helpful to consider the Old Testament references that Paul uses:

Re-read **Romans 9:10-13**

- From what we have just learned of Jacob and Esau from our time in Genesis, was there anything that made Jacob intrinsically superior to Esau? (Read Genesis 25:21-26 if you want a brief reminder).
- How does this Old Testament reference challenge any sense that we might be worthy of God's kindness ourselves?

Re-read **Romans 9:14-15**

This quote comes from Exodus 32:19. The backstory is that God has rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mt Sinai where he has been graciously giving them his law. While Moses was on the mountain with God, the people got impatient and made a golden idol in the shape of a calf.

Read **Exodus 32:30-34** to see what they deserve.

- What does this show us about God's justice?

In what follows in Exodus 33 Moses intercedes on Israel's behalf. He pleads with God to show mercy to his people on the basis of his character not theirs. God then shows remarkable mercy in the chapters that follow, ratifying the covenant promises with the people and promising not only to give them the land, but also to remain with them.

Read **Exodus 33:19-20**

- What does this teach us about God's character?

- Given this background, what do you think the point is that Paul is making by quoting from this episode in Romans 9:14-15?

Re-read **Romans 9:16-18**

The scripture referred to in v17 is Exodus 9:16, which is right in the middle of the plagues brought on Egypt to set Israel free from slavery.

Read Exodus 9:13-19.

- What does verse 15 say God could have rightly done if he wanted?

- What hint of ongoing mercy does verse 19 give?

In the story of God's interaction with Pharaoh in Exodus 5 to 14, we know that Pharaoh is hard hearted and that moving forward from this episode God contributes to Pharaoh's hard heartedness (see Exodus 7:3, 13, 22, 8:15, 19, 32, 9:7, 12, 34, 10:1, 20, 27, 11:9, 14:1, 8, 17). Throughout this account there is no doubt that Pharaoh and Egypt were utterly deserving of what they got – indeed there were various hints of mercy offered along the way as God gave both warning and opportunity to avoid the plagues (such as we saw in 9:19).

Returning to Romans 9:14-18 as a block we now see God's judgment towards disobedient idolatrous Pharaoh alongside God's mercy towards disobedient idolatrous Israel (who had just been saved from Pharaoh!).

- What made Israel more worthy of God's mercy than Pharaoh?
- What did they both deserve if God acted in justice?
- How does this challenge any sense that we, or anyone we know and love, are deserving of God's mercy?

With all this background in mind, read **Romans 9:19-25** again. This remains a really tough question and response to grapple with. None of us really like being put in our place – as verse 20 certainly does!

- How has the background that we've considered given context to these strong words?

- How do you feel about what is said here?

Verses 23-25 help us see that the whole purpose of this section is to increase our appreciation for God's mercy that is summed up in the quote from Hosea, where God says "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people." With this in mind,

- How has this careful reading of Romans 9 increased your appreciation of God's mercy?

- What aspects of this passage remain unclear to you?

- Recognising that there may still be things we struggle to understand, let's turn to Paul's conclusion to the matter, which he comes to after another two chapters of wrestling with it.

Read **Romans 11:33-12:2**

- How would you sum up this conclusion?

- What would it look like for us to pray in light of this in the coming week?

Study 3 – Election: Does it work?

In the last two studies we've asked a couple of big questions that many people have about the Doctrine of Election. But there are a number of practical questions about the Doctrine of Election that can be summed up in the third of our questions: Does it work? To be clear, we don't mean 'Does it work?' in the sense of asking whether God is actually able to choose the people he wants to choose. Rather, we could ask about three particular practical issues: Does the Doctrine of Election remove the impetus for evangelism? Does the Doctrine of Election mean we can be complacent about enduring in the faith? Does the Doctrine of Election make it pointless to pray, because God has already decided what he's doing ahead of time?

Let's look at each of these – or you could choose to focus on one as a group and the others in your own time.

Study 3 Part 1 – Election and Evangelism:

- From what we've discussed in the last two studies, do you think the Doctrine of Election increases or reduces enthusiasm for evangelism?

Let's start digging into this by considering Paul's own conversion as a case study. Begin by reading of the first time we are introduced to Paul, who went by the name Saul at that time. We meet Paul at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Read **Acts 7:54-8:3**

- On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being someone who seems unlikely to come to faith in Christ and 10 being someone who seems right on the verge of accepting him as Lord, what score would you give Saul? (You might like to read how Ananias reacted when God sent him to speak to Saul about Jesus in Acts 9:10-18).
- What does this suggest about whether there are visible signs of whether a non-Christian has been predestined by God for salvation?

- Read how Paul recalls the occasion of his conversion in Galatians 1:13-24. How does he connect God's sovereign choice with his conversion?

Let's move on from Paul's experience to see how he teaches about evangelism alongside election. Read **Romans 10:1-15**

- How does this passage emphasise the importance of evangelism?
- How does 10:9-11 sum up the response to the gospel necessary for salvation?
- Recalling that the preceding context of Romans 9 highlighted God's sovereign choice in salvation, you could say something like:
The proclamation of the gospel is God's chosen means for saving those he has chosen to save.
How does this perspective challenge our assumption that election diminishes evangelism?

Turn to Acts 13:46-14:1. Here we read the conclusion of Paul and Barnabas' evangelistic mission in Pisidian Antioch followed by the beginning of their mission in Iconium.

- How does 13:48 sum up their evangelism from a perspective of God's sovereign choice?
- How does 14:1 sum up their evangelism from the perspective of human responsibility?
- How does this help us see both a concerted effort in evangelism and an underlying awareness of God's sovereignty in election?

Read **2 Timothy 2:8-10** which forms part of Paul 'passing the baton' of evangelism to his young colleague Timothy.

- How does the Doctrine of Election give us good reason to sacrifice comfort and endure suffering for the sake of evangelism?

Putting this all together, consider how the Doctrine of Election fuels evangelism in the following scenarios:

- You're trying to summon the courage to talk to a non-Christian friend about Jesus, but you don't know if you've got all the answers to the questions you're sure they're going to ask.
- You've been praying for a family member to come to faith in Christ and nothing seems to be changing.
- You've been asked to help lead a Jesus Works course, but the last time you ran one no one came to faith in Jesus even though you're confident the gospel was clearly proclaimed and they seemed fairly engaged.

Share with someone one way that you're encouraged in evangelism in light of the Doctrine of Election. What is one concrete action you can take this week in light of what we've been studying? Give thanks together for what we've learnt and pray for each other in the steps you hope to take.

If you want to read further on this, see 'Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God' by J.I. Packer

Study 3 Part 2 - Election and Perseverance:

Begin by discussing the following to scenarios:

Ann Ziety is plagued by doubts about whether or not she's really a Christian. She knows that salvation is not by works but by faith in Jesus Christ. But this doesn't help because her problem is that, although she really does believe that Jesus died for her sins, she's worried that her name might still not be 'written in the book of life' (Revelation 20:15). How might you comfort her?

Con Placent has been a Christian all his life and has had the 'Doctrines of Grace' – including election – drilled into him for as long as he can remember. This has always been of great comfort to him, particularly when he has occasionally strayed into some less-than-ideal behaviour, as he knows that nothing can take him out of God's hand. Recently, however, he has found himself less and less concerned about the ungodly aspects of his behaviour because of this. How might you warn Con?

Read **1 Peter 1:1-9**

- How does Peter address his readers in verses 1-2?
- What is the end goal God has in mind for them? (see verses 7 & 9)
- What can they expect in the meantime and how should they conduct themselves?
- How does this speak into the scenarios with Ann and Con above?

Read **Philippians 2:12-13**

- Who is described as being at work in the perseverance of the Christian?
- Verses 12 and 13 are connected with the word 'for' in the sense of 'because'. How does verse 13 contribute to the encouragement to do verse 12?

Read **John 10:27-28**

- What does Jesus say his sheep do?
- What does Jesus say he and his Father will ensure?
- How might this be an encouragement to Ann?

Read **1 Thessalonians 5:23-24**

- You've been chatting with Con from the scenario above and he isn't all that impressed with the concerns you raise. He quickly quotes this passage in response. What does this passage affirm and how is it a source of great encouragement?
- Briefly consider the context of this quote by skimming the rest of 1 Thessalonians 5. How does this context help correct Con's dismissive use of this passage as a 'proof text' to justify his ungodliness?

- Many of us will know of people who have professed faith in Christ and later they have turned their back on him. To sum up God's promise in this passage: when God calls someone he will keep them blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. If this promise can be trusted (and all of God's promises can be), what two alternative explanations are there for the situation of someone who appears to have abandoned Christ? How can each of these options provide a helpful warning to us?

Bringing these reflections together:

- How are you encouraged to rest in God's work in your life to grow you in faith?

- How are you challenged to strive for obedience in response to God's grace?

- Share these reflections with someone and consider how you might put it into practice: what will you do, when will you do it, and how can you pray for each other until you catch up again next week?

If you want to read further on this see 'The Everlasting Purpose' by Broughton Knox

Study 3 Part 3 – Election and Prayer:

Discuss the following bumper sticker claim: “Prayer Changes Things”

Read **Acts 4:23-30**.

This scene comes immediately after the arrest, imprisonment, threatening and release of Peter and John for preaching the gospel.

- In the face of such hardship, what is the first action they take?
- List all the ways they affirm God’s sovereignty over the situation?
- How do they affirm human responsibility?
- How is prayer itself a reflection of both realities – that God is sovereign and that he calls us to act?

Read **Matthew 6:7-13**

- How does Jesus affirm God’s sovereignty and our dependence on him?
- Given this is the passage where Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray, a bold confidence in God’s sovereignty clearly shouldn’t reduce our incentive to pray. How does the Lord’s Prayer teach us to ask things of God even though he is totally in control?

Read **Daniel 9:1-19**

Daniel prays as one of the Israelites in exile in Babylon and from verse 1 we know he prays right at the time of the fall of the Babylonian kingdom in 539BC. So he's praying right about the time when Jeremiah had said they'd be getting ready to go home (verse 2). Though Daniel didn't know it, it turns out that this was just one year before the decree was made for the Israelites to return home! (see Ezra 1:1)

- With this context in mind, what stands out to you about Daniel's prayer?

- How is this an example of a prayer that has been informed by the knowledge of God's promises and a conviction that he is powerful to fulfill them?

- In many ways God hasn't given us specific details in his promises to us like what Daniel had in the scripture from Jeremiah that stipulated the length of the exile. For example, we don't have a specific timeline for when Jesus will return and we don't have a list of who God has predestined for salvation. However, what might it look like for us to pray with Daniel's confidence in God's promises to us?

Consider the following quote as a helpful summary of what we've discussed:

"If I pray aright, God is graciously working out his purpose in me and through me, and the praying, though mine, is simultaneously the fruit of God's powerful work in me through his Spirit. By this God-appointed means I become an instrument to bring about a God-appointed end."
(Don Carson in *Praying with Paul*)

- In light of what we've learned from the Bible, how are you moved to pray differently? Do you feel encouraged, rebuked, challenged, informed...?

- What would it look like to pray your own version of the three prayers we've read (from Acts 4, Matthew 6, Daniel 9) this week?

- Who are two non-Christians that you could commit to praying for over the next 3 months? Share these names with a prayer partner and commit to praying together for them in light of God's sovereign grace and asking that in his mercy he might choose to use your humble prayers as part of his appointed means to call his children home.

*If you want to read further on this, see *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* by Don Carson*

