

How Does Election Occur?

Unconditional Election, pt 2

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We ended part 1, “Chosen in Him,” with several questions: Is saving belief a work that is a condition to becoming elect? Does election have conditions? Are there good works we must do to remain one of the elect? Is Jesus’ testimony in Matthew 7:21 that “he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” will “enter into the Kingdom of Heaven” a reference to such works?

Before we answer these questions, we must understand when election occurred. Jacob is listed among the faithful in Hebrews 11. Although he lived before the time of Christ, he was among the elect (as demonstrated by his faith in God’s promises of what was to come). We read of his election in Romans 9:11-13: “For being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him who calls, it was said to her, ‘The elder will serve the younger.’ Even as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

The Scripture tells us that Jacob was elect before he was born, and that his election—because it was before he was born—was not based on any works he could have done. Some might object that God may have made an exception for Jacob in electing him before he was born. Let’s see if other Scriptures concerning election agree with what happened to Jacob.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13a, Paul tells the Christians in Thessalonica that “God chose you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth.” Here we see election occurring not just immediately before birth, but long before birth, “from the beginning.” And Ephesians 1:4 says, “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.” This is a reference to eternity.

Our questions about whether election has conditions are answered plainly in 2 Timothy 1:9, which speaks of God: “who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given to us in Christ Jesus before times eternal.” Our election is from eternity (the Greek here literally says, “before the times of the ages”). Notice also that it is specifically not according to our works, but according to God’s own purpose and grace.

If election is by grace, then it is not by works. They cannot both be the cause of election: “Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work” (Romans 11:5-6). Election occurred in eternity completely by grace.

But there are those who agree that works are not a precondition to election in time—that is, works

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do not precede election in time as we experience it. But these people say that God looked ahead from eternity and elected only those whom He saw would do good works—these works include accepting the call to salvation and the good works they would do once they are saved. Then God elected only these people.

Those who hold this view, which does not have biblical support, do so because they are concerned not to interfere with man's free will. This view implies that God's decisions are reactions to man's will. God, they say, looks ahead from eternity, sees if someone will believe the Gospel and live a good Christian life, and then He puts that person among His list of the elect.

This strips God of His omnipotence, and gives man a vital part in his own salvation, something the Bible emphatically denies. Read Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast." Paul also says this: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.... Where then is the boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. We maintain therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Romans 3:24, 27-28).

Christian philosopher and theologian Gordon Clark points out another problem with the erroneous "looking ahead" idea:

But if this "looking ahead" were accurate, and unchangeable, the man's will would not be free. Some factor in the dim distant past would have had to determine the will so that it could not change. If it was not God who determined the act of faith, then there must be some power beyond God's control that did so, for a completely free will is not subject to accurate prediction. For reasons such as these Paul wrote "God chose you from the beginning."

—Gordon H. Clark, *First and Second Thessalonians*
(Jefferson, Md.: The Trinity Foundation, 1986), 102

But what of Jesus' assertion in Matthew 7:21 that the one "who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" will "enter into the Kingdom of Heaven"? Isn't this a reference to some sort of works upon which election is conditioned? Let's look at the context.

Verses 13 and 14 tell us to enter eternal life through the narrow gate and restricted way, which is Jesus Christ. We read in verses 15-20 about false prophets likened to wolves in sheep's clothing and to corrupt trees bringing forth evil fruit. Even though the wolves may look like sheep on the outside, they are still wolves inwardly. Notice also that corrupt trees cannot change themselves to bring forth good fruit; only good trees can bring forth good fruit. This is a reference to election and reprobation.

This is followed by verses 21-23 containing the passage in question, and these verses are then followed by 24-27, the parable of the house built on a rock (Christ) and the house built on sand (not on Christ).

It would be very strange for Jesus, in the midst of these sayings about salvation through Christ and only the good being able to bear good fruit, to say something about having to do works for salvation. In fact, this is not what He is saying; at least, He is not talking about works of human origin.

Verses 21–23 are about those who will be saved and those who will not. Who in these verses will not be saved? Those who do many works (verse 22), but not the will of the Father. Who will be saved? Those who do the will of the Father (verse 21). What is the will of the Father? Jesus, speaking primarily of the Father’s will for Him, but also of the Father’s will for those whom the Father has given Him, says, “This is the will of my Father who sent me, that of all he has given to me I should lose nothing, but should raise him up at the last day. This is the will of the one who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son, and believes in him, should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:39-40). Jesus is speaking about election. The will of the Father is what He has foreordained for His elect to do: believe the Gospel and walk in the works “which God prepared before that we would walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Matthew 7:21–23 is about election and reprobation.

God chose His elect purely by His sovereign will, and He extends mercy to—saves—His elect because they are His sovereignly chosen elect. Read Romans 9:15–16: “For he said to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who has mercy” (Romans 9:15-16). Willing and running are references to the will of man and the works of man. In other words, neither the will of man nor the works of man can influence God in the matter of extending mercy toward the elect. It is the sovereign act of the sovereign God.

It is pure sovereign grace which alone determines the exercise of Divine mercy. God expressly affirms this fact in Rom. 9:15.... It is not the wretchedness of the creature which causes Him to show mercy, for God is not influenced by things outside of Himself as we are.... Still less is it the merits of the creatures which causes Him to bestow mercies upon them, for it is a contradiction in terms to speak of meriting “mercy.” “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us” (Titus 3:5)—the one standing in direct antithesis to the other.

—Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*
(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1975), 74

Works After Salvation?

If our works are not a precondition to God electing us to salvation, and if God does not choose His elect by looking ahead to see if they will do good works after they become Christians, can our works have anything to do with our remaining elect to salvation? In other words, does our continuing to be saved depend on our works? If it did, would not our salvation depend on our works? Yes, and the Scriptures we have already examined unmistakably tell us this cannot be. Although, once we are saved, we do the good works God has ordained for us to do, we are not saved by these or any of our works. Ephesians 2:8–10 makes this perfectly clear.

Also consider that if the elect’s continuing in a saved state depended on their works, they might lose

their salvation if they didn't do these works. But the Bible states this is impossible: "Who [Jesus Christ] will also confirm you until the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:8); and, "Being confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). Remember also Jesus' words concerning His elect in John 10:28: "I give eternal life to them. They will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

What Must You Do to Be Saved?

What must you do to be saved? You can do nothing to save yourself. Jesus has already saved His elect by dying on the Cross. If you are among His elect, you will believe the Gospel, trusting in Jesus Christ alone as your Savior. You will do this because it is God's will (which cannot be thwarted—see 2 Chronicles 20:6; Daniel 4:35; Romans 9:20–21), and because it is not really your work at all, "For it is God who works in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). If you are not among the elect, you will not believe the Gospel. Believing only whatever part of the Gospel seems reasonable to you while rejecting the rest or believing a corrupt gospel is the same as not believing at all. No works you try to substitute for the work of God will ever earn you salvation.

And what is the Gospel you must believe? Briefly, it is that all humans (including you) are sinful and unable to do anything to save themselves from the damnation that will result from their sinfulness (Isaiah 64:6–7; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:10–12, 23; 6:23a). But the Good News is that the Son of God was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14; Matthew 16:16; Philippians 2:5–8). He lived a perfectly righteous, sinless life (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:5). He suffered and died for the sins of His people, taking upon Him the punishment they deserved, dying for their sins, and satisfying the justice of the Father and turning away, or propitiating, God's wrath (Isaiah 53:5–6; Matthew 20:28; Romans 3:25; 4:25; 5:6–9; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Galatians 1:4; 3:13; Ephesians 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:9; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 4:10). On the cross, Jesus said, "It is finished," and by that He meant that He had completely accomplished the salvation of His people (John 19:30; Colossians 1:20; Hebrews 9:28; 10:10). Nothing more need ever—indeed must never—be added to what Jesus has done (Romans 11:6; Galatians 5:4). On the third day, He rose from the grave (1 Corinthians 15:4). This provided evidence of the justification of His saints (Romans 4:25), for if their sins that He bore on the cross were still on Him, He would not have risen. Christ rose, therefore His elect's sins are gone! His rising also proved Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 28:6; Luke 24:6–7; Romans 1:4). Those who believe the Gospel (because they are elect and God has given them saving faith through a miraculous renewing of their minds known as regeneration or being born again) and trust in Jesus Christ alone as Savior have their sins forgiven and are saved (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:18). They are declared "not guilty," (justified) (Romans 3:28; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:24). God counts or imputes the righteousness of Jesus Christ as theirs; it is as if they wear Christ's righteousness as a robe, and when God looks on them He sees Christ's righteousness instead of their sinfulness (Romans 5:18; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Revelation 7:9, 13–14; 19:7–8). Because of what Jesus Christ has done, the elect are saved (Romans 6:23b; 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10; 2 Timothy 2:10; Hebrews 5:8–9).

Remember, there is nothing you can do to make yourself elect. Who is elect and who is not is entirely up to God's sovereign will. But if you believe the Gospel, you can know that you are among the

elect, and you are saved. But be careful: If you believe that there is something you can add to what Christ has done to make yourself acceptable to God, or if you believe that Christ's sacrifice was not sufficient to save you, you do not believe the Gospel.

If you would like more information about the Gospel, and what the Gospel is not—for there are many false gospels—you can download our booklet, *What Is the Gospel?*, from this page (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/printable-booklets/>).

He who didn't spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how would he not also with him freely give us all things? Who could bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who justifies.

Romans 8:32-33