

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 27

How Does God Choose Who Will Be Saved?

The question of God's choice regarding those who will be saved is a major divide between Calvinism and Arminianism (introduced in chapter 11). Notice that the question is not "Does God choose those who will be saved?" The Bible clearly says God chooses, or elects, those who will be saved. For example,

He chose [or, elected] us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.

Ephesians 1:4–5

Note that chose and predestined are essentially the same in meaning here. So, we are contemplating the doctrine of predestination, a subcategory of the doctrine of divine providence (see chapter 11). A common misconception is that Calvinists believe in divine election and predestination while Arminians do not. However, the Bible says God does indeed choose and predestine. The question is not *does* God elect? but how does God elect—on what basis?

Conditional Election

Arminians believe in *conditional* election. They hold that given God's ability to look into the future and know for certain what will happen before it happens, he knows beforehand who will believe in Jesus and be saved. Based on this "foreknowledge," he chooses them for salvation "before the creation of the world" (**Ephesians 1:4**). "Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (**Romans 8:29; compare 1 Peter 1:2**).

The condition, then, is the person's saving faith, which God foreknows. This fits with what we have already seen to be central to Arminian theology, that because God's love is perfect, he gives all people free will, including the ability to trust in Christ or reject Christ. Therefore, with regard to salvation, God's choice in election is based on the individual's choice regarding Christ (even though that choice has not yet been made in the flow of history).

Two key biblical texts for the Arminian view are

1 Timothy 2:4—“[God] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth”—and

2 Peter 3:9—“*[The Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*”

Since God loves all people (**John 3:16**), shows no partiality (**Deuteronomy 10:17; Romans 2:11**), and clearly wants *all* people to be saved (**see also Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11**), it does not make sense that he would choose some and not others for salvation apart from their decision to accept or reject Christ as Savior. It boils down to this:

- All people are sinners and deserve to go to hell.
- God loves *all* people and sent his Son to die for *all* people.
- As a result of God’s grace given to *all* people (more on this later), *all* people are able to believe in Christ for salvation.
- The choice to do so is entirely up to the individual.

According to Arminians, only this view makes sense of the multitude of biblical passages that invite sinners to believe and be saved (e.g., **Acts 16:30–31**).

Unconditional Election

Calvinists, who believe in *unconditional* election, reject any condition for God’s choice outside of God himself (specifically, the individual’s foreknown faith). God’s choice of who will be saved is based entirely on *his* plans and purposes. No biblical text says God’s choice is based on any human choice. Rather, for instance, “*He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will*” (**Ephesians 1:5**).

What about the texts that say God chose according to his foreknowledge (**Romans 8:29; 1 Peter 1:2**)? Calvinists say the Greek term translated *foreknowledge* means more than just knowing about something before it happens (a concept known as *simple foreknowledge*); it means “an intimate relationship with someone before that person is even born.” This is based on the biblical concept of “knowing” as more than intellectual; it includes relationship. For example, “[Adam] had relations with [literally, *knew*] his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain” (**Genesis 4:1 NASB**). A man’s intellectual knowledge of a woman does not produce a baby! This is why God could say of Jeremiah, “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,*

before you were born I set you apart” (Jeremiah 1:5). Surely this cannot just mean God had intellectual knowledge of Jeremiah before his birth. So the term *foreknowledge*, understood in this way, supports *unconditional* election.

Calvinists claim biblical support from texts like **John 6**, in which Jesus speaks of a “group” that the Father gives to him, draws to him, and enables to come to him (**vv. 37, 39, 44, 65**). Those not in this group cannot come; those in this group not only *can* come but do *indeed* come. This group seems to be what other texts refer to as the “elect” (**Matthew 24:22–31; Romans 8:33**). Jesus said to his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit.” This seems to deny the divine choice is based on any human choice (**John 15:16; see also Romans 9:16** [below]).

In several passages the order is significant. In **John 10:26**, Jesus says, “*You do not believe because you are not my sheep [the elect].*” **Acts 13:48** says of those who heard the gospel, “*all who were appointed for eternal life [the elect] believed.*” In both, being one of the elect produces belief, rather than the other way around (as Arminians maintain).

Probably the strongest biblical support for *unconditional* election comes from **Romans 9:1–24**. Paul argues that God has the right to make his choices: “*It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy*” (**v. 16**). This seems to rule out God’s decisions being based on anything humans want or do. The basis is within God himself, specifically his mercy.

A common criticism of this understanding of predestination is that it is unfair to base such a decision on anything but what humans freely choose. Paul addresses this: “What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!” (**v. 14**). Since God is the potter (the Creator), he has the right to do with the clay (his creation) as he chooses. Who are we to question his ways (**vv. 19–21**)?

The deep things of God are tough to understand. The complexity leads some Christians to try to avoid the whole matter. But God has spoken about it in his Word, so we ought to be willing to consider these texts, come to our own convictions, and humbly hold to them while we remember:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*

Romans 11:33

INTERESTING FACT

Apart from the two primary views described above, some believe that election is not individual but rather corporate. That is, God has not chosen for salvation certain individuals but a whole group. In the Old Testament era, he chose the nation of Israel for his special blessing. In the New Testament era, that chosen group is the church, Christ's body. If this is so, an individual can only be considered "elect" once he or she has believed in Jesus as Savior and been united with the body of Christ.