



Let's Get Ready to Rapture

First Thessalonians 1:4

"Election Daze"

If you are saved, it's because you were chosen by God before the foundations of the earth. The sovereign God of creation foreknew you and He predestined you.

All Christians believe what I just said. You **have** to believe it because it is what the Bible unequivocally teaches.

Having said that, it must be admitted that there is wide disagreement on exactly *how* you were chosen and *what* God foreknew and *when* you were predestined.

Welcome to the Doctrine of Election.

Over the past ten or so years these issues have been the hot button among Christians. Even today there is a popular movement, affectionately called Young, Restless, and Reformed, that keeps this topic burning.

Let me say that I don't anymore see arguing over election as the most valuable use of our energies as believers.

It seems to me a far more important issue, for edifying believers and evangelizing nonbelievers, to deal with the Problem of Pain in our world.

Your co-worker or neighbor or relative who just learned they or someone close to them has terminal cancer isn't going to be ministered to by a discussion of God's foreknowledge and predestination. They need to understand that God can be both omnipotent and love and yet permit suffering on account of His own longsuffering with sinners, not willing that any one of them perish, but that all come to eternal life.

Nevertheless we've come in our reading of First Thessalonians to the Doctrine of Election and it is our blessed duty and privilege to discuss it.

1Th 1:4 knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.

What is "election by God?" There are at least six ways that the concept of God's election is used in the Bible:

1. There's a verse in First Timothy that refers to certain elect angels (5:21). There the word is used to refer to the angels who did not rebel against God with Satan. They form a group, a corporate group, that includes them but excludes all others.
2. Election can simply refer to God raising you up to serve Him. When Samuel came to anoint the next king of Israel God chose - He elected - David to serve Him (First Samuel 16).
3. Jesus Christ is specifically referred to as God's Elect (Isaiah 42:1).
4. In the Old Testament the nation of Israel, as a whole, is regarded as God's elect nation (Isaiah 45:4).

5. Likewise in the New Testament the church, as a whole, is regarded as God's elect.
6. The word "elect" can be synonymous with an individual being saved.

We might, therefore, give this working definition of election: Election is God's choosing of individuals or groups to be the objects of His grace or to otherwise fulfill His purposes. Often, but not always, God's election is associated with his choice of individuals or groups unto salvation.

There is widespread disagreement as to exactly how a person is elected by God. Theologian and author John Stott frankly says. "No explanation is given except God's love." Nevertheless we struggle to understand certain aspects of God's election.

If you survey the theological landscape you'll find three prominent, recurring themes about election. They are sometimes categorized as unconditional election, conditional election, and corporate election. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but there are vast differences between them.

Unconditional election teaches that in eternity past God chose some individuals from the mass of fallen humanity to save without regard to foreseen faith in them but solely based on His sovereign discretion.

This view is associated with Reformed Theology and Calvinism. You may not know it but here are many and varied expressions of it. Not all Reformed groups agree. You can, for example, be Reformed but not be a Calvinist.

Not all Calvinists believe the same thing. It's even become popular to say that John Calvin was not really a Calvinist.

One of the major, and I feel insurmountable, conclusions of unconditional election is that if God chose some to salvation without regard to foreseen faith, **then He also chose others - perhaps the majority of the human race - to damnation.**

He could have saved more, or even all, since it was solely His prerogative; but for reasons that remain mysterious He thought it would bring Him more glory to save a few while consigning the rest to suffer in Hell, having had no choice in the matter.

Baptist theologians offer this analogy. Imagine a fireman who goes into a burning orphanage to save some young children because they are unable to escape by themselves and can be saved only if he rescues them. Only he can save them because he has the proper equipment. He comes back in a few minutes bringing out 3 of the 30 children, but rather than going back in to save more children, the fireman goes over to the news media and talks about how praiseworthy he is for saving the three children. Indeed, saving the three children was a good, heroic deed. But the pressing question on everyone's mind is, "What about the other 27 children?" Since he has the means to rescue the children and, indeed, is the only one who can save the children since they cannot save themselves, do we view the fireman as morally praiseworthy?

We would not. In fact, probably he would be charged with depraved indifference. He had the means to help them, but he would not. If we do not find that praiseworthy in a human, why would we find it praiseworthy in God?

This dual choosing on God's part is referred to as Double Predestination. If in eternity past God predestined some to salvation then He also predestined others to damnation.

Unconditional election also teaches that regeneration precedes faith. In other words, God saves you, He regenerates you, you are born-again, and only afterward can you exercise faith to believe in Him. His grace is said to be irresistible to those He has elected from eternity past and regenerated.

Let's move on. Conditional election is so-called because it is conditioned upon God's foreknowledge of faith in individuals which is made possible because of God's grace. That is, God's grace frees man's will to make the choice to believe, but you can resist this grace and remain lost. Those that God foresees will believe (as enabled by His grace) are the ones whom He chooses from the beginning for salvation.

This view is identified with Arminianism. Not *Armenian*, as in the people from Armenia, but *Arminian* after Jacob Arminius, the Dutch theologian who debated Reformed Theology in the late 1500's.

A criticism of this view is that it makes man responsible for his own salvation; that it puts too much of the choosing on man. "Man saves himself," they say.

That's not at all fair to those who hold this view. They, too, along with Reformed and Calvinist theologians see mankind as totally depraved and hopelessly lost but instead of irresistible grace acting upon your heart to save you before you exercise faith, what they call *prevenient grace* frees your will to accept or reject Jesus Christ.

Another criticism is that any election other than unconditional election undermines God's sovereignty. If you are freed, even by grace, to choose, then God is no longer sovereign.

The answer to that is to realize that God is sovereign over His own sovereignty! If, in fact, He has decided in His sovereignty to free your will to choose, how does that undermine anything?

We joke sometimes about a man doing something that might not be considered manly. We say he is comfortable with his manhood.

God, if indeed He has chosen to allow prevenient grace to free the human will, is obviously comfortable with His sovereignty.

Arminian theologian Roger Olson says,

Saying we have free will to resist and even thwart the will of God does not diminish the greatness of God's sovereignty and power because our ability to resist and thwart God's perfect will is given us by God for the sake of having real relationships with us, not artificial ones. Yes, of course, God could control us. But He doesn't. Not because we have some power over Him but because He wants us to love Him and obey Him freely and not by compulsion.

God is love and in His love He can limit His sovereignty to allow your will to be freed by His grace so you might choose to love Him.

Love cannot be forced; it must be freely chosen or it is not love.

Perhaps we should not talk about *free will* but in a *freed will*, one which, though initially bound by sin, has been brought by the prevenient grace of the Spirit of God to a point where it can respond freely to the divine call.

I haven't forgotten that there is a third view, called corporate election. It accurately points out that Jesus Christ is called God's Elect and that through Christ's redemptive work God has purposed to form a people to be His body (who become part of Him, the Elect). This election is freely offered to all mankind. Anyone who believes and is identified with Jesus Christ becomes part of the elect and is assured of salvation.

Supporters argue that the New Testament language that explicitly discusses election is always corporate. Our text here in First Thessalonians, for example, is addressing the church as a corporate group, **all** who are the "beloved brethren," rather than any one individual.

Further, Paul says he *knows* they are elect. Can he really know, after only three weeks of being with them, and they being just a few months old as a church, that every one of them is truly saved? It seems more likely he was addressing them corporately.

Corporate election is sometimes illustrated by comparing the church to a ship on its way to its future and final destination. The ship is chosen by God to be His very own vessel. Jesus Christ is the chosen Captain and Pilot of this chosen ship. God desires that everyone would come aboard this ship and has graciously made provisions for them to do so through its Captain.

Only those who place their trust in the Captain of the ship are welcomed to come on board. Election is experienced only in union with the Captain and his ship. Predestination tells us about the ship's future direction and final destination that God has prepared for those on it. God, out of his immense love, invites everyone to come aboard the ship through faith in the ship's Captain, Jesus Christ.

Those in the corporate election camp also speak of prevenient grace. It's not a different type or kind of grace. The word "prevenient" means *that which precedes or comes before*. When used of grace it means the grace of God that precedes salvation.

Prevenient grace is simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible. Calvinists interpret it as irresistible and effectual; the person in whom it works **must** repent and believe unto salvation. Arminians interpret it as resistible; people are always able to resist the grace of God, as Scripture warns (Acts 7:51).

Jacob Arminius stressed that "the grace of God is not a certain irresistible force... it is a Person, the Holy Spirit, and in personal relationships there cannot be the sheer overpowering of one person by another."

One of my very favorite theologians, Henry Thiessen, described prevenient grace like this:

Because man is without any ability or desire to change, God responded by prevenient grace. This grace restores to the sinner the ability to make a favorable response to God. This fact is implied in God's dealing with Adam and Eve after the fall and in the many exhortations to sinners to turn to God, to repent, and to believe. Because of prevenient grace man is able to make an initial response to God, and God will then give to him repentance and faith. God in His foreknowledge knows what men will do in response to his prevenient grace, whether or not they will "receive the grace of God in vain" (Second Corinthians 6:1). Thus, foreknowledge is not itself causative... God foreknew what men would do in response to his prevenient grace, and He elected those whom He foresaw would respond positively. In this way election follows foreknowledge.

If God, by prevenient grace, frees your will to respond, does that mean you work for salvation, or that you somehow earn it - making it not by grace through faith?

Think of this analogy. If someone gives you a check for a hundred thousand dollars that saves you from bankruptcy, and all you have to do is endorse the check and deposit it, did you earn part of the money? Was it any less a gift? Absolutely not.

What if someone who received such a check that saved him or her from bankruptcy then boasted of having earned part of the gift? People would think him mad or ungrateful or both! A gift that must be freely received is no less a gift.

Honest pastors and theologians will say that a strong biblical case can be made for all three views of election.

John Stott insightfully wrote,

To whatever denomination or tradition we may belong, the doctrine of election causes us difficulties and questions. To be sure, it is a truth which runs through Scripture... Moreover, the topic of election is nearly always introduced for a practical purpose, in order to foster assurance (not presumption), holiness (not moral apathy), humility (not pride), and witness (not lazy selfishness). **But still, no explanation is given except God's love.**

God is love, and since love is an essential attribute of God it prompted Dave Hunt, in examining these issues, to ask the question, "What love is this?" that could have saved billions but instead either did nothing to save them or acted to damn them to an eternity of suffering in Hell.

I guess what I'm saying is that since this debate can **never** be finally settled this side of Heaven, and since you can choose between viable, biblical options, why choose one that makes God a monster - especially when the average nonbeliever already thinks He is one for allowing their pain and suffering?