

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 7: THE ETERNAL DECREES OF GOD

Lesson 24

Predestination, Election, and Reprobation

The Hardest and Most Humbling of All Doctrines

Key Texts: Romans 9:6–24; Ephesians 1:3–11; John 6:37–44; 2 Timothy 1:9

Not by Works but by Him Who Calls

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Series Verse
<i>“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?”</i>
Romans 11:33–34, NASB 1995

Introduction

There are doctrines in the Christian system that are controversial not because they are unclear in Scripture, but because what they clearly teach cuts across the grain of everything fallen human nature most wishes were true about God, about itself, and about the terms of salvation. Predestination, election, and reprobation are among the most prominent of these doctrines, not peripheral curiosities tucked away in obscure corners of the biblical text, but front-and-center affirmations of some of the New Testament's most carefully constructed theological arguments. Romans 9, Ephesians 1, John 6, 2 Timothy 1, these are not the byways of the canonical witness. They are its highways, and they lead, again and again, to the same destination: the sovereign, unconditional, gracious election of God as the ultimate ground of the salvation of every person who has ever been saved.

The subtitle of this lesson calls predestination, election, and reprobation the hardest and most humbling of all doctrines. Hard, because they press upon the mind questions that resist easy resolution: the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the justice of God in passing over some while choosing others, the mystery of why grace is given to the guilty and withheld from those who seem, by human reckoning, equally guilty. Humbling, because they strip away every vestige of human pride in the matter of salvation: if election is unconditional, then not a single element of God's choice of me can be attributed to anything I am or anything I have done or anything He foresaw that I would do. I am chosen because He chose to choose me, for reasons that are rooted entirely in His sovereign grace and not at all in my merit, foresight, or anticipated faithfulness.

This lesson does not pretend that these doctrines are simple or that all their difficulties admit of tidy resolution. Paul himself, the apostle who most extensively and most rigorously develops the doctrine of election in the New Testament, closes his exposition of it not with a neat logical summary but with the doxology of Romans 11:33–36. The proper response to a full engagement with these doctrines is not the satisfaction of a problem solved but the awe of a worshipper who has glimpsed something of the unsearchable riches of the wisdom of a God who is greater than our greatest thoughts. Let us approach these pages, then, with intellectual rigor and with bended knee.

I. Predestination Defined

We begin with definitions, because imprecision of language in this domain generates an enormous amount of unnecessary confusion. The word predestination (from the Latin *praedestinatio*) is the broadest of the three terms we will examine in this lesson. In its most general sense, predestination refers to God's eternal determination of the destiny of every moral creature, His foreordaining of the final state of both the redeemed and the condemned.

The classic Reformed definition, drawn from the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 3.3), is as follows: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory,

some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.” This definition is deliberately comprehensive: predestination encompasses both the positive decree by which God ordains certain persons to salvation (election) and the negative decree by which He passes over others, leaving them in their sin and ordaining their just condemnation (reprobation). Some theologians use predestination in the narrower sense of election alone; the broader usage, encompassing both election and reprobation, is the more technically precise and the more confessionally accurate.

The biblical term most frequently associated with predestination is the Greek *proorizo*, to mark out beforehand, to predetermine, to foreordain. It appears in Romans 8:29–30 (twice), Ephesians 1:5, 11, Acts 4:28, and 1 Corinthians 2:7. In every occurrence, it refers to a divine act of eternal purposing that precedes the temporal event it determines. God does not predestine in response to what He foresees; He predestines as the eternal expression of His own sovereign will, and history unfolds as the temporal realization of what eternity has decreed.

“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son... and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

Romans 8:29–30, NASB 1995

II. Election Defined and Defended

A. The Definition of Election

Election is God’s sovereign, eternal, unconditional choice of certain individuals to salvation, not on the basis of any foreseen faith, merit, or worthiness in those individuals, but solely according to the gracious and mysterious purpose of His own will. The Westminster Confession (3.5) defines it with characteristic precision: “Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions or causes moving Him thereunto.”

Three elements of this definition deserve special attention. First, the election is “before the foundation of the world”, it is eternal, temporally prior to creation itself, and certainly prior to anything the elect person has done or will do. Second, it is “in Christ”, election is not an abstract divine decree but is located in the person of the Elect One, Jesus Christ, who is Himself the eternally chosen Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 42:1) and in whom the elect are chosen. Third, it is “without any foresight of faith or good works”, the ground of election is entirely and exclusively in God, not in anything God foresees in the creature. This is the point at which the Reformed and Arminian traditions most sharply divide.

B. The Biblical Foundation: Ephesians 1:3–11

The most sustained and theologically dense exposition of election in all of Scripture is found in Ephesians 1:3–11, and no serious student of the doctrine can bypass it. Paul’s language accumulates with deliberate force:

“just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved... also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.” (Ephesians 1:4–6, 11–12, NASB 1995)

Notice the precise language. We were chosen “before the foundation of the world”, the election is pretemporal. We were predestined “according to the kind intention of His will”, the ground of predestination is in God’s own sovereign pleasure, not in anything in us. The goal is adoption “to the praise of the glory of His grace”, the ultimate end of election is the magnification of divine grace, not the magnification of human worth. And we have obtained an inheritance having been predestined “according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will”, predestination is one expression of the comprehensive sovereignty with which God governs all things.

C. The Biblical Foundation: Romans 9:6–24

Romans 9 is the passage in which Paul most directly and most carefully addresses the apparent problem that the sovereign grace of God in election raises: Is God unjust? Does His sovereign election undermine His fairness? Paul’s answer is to go deeper into the doctrine, not to retreat from it.

The primary illustration is the election of Jacob over Esau (Romans 9:10–13). Paul’s argument is precise and devastating for every form of conditional election: “for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated’” (Romans 9:11–13, NASB 1995). The election of Jacob was made before either twin had done anything, the text is explicit that this was precisely in order to demonstrate that divine election “stands” on the basis of “Him who calls,” not on the basis of works. If the election had been made on the basis of foreseen faith or works, the pretemporal character of the election, before either twin had done anything, would be inexplicable.

Paul then anticipates the objection: “There is no injustice with God, is there?” (Romans 9:14, NASB 1995), and his answer is not to qualify the sovereignty of election but to ground it in God’s own declaration: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Romans 9:15, NASB 1995; Exodus 33:19). Mercy is always sovereignly given, never owed. God is under no obligation to give mercy to anyone; that He gives it to any is an act of pure, sovereign, undeserved grace. The conclusion is inescapable: “So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Romans 9:16, NASB 1995).

D. The Biblical Foundation: John 6:37–44

Our Lord's own teaching in John 6 is perhaps the most pastorally direct statement of election in all of Scripture, and it comes from the lips of the One who is Himself the ground of election. In the bread of life discourse, Jesus articulates the relationship between the Father's sovereign giving of the elect to the Son and the Son's certain reception and preservation of them:

"All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out... For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life... No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:37, 40, 44, NASB 1995)

Three truths emerge from this passage that are foundational to the doctrine of election. First, there is a specific group, "all that the Father gives Me", whom the Father has sovereignly given to the Son. This is the language of election: a definite, particular group, given by the Father to the Son in the eternal counsel of the Godhead. Second, all those given by the Father will come to the Son, the coming to faith is the certain, unfailing result of the Father's elective giving. Third, no one can come to the Son unless the Father draws him, the initiative in salvation is entirely divine. Human coming to Christ is real and voluntary; but it is enabled by a divine drawing that no one is able to resist ultimately. Election is not a response to foreseen faith; it is the prior divine act that ensures the coming of faith.

"All that the Father gives Me will come to Me... No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."

John 6:37, 44, NASB 1995

III. The Arminian Alternative and the Reformed Response

A. The Arminian Position

The principal alternative to the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election within the evangelical tradition is the Arminian position, named for Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), a Dutch theologian whose views sparked one of the most significant theological controversies in Reformation history. The Arminian position was systematized by Arminius's followers in the Remonstrance of 1610, and it has been the dominant soteriological framework in much of Protestant Christianity since the eighteenth century, most influentially through the Wesleyan-Methodist tradition, and more recently through virtually all strands of broadly evangelical thought that resist the Reformed position.

The Arminian doctrine of election is conditional election: God elects to salvation those whom He foreknows will believe in Christ. On this view, God's decree of election is not the cause of faith; it is God's eternal response to the faith that He foreknows the creature will exercise through his or her own libertarian free will. Election is "according to foreknowledge" (1 Peter 1:2) in the sense of God foreseeing which individuals will freely choose to believe, and then electing those individuals on the basis of their foreseen faith.

The Arminian God does not unconditionally choose; He conditionally ratifies the choices that He foresees His creatures will make.

B. The Reformed Response

The Reformed critique of conditional election operates on several levels. First, at the level of exegesis: the texts adduced in the preceding section, Romans 9:11–16, Ephesians 1:4–6, John 6:37, 44, do not yield a conditional election reading without considerable interpretive violence. Paul's explicit argument in Romans 9:11 that the election of Jacob was made before either twin had done anything, precisely so that the election would rest on "Him who calls" rather than on works, is designed to exclude exactly the Arminian reading: that election is based on foreseen human choice. If election is based on foreseen faith, Paul's argument about the pretemporal character of the election is inexplicable.

Second, at the level of the meaning of foreknowledge: 1 Peter 1:2 and Romans 8:29 speak of God's foreknowledge as the basis of predestination. The Arminian reads this as God foreseeing future belief. But in biblical usage, the verb "to know" (*yada*, *ginosko*) is regularly used to denote not mere cognitive awareness but a sovereign, intimate, covenantal choosing, as in Amos 3:2 ("You only have I chosen [known] among all the families of the earth", NASB 1995) and Matthew 7:23 ("I never knew you"). "Foreknew" in Romans 8:29 is not foreseen faith but sovereign foreloving, God's pretemporal, elective love for specific persons.

Third, at the level of theological coherence: if election is based on foreseen faith, then faith becomes, at bottom, the ultimate ground of election, the decisive factor that distinguishes the elect from the non-elect. The Arminian intends to give all the glory to God, but the logic of his system awards the decisive credit to the person who believes. As B. B. Warfield observed, the Arminian system is ultimately a system of self-salvation: the sovereign act that determines election is the creature's own free choice, not the sovereign grace of God. The Reformed system, by contrast, is a system of sovereign grace from beginning to end: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9, NASB 1995). The faith itself is the gift of God, not the independent contribution of the sinner.

Fourth, at the level of pastoral coherence: if election is conditioned on foreseen faith, then the believer's assurance ultimately rests on his confidence in his own faith, and a faith that was decisive in God's eternal choice is a faith that must be extraordinarily strong and unwavering to bear that weight. The Reformed doctrine of unconditional election grounds assurance not in the quality or strength of my faith but in the sovereign purpose of a God whose elective will cannot be thwarted and whose love for the elect is not conditioned on their performance.

IV. Reprobation: The Doctrine the Church Has Most Feared to Speak

A. The Definition of Reprobation

If election is the most humbling of the positive doctrines of the Christian system, reprobation is the most feared of all, the doctrine that the same sovereign God who chose

some for salvation passed over others, leaving them in their sin and ordaining their just condemnation for the display of His glory in justice and holiness. The Westminster Confession (3.7) states it with solemn precision: “The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.”

The doctrine of reprobation, as the Reformed tradition has consistently articulated it, has two distinguishable elements: preterition and condemnation. Preterition is the sovereign act of God by which He passes over certain persons, not choosing them for salvation, the act of withholding election. Condemnation is the just punishment of those passed over, assigned to them on account of their sin. These two elements are closely related but must be carefully distinguished: the ultimate ground of condemnation is always the sinner’s own sin, not merely the bare divine act of preterition. God does not condemn the reprobate for being passed over; He condemns them for their sin. Preterition removes the grace that would have led to salvation; condemnation falls on account of the sin that the reprobate, without that grace, inevitably commit.

B. The Biblical Foundation

The clearest biblical texts for reprobation are found in Romans 9. Having established election from the case of Jacob and Esau, Paul turns to the case of Pharaoh: “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.’ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires” (Romans 9:17–18, NASB 1995). God raised up Pharaoh for the specific purpose of demonstrating His power in the judgment of the hard-hearted, a purpose that presupposes the divine foreordination of Pharaoh’s hardness and his judgment.

Paul then draws the explicit conclusion that the doctrine of double predestination demands: “What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory” (Romans 9:22–23, NASB 1995). The “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” stand in deliberate contrast to the “vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.” The vessels of mercy are actively prepared by God for glory; the vessels of wrath are “prepared for destruction”, the grammar of the Greek participle (*katartizomena*, a perfect passive participle) is somewhat ambiguous regarding the agent of preparation, which may be deliberate, but the overall logic of the passage, and Paul’s explicit statement that God “hardened” Pharaoh, makes the sovereign divine governance of reprobation clear.

Jude 4 speaks of those “who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation” (NASB 1995), using the verb *prographo* to indicate a pretemporal divine marking. 1 Peter 2:8 speaks of those who stumble “to which doom they were also appointed” (NASB 1995). Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 speak of those “whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world” (NASB 1995), implying that the absence of a name from the book of life is as pretemporal as its presence.

C. The Critical Asymmetry Between Election and Reprobation

The Reformed tradition has consistently insisted on a critical asymmetry between the way God relates to election and the way He relates to reprobation. Election is an active, positive, sovereign decree by which God works in the elect to bring them to faith and salvation, it is the cause of their salvation in the most ultimate sense. Reprobation, by contrast, is not the cause of the reprobate's sin; it is the sovereign withholding of the grace that would prevent it, followed by the just punishment of sin that the reprobate themselves have committed. God is the efficient cause of election; God is not the efficient cause of reprobation in the same positive sense. The reprobate are condemned for their own sin, not for God's act of preterition.

Calvin expressed this asymmetry with characteristic care in the Institutes: God “does not create evil in men, but only governs and uses it for His own purposes”, the reprobation of the wicked is the just punishment of creatures who freely chose sin, ordered by a sovereign God who could have prevented their sin but chose, for reasons of His own unsearchable wisdom, not to do so. This is a genuine asymmetry, and it is the reason the Reformed tradition has always resisted the charge that its doctrine of double predestination makes God the author of sin. God is the sovereign Author of salvation in the elect; He is the just Judge of sin in the reprobate.

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy... He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”

Romans 9:15–16, 18, NASB 1995

V. The Mystery, the Humility, and the Objections

A. The Objection of Injustice

Paul anticipates the most natural objection to the doctrine of reprobation with directness: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’” (Romans 9:19, NASB 1995). If God sovereignly hardens and sovereignly has mercy, how can He hold the hardened accountable? This is precisely the objection that the doctrine of reprobation generates in every mind that encounters it honestly, and Paul does not answer it by softening the doctrine. He answers it by asserting the prerogative of divine sovereignty over the creature:

“On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?” (Romans 9:20–21, NASB 1995)

Paul's answer is not a philosophical explanation of how divine sovereignty and human culpability coexist; it is a theological rebuke of the presumption that creaturely reason has the right to sit in judgment over divine sovereignty. The creature is clay; God is the Potter. The clay does not dictate the terms on which the Potter may exercise his craft. This is not

an evasion of the question; it is the affirmation that the question itself, when pressed to the point of accusing God of injustice, has overstepped the bounds of creaturely propriety.

B. The Objection of Universal Love

A second objection, pressed especially from the Arminian direction, is that reprobation conflicts with passages that speak of God's universal love and His desire for the salvation of all. "For God so loved the world" (John 3:16). "Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4, NASB 1995). "Not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9, NASB 1995). How can a God who loves all and desires the salvation of all pass over some in reprobation?

The Reformed response employs the distinction between God's decretive and preceptive will, developed in the preceding lesson, and applies it here with particular force. God's "desire" for all to be saved and His "not wishing" that any should perish are expressions of His preceptive will, His moral delight in the salvation of sinners, His genuine and sincere offer of the gospel to all who hear it, and His genuine willingness to receive all who come. They are not expressions of His decretive will, His unconditional eternal purpose to save all without exception. God can genuinely desire the salvation of all in the sense of His revealed moral will while simultaneously, in His sovereign decretive will, electing only some. This is not a contradiction; it is the recognition that God's revealed will and His decretive will are distinguishable modes of the divine willing that operate simultaneously without collision.

The "world" of John 3:16 is best understood not as every individual without exception but as the world of elect sinners from every nation and tribe and tongue, the universal scope of redemption's reach, not its absolute extent. Christ's death is sufficient for the world; it is efficacious for the elect. The offer of salvation is genuinely extended to all who hear; it is savingly applied to the elect. These are not strained readings; they are the most coherent account of the total biblical witness.

C. The Posture of Humility Before the Mystery

After addressing the objections, Paul does not proceed to a philosophical resolution; he proceeds to worship: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Romans 11:33, NASB 1995). The doctrine of predestination, both election and reprobation, belongs to the category of the "unsearchable judgments" and "unfathomable ways" of God. We affirm what Scripture teaches with full conviction. We defend it from the objections raised against it with the arguments Scripture itself provides. And then we bow before the mystery of a sovereign God whose wisdom exceeds all creaturely comprehension, and we worship.

This is the posture that the doctrine demands and the posture that, when genuinely adopted, transforms the doctrine from a theological problem into a pastoral treasure. The God whose ways are unsearchable is the same God who has loved us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3), who has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and who will never let us go. The unsearchability of His ways is not a threat to our security but the very ground of it: a God whose ways are traceable is a God

whose sovereignty is limited; a God whose sovereignty is limited is a God who might fail us. The unfathomable God of sovereign grace is the only God whose promises can be trusted with absolute and unqualified confidence.

VI. The Doxological Response: What Election Does to the Soul

A. Election Humbles the Proud

The doctrine of unconditional election is the most effective antidote known to theological anthropology for the virus of human pride in the matter of salvation. If I am elect not because of anything in me, not my wisdom in seeing what others missed, not my moral sensitivity in choosing right when others chose wrong, not my openness of heart, not my readiness of spirit, if I am elect solely because God, in His sovereign grace, chose to set His love upon me before I had any existence at all, then I have nothing to boast of in my salvation. Nothing. “Where then is boasting? It is excluded” (Romans 3:27, NASB 1995). Not merely reduced, not merely tempered, excluded.

This is the profound pastoral function of the doctrine of election: it roots out the last and most subtle form of human pride in the matter of salvation, the pride of the person who believes that his coming to faith, though assisted by God, was ultimately his own decisive contribution to his redemption. The doctrine of unconditional election says: the decisive act was God’s, not yours. Your faith is real; your repentance is real; your love for Christ is real. But each of these is the fruit of God’s sovereign elective grace, not its cause. “You did not choose Me but I chose you” (John 15:16, NASB 1995).

B. Election Comforts the Anxious

If election humbles the proud, it is equally true that election comforts the anxious. The believer who is assailed by doubt, who fears that his sin is too great, his faith too weak, his perseverance too uncertain, finds in the doctrine of unconditional election a ground of assurance that rests entirely outside himself. My assurance does not rest on the quality of my faith, for my faith is weak and wavering. It does not rest on the constancy of my obedience, for my obedience is fitful and incomplete. It rests on the sovereign elective purpose of a God who chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world, whose purposes are immutable, whose love is everlasting, and whose hold on the elect is described by the one who cannot lie in terms that admit no exception: “and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:28, NASB 1995).

This is the comfort that the Puritan divines drew from election in their pastoral ministry, and it was a comfort grounded not in emotional warmth but in theological precision. The elect cannot ultimately fall away, because their perseverance is as much the product of God’s sovereign grace as their initial election. The God who chose them will keep them; the God who called them will sanctify them; the God who justified them will glorify them. The golden chain of Romans 8:29–30 has no weak links.

C. Election Produces Worship

The fullest and most appropriate response to the doctrine of election, when it has been genuinely grasped, not merely assented to, is adoring worship before a God of sovereign grace that is altogether too large, too free, and too undeserved to be received with anything less than wonder. Paul's response to three chapters of the most rigorous election theology in the New Testament, Romans 9, 10, 11, is not a further logical development but a lyrical eruption of adoration: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33, NASB 1995). The depth of the riches is precisely the depth of the elective grace of a God who could have saved no one, who owed salvation to no one, and who chose to save some, not because of anything in them, but to the praise of the glory of His grace.

The hymn "To God Be the Glory", like the great hymns of the Reformed and Puritan traditions, is the natural fruit of a soul that has sat long enough with the doctrine of election to have moved from intellectual assent to doxological wonder. "Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood, to every believer the promise of God", the "perfect redemption" that these hymn-writers celebrated is perfect precisely because it rests on the sovereign elective grace of a God who does not begin His redemptive work and leave it to the creature to complete it. He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6). That is the ground of a doxology that will never run dry.

Key Texts: *Romans 9:6–24; Ephesians 1:3–11; John 6:37–44; 2 Timothy 1:9; Romans 8:29–30*

VII. The Pastoral and Doxological Significance

A. Preaching Election Faithfully

The doctrine of election and reprobation is one that many pastors and teachers have found difficult to preach, not because it is unclear in Scripture, but because it is difficult for congregations to receive. The temptation is to soften the edges, to qualify the language of Paul beyond recognition, to speak of God's "choosing" in ways that ultimately defer the decisive act to the human will. This temptation must be resisted, not out of a love for controversy, but out of a love for the people of God. A congregation that does not know the doctrine of election is a congregation that does not know the full depth of God's grace; a congregation that does not know the full depth of God's grace is a congregation whose worship is thinner, whose assurance is more fragile, and whose evangelism is more uncertain than it need be.

Preach election as Paul preached it: with full doctrinal precision, with honest engagement of the objections it raises, and with the doxological terminus it demands. Preach it in its proper context, as one of the most glorious expressions of the sovereign grace that is the heartbeat of the entire gospel. And preach it with the pastoral sensitivity that the doctrine itself demands: not as a club to beat the unconvinced but as a window through which the soul may glimpse, trembling and adoring, the inexhaustible riches of the grace of a God who loved us before we existed.

B. Evangelism and Election

One of the most common practical objections to the doctrine of election is that it undermines the urgency of evangelism: if God has already determined who will be saved, why evangelize? The Reformed tradition's answer is twofold. First, God has ordained the means as well as the end: the elect come to faith through the preaching of the gospel (Romans 10:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:21), and the preaching of the gospel is therefore not redundant but indispensable. God achieves His elective purpose through the proclamation of the good news; to refuse to proclaim it is to refuse the means God has appointed for the accomplishment of His purpose.

Second, the doctrine of election is, in the Reformed understanding, the ground of evangelistic confidence rather than its enemy. We preach the gospel knowing that it will not return void (Isaiah 55:11), knowing that God's elect will hear it and respond, knowing that the sovereign grace of God is sufficient to overcome every hardness of heart. The Arminian evangelist, by contrast, must ultimately rest his confidence on the response of the human will, a confidence that the doctrine of total depravity should seriously undermine. The Reformed evangelist rests his confidence on the sovereign elective purpose of a God whose sheep will hear the voice of the Good Shepherd (John 10:27) and come.

C. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: You may be encountering the doctrine of election for the first time and finding it deeply challenging. That is an entirely appropriate response. This doctrine is not meant to be grasped easily; it is meant to be sat with prayerfully, engaged with

seriously, and received humbly. Begin with this: if you have come to faith in Christ, the doctrine of election tells you that your faith is not a contribution you have made to your salvation but a gift that God's sovereign grace has produced in you. You did not choose God first; He chose you. And His choice is immutable. Let that anchor your soul.

For the long-tenured saint: The doctrine of election is not a doctrine you graduate from or master. It is one you return to again and again throughout the Christian life, finding in it, each time, a deeper ground of humility and a richer occasion for worship. Return to Ephesians 1:3–14 today. Read it slowly. Let the words 'He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world' press upon you with their full weight. And then respond as Paul responds, with adoration of the God whose grace is too deep, too free, and too undeserved to be received with anything less than wonder.

For the one who is doubting their salvation: The very fact that you fear you are not elect is evidence against your fear. The reprobate do not typically agonize over their election; they are indifferent to it. The anxiety about one's own salvation that drives one to Christ in desperate longing is itself a work of the Spirit. Do not look into yourself for the assurance of your election; look to Christ, in whom all the elect are chosen (Ephesians 1:4). 'Come to Me,' He says, 'and I will certainly not cast out' (John 6:37). The invitation is real, the promise is unconditional, and the one who comes is precisely the one the Father has given to the Son.

For the one who is suffering: The doctrine of election has a particular comfort for the suffering soul that is easy to miss in times of health and prosperity: it means that you were not chosen for suffering accidentally or carelessly. The God who chose you before the foundation of the world chose you knowing exactly what your life would contain, including this specific season of pain. He did not choose you in spite of this trial; He chose you for a purpose that encompasses it. The God who is working all things together for the good of the elect (Romans 8:28) is the same God who has loved you with an everlasting love, and that love was not surprised by what you are going through.

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Predestination	God's eternal determination of the destiny of every moral creature, encompassing both election (the predestination of some to salvation) and reprobation (the foreordination of others to just condemnation). In its narrower usage, sometimes limited to election alone. Derived from the Latin <i>praedestinatio</i> ; the Greek term is <i>proorizo</i> , "to mark out beforehand."
Election	God's sovereign, eternal, unconditional choice of certain individuals to salvation in Christ before the foundation of the world, not based on any foreseen faith or merit in the elect, but solely according to the good pleasure of His will. The Reformed doctrine is of unconditional election; the Arminian doctrine is of conditional election based on foreseen faith.
Unconditional Election	The Reformed doctrine that God's election of individuals to salvation is not conditioned on any foreseen quality, choice, faith, or merit in the creature, but rests solely in the sovereign, gracious, and free purpose of God's own will. Grounded in Romans 9:11–16, Ephesians 1:4–6, and John 6:37, 44. Distinguished from the Arminian doctrine of conditional election.
Conditional Election	The Arminian doctrine that God's election of individuals to salvation is conditioned on His foreknowledge of who will freely choose to believe in Christ. On this view, God elects those whom He foresees will exercise saving faith through their libertarian free will. Rejected by the Reformed tradition as making faith the ground rather than the fruit of election and as failing to account for Romans 9:11–16.
Reprobation	God's sovereign eternal decree concerning those not chosen for salvation, encompassing two elements: (1) preterition, the sovereign passing over or withholding of election; and (2) condemnation, the just punishment of the reprobate for their own sin. The Reformed tradition insists on a critical asymmetry: God is the efficient cause of election but not of sin; the reprobate are condemned for their own sin, not merely for being passed over.
Preterition	Latin: <i>praeteritio</i> , "passing over." The first element of reprobation: God's sovereign act of passing over certain persons, not granting them the election that others receive. Preterition is distinguished from condemnation, which falls on account of the reprobate's own sin. The infralapsarian tradition holds that preterition logically follows the decree to permit the fall, so that the objects of preterition are sinful human beings, not merely abstract human entities.
Double Predestination	The doctrine that God's eternal decree encompasses both a positive decree of election (ordaining certain individuals to

	salvation) and a negative decree of reprobation (passing over others and ordaining them to just condemnation for their sin). Affirmed by Calvin, the Westminster Confession (Chapter 3), and the 1689 Baptist Confession. Distinguished from single predestination, which affirms election but denies or remains silent about reprobation.
Foreknowledge	In its theological usage within the doctrine of election, foreknowledge (Greek: prognosis; verb: prognosko) refers not merely to God's cognitive awareness of future events but to His sovereign, covenantal, elective knowing, a foreloving or forechoosing of specific persons. The biblical evidence for this usage includes Amos 3:2 ("You only have I known"), Genesis 18:19, and Matthew 7:23 ("I never knew you"). On this understanding, "foreknew" in Romans 8:29 refers to God's pretemporal, elective love, not to His cognitive foresight of human choices.
Perseverance of the Saints	The doctrine that all those who are truly elect and truly regenerate will persevere in faith and obedience to the end and will certainly be glorified. Grounded in the immutability of the divine decree of election (Romans 8:29–30), the security of the elect in Christ's hand (John 10:28–29), and the effective intercession of the High Priest (Hebrews 7:25). The "P" of the TULIP. Distinguishable from the Arminian doctrine that the truly regenerate may ultimately and finally fall away.
Total Depravity	The Reformed doctrine that the fall of Adam has corrupted every faculty of human nature, mind, will, affections, conscience, to such a degree that the unregenerate person is incapable of savingly understanding, desiring, or choosing the things of God apart from divine regeneration and grace. Total depravity does not mean that the unregenerate are as wicked as they possibly could be, but that no faculty of the natural person is unaffected by sin. The "T" of the TULIP and the premise from which the necessity of unconditional election follows.
Irresistible Grace	The doctrine that the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit in the regeneration of the elect cannot ultimately be resisted, God's sovereign grace so renews and transforms the will of the elect that they freely and genuinely embrace the gospel, their resistance overcome not by coercion but by the sweet and sovereign persuasion of the Spirit. The "I" of the TULIP. Grounded in John 6:37, 44; Ezekiel 36:26–27; and Acts 13:48. Distinguished from the Arminian view that the call of the Spirit can be ultimately resisted by the creature's libertarian will.
TULIP	The traditional acronym summarizing the five points of Calvinist soteriology as articulated at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) in response to the Arminian Remonstrance: T, Total Depravity; U, Unconditional Election; L, Limited (Definite) Atonement; I,

Irresistible Grace; P, Perseverance of the Saints. The five points are not arbitrary but form a coherent soteriological system in which each point logically implies and is supported by the others.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the election of God is unconditional, that the decisive act in every salvation is God's sovereign choice, not the creature's wise response to a divine opportunity. We must believe this not as an abstract theological proposition but as a living conviction about the nature of our own salvation. If I am saved, it is because God, in His sovereign grace, chose to save me, not because I was wiser, more morally sensitive, or more spiritually receptive than those who are not saved. This conviction does not produce pride; it produces adoration. It does not produce passivity; it produces gratitude. And gratitude, in the economy of the Christian life, is one of the most powerful motivators of holiness, service, and love.

We must also believe the doctrine of reprobation, not with a grim satisfaction in the justice of God toward the wicked, but with the solemn humility of those who recognize that apart from sovereign grace, we ourselves would be among the passed-over. "But for the grace of God" is not a pious cliché for the person who has genuinely grasped the doctrine of reprobation; it is the most personally weighted theological statement any believer can make. The line between election and reprobation does not run between the morally deserving and the undeserving; it runs between those to whom God, in sovereign grace, has given the gift of saving faith and those from whom He has withheld it. We did nothing to earn our place on the right side of that line.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the doctrine of election press you toward worship rather than intellectual satisfaction. The temptation of the theologically trained is to feel a kind of satisfaction in having the right theology on predestination, a subtle pride of doctrinal precision that is, in its own way, as dangerous as the pride the doctrine is meant to eliminate. The person who knows the doctrine of election and is not undone by it, not humbled to the dust and lifted to the heights of adoring wonder simultaneously, has understood it with the mind but not received it with the heart.

Desire the doxological response. Return again and again to Romans 11:33–36. Pray through Ephesians 1:3–14 as an act of worship. Let the truth that you were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, before you existed, before you had done anything good or bad, before you were capable of contributing anything to the divine decision, let that truth reduce you to a grateful, trembling, adoring silence before the God of sovereign grace. And then let it lift you to a joyful, confident, unshakeable trust in the God whose purposes cannot be thwarted and whose love for the elect is everlasting.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Evangelize with urgency and confidence. The doctrine of election does not dampen evangelistic urgency; it grounds it in a confidence that no amount of human resistance can ultimately frustrate the redemptive purposes of God. Preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15), knowing that God's elect will hear, and

that your faithful proclamation is the means through which God has chosen to call them.

- Rest in your assurance. If the temptation of the theologically proud is to use the doctrine of election as a ground of complacency, the temptation of the spiritually anxious is to use it as a source of terror: what if I am not elect? The doctrine of election, rightly understood, is not a source of terror but of comfort. Come to Christ. All who come to Him He will not cast out (John 6:37). The coming itself is evidence of the Father's drawing; the drawing is evidence of election.
- Pray for the conversion of the lost with new confidence. If you have loved ones who do not know Christ, the doctrine of election is not an excuse for prayerlessness; it is the ground of hopeful intercession. God can and does change the hardest of hearts. He opened the heart of Lydia (Acts 16:14). He apprehended Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road (Acts 9). Pray for the conversion of the lost knowing that the same sovereign grace that saved you is able to save them.
- Engage graciously with those who differ. The doctrine of predestination is one of the most contested in the Christian tradition, and many sincere and faithful believers hold the Arminian position. Engage them with respect, with patience, and with the recognition that the disagreement, while real and significant, does not place either party outside the bounds of evangelical orthodoxy. Press the biblical arguments with clarity and charity, and trust the Spirit to illumine.
- Let election reshape your worship. The hymns, prayers, and doxologies of the Reformed tradition are among the richest in all of Christendom precisely because they are saturated with the wonder of sovereign grace. Isaac Watts, John Newton, William Cowper, Augustus Toplady, these men wrote as they did because they had been broken and rebuilt by the doctrine of election. Let that same doctrine break and rebuild your worship until it is worthy of the God who loved you before the foundation of the world.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. What has been your prior experience with the doctrine of election and predestination? Have you encountered it as a source of comfort, of confusion, of controversy, or of worship? Share briefly, and be honest about where this doctrine has been most difficult for you personally.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Ephesians 1:3–14 carefully. List every phrase that indicates the pretemporal, divine, and unconditional character of election. What is the stated ground of our predestination in verse 5? What is the stated ultimate goal in verses 6, 12, and 14?

3. Read Romans 9:6–24. Trace Paul's argument from the election of Jacob (vv. 10–13) through the hardening of Pharaoh (vv. 17–18) to the potter and the clay (vv. 20–23). What two objections does Paul anticipate (vv. 14 and 19), and what is his response to each? Notice that Paul's responses do not soften the doctrine but go deeper into it.

4. Read John 6:37–44. Identify the three affirmations Jesus makes about the relationship between the Father's giving, the Son's receiving, and the Spirit's drawing. What do these three affirmations together imply about the nature of coming to faith in Christ?

5. Read 2 Timothy 1:9. What does Paul say about the "purpose and grace" by which we were called? When was this grace given? What does the phrase "not according to our works" indicate about the ground of election?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

6. Explain the distinction between unconditional election and conditional election. What is the Arminian argument for conditional election, and what are the three or four strongest Reformed responses to it? Which do you find most persuasive, and why?

7. The lesson argues that "foreknew" in Romans 8:29 refers to sovereign, covenantal foreloving rather than mere cognitive foresight of human choices. What is the biblical evidence for this interpretation? How does this reading affect the overall argument of Romans 8:29–30?

8. Explain the two elements of reprobation, preterition and condemnation, and the critical asymmetry between election and reprobation that the Reformed tradition insists upon. Why is this asymmetry important for the claim that God is not the author of sin?

9. How does the doctrine of election, rightly understood, both humble the proud and comfort the anxious? Can you think of ways in which a misunderstanding of election might produce either arrogance (on the part of the "elect") or despair (on the part of those who fear they are not elect)? How does the doctrine, properly grasped, guard against both errors?

10. The lesson argues that the doctrine of election strengthens rather than undermines evangelistic urgency. How would you develop this argument? What is the theological foundation for evangelistic confidence in the Reformed system? How does this differ from evangelistic confidence in the Arminian system?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

11. John 15:16: “You did not choose Me but I chose you.” Sit with that sentence for a moment. What does it do to your sense of your own importance in the transaction of your salvation? How should it reshape the way you speak about your conversion, the story you tell about how you “became a Christian”?

12. Do you know someone who is genuinely struggling with the doctrine of election, finding it difficult to reconcile with God’s love, human freedom, or the universal offer of the gospel? What from this lesson would you bring to bear in that conversation? How would you do so with both theological clarity and pastoral gentleness?

13. The lesson closes Unit 7 by calling for the doxological response that Paul himself makes in Romans 11:33–36. Take a moment now to read that passage together slowly. Then ask: Is your current experience of the doctrine of predestination producing worship? If not, if it is producing anxiety, pride, confusion, or indifference, what might need to change in how you are relating to this doctrine?

14. As you close Unit 7 on the Eternal Decrees of God, reflect on what Lessons 23 and 24 together have taught you about the nature of God’s sovereign governance of all things. What is the single most important truth about the divine decrees that you want to carry with you into the next unit? How do you intend to apply it in your life of prayer, your witness, or your response to the sufferings and uncertainties of the coming days?

Prayer Focus

Open your time of prayer by sitting quietly together with Ephesians 1:3—6: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (NASB 1995). Let the phrase “before the foundation of the world” press upon you with its full weight. You were chosen before the world began. The God who spoke the universe into existence had already, in the eternal counsel of His will, set His love upon you.

Pray with the humility that this doctrine demands: thanking God not merely for saving you but for choosing to save you, for the sovereign, gracious, pretemporal love that reached down into your nothingness and claimed you as His own before you had done anything good or bad. Confess the pride that resists this doctrine. Ask for the grace to receive it with the openness of a beggar who has been told that his debts have been paid, not by his own industry, but by the inexhaustible generosity of one he had never even met.

Intercede for those in your life who do not know Christ, naming them before the God who knows whether their names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, and trusting that the same sovereign grace that saved you is able to save them. And close with the doxology that is the only adequate response to the entire doctrine of the divine decrees: “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:36, NASB 1995).

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com