

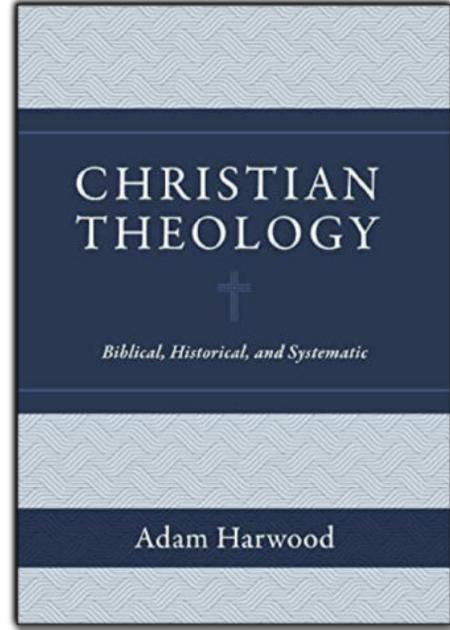
## 23. PREDESTINATION AND ELECTION INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Some pastors and theology students avoid discussions of predestination and election because of their differences with other Christians on the topic. One semester, I co-taught an undergraduate doctrine course with a PhD student who had been born in and ministered in an African country. He said the doctrine is rarely discussed in African churches because it was used in recent history by some Christian leaders to justify the institutional segregation of ethnic groups under apartheid. The doctrine was also viewed as a Western concept imported into the African church through Western theology and European history. On another

occasion, a master's student privately admitted that he skipped my class session on the doctrine. Though he expressed confidence that I would deal fairly with the students and their viewpoints, he had seen arguments divide his friends on the campus of his Christian college. He said he wanted to attend the class discussion, but he felt physically sick when he imagined the possibility that another group of his friends on another campus might divide over the same topic.

Some people avoid studying predestination and election due to its misuse by Christian leaders, and others avoid it because of the division that sometimes results when it is discussed. However, the Bible contains references to God's people as "predestined" and "elect," as well as instances of God choosing individuals and groups. Thus, those who regularly preach and teach from the Scriptures will encounter references to predestination and election.<sup>2</sup> Rather than avoiding those texts or failing to address the concept, Christians should humbly study those biblical passages while maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3).

In the previous chapter, we considered the question, *What* is salvation? Now, we begin to consider various Christian views of *how* and *why* only some people are saved. We will begin by examining predestination and election. Though discussing these twin concepts has



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<sup>1</sup> Adam Harwood, *Christian Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Systematic* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 579-606.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 309, "Whatever may have been our prejudices against the doctrine of election as held and taught by some ministers of religion, it is undeniable, that, in some sense, the doctrine is found in the Bible; and we cannot reject it, without rejecting that inspired book."

resulted in controversy since the time of the early church,<sup>3</sup> students of theology and Scripture should attempt to understand the terms. In this chapter, I survey predestination in both theology and Scripture; then, I do the same for election. This chapter is intended to fill a gap in the theological literature by presenting a perspective on predestination and election that simultaneously draws from Scripture and resists importing later concepts into the interpretation of key biblical texts.

## PREDESTINATION IN THEOLOGY

A widely—though not universally—accepted view in Protestant theological literature is that God determines all things, including the salvation and reprobation of individuals.<sup>4</sup> For example, Millard Erickson begins his chapter on predestination with this statement: “Predestination is God’s choice of persons for eternal life or eternal death.”<sup>5</sup> Robert Letham writes, “*Predestination* refers to God’s ordaining this or that immutably from eternity.” Letham adds, “*Election* is that aspect of predestination that relates to those whom God ordains to salvation in Christ.”<sup>6</sup> Alan Cairns refers to predestination in both wide and narrow senses. In a wide sense, predestination refers to God’s foreordaining of all things; in a narrow sense, it refers to God selecting some individuals for salvation and others for reprobation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Differences on predestination and election constituted one important— though not the only—theological issue that divided Augustine from some Western and all Eastern theologians in the early church. Those differences also emerged between Molina and the Catholic Church as well as between magisterial and Anabaptist leaders during the Reformation. The differences persist today between and, at times, *within* Christian denominations.

<sup>4</sup> Election, defined as God’s choice of certain individuals for salvation, is either presupposed or explicitly taught in most of the recent Protestant theological literature. See, e.g., Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 816–41 ; Katherine Sonderdegger, “Election ,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105–20; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 309–23; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* , 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 841–59; John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 163–64 , 206–30 ; Kenneth Keathley, “The Work of God: Salvation ,” in *A Theology for the Church*, rev. ed., ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 557–70 ; and Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 405–39. A notable exception is Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 448–60. He summarizes the Calvinist-Arminian position but prefers Pannenberg’s approach of considering God’s plans for the future rather than past decrees. See also James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2:453–54. He wonders whether Augustine and Calvin’s views have “contributed to a hyper-individualization of this doctrine.”

<sup>5</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 841.

<sup>6</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 173–74 (emphasis original).

<sup>7</sup> Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 335–36: “In the widest sense, predestination ‘is the theological doctrine ... that from eternity God has foreordained all things which come to pass’ (Boettner). In this sense it is synonymous with God’s decree. However, it is most frequently used in a narrower sense, ‘as designating only the counsel of God concerning fallen men, including the sovereign election of some and the most righteous reprobation of the rest’ (A. A. Hodge). In this sense, predestination is in two parts, election and reprobation (see *Westminster Confession*, chap. 3, sec. 3, 7).”

This widely accepted understanding of predestination and election can be traced to Augustine.

One of Augustine's final writings was the short work titled *A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints*.<sup>8</sup> The African bishop wrote it in 428 or 429 to warn Prosper and Hilary against Pelagian views.<sup>9</sup> Augustine argues that the Lord prepares the will of the elect for faith, and only some people are elected to salvation, which is an act of God's mercy. Faith is a gift given to only some people, and only some are called by God to be believers. Those elected are called in order to believe. Augustine explains, "He chose them that they might choose Him."<sup>10</sup> Augustine's views established a grid for understanding predestination and election that has significantly influenced subsequent interpreters. The Calvinist-Arminian tradition adopted his interpretation (though it modified it at certain points), while others (such as the Eastern Orthodox Church) rejected it. Other Christian groups are composed of some who accept his view and others who reject it.<sup>11</sup> Though some Christians affirm a version of Augustinian predestination, the view has never gained a consensus in the church.<sup>12</sup>

In a previous chapter, I presented various models of providence.<sup>13</sup> Those who affirm divine determinism would be comfortable with Augustinian predestination. However, those who affirm divine guidance, middle knowledge, or open theism would resist the view. To discern the New Testament authors' intended meaning of the word "predestine," we will consider every occurrence of the word in the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints*

<sup>9</sup> For more on Augustine's views of grace and predestination, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 366–69. For Augustine's shift from prioritizing human free will in salvation to prioritizing God's sovereign choice in election, see David Roach, "From Free Choice to God's Choice: Augustine's Exegesis of Romans 9," *Evangelical Quarterly* 80.2 (2008): 129–41; Eric L. Jenkins, *Free to Say No?: Free Will in Augustine's Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012); and Kenneth M. Wilson, *Augustine's Conversion from Traditional Free Choice to "Non-free Free Will,"* *Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum* 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Treatise on the Predestination* 10–11, 16, 32, 34 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 5:515).

<sup>11</sup> My own theological tradition is composed of some who affirm Augustinian predestination, others who reject it, and still others who suspend judgment on the matter. See E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner, eds., *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), for a collection of essays representing the two major sides of that discussion from within the same convention of churches. The *Abstract of Principles* (1858) defines election according to Augustinian predestination, but the *BFM* (2000) is ambiguous. According to Daniel L. Akin, "the nature and basis of election is not defined" in the confession. Akin, "Article V: God's Purpose of Grace," in *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Woodell (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 46.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 182–83, "However great Augustine may have been, his views of predestination were never fully received and often modified, so those particular views can hardly be regarded as having received the consent necessary for being viewed as ancient ecumenical consensual tradition."

<sup>13</sup> See chapter 8 in this book for a presentation of the various models of providence.

<sup>14</sup> Some Christians support Augustinian predestination and election by appealing to the covenant of redemption, or *pactum salutis*, an agreement among the persons of the Godhead, before creation, to redeem

## PREDESTINATION IN THE BIBLE

The word “predestine” occurs only six times in the Bible, all in the New Testament. Predestination is not a prominent theme in Scripture. By comparison, the verb translated “believe” (*pisteuō*) occurs 241 times in the New Testament alone.<sup>15</sup> The Greek word behind “predestine” is *proorizō*. A standard Greek lexicon defines the verb as “to come to a decision beforehand—to decide beforehand, to determine ahead of time, to decide upon ahead of time.”<sup>16</sup> Another lexicon defines the word in a similar way: “decide upon beforehand, predetermine.”<sup>17</sup> Do the six New Testament occurrences of the word indicate precisely *what* was decided beforehand? Every New Testament occurrence of the word *proorizō* is considered here in its context to determine *what* was decided, or determined, in advance.

ACTS 4:28

*They did what your power and will **had decided beforehand** should happen.*<sup>18</sup>

—Acts 4:28

Acts 4:28 is part of Peter and John’s prayer spoken upon their release by the religious authorities. Verses 25–26 quote from an Old Testament text, which states that people raged against the Lord and the Christ. In verse 27, Jesus is identified as the Christ, who was rejected by both Herod and Pilate. Verse 28 continues the prayer by referring to the actions of the people: “They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” In this verse, the action predestined was *neither* every event in history *nor* the salvation of certain people chosen by God from eternity past. Rather, the action predestined—or decided in advance—was *the cross of Christ*.<sup>19</sup>

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a certain number of lost people. However, even many of its defenders note the concept is not in the Bible. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 54, writes: “To speak concretely of an intertrinitarian ‘covenant’ with terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety.” For more on the *pactum salutis*, see chapter 24.

<sup>15</sup> The search for the Greek verb forms of *proorizō* and *pisteuō* was performed through the interactive Bible Word Studies and Morphology Charts in Logos Bible Software 8.12, based on the *Greek New Testament: SBL Edition*.

<sup>16</sup> L&N, 359.

<sup>17</sup> BDAG, 873; the second definition is in italics in the original.

<sup>18</sup> The words in bold reflect the translation of *proorizō* in each verse.

<sup>19</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 113, “The reference to God’s *hand* predestining what happened is a stretching of language; the thought is of God’s mighty hand which carried out what his will ordained, and this will include not only the plotting of his enemies, which he allowed, but also their frustration and defeat.” See also William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series 5 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), on Acts 4:24, “The church’s confessional ascription climaxes by celebrating God’s sovereignty in the active accomplishment of his plan, as even his enemies do what his *power* (literally, hand) has predetermined (see 2:23; Luke 22:22). What a great

## ROMANS 8:29–30

*For 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. And those he **predestined**, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

—Romans 8:29–30

Paul has already established in his letter that all people are sinners (Rom 1:18–3:20). Thankfully, God justifies sinners through the atoning work of Christ on the cross. People are justified, or made right with God, by faith in Jesus (3:21–5:11). Adam’s transgression, which resulted in death and judgment, was answered by Christ’s gift, which resulted in justification and life for those who receive God’s grace (5:12–21). Chapters 6 and 7 address a believer’s relationship to sin. Chapter 8 deals with many important themes, especially the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The Holy Spirit is mentioned nineteen times in the chapter, as God reveals his glory in and renews his broken creation (vv. 18–30). Romans 8:27 states that the Holy Spirit intercedes for saints, a common biblical term for believers. Verse 28 contains the well-known promise that all things work together for good for those who love God. The following terms in verses 27–28 describe the same group of people: saints, those who love God, and those who are called according to his purpose.

Verse 29 states those whom God foreknew (“to know in advance”) God also predestined.<sup>20</sup> Who is predestined, and for what purpose? The verse refers to people “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” In verse 29, predestination does *not* refer to God from eternity choosing certain people for salvation. Instead, the verse promises that *believers* are predestined to, one day, *be glorified and thus conformed to the Son’s image*.<sup>21</sup> In other words, God decided in advance that those who believe in Jesus will one day *be like Jesus*.

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encouragement! The very same group that is threatening these believers opposed their Lord. The persecutors’ earlier success brought Christ’s death but was really according to God’s plan and by his hand.”

<sup>20</sup> Foreknowledge requires neither determinism nor causation. God can *know* a future event without *causing* it. Against this view, see Letham (*Systematic Theology*, 173), “Sometimes in the New Testament ‘foreknow’ is the equivalent of ‘foreordain,’ as in Romans 8:29–30.” According to Grant R. Osborne, the majority of commentators interpret “foreknew” as virtually equivalent to “predestined.” Others, however, link “foreknew” with the emphasis on the faith decision in Rom 3:21– 4:25 and understand it to refer to God’s knowledge of those who would respond in faith to his call. Osborne, *Romans*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 221–22.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 228, “Is Paul then talking about a pretemporal election plan of God where the outcome is predetermined because of God’s sovereign hand in and on every step of the process? This of course is how Augustine and his offspring read this text, but it is not how some of the crucial Greek Fathers that came before Augustine read it, including most importantly Chrysostom. Paul is speaking about God foreknowing and destining in advance Christians to be fully conformed to the image of Christ.”

Verse 30 refers to the same group, “those whom he predestined,” and states they were called, justified, and glorified by God.<sup>22</sup> Other texts also reveal that believers will be glorified. Paul writes, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). John promises, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Predestination in Romans 8:29–30 is a promise that believers in Jesus—those who are called, justified, and glorified—will one day be conformed to and remade to be like Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

## 1 CORINTHIANS 2:7

*No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God **destined** for our glory before time began.<sup>24</sup>*

—1 Corinthians 2:7

In this verse, Paul refers to God’s wisdom as a mystery, “a wisdom God predestined before the ages for our glory” (CSB). What was the hidden wisdom that God predestined? Paul uses the same phrase at the end of his letter to the Romans. He refers in his doxology to “the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith” (Rom 16:25–26). In the doxology of Romans, the hidden mystery is that through faith in Christ, the gentiles were included among God’s people.<sup>25</sup> Paul teaches the same concept in Ephesians 1:9; 3:2–9; and Colossians 1:26–27.<sup>26</sup> According to 1 Corinthians

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<sup>22</sup> Romans 8:29–30 has been called a golden chain of salvation, based on the title of the book by William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine, or the description of theologie, containing the order of the causes of salvation and damnation, according to God’s word* (London: Alde, 1592).

<sup>23</sup> A. Chadwick Thornhill, *The Chosen People: Election, Paul and Second Temple Judaism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 232, “We need not assume here that what Paul intends is that God’s sovereignty has predetermined the specific individuals who will be a part of his people. Simply put, this people who love God, whom God has foreknown, will receive future resurrection through their union with Christ, who is the first of many who will experience this glorification.”

<sup>24</sup> English Bibles offer a variety of translations of *proorizō* for this verse: “decreed” (ESV, NRSV); “destined” (NIV); “determined” (NET); “ordained” (KJV, NKJV); “plan” (a noun in NLT, TLB); and “predestined” (CSB, NASB). This verse is quoted from the NIV for consistency because it is the default Bible translation of this book.

<sup>25</sup> Michael F. Bird interprets Rom 16:25–27: “Here God’s purpose, his eternal command that was hidden in eternity past, concerns how Jews and Gentiles would be praisers and participants in God’s own glory through Jesus Christ.” Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 217.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, NAC 28 (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 89, “Paul develops the term more fully in Colossians and Ephesians and explains the mystery as the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s salvation.”

2:7, God predestined that the boundaries constituting God’s people would expand in Christ to include the gentiles.

EPHESIANS 1:5, 11

*He **predestined** us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.*

—Ephesians 1:5

*In him we were also chosen, having been **predestined** according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*

—Ephesians 1:11

In the Greek, Ephesians 1:3–14 comprises one extended sentence of praise to God. The emphasis is union with Christ, as demonstrated by the ten statements in these verses, such as “in Christ,” “in him,” or “in the One he loves.” For example, Paul states, “For he chose us *in him* before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Eph 1:4). God chose believers, a group, in Christ. William Klein comments on Ephesians 1:4, “The ‘chosen ones’ designate the corporate group to whom Paul writes with himself (and presumably all Christians) included: God chose *us*. The focus is not on the selection of individuals, but the group of those chosen.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, Ephesians 1 concerns **corporate election**, God’s choice of a group.<sup>28</sup> Those who define election as God’s choice of certain individuals for salvation also affirm corporate election. However, their definition of election renders their corporate view as a reference to the group composed of those individuals chosen by God for salvation.<sup>29</sup>

Herschel Hobbs commented on Ephesians 1: “‘Predestinated’ translates a verb meaning to mark out the boundaries beforehand (see v. 11). But note also that God has chosen ‘in him.’ Thus God’s election was in Christ. And he marked out the boundaries of salvation in love, not

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<sup>27</sup> William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 179 (emphasis original). He adds, “Paul clearly envisions election as occurring within the sphere of Christ, and so it appears that he is thinking along the lines of ‘corporate election’” (219).

<sup>28</sup> Against this interpretation, see John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 37. He comments on Eph 1:4–6: “Now everybody finds the doctrine of election difficult. ‘Didn’t I choose God?’ somebody asks indignantly; to which we must answer ‘Yes, indeed you did, and freely, but only because in eternity God had first chosen you.’ ‘Didn’t I decide for Christ?’ asks somebody else; to which we must reply ‘Yes, indeed you did, and freely, but only because in eternity God had first decided for you.’”

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Thomas R. Schreiner, “Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9: A Response to Brian Abasciano,” *JETS* 49.2 (June 2006): 375, “What we have in Romans 9–11 is both corporate and individual election, for we cannot have the one without the other. If individuals are not elected, one cannot have a corporate group. It follows, then, that Paul may focus on corporate election without in the least suggesting that individual election is excluded.” He interprets Eph 1:4 in a similar way (380).

by an arbitrary choice.” Hobbs concludes, “God has chosen ‘in the sphere of Christ.’ He elected that all who are ‘in Christ’ shall be saved. ‘In Christ’ is the boundary that God marked out beforehand, like building a fence around a field.” He adds, “Man is free to choose whether or not he will be in Christ.”<sup>30</sup> Hobbs writes, “Simply stated, before the foundation of the world God elected a plan of salvation and a people to propagate that plan.”<sup>31</sup> Chadwick Thornhill’s explanation is similar: “God intends to accomplish the plan through his previous decision to adopt the elect as children through Jesus Christ.” He clarifies how predestination in Ephesians 1 should *not* be interpreted: “We need not read this as God marking out certain individuals for salvation and thereby rejecting others, but rather God determining the sphere and the means by which his people will be identified as his children.”<sup>32</sup>

Predestination is mentioned twice in Ephesians 1. In verse 5, believers are predestined for adoption. Romans 8:23 refers to adoption as a *future event*: “the redemption of our bodies.” In Ephesians 1:11, believers are informed they have been predestined to obtain an inheritance. In both verses, predestination refers to what occurs to believers and what they receive, *not how they become believers*. Verse 13 clarifies *how* a person becomes a believer, stating: “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” According to Ephesians 1:13, believers are those who hear the gospel, believe in Jesus, and are sealed with the Holy Spirit.<sup>33</sup> In Ephesians 1, predestination refers to what occurs to believers and what they receive as a result of trusting in Jesus.

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<sup>30</sup> Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention, 1971), 67. Hobbs adds, “This does not mean man can boast of his salvation once he chooses Christ. It is the result of God’s saving initiative and purpose” (67).

<sup>31</sup> Herschel H. Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco, TX: Word, 1977), 113. See also Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 219, for three elements in God’s eternal plan in redemptive history: a person (the Son), a people (the elect), and a place (the new creation).

<sup>32</sup> Thornhill, *Chosen People*, 219. See also Eric Hankins, “Commentary on Article 6: Election to Salvation,” in *Anyone Can Be Saved*, ed. David L. Allen, Eric Hankins, and Adam Harwood (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 100. Hankins writes, “It is inaccurate to say that God elects some individuals and not others to salvation on the basis of his inscrutable decrees. Calvinism’s reading evacuates the biblical concept of faith, which requires real freedom as necessary for salvation. God saves individuals by providing salvation through Christ in the announcement of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. The individual who responds to the offer of the gospel with repentance and faith is saved. By virtue of an individual’s being saved by faith in the Elect One, he is now a member of the elect. The phrase ‘God chose me’ can only mean that God has always planned to bring salvation to sinners in a way that takes seriously both their radical sinfulness and their responsibility to respond in faith. It cannot mean that God chooses some and not others without respect to their response of faith to the gospel.”

<sup>33</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 235, “When Paul speaks of how a lost person gets ‘into Christ’ he speaks on the more mundane level of preaching, hearing, responding in faith, not of God’s pre-choosing of our choices for us.”

## CONCLUSION

According to the interpretations above, which account for every occurrence of the word *proorizō* in the Bible, predestination refers to:

**Table 23.1**

Acts 4:28	God predestined the cross of Christ.
Rom 8:29	Believers are predestined to be like Jesus.
Rom 8:30	Believers predestined to be like Jesus are called, justified, and glorified.
1 Cor 2:7	God predestined to include gentiles among God's people.
Eph 1:5	Believers are predestined for adoption (a future event).
Eph 1:11	Believers are predestined to obtain an inheritance.

All Christians should affirm that God is sovereign, the ruler of all things.<sup>34</sup> However, Christians hold different views about *how* God rules all things. Since the time of Augustine, some Christians have taught that God decides or determines all things, including whether each person will be saved. These Christians believe that God from eternity selects certain individuals to be saved. This view can be found in the teachings of Augustine, John Calvin, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), John Piper (b. 1946),<sup>35</sup> and R. C. Sproul (1939–2017).<sup>36</sup> Other Christians differ with the teaching that God determines all things. Instead, they believe the Bible reveals that God *causes some* things but *allows* other things, including whether or not those who hear the gospel will repent of their sin and trust in Jesus. As

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<sup>34</sup> Theological writings sometimes characterize this topic as a balance of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Though many of those investigations are helpful, one of the terms is misleading. All Christians should affirm divine sovereignty, which simply refers to God's rule of all things. The Augustinian view introduces divine *determinism*.

<sup>35</sup> John Piper has influenced the English-speaking evangelical church since the mid-1990s through his sermons, books, conferences, and the resources published through the Desiring God Foundation. See John Piper, *Does God Desire All to Be Saved?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). There he attempts to reconcile “the simultaneous existence of God's will for all people to be saved and his will to choose some people for salvation unconditionally before creation” (13). See my review of this book in *JBTM* 10.2 (Fall 2013): 99–102. See also his section on unconditional election in John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2013), 53–61.

<sup>36</sup> R. C. Sproul has also influenced the English-speaking evangelical church through his books and resources published through Ligonier Ministries. On this topic, see his books, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1986), and *What Is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 139–61.

demonstrated by examining the occurrences of the word in the Bible, predestination does not refer to God selecting individuals for salvation.<sup>37</sup> Rather, predestination refers to God's promises for believers.

## ELECTION IN THEOLOGY

According to Augustinian predestination, God, in his mercy, chose certain individuals for salvation. This selection of some individuals for salvation was a demonstration of God's mercy and grace to unworthy sinners. Those who affirm doctrines such as divine determinism and particular atonement are comfortable defining predestination and election in ways that view God as selecting certain individuals for salvation. The cross of Christ, in their view, was the means by which God atoned for the sins and redeemed the particular group of sinners that he intended to save: the elect—defined as those sinners he planned, before the creation of the world, to redeem.

Augustinian predestination was adopted by some of the Protestant Reformers and is known as the Calvinist-Arminian view of election. Though these perspectives are often portrayed as competing alternatives, they share many presuppositions.<sup>38</sup> According to this framework, election concerns God's choice from eternity of the salvation of individuals. Both groups insist that God's grace is prior to the salvation of sinners. Calvinists affirm **effectual grace** (God *unilaterally* converts some sinners), and Arminians affirm **prevenient grace** (God *enables* a person to repent and believe).<sup>39</sup> Calvinists affirm **unconditional election**, God's choice of individuals for salvation, based on nothing about them—including God's knowledge of how they will respond to the message of the gospel. Arminians affirm **conditional election**, God's choice of individuals for salvation, based on their response to the message of the gospel.<sup>40</sup> Both perspectives presuppose that election refers to God's

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<sup>37</sup> J. Terry Young, *Understanding Evangelical Christianity: What We Believe and Why* (n.p.: Kindle Direct, 2018), 255, "According to the idea of election, our salvation is the result of the prior planning and action of God." He adds, "The doctrine of election does not mean that God has already determined who can be a believer. We must not accept a rigid doctrine of determinism that overlooks the freedom of the will granted to all humans. We were created with both freedom and responsibility. We have the freedom to say *yes* or *no* to God. If we do not have the freedom to choose, then neither do we bear the responsibility for the choices that we make" (255–56, emphasis original).

<sup>38</sup> For an irenic and helpful summary and analysis of classical Calvinist and Arminian views of predestination, see Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, and Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall, 2002), 19–84.

<sup>39</sup> For a presentation on effectual grace that is accessible to a general audience, see Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones, *PROOF: Finding Freedom through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). For a biblical, historical, and theological analysis of the important, but neglected, topic of prevenient grace, see W. Brian Shelton, *Prevenient Grace: God's Provision for Fallen Humanity* (Anderson, IN: Warner, 2014). Shelton explains, "The doctrine of prevenient grace is the belief that God enables all people to exercise saving faith in Christ by mitigating the effects of sinful depravity" (259).

<sup>40</sup> For examples of the unconditional and conditional views of election as God's choice of individuals for salvation, see the chapters by Ware and Cottrell, respectively, in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, ed. Chad

choice of certain individuals for salvation.<sup>41</sup> Though Calvinists and Arminians differ at some points, their shared understanding of election as God's choice of certain individuals for salvation unites them. Both perspectives are vulnerable if their definition of election is not required by faithful interpretations of the Scripture.

Karl Barth emphasizes the election of the Son and rejects the interpretation that election refers to a person's individual destiny.<sup>42</sup> Others have highlighted similar themes. As discussed above, Jesus is the elect Son, and believers are chosen in Christ; thus, election is Christ-centered. Roger Forster and Paul Marston observe, "The church is elect because it is in Christ and he is elect."<sup>43</sup> Barth's unique contribution is that *all people* are elect in the Son, who in his person was both elected as a man and rejected as God.<sup>44</sup>

An issue that is often overlooked when discussing election is *how* one becomes elect. In the Augustinian model, the elect were selected by God for salvation.<sup>45</sup> Other Christians, however, regard election as God's choice of the plan for salvation (atonement for sinners at the cross of Christ) and a people (those who freely repent and believe in Jesus) through a person (his Son), but not his selection of particular individuals for salvation from eternity past.<sup>46</sup> Though some treat the concepts of election and predestination as synonymous, the terms are used differently in Scripture and thus should not be confused. When I teach students about the doctrine of election, I typically distribute the texts of Scripture frequently cited on election and give them time to read the texts and discuss what they see in those texts about election. I encourage my readers to engage in a similar study. Allow your

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Owen Brand (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006). Bruce A. Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation: Unconditional, Individual, and Infralapsarian," 1–58; Jack W. Cottrell, "The Classical Arminian View of Election," 70–134. Brand regards the other three positions to be minority views; I agree and thus do not include them in the discussion.

<sup>41</sup> Eric Hankins, "Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: Toward a Baptist Soteriology," *JBTM* 8 (Spring 2011): 88–89, "Take away individual election, and the key components of Calvinism and Arminianism disappear. God does not elect individuals to salvation on the basis of His hidden councils, nor does He elect them on the basis of His foreknowledge of their future faith. Simply put, God does not 'elect' *individuals* to salvation. He has elected an eschatological people whom He has determined to have for Himself. This group will be populated by individuals who have responded in faith to the gracious, free offer of the gospel. The group, 'the Elect,' is comprised of individuals who are 'saved by faith,' not 'saved by election.'"

<sup>42</sup> See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God, Part 2*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957).

<sup>43</sup> Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1974), 130.

<sup>44</sup> See Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173–78, for a sophisticated adoption and modification of Barth's view of election.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, the section on predestination, which refers to election as God's choice of some individuals for salvation, in *The Canons of the Synod of Dort, 1618–19*, in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 2, part 4, *Creeds and Confessions of the Reformation Era*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 571–79.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., Herschel H. Hobbs, *Fundamentals of our Faith* (Nashville: Broadman, 1960), 93, "The doctrine of election refers to a plan of salvation for all men and not simply to the capricious choice of some men and the rejection of others." He adds, "It is a plan based on grace and not merit (cf. Matt 20:1–16). Those who in their free will accept it are saved; those who reject it are by their own free will lost."

examination of the biblical texts, rather than the definitions in the theological literature, to shape your view of election.

## ELECTION IN THE BIBLE

In the Old Testament, election (Heb. *bāḥar*, “to choose”; *bāḥîr*, “chosen”) refers to God choosing for himself an individual (such as Abraham, David, Solomon, and the Messiah) or a group (such as Israel or priests) for service. In the New Testament, the concept of election (Grk. *eklegomai*, “to choose, select”; *eklektos*, “chosen, elect”; *eklogē*, “choice, election”) expands to include those who are united to Christ by faith. Key biblical texts are considered below to clarify the meaning.<sup>47</sup>

### GOD’S CHOICE OF ABRAM

The foundation of God electing a people for himself is found in his promise to Abram (later called Abraham). Genesis 12:1–3 states,

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you.

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse.

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you.”

God promised to do something great in Abram’s life in order to do something great for all people. In verses 2–3, God promised to make Abram into a great nation, give him a great name, bless him, and make him a blessing. Verse 3 states, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” God promised and began to fulfill individual, national, and worldwide blessing by entering into a covenant with one man, Abram. If election is about God’s choice and if this passage is about election, then God elected Abram to bless him and to bless others through him. Although the word “elect” does not appear in those verses, Paul refers

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<sup>47</sup> See A. Chadwick Thornhill, “Election,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015); and Fred Klooster, “Election,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

to Abraham's descendants when he mentions "God's purpose in election" (Rom 9:11). Thus, any biblical survey of election should include Genesis 12.

### GOD'S CHOICE OF INDIVIDUALS

God's choice of an individual can be seen again in the life of David. God chose David to be king (1 Sam 16:1–13). God looked at David's heart (v. 7), which implies God's choice was conditioned on his knowledge of David's inner life. However, Scripture also indicates that God knew and chose his servants before their birth. David confessed, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Ps 139:16).<sup>48</sup> The Lord told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). God's choice of an individual for service was informed by his comprehensive knowledge of all things, including the person's future (and possible) words, thoughts, and actions.

God chose many individuals for certain tasks. He chose the Levitical priests to minister in the Lord's name (Deut 18:5). Moses is called God's "chosen one" (Ps 106:23), and God sent Aaron, "whom he had chosen" (Ps 105:26). God chose Israel's kings (Deut 17:15), beginning with Saul (1 Sam 10:24). God also chose David (2 Sam 6:21; 1 Kgs 8:16) and Solomon (1 Chr 28:6; 29:1) to rule his people. The Lord Almighty declared to Zerubbabel, "I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you" (Hag 2:23). When the Jews faced extermination under King Xerxes, Mordecai famously asked his cousin, Queen Esther, "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esth 4:14). Any biblical account of election must include instances of God selecting individuals for service.<sup>49</sup>

### GOD'S CHOICE OF A NATION

In addition to choosing individuals for service, God created and chose a nation for himself.<sup>50</sup> God's choice of Israel began with his selection of Abram and Sarai, a senior adult and his barren wife (Gen 11:30). Through them, God would birth a nation that would be led by Moses, who explained their special status in reference to the exodus and promise of land. Moses

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<sup>48</sup> See the models of providence in chapter 8. According to the divine determinism model, God's ordaining our days entails God's determining our choices. According to the divine guidance, middle knowledge, and open theism models, God's ordaining our days (as well as his plan for and rule of all things) does *not* determine our choices.

<sup>49</sup> Though the word "elect" is not used, God sometimes chooses individuals outside his covenant people, such as King Cyrus, to accomplish his purposes. In Isa 45:1, the Lord refers to Cyrus as his "anointed" (Heb. *māšîaḥ*). Isaiah 45:13 states, "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty." I am indebted to Rustin Umstattd for this insight, as well as for a similar observation in the next footnote about God's choice of nations.

<sup>50</sup> God sometimes chose other nations to accomplish his purposes. For example, he chose Assyria (Isa 10:5, "the rod of my anger") and Babylon (Hab 1:6, "I am raising up the Babylonians") to bring judgment on his own people.

said, “Because he [God] loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today” (Deut 4:37–38). Moses instructed the people to drive out the nations who were currently inhabiting the land they had been promised and to remain faithful to the Lord. Moses explained,

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut 7:6–8)

Moses’s instructions to the people should inform a biblical survey of election.<sup>51</sup> God delivered the people because he loved them and remained faithful to his own promises to their ancestors. God chose them to be holy to him among all other nations, his treasured possession.<sup>52</sup> He did not choose them because of their large numbers but demonstrated his power by redeeming them from the Egyptians, a more powerful nation.

#### GOD’S CHOICE AND MISSION

God’s choice of a nation entailed a responsibility to his mission. Israel was God’s chosen servant (Isa 41:8–9; 42:1–25; 43:9–13; and others), and they were to be a light to the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:1–7). Israel’s status as God’s chosen servant is evident in Isaiah 41:8–9,

But you, Israel, my servant,  
Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
you descendants of Abraham my friend,  
I took you from the ends of the earth,  
from its farthest corners I called you.

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<sup>51</sup> W. Ross Blackburn argues, “The Lord’s missionary commitment to make himself known to the nations is the central theological concern of Exodus.” Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, NSBT 28 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 15.

<sup>52</sup> See Deut 14:2, “for you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession,” and Ps 135:4, “For the LORD has chosen Jacob to be his own, Israel to be his treasured possession.”

I said, “You are my servant”.

I have chosen you and have not rejected you.

God’s choice of Israel is corporate, rather than individual, and connected to her calling to service. Israel’s unique calling to be a light to the nations is noted in Isaiah 42:6, “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.” A similar promise is made in Isaiah 49:6, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” In both texts, God promised that his people would both bless his own people and be a light, or serve as a witness, to the gentiles (all who were not Israelites). God explained in Isaiah 49:6 why he desired Israel to be a light to the gentiles: he wanted to save people of other nations. Election never meant God loved only one group. Charlie Trimm concludes, “Israel’s election did not automatically entail the condemnation of the other nations.”<sup>53</sup> Rather, God chose one group (Jews) to love them and to reach others (gentiles). For both Israel and the church, election is a call to God’s mission.<sup>54</sup> Forster and Marston observe in their study of *eklektos* that election concerns God bestowing a privileged office. They conclude, “The main idea in the New Testament seems to be one of responsibility and a task to perform.”<sup>55</sup> As the Israelites were called to be a light to the nations, the church is called to be the light of the world (Matt 5:14) and a Spirit-empowered witness of Jesus to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

#### GOD’S CHOICE OF HIS SON

God’s desire to love Israel and to reach the nations raises another major issue when surveying the Scriptures to understand election. God elected, or chose, his Son to be Israel’s Messiah. This identification of the election of God’s Son is sometimes passed by in discussions of the doctrine. However, the election of Israel’s Messiah should inform one’s view of election, for God’s election of the Messiah is the bridge between election in the Old

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<sup>53</sup> Charlie Trimm, “Did YHWH Condemn the Nations When He Elected Israel? YHWH’s Disposition toward the Non-Israelites in the Torah,” *JETS* 55.3 (2012): 536. Trimm summarizes his findings: “The dialectical portrayal of YHWH’s relationship with Sodom and Gomorrah, the Amalekites, the Egyptians, the Midianites, and the Canaanites indicates that YHWH exhibited mixed responses to several nations in the Torah. Each of these nations is portrayed negatively at some point in the narratives because of their evil actions. However, YHWH also acted graciously to these same nations at other times, and various people from these same groups even came to follow YHWH and were incorporated into Israel” (534).

<sup>54</sup> Blackburn (*God Who Makes Himself Known*, 210) writes: “This mission of the church is not imparting information (admittedly overstated), but rather living in such a way that the nations take notice. This is the call of both Israel and the church.”

<sup>55</sup> Forster and Marston, *God’s Strategy in Human History*, 118

and New Testaments.<sup>56</sup> The people of God during both eras were redeemed by Israel's Messiah, Jesus. The mystery (as mentioned in Rom 16:25–26; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:9; 3:2–9; Col 1:26–27) was that God predestined that gentiles would be included among the people of God by faith in Israel's Messiah, Jesus.

Matthew identified Jesus's ministry as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "Here is my servant whom I have *chosen*, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations" (Matt 12:18; see Isa 42:1). At the transfiguration, God the Father referred to Jesus as "my Son, whom I have *chosen*" (Luke 9:35). English translations are divided over whether Jesus was "foreknown" or "*chosen*" by God (1 Pet 1:20).<sup>57</sup> Either word is appropriate because Jesus was both foreknown and chosen by God the Father before the creation of the world to be the savior of the world.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Jesus is "*chosen* by God and precious to him" and "a *chosen* and precious cornerstone" (1 Pet 2:4, 6). The word "chosen" does not refer to believers alone. Matthew, Luke, and Peter also refer to Jesus as chosen by God.

#### GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE

In the New Testament, the people of God are called the elect. When the Son of Man returns, he will "gather his elect" (Mark 13:27). Paul told the Thessalonians, "We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that *he has chosen you*" (1 Thess 1:4). The elect are those who trust in Jesus; they were chosen in him. Some follow Augustine in interpreting these texts to mean that God selected those individuals from eternity for salvation. Other texts, which do not state those ideas, can be interpreted in ways *consistent* with Augustinian predestination. For example, Jesus remarked that no one could come to him unless drawn by the Father (John 6:44). This statement is interpreted by some to mean that God draws *only some people* to faith in Christ. Against this interpretation, though, Jesus also stated that when he was lifted up on the cross, he would draw *all people* to himself (John 12:32). When the Ephesians 1 statements of being "chosen" (v. 4) and "predestined" (vv. 5, 11) are viewed through the Augustinian lens, one might think the text states that God chooses individuals and predestines them for salvation. As already noted, however, predestination is a promise for *believers*, not a statement about an individual's election to salvation. In addition, the verses

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<sup>56</sup> For a fascinating study of election in the Second Temple literature, see Thornhill, *Chosen People*. Knowing this literature informs one's understanding of the Jewish background of Paul, who refers in his writings to the elect.

<sup>57</sup> The following translations render *proginōskō* as "foreknown": ASV, CSB, ESV, LEB, NASB, NET, and YLT; these translations use "chosen": CEB, CEV, ERV, EXB, GNT, HCSB, NCV, and NIV.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner admits that "chosen" is a reasonable way to translate the word, though he prefers "foreknown" because the word implies preexistence. Schreiner summarizes the meaning: "God determined before history ever began ("before the foundation of the world," NRSV; cf. Eph 1:4) that the Christ would appear at this particular juncture of history as redeemer." Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 88.

in Ephesians 1 do not state that people become part of the chosen by God choosing them for salvation. Rather, the text identifies that believers are chosen *in him* (election concerns Israel's Messiah and the cross of Christ), and Paul explains in Ephesians 1:13 that people unite with Christ when they hear and believe the message of the gospel.

#### GOD'S CHOICE IN HIS SON

Election refers to salvation *in Christ*. Andrew Lincoln comments on Ephesians 1:4, "In many cases, Paul's 'in Christ' phrase involves the notion of the incorporation of believers into Christ, and this concept of the incorporation of many in one representative head, together with the use of *en*, can be seen in the LXX in regard to other figures, such as Abraham (Gen 12:3) and Isaac (Gen 21:12), and in Paul in regard to Adam (1 Cor 15:22)."<sup>59</sup> Brian Abasciano, interacting with Thomas Schreiner, writes, "Jesus is the Elect One (Schreiner gets this point right) and the Church was chosen as a consequence of its being in Christ. Christ is the sphere of election. All who are in him share in his election just as all who were in Jacob/Israel were also elect."<sup>60</sup>

#### GOD'S CHOICE IN ROMANS 9–11

Romans 9–11 is a significant passage of Scripture when considering the concept of election. However, it is also a notoriously difficult passage to interpret.<sup>61</sup> Though the verses have become a hub for doctrinal controversy, followers of Jesus must endeavor to understand this section of Scripture rather than pass over it because of the difficulties. What is Paul's main argument in Romans 9–11, and what (if any) are the implications for understanding election?

Paul begins chapter 9 by expressing sadness over his fellow Israelites' rejection of their Messiah (vv. 1–5). He then addresses the question, What about Israel? God's word has not failed, and God was right in reaching out to the gentiles. God's children are not merely descendants from Israel, meaning natural-born children of Abraham; rather, they are children of the promise (vv. 6–8). The implied contrast in verse 9 is between the natural-born child of Abram (Ishmael) and his child of the promise (Isaac). Paul makes a similar contrast between Isaac and Rebekah's twins, Jacob and Esau (vv. 10–13). Before the twins were born, God elected one to serve the other. Paul then quotes from Malachi 1:2–3, stating that God

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<sup>59</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 21.

<sup>60</sup> Brian J. Abasciano, "Corporate Election in Romans 9: A Reply to Thomas Schreiner," *JETS* 49.2 (June 2006): 366. For the article to which he replies, see Thomas R. Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation? Some Exegetical and Theological Reflections," *JETS* 36.1 (March 1993): 25–40. Schreiner's article was later published under the title, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 89–106.

<sup>61</sup> Even the apostle Peter remarks that Paul's "letters contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16).

loved Jacob and hated Esau. The question arises, What is the nature of election? According to the Augustinian view, God's choice of one son over another son before their birth reflected his choice to save one and not the other. Against this view, however, "God's purpose in election" (Rom 9:11) reflects God's choice of one person (or nation) over another to accomplish his will in salvation. Paul refers to God's justice, indicating God has mercy on whom he wills, and he hardens whom he wills (vv. 14–18).

Some interpret this reference to mercy as God's decision to save some people. Likewise, the reference to hardening concerns God's decision not to save certain people. However, Paul states the purpose of the mercy and the hardening: that God's name would be proclaimed in all the earth (v. 17). The image of the potter with the clay (vv. 19–21) can be interpreted to mean that people have no right to question the God who selects some individuals for salvation and others for condemnation. However, the prophets used this potter-clay imagery when God judged a nation for its rebellion (Isa 29:16; 45:9; Jer 18:1–10), not to refer to the precreation selection of individuals for salvation. God can raise up his people from both Jews and gentiles (Rom 9:22–29), and Israel stumbled over the message of the gospel when they refused to receive Jesus as their Messiah (vv. 30–33).

In chapter 10, Paul expresses his heart and prayer that Israelites will be saved (v. 1). Righteousness is found in Christ for all who believe (v. 4). Righteousness by faith comes when a person hears the word, confesses, and believes (vv. 5–10), and everyone who calls on the Lord (whether Jew or gentile) will be saved (vv. 11–13). People can worship God when and because they are saved. Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions that result in this argument: people worship when they believe; they believe when they hear the message; they hear the message when someone preaches (vv. 14–15). Sadly, not all Israel has accepted the message of the gospel (v. 16). God's message about Christ went out, and Israel heard it, but they neither understood nor accepted it (vv. 17–19a). As a result, God raised up another nation (the gentiles) to provoke Israel to jealousy, resulting in blessings for all people (10:19b–21; 11:11).

In chapter 11, Paul addresses whether God has given up on his chosen people, who rejected their Messiah. God could be unfaithful to Israel only if he failed to keep his covenant with them, but God is faithful. Thus, God will be faithful to Israel. However, how will God deal with his unfaithful people, who rejected their Messiah? Paul describes the gentiles as ingrafted branches (vv. 17–18). The natural branches (Jews) rejected their Messiah and were broken off. In their place, God brought in wild branches (gentiles). The warning is that God, who broke off the *natural* branches because of their unbelief, will not hesitate to break off the *ingrafted* branches for their unbelief (vv. 19–20). Paul discloses this mystery: Israel was hardened (recall the mention of hardening in 9:14–18) until the full number of gentiles came in (11:25). All Israel (a reference to the true people of God) will be saved, and God has bound

all people over to disobedience to have mercy on all (v. 32). Paul closes the passage by praising God (vv. 33–36).

Election is one of Paul’s themes. God chose Israel. A key dispute among interpreters is how to define the concept. The definition of election that readers bring to their interpretation of Romans 9–11 drives their conclusions about the meaning of the passage. For example, if election is defined as God’s decision, before creation, to select certain individuals for salvation, then the choice in Romans 9 refers to God selecting individuals for salvation. Augustine, in his later writings, teaches this view. He interprets the lump of clay in Romans 9 to refer to a *massa peccati* (Latin, “mass of sin”), a lump of sin-infected dough from which God subsequently created every human. Augustine refers to this “mass” frequently in his writings, and it forms the basis of his view that God predestined a certain number of people to salvation to replace the fallen angels.<sup>62</sup> Although Augustinian predestination has influenced many Christian interpreters, Paul is addressing in Romans 9 the temporal rejection and hardening of Israel, not the eternal fate of individuals.<sup>63</sup> The hardening of Israel should be interpreted as God rejecting his people for a period of time to bring in the gentiles rather than God’s precreation choice to condemn certain individuals.<sup>64</sup> Reprobation (the view that God decides before creation, whether actively or passively, to condemn certain individuals) was not Paul’s intended meaning in Romans 9 but Augustine’s innovation.<sup>65</sup>

In the Old Testament, election concerns God’s choice of individuals (beginning with Abram) to provide himself a nation (Israel), who will be his holy people, called to serve as a light to

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<sup>62</sup> See Augustine, *To Simplician—On Various Questions* 1.2.16, 19–20 (LCC 6:397–98, 401–4); *Letter* 186, FC (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1955), 30:191–221; *Sermon* 294.15, in WSA III/8:190. See also Paula Fredriksen, “Massa,” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 545–47; and Pier Franco Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin: Augustine and the Pre-Augustinian Sources*, trans. Adam Kamesar, AAR Religions in Translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 49–51. For more on Augustine’s view of original sin, see chapter 13 in this book.

<sup>63</sup> For commentators who argue that Paul is *not* addressing the eternal fate of individuals in Rom 9, see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 238–39; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 563; Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina 6 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996), 299; Luke T. Johnson, *Reading Romans* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 140; Witherington with Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 246–59; and Brian J. Abasciano’s three volumes in the Library of New Testament Studies: *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9.1–9: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:10–18: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); and *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:19–24: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis* (London: T&T Clark, forthcoming). For commentators who argue that Paul is addressing unconditional election to salvation in Rom 9, see Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach,” 89–106; Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 460–529; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

<sup>64</sup> The temporary hardening of Israel (Rom 9–11) was for gentile salvation (11:25). See Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 106.

<sup>65</sup> See Eric Hankins, “Romans 9 and the Calvinist Doctrine of Reprobation,” *JBTM* 15.1 (Spring 2018): 62–74.

the nations (all people), and through whom God will bring the Messiah. Though related concepts, interpreters should avoid conflating election and salvation. Paul incorporates his Old Testament view of election with the newly revealed mystery that gentiles are now included among God's people through faith in Jesus (see Rom 16:24–25; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:9; 3:2–9; Col 1:26–27). Election is a mark of the true people of God, who are not identified by circumcision of the flesh but circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:29). God's true people, whether Jews or gentiles, are justified by faith in Jesus (Rom 4). Abram is the father of all who believe, whether or not they are circumcised (4:9–13). God's true people are not identified by their physical link to Abram but to faith in Jesus. Paul never states in Romans 1–8 that salvation is through election. Rather, salvation is for everyone who believes (1:16). Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (10:13). Likewise, Paul never states in Romans 9–11 that salvation is through election. Rather, God hardened and rejected his people for a period of time (because of their disobedience) to bring the gentiles into his people by their faith in Israel's Messiah. Thus, all Israel (God's true people, the elect) will be saved (11:26).

#### WHO ARE THE ELECT?

The theological literature typically follows the Augustinian view when defining the elect; they are those who were chosen by God, before creation, for salvation. However, this definition is not required by its usage in Scripture. David Capes, Rodney Reeves, and Randolph Richards observe: "Paul always uses the term *elect* to refer to those who are already members of God's people. He never uses it to prescribe who is going to be saved. Instead he employs it to remind those who have answered God's call that they are members of God's covenant people."<sup>66</sup> To discern the meaning of election in Scripture, one must move beyond simply reading the prevalent definition into one's interpretation of the biblical text. The uses of the key terms in Scripture, rather than the definitions in the theological literature, should determine one's definition of election.

#### CHAPTER SUMMARY

How and why are only some people saved? According to the Augustinian view of predestination and election, God, in his mercy, chooses certain people for salvation. This predestination of all things and election of some individuals to salvation is affirmed as a demonstration of God's mercy and grace to unworthy sinners. Those who affirm doctrines such as divine determinism and particular atonement are comfortable defining predestination and election in ways that view God as selecting certain individuals for salvation. The atonement, in their view, was God's act through the cross of Christ to redeem

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<sup>66</sup> David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, and E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters and Theology*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 162 (emphasis original).

a particular group of sinners, the elect—defined as those he planned before the creation of the world to redeem.

Other Christians, however, question the Augustinian view and tend to affirm general atonement and another view of God’s providence. They affirm that God selects the plan, means, and scope of salvation. An individual’s salvation, however, depends on that person’s response to the message of the gospel. According to this view, predestination and election do not refer in the Bible to God determining all things, including the selection of some individuals for salvation. None of the six occurrences of predestination in the Bible require one to affirm such a view. Rather, predestination concerns God’s promises for believers. In the Old Testament, election concerns God’s selection of individuals for service, his choice of a nation to reach the nations, and his choice of his Son as the Messiah. None of those instances entail God selecting individuals for salvation, which has always been by grace and through faith. Election concerns God’s choice of individuals for service, a people for himself, his Son as the Messiah, and his plan to save sinners.

#### KEY TERMS

- election, conditional
- election, corporate
- election, unconditional
- grace, effectual
- grace, prevenient

#### REVIEW QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

##### PROMPTS

1. Describe your view of predestination and election *before* reading this chapter.
2. What previous ideas or interpretations of predestination and election were challenged (if any) by reading this chapter?
3. What new ideas or interpretations were introduced (if any) by reading this chapter?

#### SELECTED CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY

##### SOURCES

##### CLASSIC

Augustine. *A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints*.

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