

## *Election*

Election. I want to spend a few minutes talking to you about this question of election. It is a topic of supreme importance. Sadly, it is often badly misunderstood, with dire consequences. I hope I may be able to clear up some misunderstandings about this subject, and show how it can be made useful to you.

First of all, let me spell out what I am talking about. I will try to do it as simply as I can. God, in eternity past, before he created the world, foreseeing everything that would happen, determined to save a vast number of mankind. Save them? Yes, indeed. God knew that Adam would sin, and that the whole of mankind would fall with him. God, in his holiness, would, therefore, have to deal with fallen mankind in wrath. Yet, as I say, because of his great love and mercy, he determined to save a vast number out of fallen mankind – the elect. Now God would have been just if he had damned all mankind, but he showed his infinite kindness in his good pleasure and determination to take many of them and save them from their sins. He decreed to do this through the sacrificial death of his Son, and by the application of his saving work to those whom he had determined to save, by the power and energy of his Holy Spirit. So, you see, the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is engaged in determining and accomplishing the salvation of the elect. Now God did not choose these whom he would save because he saw any good in them. Nothing like that. The Bible makes it clear that God chose simply out of his own grace and love.

This is what I am talking about. It goes without saying, but I will say it: this is a mysterious doctrine, mysterious indeed. We only know about it because God has revealed it to us in the Bible.

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What should be our response to such teaching? How should we react to it? Well, for a start, we should not try to impose our weak intellects on the infinite wisdom and mind of God. Nor should we have the audacity to try to measure God's actions by our wretched sense of right and wrong. God is God, and I am a sinner. God could have damned me, no questions asked. If he has chosen to show his love, grace and mercy in saving a huge number of sinners, what else can I do but submit to him, and admire him in his infinite attributes? In short, I must bow and worship God Almighty – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Paul, the apostle, put it:

God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?' But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it: 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Rom. 9:20-24).

Well, that's the background to what you are reading here. Taking this for granted, reader, I want to make some simple application of it to us all. Simple application, it may be, but it is vital! You see, as I said, there are many misunderstandings about this weighty subject, and I hope I can clear some of them up. There is a sweetness in this doctrine, a sweetness I would like to share with you.

Before I begin, here is one thing I must make clear, and it is something of the utmost importance. Reader, you are either a believer or you are not. By that, I mean you are

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either trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for your everlasting salvation, or you are not. What I say to you about this matter of ‘election’ depends absolutely upon whether or not you are a true believer.

Are you a believer – in the sense I have just set out, I mean? Yes? Very well, then. Let me address you first of all. I am going to do so in the words of Paul to the Thessalonians. Let me quote them:

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:2-10).

Let me pick out the vital words: ‘For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you’. There it is, you see: Paul knew that the Thessalonians were elect, ‘chosen by God’. He knew that in eternity past God had set his everlasting love upon them, decreed them to be saved, and determined to send his Son to die for them. Now my question is this: How on earth did he know that?

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The point is, God elected his elect in eternity, long, long before there was a universe, let alone any man. And the register of that election was entirely secret, and has been kept secret; the book has never been opened to man. There is no possibility of any man, as it were, peeping into the book of God's decrees to see if his name, or anybody else's, is there. So how did Paul know about the Thessalonians and their election of God? How could he be so confident? 'For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you'. That is what he said. My question is: How did he know?

Now this is a vital question. Or, rather, the answer is! It is to me. It is to you. Because – just as Paul knew this glorious fact about the Thessalonians – I want to know it for myself, about me! How can I know that God has chosen me? How can I know that he loves me with an everlasting love, and that he gave his Son to die upon the cross to redeem me from all my sins? Nothing could be more important to me. I want to be able to say with Paul: 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). I want to know that this is true of me, that I belong to the number of the elect who can say that 'God... has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time' (2 Tim. 1:8-9). That is what I want to know. The question is: Where can I find this assurance? How can I get it?

Well, one of the reasons God recorded this passage to the Thessalonians is to help us answer that very question. How can I know that God has chosen me? What a question! I'm certainly not the first to be concerned about it.

Take Joseph Hart:

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*Election is a precious truth,  
But, Lord, I wish to be  
Assur'd by thy own Spirit's mouth  
That thou hast chosen me*

Notice what Hart was seeking: he wanted the inner witness, the witness of God's Spirit, that he was indeed a child of God. He was, of course referring to Romans 8:16; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; 1 John 2:20,27. In this sense, Hart was quite right. This *is* the fundamental assurance for the child of God. Nevertheless, no one in Scripture is ever recorded as seeking this witness, nor is there any command to seek it. The inner witness is a direct work of the Spirit at conversion. Consequently, Hart was mistaken to talk about seeking the witness. Even so, he was right to speak of the Spirit's witness as the primary way of assurance.

But, of course, no one outside the believer in question can receive that witness for the believer; he can only receive it for himself. For an onlooker, the evidence of the newness of life in conversion is the paramount testimony (2 Cor. 5:17). Indeed, such a test will serve as a supplementary assurance to the believer himself. Well, then, in that light, let's look at what Paul said to the Thessalonians. Let us follow it through, take his prescription, and find out whether or not we have been elected of God.

For a start, notice what Paul did not say. Negatives are often very important. Paul did not say that God had taken him into heaven, or spoken to him in private, or whatever, and let him see the names in the book of his decrees. As I have said, God never does that. And Paul made no such claim. Well, that's a relief! Because if Paul had discovered this election of the Thessalonians by special revelation from God, then I should be waiting for some such thing to happen to me! Not much chance of that! None at all, in fact! But Paul said nothing of the sort.

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The fact is, Paul was able to be sure about the Thessalonians by using ‘ordinary’ means – means open to you and to me. All he did was look at the Thessalonians and observe what was going on in their lives. And from that he could deduce that God must have chosen them. Remarkable! No, it’s true. By seeing what had happened to them, Paul knew that the Thessalonians were elect. And that is the very thing I can do for myself, and the very thing I need to do for myself. Moreover, reader, it is precisely what I want you to do for yourself. Let me trace it out as simply as I can. It is all here – in the passage I quoted just now.

Paul was a preacher of the gospel. He preached the gospel in Thessalonica. Those pagans heard him. At that point, Paul didn’t have a clue as to whether or not they were elect. That was not his primary concern. As far as preaching the gospel to them was concerned, it was not his concern at all. He knew that there are secret things and revealed things; the secret things belong to God, the revealed things belong to us (Deut. 29:29). One secret thing was whether or not these Thessalonians were elect. That was God’s business, and Paul left it to him. But God has revealed that he wants his gospel preached and Christ and salvation offered to all men everywhere (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8), and that was what Paul was determined to do (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2). In that attitude, he went to Thessalonica. The pagans gathered to hear him. They were sinners. They needed to be saved. It is only Christ who can save sinners. So he preached Christ to them. He preached the gospel, and he offered Christ and salvation to them, calling them to repentance and faith.

*It is what happened next that is all-important.* Paul preached. They listened. More, they obeyed the gospel: that is to say, they confessed that they were sinners; they repented of their sin; they trusted Christ; and they began to live a life of obedience to Christ, patiently enduring

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suffering for the name of Christ, looking for, waiting for, hoping for, his expected return. When he preached, that is what Paul wanted, and that is what he got; that is what he looked for, and that is what he observed. And it was this response to the gospel that demonstrated to Paul, proved to him, and proved beyond all doubt, that these Thessalonians were indeed elect of God. They began as pagans, but they heard the gospel, and they were converted. And Paul knew that there was only one explanation of it: the power of God through Christ, by the Spirit, in the gospel. And, to cap it all, he knew that it would only have happened if God had, from eternity, marked them out, chosen them and predestined them to be saved. So, when the apostle witnessed the converting effect of his ministry, when he saw what was happening as he preached the gospel in Thessalonica, when he saw the evident change in the lives of these pagans, Paul knew beyond a shadow of doubt that God in eternity had elected them to everlasting salvation.

Wonderful! More, this is precisely what I must do for myself. First and foremost I listen to the witness of the Spirit telling me of Christ and what I am in him. Do I? Intimately connected with that, I have to be able to answer the following questions: ‘What have I done with Christ? What do I think of him? What does he mean to me? What effect has he had in my life? What have I done with his gospel? Have I been convicted that I am a sinner? Have I repented? Have I trusted Christ? Indeed, am I trusting Christ now? Am I seeking to obey the Lord Jesus in all his commands to me? Am I looking to him to come again and take me to everlasting glory? Is this my hope? Is this my experience?’ ‘Do I pass Christ’s test?’ ‘You will recognise them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?... You will recognise them by their fruits... The tree is known by its fruit’ (Matt. 7:16,20; 12:33; see also Jas. 3:11-12). That’s the question: ‘Am I a

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true Christian? Have I been truly converted? Have I got the fruits?’

My friend, if the answer to such questions – honestly asked and honestly answered – is ‘Yes’, then I grip you by the hand, look you in the eye, and tell you this as warmly as I can: on this evidence, as far as I can judge, it can only mean that God has chosen you to salvation from before the foundation of the world! Of course, I am not able to make the final definite pronouncement. But then, neither was Paul! But on the evidence, we have good grounds to express such a confident hope. Don’t believe me – believe the apostle; believe the word of God! Let me quote the relevant passage once more:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction... You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Well, that’s what I want to say to you from the passage if you are a believer.

What can I say to you if you are an unbeliever?

Some would argue that I should not say anything at all to you about all this! They are quite mistaken. I do not want to hide this glorious doctrine from you. Not at all. I dare not! God has made it public in his word, and I must be faithful to God, to his word and to you, and speak to you about it.



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I tell you this straight away: unless God has chosen you, and works his grace in you, you will never be saved! Do not get this wrong, however. The responsibility for your damnation will be yours, and yours alone. You are a sinner, and you will not trust Christ to save you (John 3:18,36), you will not submit to Christ. You are not the first; there are millions who refuse Christ and his offer of salvation, and they will all have to answer for it (Matt. 23:37; John 5:40). If you are damned, it will be your fault. In contrast to that, what I said was this: if you are to be saved, it will be all of God's grace (Eph. 2:8). In all this, I am saying nothing other than that which Jesus himself told us:

You refuse to come to me to have life... All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away... For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day... No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets: 'They will all be taught by God'. Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me (John 5:40; 6:37-45).

It's all here. You who do not believe – it is your responsibility; you refuse Christ. It takes God's grace to bring sinners to trust the Saviour, but the responsibility for your unbelief is yours, and yours alone.

Ah! But here's the crunch. Do I hear you say: 'If only I knew I was elect, then I could and would believe'? My friend, let me speak plainly to you. You have not been listening! That's not what I have said, not at all! The Bible doesn't say that; nothing like it at all. Let me remind you: when Paul went to Thessalonica, he didn't have a clue as to whether or not his hearers were elect; nor did they. He simply preached the gospel to them all. Some repented and believed. And those that did repent and believe did so because they were elect. Nobody knew they were elect,

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and then repented and believed! They only knew their election after they believed and because they believed. Please, I urge, do not put the cart before the horse!

Did you get it? My business when dealing with you is not to worry about whether or not you are elect. Nor is that any of your business, either! Your business – when you are confronted by the gospel, as you are by this small tract, even now – is not to ask yourself: ‘Am I elect?’ The issue for you is this: ‘Do I know I am a sinner? Do I admit it? Do I turn from my sin in repentance? Do I turn to Christ and cry out to him for his mercy to forgive and save me? Am I trusting Jesus? Will I obey him, come what may? Will I fix all my hope on him and him alone?’

If the answer to those questions is ‘Yes’ than I have no hesitation in taking you by the hand and joining the apostle in saying, as far as I am able to judge, on the evidence presented to me:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction... You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

John Newton summed it all up:

*What think ye of Christ? is the test  
To try both your state and your scheme;  
You cannot be right in the rest,  
Unless you think rightly of him;  
As Jesus appears in your view,  
As he is beloved or not,  
So God is disposed to you,  
And mercy, or wrath are your lot.*

Newton, having worked this out, came to give his own answer to the question:

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*If ask'd what of Jesus I think,  
Although my best thoughts are but poor;  
I say he's my meat and my drink,  
My life, and my strength, and my store,  
My shepherd, my husband, my friend,  
My Saviour from sin, and from thrall,  
My hope from beginning to end,  
My portion, my Lord, and my all.*

One word more. Never go back. Keep trusting the Saviour. Keep looking to Jesus. Grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ. In so doing, you will make your calling and election sure, and have 'a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Pet. 1:3-11). And your eternal theme will be:

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb... Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God (Rev. 7:10; 19:1).

Your theme will not be that you repented and believed – but that God chose you to everlasting salvation. You would not have been saved unless you had repented and believed, of course, but you would not have believed, you could not have believed, unless God had first chosen you. Your eternal theme will be – as it is now – thanks, praise and glory to God for his unspeakable mercy to you.

In the words of Frances Ridley Havergal:

*O Love that chose, O Love that died,  
O Love that sealed and sanctified,  
All glory, glory, glory be,  
O covenant triune God, to thee!*

And Robert Murray M'Cheyne:

*When this passing world is done,  
When has sunk yon glaring sun,  
When I stand with Christ on high,  
Looking o'er life's history,  
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,*

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*Not till then, how much I owe,  
Chosen, not for good in me,  
Wakened up from wrath to flee,  
Hidden in the Saviour's side,  
By the Spirit sanctified,  
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,  
By my love, how much I owe.*

*When I stand before the throne,  
Dressed in beauty not my own,  
When I see thee as thou art,  
Love thee with unsinning heart,  
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,  
Not till then, how much I owe.*

*When the praise of heav'n I hear,  
Loud as thunders to the ear,  
Loud as many waters' noise,  
Sweet as harp's melodious voice,  
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,  
Not till then, how much I owe.*

Of course, if the answer to my questions is 'No' – that is, you have not turned from your sin and trusted Christ – you are in a most precarious position. At any moment, you may be ushered into eternity. You must not delay. There is only one thing to do: 'See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks' (Heb. 12:25). In other words, when God commands you to repent, repent. And when he commands you to trust his Son, trust him for your salvation. Now, the truth is, God does command you to repent, now: God 'commands all people everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30) – and that includes you. What is more: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved' (Acts 16:31) – and that includes you. Or, as Jesus opened his preaching career by declaring: 'Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15) – do it! Obey him! Now!

So, I say again, do not refuse God who now speaks to you in the gospel. Repent and believe. Trust Christ. Call on the name of the Lord and you will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

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And then you will know that you are one of those that the Bible describes as ‘God’s elect, strangers in the world... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood’. ‘Grace and peace’ will ‘be yours in abundance’ (1 Pet. 1:1-2), both now and for ever.

But, unless you do receive Christ, you will perish. Jesus could not have put it more emphatically, stating it twice in a couple of verses: ‘Unless you repent, you too will all perish... Unless you repent, you too will all perish’ (Luke 13:3,5).