

"SOME SPECIAL WORDS OF SALVATION IN GOD'S PLAN"

(Romans 8:28-30)

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Election. The word "elect" (*eklego*) simply means "to pick out or choose." The New Testament usually uses a Greek verbal form that means "to pick out or choose for oneself." Thus Paul declared concerning those who have believed and become the recipients of saving grace: "He [God] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Election is God's sovereign, gracious plan before creation to save those who believe, not because of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of His good pleasure. This is a sovereign plan because God was under no obligation to elect anyone, and it is an act of grace because the recipients are totally undeserving.

Being omniscient, God knows not only all actual things but also all possible things. And He is holy, righteous, loving, and good. So the decree or "design"¹ of God must be the best of all possibilities.

To contemplate that God chose us to be His heirs for all eternity is awesome. Yet this doctrine of election has been a source of fear down through the centuries because of a failure to see its scriptural focus.² The Scriptures use the term only in a positive sense and only of the regenerate. If someone reading this is fearful of not being among the elect, he simply needs to follow Paul's instruction to the Philippian jailer and fear no longer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). Those who have believed and thus are saved can rejoice in God's electing grace. God gave us this beautiful truth to give us encouragement (Rom. 8:29-30), not fear, and to lead us to praise Him (Eph. 1:5-6).

The illustration has often been given of a person entering heaven through a door with a sign "Whosoever will may come." Then when the person goes through the door and looks back, he sees another sign: "Chosen in Him from before the foundation of the world." The first sign speaks of the availability of salvation and the second addresses the fact of God's choosing. Both are true. For if God had not elected, none would have believed.



¹ Charles Ryrie suggests that the word "design" is helpful because it brings into view the concept of an architect. "God is the Architect of a plan which does include all things but includes them in a variety of relationships. Architects' plans are detailed. So is God's plan. In the process of constructing a building, experts can predict that so many workers will be injured and some may even lose their lives. Such grim statistics are included in the planning of the building, yet we would not hold the architect responsible for the injuries and deaths (assuming proper safety measures). Carelessness, indifference to rules, even violation of safety restrictions are usually the causes of accidents. But whose fault are they? The individuals who are careless or indifferent. So God's plan has been designed so that the responsibility for sin lies with the individual even though God knowingly included sin in His plan" (*Basic Theology*, 312).

² G. C. Berkouwer, professor of systematic theology at the Free University of Amsterdam, wrote, "No doctrine has evoked more intense debates. . . . Sharp reactions have been aroused, but not the Christian doctrine of Election so much as caricatures of it are to blame. . . . Such reactions are very understandable, for the biblical doctrine of Election has at times been presented as though it were a parallel to the Islamic doctrine of election. . . . We must recognize that a more serious error can hardly be conceived than the substitution of fatalism for the biblical portrayal of the electing God. . . . Many people have difficulty with the doctrine of Election because they have encountered the doctrine only in its caricatured form. . . . In the Bible, however, Election is set within a wholly different context than that of perplexity, uncertainty, or resignation. It is always set to the tune of a doxology. . . . This is neither anxiety nor resignation in the face of arbitrary sovereignty. It is amazement at the ways of divine Grace. . . . And he who comes to see that his salvation is not of his works but of God's grace stands before Divine Election and therein finds peace" ("Election and Doctrinal Reaction," *Christianity Today*, 10 April 1961, 10-13).

Foreknowledge. *Proginosko*, the Greek word for foreknowledge, sometimes means, as in English, "to know beforehand," as in 2 Peter 3:17. But often it means to have a conscious relationship of love. As Paul wrote, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew [*proginosko*], He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son,³ that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:28-30).⁴

A common view of the words "whom He foreknew" is that by foresight God saw the faith by which some would believe. The problem with this view is that the object of foreknowledge in Romans 8:29 is not a person's faith but is a person ("whom"). That is, God foreknew the person, not something he or she would do. This is also consistent with the determining action in the other links in the chain right on to glorification. God, not man, is the active Agent from beginning to end. Those whom God elected, He engaged in a conscious, loving relationship (Rom. 8:28).

Predestination. The Greek word rendered "predestination" means "to mark off with a boundary beforehand"; it logically follows election and foreknowledge. God preplanned a great destiny for those whom He chose for Himself and with whom He established a loving relationship. This destiny is that they "be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). Paul reinforced this later when he declared that we have been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). And as John wrote, "When He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

³ When we consider the high destiny defined, 'to be conformed to the image of His Son,' there is exhibited not only the dignity of this ordination but also the greatness of the love from which the appointment flows. God's love is not passive emotion; it is active volition and it moves determinatively to nothing less than the highest goal conceivable for his adopted children, conformity to the image of the only-begotten Son" (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans, New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959], 318).

⁴ Each of the verbs in this series (foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified) is in the past tense. All of them are viewed as completed acts. This shows that God sees the end from the beginning.