



Doctrine of Salvation

Common Grace & Election

Introduction

- **Question:** How would you define salvation?
- When most think of “salvation” they think of a past-tense event.
- While this is partially true, Scripturally, salvation is a process brought about by God in stages, beginning in eternity past and extending into eternity future.
 - **Romans 8:29–30** ²⁹*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* ³⁰*And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*
 - **Philippians 2:12** ¹²*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...*
 - **Romans 13:11** ¹¹*Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.*
 - **1 Peter 1:5** ⁵*who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*
- **Salvation:**
 - We have been saved (justification)
 - We are being saved (sanctification)
 - We will be saved (glorification)
 - Today’s lesson addresses two doctrines that provide the “starting point” for the process: common grace and election.
 - **Question:** What are the undeserved blessings that God gives to all people, both believers and unbelievers?

Common Grace

- **Introduction and Definition**

- When Adam and Eve sinned, they became worthy of eternal punishment and separation from God (Gen 3:17). In the same way, when human beings sin today, they become liable to the wrath of God and to eternal punishment (see Rom 6:23).
- This means that once people sin, God's justice would require one thing—that they be eternally separated from God, cut off from experiencing any good from him, and that they live forever in hell, receiving only his wrath eternally.
- In fact, this is what happened to angels who sinned, and could justly have happened to us as well. See 2 Pet 2:4.
- But in fact Adam and Eve did not die at once (though the sentence of death began to be worked out in their lives on the day they sinned). Moreover, millions of their descendants even to this day do not die and go to hell as soon as they sin, but continue to live for many years, enjoying countless blessings in this world.
 - How can this be?
 - How can God continue to give blessings to sinners who deserve only death—not only to those who will ultimately be saved, but also to millions who will never be saved, whose sins will never be forgiven?
- The answer to these questions is that God gives **common grace**.

- **Definition of common grace:** Common grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation.

- (The word common here means something that is common to all people and is not restricted to believers or to the elect only.)
- In distinction from common grace, the grace of God that brings people to salvation is often called “saving grace.”
- Of course, when we talk about “common grace” and “saving grace,” we are not implying that there are two different kinds of grace in God himself, but only that God's grace manifests itself in the world in two different ways.
 - Common grace is different from saving grace in its results (it does not bring about salvation), in its recipients (it is given to believers and unbelievers alike), and in its source (it doesn't directly flow from Christ's atoning work, since Christ's death did not earn any measure of forgiveness for unbelievers and therefore did not merit the blessings of common grace for them either).

- **Examples of Common Grace**

- **The Physical Realm**

- Unbelievers continue to live in this world solely because of God's common grace—every breath that people take is of grace, for the wages of sin is death, not life.
- Acts 17:28 for “ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’
- Moreover, the earth does not produce only thorns and thistles (Gen 3:18), or remain a parched desert, but by God's common grace it produces food and

materials for clothing and shelter, and etc. See Matt 5:44–45; Luke 6:35–36; Acts 14:16–17.

- One specific example from the Old Testament comes from the example of Potiphar, the Egyptian captain of the guard who purchased Joseph as a slave: “The Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had, in house and field” (Gen 39:5). See also Ps 145:9, 15–16.

○ **The Intellectual Realm**

- Satan is a “liar and the father of lies” and “there is no truth in him” (John 8:44), because he is fully given to evil and to the irrationality and commitment to falsehood that accompanies radical evil.
- But human beings in the world today, even unbelievers, are not totally given over to lying, irrationality, and ignorance.
- All people are able to have some grasp of truth; indeed, some have great intelligence and understanding. See John 1:9; Rom 1:21.
- The common grace of God in the intellectual realm also results in an ability to grasp truth and distinguish it from error, and to experience growth in knowledge that can be used in the investigation of the universe and in the task of subduing the earth.
- This means that all science and technology carried out by non-Christians is a result of common grace.
- In a practical sense, this means that every time we walk into a grocery store or ride in an automobile or enter a house we should remember that we are experiencing the results of the abundant common grace of God poured out so richly on all mankind.

○ **The Moral Realm**

- God also, by common grace, restrains people from being as evil as they could be.
- Once again, the demonic realm, totally devoted to evil and destruction, provides a clear contrast with human society in which evil is clearly restrained.
 - See Ps 81:12; Rom 1:24, 26, 28; Rom 2:14–15.
- This inward sense of right and wrong that God gives to all people means that they will frequently approve of moral standards that reflect many of the moral standards of Scripture. See Rom 1:32.
- In many cases, this inward conscience leads people to establish laws and customs in society that are, in terms of the outward behavior they approve or prohibit, quite like the moral laws of Scripture.
- Though their moral behavior cannot earn merit with God (see Gal 3:11, Rom 3:12), nevertheless, in some sense less than earning God’s eternal approval or merit, unbelievers “do good.” See Luke 6:33.

○ **The Creative Realm**

- God’s grace is also evident in the existence of various organizations and structures in human society.

- For example, the human family persists today, not simply as an institution for believers, but for all people. See Gen 5:4; Gen 4:17, 19, 26.
- Human government is also a result of common grace.
- It was instituted in principle after the flood (see Gen 9:6) and is clearly stated to be given by God in Rom 13:1. See also Rom 13:4.
- One of the primary means by which God restrains evil in the world is human government.
- Can you think of other examples?
- **Common grace does not save people.**
 - In spite of all of this (and more!), we must realize that common grace is different from saving grace. Common grace does not change the human heart or bring people to genuine repentance and faith—in cannot and does not save people.
 - We must recognize that the actions of unbelievers performed by virtue of common grace do not in themselves merit God’s approval or favor. See Rom 14:23; Matt 22:37.
- **Unbelievers may receive more common grace than believers.**
 - They may be more skillful, harder working, more intelligent, more creative, or have more of the material benefits of this life to enjoy.
 - This in no way indicates that they are more favored by God, or that they will gain any share in eternal salvation, but only that God distributes the blessings of common grace in various ways, and for his own purposes.
 - In all of this, they should, of course, acknowledge God’s goodness and should recognize that God’s revealed will is that “God’s kindness” should lead them “to repentance” (Rom 2:4).
- **Reasons for Common Grace**
 - To redeem those who will be saved. See 2 Pet 3:9–10.
 - To demonstrate God’s goodness and mercy. See Luke 6:35; Ps 145:9; 1 Tim 2:4.
 - To demonstrate God’s justice. See Rom 2:5; Rom 3:19.
 - To demonstrate God’s glory.
 - Practical Application for the Doctrine of Common Grace
 - Common grace does not mean that those who receive it will be saved.
 - Be careful not to reject the good things that unbelievers do as totally evil.
 - The doctrine of common grace should stir our hearts to much greater thankfulness to God.

Election

- **Definition and Context**

- **Definition of election:** Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.
- There has been much controversy in the church and much misunderstanding of this doctrine. Our approach in this lesson will be to first simply cite a number of passages from the NT that discuss election. Then we will attempt to understand the purpose of God that the NT authors see in the doctrine of election.

- **Explanation and Scriptural Basis**

- **Does the New Testament Teach Predestination?**

- Several passages in the NT seem to affirm quite clearly that God ordained beforehand those who would be saved. Consider the following:
- Acts 13:48. It is significant that Luke mentions the fact of election in this passage almost in passing. It's as if this were the normal occurrence when the gospel was preached. How many believed? "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed."
- Rom 8:28–30.
- Rom 9:11–13.
- Rom 11:7. Regarding the fact that some of the people of Israel were saved but others were not, Paul says, "Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened." Here Paul indicates two distinct groups within the people of Israel. Those who were "the elect" obtained the salvation they sought, while those who were not the elect simply "were hardened."
- Eph 1:4–6, 12.
- 1 Thess 1:4–5. Paul says that the fact that the Thessalonians believed the gospel when he preached it is the reason he knows that God chose them.
- 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:1; 2 Tim 1:9; Rev 13:7–8; 17:8.

- **How Does the New Testament Present the Teaching of Election?**

- **As a comfort.**

- The NT authors often present the doctrine of election as a comfort to believers. See Rom 8:28–30.
- When Paul assures the Romans that "in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28), he gives God's work of predestination as a reason why we can be assured of this truth.
- Paul's point is to say that God has always acted for the good of those whom he called to himself.

- If Paul looks into the distant past before the creation of the world, he sees that God foreknew and predestined his people to be conformed to the image of Christ.
- If he looks at the recent past, he finds that God called and justified his people whom he predestined.
- And if he then looks toward the future when Christ returns, he sees that God has determined to give perfect, glorified bodies to those who believe in Christ.
- From eternity to eternity God has always acted with the good of his people in mind. In this way predestination is seen as a comfort for believers in the everyday events of life.
- **As a reason to praise God.**
 - See Eph 1:5–6, 12. Also 1 Thess 1:2 and 2 Thess 2:13.
 - Understood in this way, the doctrine of election does increase praise given to God for our salvation and seriously diminishes any pride that we might feel if we thought that our salvation was due to something good in us or something for which we should receive credit.
- **As an encouragement to evangelism.**
 - See 2 Tim 2:10.
 - He knows that God has chosen some people to be saved, and he sees this as an encouragement to preach the gospel, even if it means enduring great suffering. Election is Paul's guarantee that there will be some success for his evangelism, for he knows that some of the people he speaks to will be the elect, and they will believe the gospel and be saved.
- **Correcting Misunderstandings of the Doctrine of Election**
 - **Election is not fatalistic or mechanistic.**
 - Sometimes those who object to the doctrine of election say that it is "fatalism" (think "no choice") or that it presents a "mechanistic system" (think "robots") for the universe.
 - By "fatalism" is meant a system in which human choices and decisions really do not make any difference.
 - By "mechanistic" is meant a picture of an impersonal universe in which all things that happen have been inflexibly determined by an impersonal force long ago, and the universe functions in a mechanical way so that human beings are more like machines or robots than genuine persons.
 - By contrast to "mechanism," the NT presents the entire outworking of our salvation as something brought about by a personal God in relationship with personal creatures.
 - God "predestined us *in love* to be his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:5).
 - His act of election was neither impersonal nor mechanistic, but was permeated with personal love.
 - In contrast to robots is the personal nature of the gospel invitation. See Matt 11:28; Rev 22:17.

- In contrast to the charge of “fatalism,” we also see a much different picture in the NT.
 - See John 3:18; Acts 18:9–11.
- Our personal decisions to believe or not believe in Christ have eternal consequences in our lives, and Scripture is quite willing to talk about our decision to believe as the fact that decides our eternal destiny.
- The implication of this is that we certainly must preach the gospel, and people’s eternal destiny hinges on whether we proclaim the gospel or not and whether they believe it.
- **Election is not based on God’s foreknowledge of our faith.**
 - Quite commonly people will agree that God predestines some to be saved, but they will say that he does this by looking into the future and seeing who will believe in Christ and who will not. If he sees that a person is going to come to saving faith, then he will predestine that person to be saved, based on foreknowledge of that person’s faith.
 - In this way, it is thought, the ultimate reason why some are saved and some are not lies within the people themselves, not within God.
 - Rom 8:29 is sometimes used to argue for this misunderstanding. “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”
 - To answer this misunderstanding, we can say three things and offer a more biblical conclusion:
 - **First, foreknowledge is of persons, not facts.** Romans 8:29 can hardly be used to demonstrate that God based his predestination on foreknowledge of the fact that a person would believe. The passage speaks rather of the fact that God knew persons (“those whom he foreknew”), not that he knew some fact about them, such as the fact that they would believe. See 1 Cor 8:3; Gal 4:9; Rom 11:2 for other supporting verses.
 - **Second, Scripture never speaks of our faith as the reason God chose us.** See Rom 9:11–13. We are chosen by grace (see Rom 11:5–6), according to his love and purpose for us.
 - **Third, election based on something good in us (our faith) would be the beginning of salvation by works.** The biggest question at the end of the argument that needs to be answered is: “What ultimately makes the difference between those who believe and those who do not?” If our answer is that it is ultimately based on something God does—namely, his sovereign election of those who would be saved—then we see that salvation at its most foundational level is based on grace alone.
- **Scripture paints a much bleaker picture of our Spiritual state apart from God than we often acknowledge.**
 - Some have trouble with the doctrine of election based on an assumption that they, if presented with the gospel, would choose God without His intervention.
 - Scripture’s view of the human heart is far less optimistic:

- In Ephesians 2, our sinful condition apart from God's grace is analogized to spiritual deadness that requires an external power to make us alive. Dead things can't raise themselves.
- In Ezekiel 36, God tells the people that the means of their salvation will not come because of anything good in themselves, but because of his sovereign work to give them a new heart.
- In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must be "born again" to enter the kingdom of God, implying that salvation must be given as a gift, and that the entire process is of God's grace.
- In John 6, Jesus says that no one comes to Him unless the Father first draws him, implying that it's impossible for one to choose God unless God has chosen him/her first.
- In Romans 3 and Romans 5, we're told that no one seeks God, not even one, and that before God intervened, we were not amoral, but were his enemies.
- Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.
- **Conclusion:** Election is unconditional. God chose us simply by his sovereign choice (see Eph 1:5). God chose us simply because he decided to save us. It was not because of any foreseen merit in us. Election is God's determination to lavish his saving grace upon undeserving recipients to the praise of His glory.

- **Objections and Answers to the Doctrine of Election**

- **Election means that we do not have a choice in whether we accept Christ or not.**
 - In response to this, we must affirm that the doctrine of election is fully able to accommodate the idea that we have a voluntary choice and we make real, willing decisions in accepting or rejecting Christ.
 - Our choices are voluntary because they are what we want to do and what we decide to do, and in that sense they are "free."
 - This does not mean that our choices are absolutely free, because God can sovereignly work through our desires so that he guarantees that our choices come about as he has ordained. We must also acknowledge that the biblical doctrine of sin teaches that our "free choices" are in bondage to sin and evil desires apart from the gracious work of God to change our hearts.
- **Election means that unbelievers never had a chance to believe.**
 - This objection to election says that if God had decreed from eternity that some would not believe, then there was no genuine chance for them to believe, and the entire system functions unfairly.
 - Two responses can be made to this objection.
 - First, we must note that the Bible does not allow us to say that unbelievers "had no chance" to believe, for such a way of expressing the situation puts the blame on God and makes it appear as if unbelievers are not responsible for their unbelief and did not choose it. See John 8:43–44; John 5:40; Rom 1:20.

- Second, Paul offers a simple answer to a similar objection: “But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me this way?’” (Rom 9:20)
- **The Bible says that God wills to save everyone.** See 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9. Do not these passages contradict the idea that God has only chosen certain people to be saved?
 - A common solution to this question is to say that these verses speak of God’s revealed will (telling us what we should do), not his secret will (his eternal plans for what will happen).
 - These verses simply tell us that God invites and commands every person to repent and come to Christ for salvation, but they do not tell us anything about God’s secret decrees regarding who will be saved.
- **God wouldn’t interfere with our wills; for love to be genuine, it must be completely free!**
 - Firstly, the premise that genuine love is only possible by our “free choice” is not true; parents love their children, and but not choose them.
 - Secondly, see previous points related to free will; our wills are always bound by our affections. In salvation, God sovereignly works to woo our affections through the gospel of Jesus Christ. We freely choose that which we greatly value and desire. By His grace, he opens the eyes of our hearts to see Christ, and by His grace, draws us to Him.
 - Thirdly, Scripture is replete with examples of God overriding the will of men (see Pharaoh, the calling of Abraham, the calling of the disciples, God’s protection of Abimelech from sin in Genesis 20, etc.). Because God is sovereign over his creation, there is nothing outside of his control nor outside of his prerogative to interfere with. Furthermore, Scripture overtly asserts that God’s purposes override man’s will.
 - **Proverbs 21:1** ¹*The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*
 - **Proverbs 19:21** ²¹*Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.*
- **Practical Application of the Doctrine of Election**
 - In terms of our relationship with God, the doctrine of election does have significant practical application. When we think of the biblical teaching on election, it is appropriate to apply it to our own lives individually.
 - It is right for each Christian to ask of himself or herself, “Why am I a Christian? What is the final reason why God decided to save me?”
 - The doctrine of election tells us that I am a Christian simply because God in eternity past decided to set his love on me. But why did he set his love on me? Not for anything good in me, but simply because he decided to love me. There is no more ultimate reason than that.
 - It humbles us before God to think in this way. It makes us realize that we have no claim on God’s grace whatsoever. Our salvation is totally due to grace alone. Our only appropriate response is to give God eternal praise.