

CHOSEN BY GRACE: THE GLORIOUS MYSTERY OF ELECTION

C.J. MAHANEY

"God in his great love, before the foundation of the world, chose those whom he would save in Christ Jesus. God's election is entirely gracious and not at all conditioned upon foreseen faith, obedience, perseverance, or any merit in those whom God has chosen."

(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "God's Sovereign Purposes")

The first chapter of John Stott's book *Why I Am A Christian* is entitled "The Hound of Heaven." Stott explains that the phrase was first used by the English poet Francis Thompson to describe God's gracious and relentless pursuit of sinners. Though Thompson had fled from God through opioid addiction and the pursuit of worldly pleasure, the grace of God sought him out and rescued him.

Stott similarly explains his conversion: "Why I am a Christian is due ultimately neither to the influence of my parents and teachers, nor to my own personal decision for Christ, but to 'the Hound of Heaven.' That is, it is due to Jesus Christ himself, who pursued me relentlessly even when I was running away from him in order to go my own way. And if it were not for the gracious pursuit of the Hound of Heaven I would today be on the scrapheap

of wasted and discarded lives."¹

What is your understanding of your conversion experience? Who pursued whom? Did God come looking for you? Or does it seem that, in essence, you were pursuing God? What stands out the most to you: God's initiative and intervention or your repentance and faith?

These are not academic questions. The Christian who misunderstands or misinterprets the underlying cause of his or her conversion can be vulnerable to legalism, pride, self-reliance, ingratitude, condemnation, and lack of assurance. But when we rightly understand the nature of our conversion— that is, when we clearly grasp the role of God's sovereign grace in election—we position ourselves to enjoy, in an ongoing way, the wonderfully life-transforming benefits that are available only through the gospel.

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Out of Our Depth

Election, of course, is a doctrine issuing from the deep end of the theological pool. Yet, as soon as we encounter it, we must all acknowledge that we are in way over our heads. This is a place of mystery, a place that spawns a hundred questions, all of them variations on a single question: "How do I reconcile divine sovereignty with human responsibility?"

It is good to acknowledge that just as we cannot fully understand God, so we cannot fully understand doctrines about God and his ways. Mystery remains. Indeed, God has announced the following non-negotiable arrangement: "The secret things belong to the Lord and the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deut. 29:29).

How comfortable are you with the secret things of God?...with the difficult to understand?...the paradox?...the apparent contradiction? Are you at peace in the deep end of the pool? In Scripture, God has asserted both divine sovereignty and human responsibility without seeking to harmonize them

1. JOHN STOTT, *WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL: INTERVARSITY PRESS, 2003), 14-15.

completely. But they are certainly harmonized in his infinite wisdom, and that should be enough for us.

John Calvin offers wise counsel on this matter:

The subject of predestination, which in itself is attended by considerable difficulty, is rendered very perplexed, and hence perilous, by human curiosity, which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths ... Those secrets of His will which he has seen fit to manifest are revealed in his Word—revealed in so far as he knew to be conducive to our interest and welfare... Let it, therefore, be our first principle that to desire any other knowledge of predestination than that which is expounded by the Word of God, is no less infatuated than to walk where there is no path, or to seek light in darkness.... The best rule of sobriety is, not only in learning to follow wherever God leads, but also when he makes an end of teaching to cease wishing to be wise.²

I believe that Christian maturity includes an increasing comfort with divine mystery and a growing trust in God so that we can say with David, "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great or too marvelous for me" (Ps. 131:1).

As one grows in Christ, there won't be less mystery. But there ought to be more humility, that we may be more at rest in the presence of divine mystery. May it be great enough and marvelous enough for us to know that the doctrine of election is sound and reliable, representing the clear teaching of Scripture.

The Glorious Mystery

Ephesians 1:4 is a definitive text for gaining a biblical understanding of one's salvation. Here, despite the lingering presence of mystery, is clarity that the human mind can grasp firmly. This verse explains what was really taking place at that moment of conversion: the outworking of a divine choice made before the world began.

The verse tells us that our transition from death to life, from sinner to saint, from an object of wrath to an object of mercy, was exclusively and entirely

2. QUOTED IN J.I. PACKER, *GOD'S WORDS* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL, INTERVARSITY, 1981), 158.

the result of sovereign grace. Does your first impression of your conversion suggest otherwise? If so, let that impression be adjusted by truth:

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world.

In this verse, Paul takes us behind the scenes. He turns our attention away from our limited, personal experience and toward the Sovereign One, reigning in eternity past. Inspired by the Spirit, Paul wants absolute clarity on this point: salvation flows from divine election. Every conversion, in every era, in every land, has come about solely by God's sovereign grace.

In the context of Ephesians 1, Paul is celebrating the spiritual blessings we have in Christ: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing." Paul then spins out a dizzying array of blessings, beginning with the fact that "He chose us" (v. 4). The effect of that initial blessing is later echoed several more times in the passage—in words such as "predestined," "adoption," "redemption," and "forgiveness"—as Paul explores the wonders of our unmerited salvation.

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We learn from this passage of Scripture that divine choice precedes human response. In light of my sinfulness, pervasive depravity, and wicked hostility to God, I must concur with Charles Spurgeon that this is precisely what happened in my case.

I believe the doctrine of election because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love.³

Do you agree? Does your spirit rise in affirmation? Do you see that God chose you, and not vice versa? And do you see that he chose you not because of who

3. CHARLES SPURGEON QUOTED IN *TABLE TALK* (SEPTEMBER 8, 1994).

you were, or are, or will yet become, but simply out of His abundant mercy?

Running in the Opposite Direction

Mark Webb tells a story that brilliantly addresses a common misunderstanding regarding the nature of election. It begins with him teaching a class.

After giving a brief survey of these doctrines of sovereign grace, I asked for questions from the class. One lady, in particular, was quite troubled. She said, "This is the most awful thing I've ever heard! You make it sound as if God is intentionally turning away men who would be saved, receiving only the elect." I answered her in this vein. "You misunderstand the situation. You're visualizing that God is standing at the door of heaven, and men are thronging to get in the door, and God is saying to various ones, 'Yes, you may come, but not you, or you, or you...!' The situation is hardly this. Rather, God stands at the door of heaven with his arms outstretched, inviting all to come. Yet all men, without exception, are running in the opposite direction towards hell as hard as they can go. So God, in election, graciously reaches out and stops this one, and that one, and this one over here, and that one over there, and effectually draws them to himself by changing their hearts, making them willing to come. Election keeps no one out of heaven who would otherwise have been there, but it keeps a whole multitude of sinners out of hell who otherwise would have been there. Were it not for election, heaven would be an empty place, and hell would be bursting at the seams." That kind of response, grounded as I believe that it is in scriptural truth, does put a different complexion on things, doesn't it?

If you perish in hell, blame yourself, as it is entirely your fault. But if you should make it to heaven, credit God, for that is entirely his work! To him alone belong all praise and glory, for salvation is all of grace from start to finish!"⁴

Do you realize that God stopped you in your willful, headlong rush toward the fires of hell? Scripture speaks of us, in our unregenerate condition, as enemies of God, denoting an active hatred and hostility (Col. 1:21; Rom. 5:10; Phil. 3:18-19). Yet before Genesis 1:1, this God whom you hated determined to save you. And in time, through the proclamation of the gospel, he

4. MARK WEBB, "WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE" (*REFORMATION AND REVIVAL JOURNAL*, VOL. 3, NO. 1, WINTER 1994), 53-54.

called you by name, stopping you in your eager flight. Why did he do that? Certainly not because there was anything lovable in you. This is the mystery of his mercy. Because he had chosen you in Christ, he drew you to Christ.

Do you not find that astonishing? The more you are aware of God's divine initiative and your depravity, the more you will be amazed by grace. Let's remember: You and I were dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13). God placed that phrase in the Bible intentionally. We were not weakened. We were not injured. We were not sickly or languishing. But, in relation to God and salvation, we were dead. Flatlined. Gone. A bunch of corpses.

At the same time, we were very much alive with respect to sin and self. We loved darkness, and that love made us enemies of God and hostile to him. We hated him. Please, don't flatter yourself by thinking otherwise. Let the plain teaching of Scripture enlighten your understanding. You were not seeking God. You did not discover God. You did not find God. (He was not hiding.) Nor were you neutral toward God. On the contrary, you were actively and arrogantly hostile and opposed—you hated God as your enemy. You may well have been drawn to some caricature of God. You may have been pursuing a counterfeit religious experience involving a man-pleasing deity crafted out of vain hopes and sinful imagination. But the true and living God—the sovereign, self-sustaining, pre-existent one—him, you despised. It was directly away from him, away from the uncompromising standard of his perfect holiness, that you were running and running hard.

How could a holy God choose sinners such as us? Scripture provides the answer to this all-important question. He chose us "in him." That is, in the Savior, who in the first 14 verses of Ephesians is referenced no less than 15 times. He is the means by which God's choice to save is achieved. Sovereign grace is in him. I am chosen in Christ and solely because of Christ. I am not chosen apart from Christ or because of anything within me. Election, redemption, adoption, and forgiveness of sins are in him, and none of these can exist apart from him. He was the spotless lamb of God, foreknown before the foundation of the world as our redeemer.

Moved to a Worthy Response

"When [Paul] introduces [election] into his teaching," writes J.I. Packer, "it is for one end only—to help Christians see how great is the grace that

has saved them, and to move them to a worthy response in worship and life."⁵ Indeed, to hold to a biblical understanding of election is to live a life of "worthy response." To learn that we were chosen before time enables us to live for God, in time, with joy, passion, and clarity of purpose that is rooted beyond time.

In my experience, a clear and thorough understanding of God's grace in election promotes, at a minimum, humility before God, assurance from God, gratefulness to God, and a pervasive sense of mission for the glory of God. By God's grace, these "worthy responses" in large measure have characterized the churches of Sovereign Grace thus far. It is my hope that they continue to do so, and in increasing measure, that God may be increasingly glorified.

Humility before God

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In 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, Paul references election four times and then ties the doctrine of election to humility, "so that no human being might boast" (v. 29). "God intentionally designed salvation so that no man could boast of it," writes Mark Webb. "He didn't merely arrange it so that boasting would be discouraged or kept to a minimum—He planned it so that boasting would be absolutely excluded. Election does precisely that."⁶

Election leaves no room for self-congratulation, for it precludes all human contribution. If your repentance had contributed to your eternal salvation, if it had helped in any way to bring about your resurrection from spiritual death into eternal life, if it had somehow persuaded God to change his mind about your eternal destiny, well that would be a pretty neat trick. I'd be very impressed, and you would have something to boast about before God and man. But, as Philip Ryken points out, "Repentance is not a special method for saving ourselves; it is a way of admitting that we cannot save ourselves at all. It is a way of throwing ourselves on the mercy of God and begging

5. J.I. PACKER, *GOD'S WORDS* (ADA, MI: BAKER ACADEMIC, 1998), 157.

6. MARK WEBB, "WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?" (*REFORMATION AND REVIVAL JOURNAL*, VOL. 3, NO. 1, WINTER 1994), 52.

the Saviour to save us."⁷

One reason I am so thankful to God that we have the name Sovereign Grace Churches is that this name should help to restrain pride and promote humility. "Sovereign grace," of course, encompasses far more than election. It speaks of all God's gracious attributes and acts, as they relate to all of life, for all things are under the sovereign, gracious, attentive care of God. Nothing that man does for God is ever about human achievement. It is about God's mercy, kindness, and gracious enabling. "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). A right understanding of grace will always promote humility. So I have always viewed this name as a gift, a catalyst to humility, effective today, but also sent on ahead to some future generation I will not see.

Assurance from God

I meet far too many people who seem unsure or unaware of God's love for them personally. They know God loves other Christians. They know God loves their pastor. They know God loves the members of their church. But they are far less certain that the Creator loves the specific individual bearing their name, their fingerprints, their unique DNA.

To have even a minimal understanding of election is to experience the love of God on a personal level. Note how Paul, when exploring the intricacies of the doctrine of justification beginning at Galatians 2:15, could not help but move very quickly into what this meant for him personally: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (v.20).

May the phrase by which our denomination is known promote a continual, deepening assurance of God's unfailing, timeless love. That divine love began in eternity past. It is immune to the effects of this present age. It stands outside of time and creation and will continue forever.

Gratefulness to God

Ephesians 1:3-14 is an uninterrupted outburst of praise. That's the effect of

7. PHILIP RYKEN, *THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL: INTERVARSITY, 2001), 60.

understanding the sovereign grace of election. Bruce Milne writes of this passage: "Paul is not standing at his desk engaged in dialectical argumentation; rather he is on his knees, lost in adoring worship."⁸ The doctrine of election is not meant to be a point of theological disputation. It is a call to worship.

My prayer and exhortation are that the name of our family of churches serve as a continual reminder of God's gracious initiative toward his people and thus as a call to worship. May our personal lives and churches be characterized by the distinct absence of complaining and the distinct presence of passionate, grateful praise and worship to God.

May it never be that these outward expressions to God become superficial or merely habitual. Before the foundation of the world, he chose me

in Christ. Therefore, even to a basic understanding of the doctrine of election, the only appropriate response is passionate gratefulness—praise and worship all the days of my life until my dying breath.

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Mission for the Glory of God

Before creation, God was doing some choosing. He's been busy in eternity past, and he's got saving work to do

in the present. And he does that work when his people proclaim the good news. The churches of Sovereign Grace are called by God to evangelism and church-planting, both locally and among the nations.

In this world, we live amongst men, women, and children who have not experienced salvation. Yet, because of the doctrine of election, we know that the eventual salvation of specific ones among them is absolutely certain. We do not—indeed, we can not—know in advance who these individuals are. But we know they are there, in every tribe and tongue and nation. And we know that, for each one chosen before time, there will be that moment in time when a single presentation of the gospel is used by God to bring about salvation.

8. BRUCE MILNE, *KNOW THE TRUTH, THIRD EDITION* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL: INTERVARSITY PRESS, 2009), 253.

Knowing that our salvation was fundamentally accomplished by God rather than ourselves fuels our confidence and builds our faith to see others regenerated. We go out into the world full of faith, knowing that the gospel is the power of God and that the triumph of the gospel was assured before time began.

Far from undermining evangelism and church planting, a proper understanding of the doctrine of election invigorates both these activities and assures us of their ultimate success. How good it is to know that the gospel of the crucified and risen Savior does not return void. Our God has "a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). By grace, this plan of the Sovereign One will indeed be fulfilled. Whatever exceedingly small role our churches may play in that fulfillment, sovereign grace has surely been our history. Sovereign grace will be our future.

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C.J. MAHANEY

C.J. Mahaney is senior pastor of [Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville](#) (Louisville, KY).