What does the Bible teach about election?
Scripture: John 6:44; Acts 13:48; Romans 9:16; Ephesians 2:1-3
Code: QA86

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Election is the act of God whereby in eternity past He chose those who will be saved. Election is *unconditional*, because it does not depend on anything outside of God, such as good works or foreseen faith (Romans 9:16). This doctrine is repeatedly taught in the Bible, and is also demanded by our knowledge of God. To begin with, let's look at the biblical evidence.

The Bible says prior to salvation, all people are dead in sin--*spiritually dead* (Ephesians 2:1-3). In this state of death, the sinner is utterly unable to respond to any spiritual stimulus and therefore unable to love God, obey Him, or please Him in any way. Scripture says the mind of every unbeliever "is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for *it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God*" (Romans 8:7-8, emphasis added). That describes a state of total hopelessness: spiritual death.

The effect of all this is that no sinner can ever make the first move in the salvation process. This is what Jesus meant in John 6:44, when He said, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him."

This is also why the Bible repeatedly stresses that salvation is *wholly God's work*. Consider these passages:

- In Acts 13:48 we read, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed."
- Acts 16:14 tells us that Lydia was saved when, "... the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul."
- Romans 8:29-30 states, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified."
- Ephesians 1:4-5,11 reads, "Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will ... also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will."

- Ephesians 2:8 says even our faith is a gift from God.
- In 2 Thessalonians 2:13, the apostle Paul tells his readers, "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation."
- Second Timothy 1:9 informs us that God "has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity."

Occasionally someone will suggest that God's election is based on His foreknowledge of certain events. This argument suggests that God simply looks into the future to see who will believe, and He chooses those whom He sees choosing Him. Notice that 1 Peter 1:2 says the elect are chosen "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father," and Romans 8:29 says, "whom He foreknew, He also predestined." And if divine foreknowledge simply means God's knowledge of what will happen in advance, then these arguments may appear to have some weight behind them.

But that is not the biblical meaning of "foreknowledge." When the Bible speaks of God's foreknowledge, it refers to God's establishment of a love relationship with that person. The word *know* , in both the Old and New Testament, refers to much more than mere cognitive knowledge of a person. Such passages as Hosea 13:4-5; Amos 3:2 (KJV); and Romans 11:2 clearly indicate this. For example, 1 Peter 1:20 says Christ was "foreknown before the foundation of the world." Surely this means more than that God the Father looked into the future to behold Christ! It means He had an eternal, loving relationship with Him. The same is true of the elect, whom we are told God "foreknew" (Romans 8:29). That means He knew them--he *loved* them--before the foundation of the world.

If God's choice of the elect is unconditional, does this rule out human responsibility? Paul asks and answers that very question in Romans 9:19-20. He says God's choice of the elect is an act of mercy. Left to themselves, even the elect would persist in sin and be lost, because they are taken from the same fallen lump of clay as the rest of humanity. God alone is responsible for their salvation, but that does not eradicate the responsibility of those who persist in sin and are lost--because they do it willfully, and not under compulsion. They are responsible for their sin, not God.

The Bible affirms human responsibility right alongside the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Moreover, the offer of mercy in the gospel is extended to all alike. Isaiah 55:1 and Revelation 22:17 call "whosoever will" to be saved. Isaiah 45:22 and Acts 17:30 command all men to turn to God, repent and be saved. First Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9 tell us that God is not willing that any should perish, but desires that all should be saved. Finally, the Lord Jesus said that, "the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).

In summary, we can say that God has had a special love relationship with the elect from all eternity, and on the basis of that love relationship chosen them for salvation. The ultimate question of why God chose some for salvation and left others in their sinful state is one that we, with our finite knowledge, cannot answer. We do know that God's attributes always are in perfect harmony with

each other, so that God's sovereignty will always operate in perfect harmony with His goodness, love, wisdom, and justice.

For further study on this crucial question, consider these resources:

- J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1961).

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