

## Unconditional Election Vern S. Poythress

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What is the ultimate reason why some people, and not others, are saved? To answer this question, let us begin by looking at our *present* and *future* salvation, and then trace it back to its roots in the *past*.

How do we receive eternal life? The Bible tells us that "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life" (1 John 5:11-12). It is by no self-sufficient power, but by the power of His resurrection life, communicated to us by our union with Him, that we will be raised at the last day (Phil. 3:21, Col. 3:3-4).

How did we receive such blessing? How were we first united to Christ? As we trace God's work backward in time, we find that at every stage the benefits we receive come as gracious gifts of God "*in His Beloved*" (Eph. 1:6). First, the good works we do, God has "worked in us" (Phil. 2:13), through "the energy which Christ mightily inspires" (Col. 1:29). Second, good works always arise from faith: "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). How did faith itself arise?

God gave us faith because of Christ: "For it has been granted to you that *for the sake of Christ* you should not only *believe* in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). For the sake of Christ the Philippians were *given* (Greek--*echaristheē* [ed.: *ἐχαρίσθη, echaristhē*]) belief! Again, God "has blessed us *in Christ* with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph. 1:3), and faith is certainly a "spiritual blessing." Thus faith is a gift of God given to us "in Christ."

Third, why does God give faith to some and not to others (2 Thes. 3:2)? What is in back of this gift in Christ? Ephesians 1 gives us the answer: God "blessed us in Christ ... even as he chose us *in him* before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (1:3-4). So our union with Christ (the "in him") extends back not only to the point when God gave us faith in Him, but was established in God's counsel even "Before the foundation of the world." 2 Timothy speaks in similar terms: God "saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue [*sic*; virtue] of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us *in Christ Jesus ages ago*" (2 Timothy 1:9).

What conclusions can we draw from Eph. 1:3-14?

1. *Every stage* of our salvation, God brings about by means of our union with Christ. In Him we are blessed (1:3), chosen (1:4), made sons (1:5), made receivers of grace (1:6), redeemed (1:7), destined and led to consummation (1:10-11, made believers (1:13). Our union with Christ *begins* (in the plan of God) before the foundation of the world, but it deepens, broadens, and intensifies as we come to faith, to maturity, and finally to consummation.

2. God chose us *both* individually (by name; personally) *and* corporately (all united in one body to Christ). Some people argue that Ephesians 1 is only talking about a "corporate election," a supposed decision by God to save the church without a decision about who in particular is and isn't included in the church. But Eph. 1:4 teaches us about a choice which *does* descend to particulars. Paul says, "He chose *us*," not "the church." And the "us" were chosen "in him." Now how can we be "in him" without each one of us *in particular* being "in him"? Tell me, if you are

a believer in Christ, is Christ *presently* united to His church "only" corporately, without caring who in particular is *in* His church? No, bless His name, He is also united to us each *personally*. The Apostle Paul simply invites us to trace that *personal* relation back to the time before we were conscious of it, back before the foundation of the world. God chose us in Christ *by name* (John 10:3, 14), as He chose Israel of old by name (Is. 43:1; cf. 1 Chron. 1-9).

To remove all doubt about the personal character of the Father's choice, Jesus expresses it in the singular: "All that the Father gives me will come to me; and *him* who comes to me I will not cast out" (John 6:37). The "all that the Father gives me" thus includes any *particular* "him" who comes. Jesus is here contemplating a fixed group, a flock of "sheep" of which He will "lose nothing ... but raise it up at the last day" (John 6:39).

3. God chose us graciously, rather than because of any good thing that He foresaw in us. Some people suppose that God chose us because He foresaw that we, rather than others, would have faith. But (a) we have seen that faith itself is a gift of God; it can't be the final reason for God's choice; (b) Paul always traces God's choice back, not to foreseen faith, but to "the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:5; 1:9), "according to the *purpose* of him who accomplishes all things according to the *counsel* of his *will*" (1:11). God loved us, that's the ultimate reason. O the riches of His grace!

(c) If something *we* did made the ultimate difference, then *in that thing* we would have *made ourselves* to differ eternally from the lost. The truth is, "Who made you differ? What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Why not give all the glory to God for our salvation?

4. God's choice is immutable, that is, everyone He chooses in Christ He *also* saves and raises in Christ at the last day. This is fundamentally because those who were united with Christ before the foundation of the world can never be separated from him: Rom. 8:39, 29-30. Jesus puts it this way: "This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose *nothing of all* that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day" (John 6:39). We have an unfailing Savior.

Has God chosen you in Christ? Are you among those whom God has given to Christ? Don't try to *pry* into God's secret decision (Deut. 29:29) about whom He is will, but rather cast yourself on the mercy of Christ who has said "Him who comes to me I will not cast out" (John 6:37). According to Christ, your coming itself is a sure sign that you are among "all that the Father gives" him (John 6:37). It is by developing the fruits of the Spirit (2 Peter 1:5-9), and above all by developing our fellowship with Christ Himself (1 John 2:28), that we arrive at a firm conviction that God has indeed chosen us in Him (2 Peter 1:10-11).

by V. S. Poythress