

God's Electing Love

Ephesians 1:4-6

15 October 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How does God show his love by choosing people to be saved?

Big Idea: Because of his amazing love, God chooses sinners to save.

Introduction

Things might be different in other parts of the world, but in the playgrounds I grew up in, there was a very particular way that teams were chosen.

Everyone would line up and select two captains.

They were always the two kids that everyone thought was the best at whatever sport you were playing.

Then each captain would take it in turns to choose a player.

Obviously, they'd choose who they thought was the best from whoever was left.

There was always this sense of anticipation as each person was chosen.

I'm sure that it felt good to be amongst the first ones chosen – I wouldn't know.

What I do know is that even if you were amongst the last few – as I almost invariably was – then it was a good feeling not to be chosen last.

Being chosen is a great feeling.

You feel valued and wanted when you're chosen.

Imagine what it must feel like for a politician on election night.

After a long campaign, the people have spoken, the people have chosen.

Or applying for a job and getting selected from amongst a large field of strong candidates.

Or winning an art competition – having your work chosen as the best amongst all the others. Again, not something I'm ever like to experience.

Being chosen affirms you and makes you feel special and wanted.

You've probably even experienced the feeling when you've visited a website and it flashes up a box that says, "You've been chosen as a winner because you're the 1,000,000 visitor to our site."

You wouldn't believe the number of times I've been the 1 millionth visitor to a site.

You know it's a scam, don't you?

And yet there are those few moments where you feel pretty good that you've been chosen.

We're in our fourth week of a topical series of sermons called "God is Love".

God's love is a massive topic for us to try and get our heads around.

What makes it tricky is that his love can't just be reduced down to one aspect.

There are a bunch of different ways that God shows his love.

We've seen that God's love is shown by the way that God the Father loves the God the Son. That's God's Intra-Trinitarian love.

God's love is displayed in the way that he sustains the whole world and cares for everyone in it. That's God's providential love.

Last week, we saw God's love at the Cross – God showed his love by sending his son to die willingly on a cross so that we might be saved. That's God's saving love.

All of these ways that God shows his love are controversial in their own way, but this week we're coming to a really controversial aspect of God's love.

This's definitely a difficult part of the difficult doctrine of the love of God.

I'm hoping that we can get beyond the controversy though, and be excited and amazed once again by God's love.

Today, we're looking at God's electing love.

Election is the doctrine which says that God chooses people for salvation before the beginning of the world.

The Bible clearly shows us that this's another way that God shows his love.

Outline

The big idea is that because of his amazing love, God chooses sinners to save.

We're going to look at three points:

1. Chosen in Love
2. Is it Really Love?
3. Sharing God's Love

1. Chosen in Love

We're going to begin by seeing how God shows his love by choosing people.

To do this, we'll camp out in Ephesians chapter 1.

It's a passage that's about all the spiritual blessings we have in Christ.

Reading through it is like being taken to a lookout and being shown all the amazing things that God has given us in Christ.

I know we looked at this whole passage recently, but today we're going to focus on verses 4-6.

There are six things I want you to see in this passage.

#1: God chooses

It might seem obviously, but the first thing you need to notice is that God does choose people, as we see in verse 4.

It might seem strange to talk about God choosing people however it's a very common theme throughout the Bible.

To find election, you don't have to go hunting for it in the dark corners of the New Testament – it's a theme almost from the beginning.

Sometimes, God chooses a particular person for specific mission – like when he chooses David to be king over Israel.¹

Jesus chose a specific group of people to be his disciples and then the apostles were chosen to establish the church.

There are even some angels that God chooses over others.²

One of the clearest places we see God choosing is in the twin study in Genesis 25.

The great thing about twin studies is that you have two human beings who are as similar it's possible for two human beings to be.

And yet they often turn out differently.

Isaac and Rebekah are childless, so Isaac prays to God, asking that Rebekah would fall pregnant.

God answers his prayer twice as much as he probably expected – giving them twins.

This happened before the days of ultrasounds when twins were often a surprise.

Though Rebekah obviously knew that something was up.

Because she goes to the Lord – quite possibly in pain – to ask what’s happening.

The answer is that God hasn’t just allowed these two kids to be conceived, he’s also chosen two very different futures for them.

Genesis 25:22–23 (NIV11) ²² The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. ²³ The LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”

Before they were even born, there was a difference between these two twins – God chose one and not the other.

They’ll be the heads to two different nations.

Two brothers from the same mother, but when they grow up, one will be the head of the large, prosperous, special, chosen people of God and the other will become a wanderer.

In the New Testament, we get some commentary on these events in Romans 9:

Romans 9:11–12 (NIV11) ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”

This twin study shows us that God’s purposes aren’t based on what family you’re born into.

The difference isn’t the works that they’d done – they hadn’t even been born yet.

The only difference is the way God calls one brother and not the other.

As Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, he says that the same is true of them.

The reason that they are now considered holy and blameless in his sight is because God chose them.

#2: Before the creation of the world.

Secondly, he chose you before the creation of the world as we also see in verse 3.

God’s choice isn’t something that he makes up as he goes along.

It’s not even a choice that’s made at the moment your life begins.

We see here that God's choice was made before the creation of the world.

God's election goes back to time immemorial.

You can see the same thing in the second letter to the Thessalonians.

There's a tricky textual variant in this verse – some Biblical manuscripts say "firstfruits" and some manuscripts have "from the beginning".

Just one letter difference makes the passage say something very different.³

I think the most likely translation is:

2 Thessalonians 2:13 (CSB17) ¹³ But we ought to thank God always for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God has chosen you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

It was from the beginning that God chose you for salvation.

How does that salvation happen?

Through the sanctification of the Spirit and believing in the truth.

What's startling about this verse is that Paul doesn't see unresolvable tension between God saving and people believing.

More than that, he doesn't see either of those as being incompatible with election long before we were born.

#3: In love

Probably the most important thing to see for our purposes this morning is that election is an act of love.

"In love he predestined us for adoption", as we see in verses 4 and 5.

Election is an expression of God's love.

It's those God loves that he chooses, 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

Similarly, we find in Romans 9:13 that choosing Jacob was an expression of God's love.

If you have a cold, hard, harsh view of God's election, then it's not the Bible's view.

The doctrine of election is often characterised as a heartless, arbitrary choice by a deity who doesn't care.

Whatever the criteria are that God uses to choose people, it's not callous.

Out of his great love God chooses us to be adopted into his family – to become children of God.

In Jesus, we get grafted into God's family.

That's not mean and cruel.

It's an awesome privilege.

Have you ever been grafted into someone else's family?

My mother was an only child and all my father's family lived a long way away and so we really didn't have much blood family around us growing up.

But we still had lots of family because others welcomed us into theirs.

Friends treated us as if we were part of their family.

And our church family was really tight too – loving us and truly treating us like family.

What we see in the way others welcome us into their families is a taste of the amazing love that God shows us in election.

We get to join the family as ridgy-didge children.

Jesus is the firstborn who we get to become like.

We see this in Romans 8:29:

Romans 8:29 (NIV11) ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

That's the amazing blessing of being included in Christ.

#4: In Christ

Fourthly, we see what the result and purpose of election is.

“For he chose us in him”, verse 4.

Election has everything to do with Jesus.

When God chooses us, it's not apart from Jesus and what he has done.

God chose us to be the beneficiaries of his sacrifice on the cross.

When we're united with Christ, his goodness and righteousness is what allows us to stand before a holy God.

God has chosen broken, hurt and sinful people to become holy and blameless children.
He's brought people who were once far off near, as Paul says in chapter two.
He doesn't just click his fingers to make it happen.
As we saw last week, it came at a huge cost – it cost him the life of his one and only son.
Our righteousness is only possible in Jesus.

#5: It's in accordance with his pleasure and will

Probably one of the biggest questions that comes up about election is “Why would God chose some and not others?”

What criterion does he use?

There's actually no obligation on God to share his exact reasons.

Ultimately, it's probably beyond our ability to understand.

What we do know is that it's “in accordance with his pleasure and will”, verse 5.

God chooses us because he wants to.

Election conforms to his pleasure and will.

That alone might not seem like a satisfying answer.

It might even seem like a cop-out.

But we also know God's character.

He is good and he is loving.

He tells us that he is showing his love in election.

So we can be sure that his purposes in election are just, fair and good.

#6: This is a reason to praise

The doctrine of election often gets a bad rap.

It's a teaching that can make people nervous – I understand that.

At this point, the jury might still be out for you.

You might be thinking, “But what about this, what about that?”

We'll hopefully get to some of the common questions soon, but I want you to notice something first.

Don't just look at what Paul says about election; look at how he talks about election here in verse 6.

Knowing that we've been predestined for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ should result in praise.

This's a truth that's celebrated.

If you get election, then you're going to want to sing out praise to God.

If you understand God's love in this way, then you'll praise him for his grace.

Election is a doctrine that people often get embarrassed by.

One of the reasons is that we don't understand it exactly – all the ins and outs.

A little like the Trinity, we can't rationalise it.

There's a lot mystery and unanswered questions for us in the doctrine of election.

And so we tend to downplay it.

That's not what Paul does here in Ephesians 1 though: he celebrates it.

Even talking about 'the elect' is reserved for serious theological discussions between egg-heads.

Yet in the New Testament, that's exactly how we hear God's people being described.

Titus 1:1 (NIV11) ¹ Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness—

1 Peter 1:1 (NIV11) ¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,

And Dr Luke does exactly the same thing in the book of Acts.

If we were to have an evangelistic campaign and see a whole heap of people become Christians, how would we describe it?

Would you say, "People were saved?"

Or, "People came to faith in Jesus?"

How would you described to others what happened?

In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas are in the town of Pisidian Antioch.

One Sabbath, they speak at the Jewish synagogue.

The following week, the whole town comes out to hear them.

As they speak and share the gospel, many are saved.

This's how Luke describes these events:

Acts 13:48 (NIV11) ⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Far from being ashamed about God's electing role in their conversion, Luke highlights it.

"All who were appointed for eternal life believed."

Thinking about the doctrine of election should cause us to bask in the wonderful grace he has shown us in Christ.

Getting election should result in "the praise of his glorious grace."

He has chosen to free us so that we're not trapped by our sins any longer, bound without any escape.

He's called us to live holy and blameless lives.

Instead of being enemies of God, we have become the family of God because of what he's done in Jesus.

God's choosing of us is a demonstration of God's love towards us.

Are you a Christian? Are you saved?

Then praise him for his grace.

Don't be embarrassed by it.

Celebrate and give thanks to the Lord for his kindness towards us.

2. Is it Really Love?

We've seen how God predestined us in love, but I reckon there may be a few people who'd still be sceptical.

Is the doctrine of election really an expression of God's love?

It's great to be chosen, but what if you're one of the ones who aren't chosen?

To return to the sporting analogy we opened with, what about if you don't even make it onto the team?

A sense of fair play makes us feel like everyone really deserves to get in.

Why doesn't God chose everyone to be saved?

If we're not careful with the doctrine of election, we can actually make God out to be exceedingly unloving.

Rather than praising God for his love election, election ends up getting pitted up against the love of God.

And love wins.

Which is very different to the Bible's explanation of how God's love works through election.

The first objection is that it's unfair for God not to choose everyone.

In other words, that it is actually morally irresponsible of to God to allow anyone at all to go to hell.

This is the view of the universalist – someone who believes that everyone is going to get to heaven.

They reason like this – if God is love then how could he send people to hell?

I like how one preacher said – quite provocatively and controversially:

“We've so elevated the love of God over the wrath of God that we've air conditioned hell.”⁴

It's fairly clear that the universalist's position is unbiblical.

It's only those who believe who will receive eternal life.

Everyone who rejects Jesus heads towards eternal death.

Jesus' words in John 3:36 are key here:

John 3:36 (NIV11) ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

That still doesn't answer how God can still be loving in doing this.

Love is fundamental to God's nature.

However wrath isn't.

God isn't fundamentally in a bad mood, he's not irrationally angry. His wrath isn't blind rage.

Where there's no sin, there's no wrath.

The reason that he has wrath is because of sin.

The problem with the universalist is that they underestimate the problem of sin.

Sin is the wilful rejection of God – turning our back on him and wanting to have nothing to do with him.

Far from being unfair, when God sends people to hell, he's allowing them to have exactly what they want.

Assuming that God's love and God's wrath are incompatible is a fundamental misunderstanding of the justice of God.

God's love demands that there is justice.

He can't sweep sin under the carpet. He can't ignore it.

Instead he must deal with it.

Allowing injustice to continue indefinitely would be unloving.

We all know that when we're wronged, we want justice.

God's love isn't opposed to his wrath.

God's stern hatred of evil is a necessary part of his love for man.⁵

And they misunderstand how deeply sin runs.

The Bible tells us that we are all sinners.

Romans 3:23 NIV11 ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

When we read the Bible, we aren't left thinking that most of us are actually mostly okay.

We see that we all deserve God's wrath because of our sin.

Far from it being unfair in punishing people for their sin, God is just in doing this.

God's love actually requires that he deal with sin.

It's because of his love that God's angry at sin.

So, is it fair for sinners to receive God's wrath?

You bet. Because that's exactly what we deserve.

God could be a universalist – he could save everyone – but there's no requirement for him to.

At the same time, he would be well within his rights to save no one.

That's wouldn't be unfair.

Praise God' that's not what he's decided to do.

Why does he choose some and not others though?

Ultimately, we don't know why.

But God isn't unjust for doing so.

The unfair thing is that he chooses to save anyone.

It's only because of his mercy that anyone is saved.

The truly great, awesome and amazing thing about election is that we'd be chosen at all.

God is completely free to choose who he saves without being unfair.

Romans 9:14–15 (NIV11) ¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

The second big objection to election is the apparent incompatibility between God's love for all and his election of some.

The way this's usually expressed is that election would be unloving because God has said that he doesn't want anyone to perish.

If election means that only some are saved, how could those two things possibly go together?

Is God confused?

We know that God isn't a God of confusion,⁶ but it can sure feel like it.

There are basically two main ways of resolving this.

Those who follow the theology attributed to John Calvin and those who follow the theology of Jacobus Arminius.

These two camps actually aren't as far apart as you might think.

Both believe that original sin prevents anyone being saved without God's grace.

Where they disagree is in how salvation happens.

In a nutshell, Calvinists hold that people are totally depraved and can never choose God on their own.

Therefore God has to do everything when it comes to salvation.

They believe that God's election is completely unlimited in every way – that it's entirely up to God's choice.

It's entirely God's decision before the foundation of the world who will be saved.

Arminians believe that God shows a kind of grace – called prevenient grace – to all people.

This gives everyone in the world enough grace to allow them to either choose or reject God.

When it comes to election, they believe that God's election is limited.

God chooses people in advance based on his foreknowledge of the decision they will make about salvation in the future.

Arminianism emphasises the texts that say that God wants everyone to be saved.

If God elects people without any input from them as the Calvinist says, what is to be done with these texts?

We're going to look briefly at this handful of key texts.

From a Calvinist perspective, I don't think they're actually that much of a problem.

The first one is 1 Timothy 2.

We looked at this verse when we went through 1 Timothy last year.

It's often assumed that 'all' here means each and every individual.

However, when you read the verses around – verses 1, 2 and 6 – the word ‘all’ is used a number of times.

The best way to understand the word ‘all’ in all these cases is that it means all kinds of people, not all individuals.

1 Timothy 2:3–4 (NIV11) ³This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, ⁴ who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

The second key verse is 2 Peter 3:9.

2 Peter 3:9 (NIV11) ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Again, look at the context here.

In verse 8, we told not to expect that God counts time like we do.

The point isn't the every individual without exception will be saved.

Rather, the point is that God is being slow – or patient – allowing time for everyone to be saved.

If Jesus came back 1917, then none of us would've been saved because we wouldn't have even existed yet.

That could just as easily be all that God chooses to elect as all who will choose him.

That's how I understand those texts.

But I also understand that not everyone will find that compelling.

So, I think it's helpful to point out that these verses are problematic for Arminians too because they don't actually support the position that they're often used to support.

These verses cause the same problem for Arminians as they do for Calvinists.

If it is God's desire for every individual to be saved, the problem is that, quite simply, not everyone is saved.

What God apparently wants doesn't actually happen whether we choose or he does.

If not, *why* not?

Why doesn't God save everyone, like the universalist says?

Although it's God's desire that everyone be saved, what he allows to happen must depend on a commitment to something more valuable.

However these verses don't tell us what that more valuable thing is.

In simple terms, for the Arminian it's human free-will and for the Calvinist, it's God's glory.

From a Calvinistic viewpoint, God's sovereign choice to bring him the most glory is what drives his actions.

From an Arminian viewpoint, God's desire to let human beings choose overrides his desire that everyone is saved.

Here's how John Piper describes it:

*"The answer the Arminians give is that human self-determination and the possible resulting love relationship with God are more valuable than saving all people by sovereign, efficacious grace. The answer the Reformed give is that the greater value is the manifestation of the full range of God's glory in wrath and mercy (Rom. 9:22–23) and the humbling of man so that he enjoys giving all credit to God for his salvation (1 Cor. 1:29)."*⁷

We have to look outside these verses to get an answer.

We just don't have time to make a full case this morning, but I'll offer some thoughts to do with election.

I'll nail my colours to the flag – I'm a Calvinist.

The first thing is that I don't find the Biblical case for prevenient grace very convincing.

The second reason is that, in their desire to affirm human choice, it seems to me that for the Arminian election stops really being election.

If we human beings have the ultimate choice whether we're saved and God elects us based on our foreknowledge of our choice, how is that really election?

It's not a choice, but a response.

Let's come back to the question we're trying to answer in this section though: is it really love for God to elect people?

Is election an example of God's love? Absolutely.

It's not a battle between God's election and God's love.

It wouldn't be loving of God not to deal with sin and so it's entirely fair that he punishes people for their sin.

None of the passages which speak of God's love for all exclude a Calvinistic understanding of unconditional election.

If anything, it's much more questionable how conditional election can be said to issue from God's love at all.

Is it truly a demonstration of God's love if his choice is ultimately dependant on our choice?

Sharing God's Love

Where does the rubber hit the road with this?

The topic of election is one of those areas of theology that can all too easily just be an intellectual exercise.

May that never be!

The doctrine of election makes a real difference to who and how we share the gospel.

One of the biggest criticisms of Calvinist thinking is that it encourages people not to share the good news of Jesus.

If God has chosen who the elect are, then what we do or don't do will make absolutely no difference.

God's the one who saves people!

So, let's go about our business and we'll let him go about his.

It's an entirely valid criticism because there are people who have reasoned exactly like this.

The problem with, of course, is that's another imbalance.

Hyper-Calvinists emphasise God's sovereign election so much that they ignore what God has quite clearly called us to do elsewhere in the Bible.

Jesus commanded his disciples:

Matthew 28:19–20 (NIV11) ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The apostle Paul boldly declares:

1 Corinthians 9:16 (NIV11) ¹⁶ For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

God doesn't need us to share his love with the world.

He could've got the message out on cornflake boxes, if he wanted to.

But in his wisdom, he's made it our business.

He's chosen to use broken, hurting and sinful people like us to be his agents in the world.

What a tragedy it would be if we ignored the great privilege he's given us.

How could we when God's love compels us?⁸

Even as we affirm election, we mustn't be people who throw the baby out with the bath water.

We need to ask: how does God's election and the command to make disciples hold together?

The answer is that we faithfully proclaim Jesus to all people – sharing his love with everyone – and see what the Lord does.

Is this person we're sharing the gospel with elect?

As I read one person say, evangelism will achieve nothing if the person isn't elect.

We don't know though, so let's share the gospel with them.

God might use the conversation to achieve much if they are!

At the same time, we know that God's love won't make sense to many.

Even though we invite everyone, we'll expect that not everyone will respond.

As Jesus said:

Matthew 22:14 NIV11 "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

It's easy to get disappointed when people aren't interested or don't understand God's love.

How could they not get how marvellous and fantastic God's love is?

God's sovereignty in election is also a great comfort when our efforts don't seem to "work".

It also means that we can't stuff it up... which doesn't mean that we should try.

We can't save people but equally, we can't stop them from being saved because it's ultimately not up to us.

God needs to work to reveal himself to sinners like us.

In Ephesians 2, Paul talks about how it's by God's grace that we're saved.

That means that we can't boast.

Ephesians 2:8–10 (NIV11) ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith— and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

We usually think that we can't boast about earning our own salvation.

That's certainly true.

At the same time, it also means that the person evangelising can't boast either.

You can't boast, "Aren't I great because I've saved so many people!"

Because it doesn't come down to you who gets over the line.

God's love compels people.

It's his choice and that's a wonderfully liberating truth.

Conclusion

The doctrine of election is far from the embarrassing controversy that it's often made out to be.

As we consider how God's chosen us, may it cause us to praise him for his grace.

Because in election, we see God's amazing love on display.

¹ 1 Samuel 16:7-12

² 1 Timothy 5:21

³ The New Testament Greek manuscripts were written in capitals and without spaces. The only difference between "from the beginning" (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς) and "firstfruits" (ἀπαρχή) is the final letter.

⁴ Steve Lawson

⁵ Robert Mounce

⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:33

⁷ John Piper, *Does God desire all to be saved?*, 39.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:14

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Big Question: How does God show his love by choosing people to be saved?

Big Idea: Because of his amazing love, God chooses sinners to save.

Discussion Questions

1. Choice is often something we struggle with in everyday life. What are some reasons we find choosing so difficult?
2. What are some of the consequences of God electing/choosing people "before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4)?
3. What should election lead Christians to do?
4. How is election talked about differently in the Bible compared with how it's often talked about in the church?
5. What does 2 Thessalonians 2:13 say about the compatibility between God sanctifying, election and belief?
6. Is God unloving if he doesn't save everyone?
7. If God "wants all people to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4), why would he only choose some?
8. What are the similarities and differences between an Arminian and Calvinistic understanding of election?
9. How does God's election and his command to make disciples hold together?