

# Who are the “elect”?

## Part 1 - What defines the elect, and what is their purpose?

A question: Did God elect only certain people for salvation from the beginning of time? Because there are several scriptures that suggest he did:

**Ephesians 1:4** - “For he **chose us** in him **before the creation of the world...**”

**2 Timothy 1:9** - “God who has **saved us** and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus **before the beginning of time...**”

**2 Thessalonians 2:13** - “...because **from the beginning** God **chose you to be saved** through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.”

**Revelation 17:8** - “The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life **from the creation of the world** will be astonished....”

Did God actually choose who was going to be saved and write their names in a “book of life” before he created us? Because other verses seem to say that too, like:

**Romans 8:29-30** - “For those **God foreknew** he **also predestined** to be conformed to the likeness of his Son....And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

**1 Peter 1:1-2** - “To God’s elect....who have been **chosen according to the foreknowledge** of God the Father.”

**Acts 13:48** - “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord: and **all who were appointed for eternal life** believed.”

**Romans 9:22-23** - “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath **that are made for destruction**; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, **which he has prepared beforehand for glory....?**”

It looks like God only appointed an “elect” group of people for eternal life and glory, and it was only they who were predestined from the start to be “conformed to the likeness of his Son.”

So what happens to everyone else - those who **aren’t** the elect? Is it true that God’s only purpose for them is to be “objects of wrath...made for destruction,” that God never meant to save them, and they exist only to demonstrate the effects of God’s anger? If that’s true, though, it sounds awful.

But to a large section of Christianity that's exactly what these verses mean, which led to the rather fearsome doctrine of "Predestination," the belief that only some people are "objects of God's mercy" predestined for salvation, but everyone else is an "object of God's wrath" predestined for destruction.

So what do you do when fellow Christians come up with a doctrine that sounds terrible - but they say they got it from Scripture?!

Ask 3 questions:

- 1) First of all, what is the **context** in each of those verses mentioned above?
- 2) Secondly, what about all those **other scriptures** that talk of God opening up salvation to everybody, and not just to a select few?
- 3) And thirdly, **a question**: "How can I ask people to put their trust in God when he may never have meant them to be saved in the first place?" (And another question closely related to that – "Where's the GOOD NEWS in a doctrine that says God only saves some and the rest are lost?")

Talking of **context**, then, what's the context of those verses in **Romans 9:22-23**? Are they really saying that all humanity falls into two categories – "objects of wrath" or "objects of mercy" - and we're all in either one category or the other, predestined by God from the beginning of time for either salvation or eternal destruction?

Romans 9 in context, however, isn't referring to all humanity. In **verses 3-4** Paul is talking to "**my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.**" And if anyone deserved to be "objects of God's wrath," it was them. Why? Because God had given them everything, **verse 4** - "**Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ.**"

God had chosen, or elected, Israel for an amazing purpose, **Deuteronomy 7:6** - "**For you are a holy people to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.**" And God promised he would never fail them too, **Isaiah 41:8-10** - "**But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.**"

So Israel was truly God's "elect," hand-picked and chosen by God for his special blessings and protection. But things had gone terribly wrong for them, which they, amazingly, had taken to mean that "**God's word had failed,**" **Romans 9:6**, so why should God blame *them* for what happened (verse 19)? They thought they deserved better.

“Ah, but,” Paul replies in **verse 22** (Romans 9 still) - “**What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction?**” First of all, Paul says, Israel *didn't* deserve better, because the way they'd behaved had “prepared” (or doomed) them for destruction. God was extremely angry at them, and he wanted to SHOW it too (“make his power known”). But what if, Paul asks, God made that show of power - NOT in giving them what they deserved - but rather in an amazing display of patience?

And why would God do that? Well, **verse 23**, “**What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory...?**” What if being patient was a much better way of making his glory known? Well, wouldn't it be?

Think of a child who misbehaves terribly but instead of his parents blowing fuses and yelling to show their anger to wake up their idiot child to what he's done, they take it all with amazing patience and they continually extend mercy? What's going to impress the child more - yelling or mercy? Which of the two would more effectively tell the child he is his parents' “treasured possession”? Which of the two would more wonderfully assure the child that his parents love him, believe in him, and they'll never give up on him? And which of the two, most crucially, would more likely make the child love his parents and trust them in return?

So, Paul asks, what if that's the way God was working with Israel - where instead of showing his power in destroying them, he showed his power in patience? Because isn't that the kind of God he is, who loves us no matter what? Well, what better way of proving it than God never rejecting Israel, despite their total rejection of him? They said God had failed them, but in fact God was using their rejection not only to prove his love for them, but also to show what kind of God he is to others **beyond** Israel - to Gentiles as well as Jews (verse 24) - who'd see the glory of God's incredible patience with Israel and **they would** trust him.

So it's a GOOD news message here - of God's mercy to Israel, the least deserving people of all, to “make the riches of his glory” known, not only to Israel but to Gentiles, too. There is nothing in the context whatsoever about God selecting some for salvation and some for destruction. Quite the opposite; it's about God reaching out to as **many** people as possible with the good news message of his amazing mercy.

And still in the context of Israel we come to **Romans 10:11-13** - quoting Isaiah 28:16, which says - “**Everyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.**’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for (quoting Joel 2:32) ‘**Everyone who calls on the name of Lord will be saved.**’” So here are OTHER VERSES - Old AND New Testaments - clearly stating that God hasn't elected just some for salvation. Salvation is open to everyone.

But what about all those other verses mentioned earlier that suggest God only appointed some people, not all, for salvation and eternal life? Like **Romans 8:29** - "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son," which some interpret to mean that God is only saving those **he chose** for salvation.

First question – what is the context? Is it saying only certain people will be saved and the rest won't be? No, **verse 28**, it's talking about God working "for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." The context is Paul assuring Christians that God will never let them down, "FOR" (or because, **verse 29**) those God knew he'd be calling (foreknew) were guaranteed (predestined) to be conformed to the image of his Son. In other words, God won't fail anyone he calls. His purpose for them will be fulfilled. "And we know that," Paul says, meaning we Christians KNOW that anyone God calls "according to his purpose" is guaranteed to have that purpose fulfilled in him. So, in context, it's a wonderful message of assurance to the ones God's already called that he's working things out just perfectly for them. It's got nothing to do with God only saving certain people and not others.

But then there's **Ephesians 1:4**, that talks of God choosing people "before the creation of the world," which some take to mean that God only chose us Christians for salvation and no one else. Check the context, however, and it talks in **verse 10** of God bringing "ALL things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." So it's not "some" people God's after, it's "all." And where **we Christians** fit into that plan is in **verses 11-13** - "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were THE FIRST to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation."

Christians are simply "the first" in line to be brought together under Christ. And yes, God predestined the existence of Christians "before the creation of the world" to be "adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ" (verses 4 and 5), but eventually "everything" will be brought into "conformity with the purpose of his will." We're not the ONLY ones being saved, therefore, but we are THE FIRST, because it was God's plan from the very beginning to choose Christians first. Paul then goes on to assure the Christians of his day that they are *personally* included in that first group (**verses 11 and 13**, "we were also chosen" and "you also were included").

God has a plan but there's an ORDER in which he predestined that plan to be accomplished. It started with Jesus Christ "the FIRSTBORN over all creation," **Colossians 1:15**, and "the firstborn from among the dead," **verse 18**. But Jesus was also "the firstborn among many brothers," **Romans 8:29**, the FIRST of which would be Christians. And what Paul wants Christians in his day to know - with absolute assurance - is that "you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ," **Romans 1:6**.

It's the same message of assurance to Christians that we found in Romans 8:28-30. So, instead of these verses being a bad news message of only some people being saved, they are, in context, verses of good news about the masterplan of God **"who works EVERYTHING in conformity with the purpose of his will,"** starting with Christians, whom he predestined and elected to be THE FIRST **"of MANY brothers."**

It's not surprising to discover later on, then, that Christians - just like Israel of old - are ALSO called **"the elect,"** in **1 Peter 1:1-3** - **"To God's elect....who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood."**

So now we have two groups of people called **"the elect"** - Israel and Christians - both defined as chosen by God, and both of whom are assured that God will **never fail** them, a point Paul repeats for Christians in **1 Corinthians 1:2, 8-9** - **"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.....He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."** Paul wants Christians to realize who we are - that God chose us from the very beginning of time as an essential part of his plan of bringing all people under Christ eventually. We can rest assured, then, that God will complete in us what he elected us for. He **"is faithful."**

But notice in **Romans 11:7** that the term **"elect"** **switches** from Israel to Christians - **"What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did."** The **"elect"** now being whom? In context, it's us Gentiles, who, unlike Israel, know how salvation is **"obtained"** - that it's **"by grace,"** **verse 6**, **"no longer by works."** Israel, however, thought it **was** by works (Romans 9:31-32). But, Paul writes in **Romans 9:11-12**, **"God's purpose in election might stand NOT by works but by him who calls,"** and in **verse 16** - **"It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."** In other words, God's purpose in electing people, no matter who it is - Israelites or Gentiles - is that they TRUST HIM for salvation, because it's purely by HIS grace and mercy we're saved, not by anything we do.

And God elected Israel to demonstrate that by trusting him. But they failed. So **"salvation has come to the Gentiles,"** **Romans 11:11**. God has now elected others to show the way to salvation, because **that's what God elects people for**. Who are the elect, then? It's those who understand, believe, preach and demonstrate that they depend on nothing but God's grace and mercy for salvation. That was what God elected Israel for, and that's what he's elected Christians for.

It's summarized beautifully in **2 Timothy 1:8-9**, that it's **"the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time."**

It was God's plan from the very beginning to save humanity by HIS power and calling alone, as his GIFT to us in Jesus. No part of our salvation comes from us. But the FIRST ones to actually grasp that fact are Christians, **Ephesians 1:9** - "And he made known TO US the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ."

And why did God elect Christians to know the mystery of his will? **1 Peter 2:9** - "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, THAT you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

God gives Christians an understanding of what he's up to, because when we see it we "declare his praises" and "make the riches of his glory known." We can't help it. Why not? Because we understand **what the riches of God's glory are**. Well, of course we understand what they are because we've experienced those riches personally. How? **Verse 10** - "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

We were nothings, faceless nobodies. If God hadn't called us we too would be "objects of his wrath - destined for destruction," **Romans 9:22**. BUT, **verse 23**, God made us "objects of his mercy" instead, "EVEN US, whom he ALSO called," **verse 24**, "not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles. As he says in Hosea, 'I will call them my people who are NOT my people; and I will call her my loved one who is NOT my loved one.'"

Suddenly we're among God's "loved ones," loved by God as much as his beloved elect Israel, and for absolutely nothing we've done. And what we see in that is God's amazing mercy, in stepping beyond the bounds of his beloved Israel to include and prepare US "in advance for glory" too, **verse 23**. And when at last we Christians see the glory of God's mercy, there's no stopping us from "declaring" it and "making it known," because that's what God elected us for.

It was all part of God's plan from the beginning, that one day there would be this motley group of people called Christians who would talk **only of God's mercy when it comes to salvation**. They would recoil violently at the suggestion that we humans have any part in our salvation, because Christians - more than anyone else on the planet - would be so excruciatingly aware that the only reason they're among God's loved ones is God's amazing mercy.

And why would God elect this motley crew of Christians who talk only of his mercy and grace in their salvation, and never of human effort? For two reasons:

- 1) To declare to the world, **Romans 9:16**, that all God's dealings with us humans do not "depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy," and -
- 2) **Romans 11:31** - "in order that they too (Israel) may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you." God is reaching out to Israel through us, too.

We are now living proof that God has never failed his beloved Israel, because God predestined from the beginning of time that he would elect others to understand what Israel never understood, to not only **show the world** what God's salvation is based on, but to "make the riches of his glory known" to **his beloved Israel** too, so that one day, **Romans 11:26, "ALL Israel will be saved."**

Does this sound like only a few are going to be saved, or that God only chose some people for salvation and the rest for destruction, or that his elect are the only ones predestined to be saved?

Christians recoil at such suggestions, because how can we ask people to put their trust in God when he may never have meant them to be saved in the first place? And where's the GOOD NEWS in a doctrine that says God only saves some and the rest are lost? How dare anyone limit God's grace and mercy, Christians cry.

But that's what we Christians were predestined and elected to cry from the very beginning of time! Someone has to believe in God's amazing grace, and for this age now God chose and elected us - not as the only people to believe it, but simply the first - so that others (and in particular Israel) can see the glory of God's patience and mercy too.

God had it all worked out before he even created us. And Christians are proof of it, as we now play the part he elected us for "**according to the plan of him who works everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.**"

(More in Part 2...)