

## Election

Matthew 22:14 "For many are called but few are chosen."

**Question:** God chose me for what?

**Key Verses:** Josh 24:15; Rom 8:29-30; 2 Pet 3:9

### The Parable

This was the last time Jesus would teach in the temple. It was Tuesday afternoon, the week of his death. Tensions were running high, particularly after the crowds acclaimed Jesus King during the Triumphal Entry on Sunday. So the executive leadership of the Temple accosted to Jesus with a question. It was designed to undermine his rabbinic authority. "And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'" (Matthew 21:23).

Jesus answered their question with one of his own. He's not trying to be evasive. He's simply being Rabbinic. Rabbis led their pupils by asking probing questions that led them to the right answer. Jesus: "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?' And they discussed it among themselves, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'" (Matthew 21:24–25). Because the people revered John as a martyred prophet, the Sanhedrin could hardly minimize his authority. Yet that was the very authority that empowered him to Baptize Jesus, launching his public preaching career. They think they are painting Jesus into a corner only to find out he has them in a head lock!

This tense interaction launched an avalanche of debates that day. All the ensuing questions, rebuttals, and parables stem from this single question about Jesus' authority. As we come to our key verse, we find ourselves at the tail end of a parable designed to answer this question. The story line is familiar, virtually identical to the earlier version from Luke 14:16-24. A king threw a banquet celebrating his son's wedding. All kinds of potentates were invited. All refused, shamelessly abusing and murdering the very messengers inviting them to come. The king, of course was furious. In a vengeful rage he leveled the cities of his obstinate clients. Yet the wedding hall was still empty. So he sent other servants to invite all sorts and sundry. One would never suspect these folks could attend such an auspicious feast. They came in droves and most were delighted. Though there was one in attendance who didn't bother to dress for the occasion. It was a deliberate affront against his majesty. That callous guest was thrown out and brutally punished. Here then is the explanation: "For many are called but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14).

Because this word “chosen” (aka “elected”) is pregnant with theological meaning, multiple passages converge on its interpretation. However, let’s start with the simple context before running too far afield. Jesus’ parable explains the basic meaning of the term. How were they elected? They were invited AND they came. It’s that simple. Many nobles were invited but refused to come. They were not elected. Others never deserved an invitation but came gladly. They were elected. One guy came for the wrong reason and without the garb of respect. He was rejected. In a nutshell, that is the meaning of election. Let’s tease that out with a few other notable statements about election.

### **The Principle**

At the risk of oversimplification, there are two basic views of election. (1) God alone chooses who goes to heaven and who does not. (2) God determined the parameters of salvation; we choose whether to enter or not. Very smart (and good) people differ on the definition of election and with good reason. Starting with Jesus’ own definition in this parable, however, it seems easier to explain election along the lines of the second view of election: God’s invitation AND our acceptance. God determines the time, place, and parameters of the party. Yet we apparently have the choice whether or not to attend. Having said that, let’s clarify a few important points.

(1) *Everyone is invited.* The rich and poor of the parable both get an invite. For Jesus’ immediate audience, that implies that those Jews who were the religious elite and those who were peasants. Some inherited religious leadership and clout. Others were born as farmers, day-laborers, or even the fringes of society whose daily survival might render them unclean or unable to attend Temple festivities. From the top of society to the bottom all are invited. Beyond the Gospels, the church spread across geographic and cultural boundaries. The message went from Jews to Gentiles. The early church was stunned at the breadth of the invitation. It included Gentiles, slaves, women, and pagan. They too get an invite. Isn’t this, after all, the implication of John 3:16? It is spelled out in 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” According to Scripture, God’s “desires all people to be saved” (1 Tim 2:4). That’s not new with the Gospel. As far back as Ezekiel 18:32 God showed his cards, “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.”

(2) *Not everyone gets the same invitation.* God is all-inclusive but he is not egalitarian. According to the parable, the invite starts with the elite. In historical terms, that means the religious elite who had greater access to Scripture and Temple worship. In Theological terms that means God elected the Jewish people to bear the promise and the Christian Church to extend it to the world. In sociological terms it means that all economic groups, all tribes, all tongues, and political affinities have open access to Election but not necessarily equal access.

The reality is that those born in the modern West have more opportunity to hear the gospel, to respond freely than those born in the Middle East or in other historical eras. Does that mean God is not fair? Yes. God is not fair; he is gracious *to all*. For reasons above and beyond our comprehension, God chose a man Abraham to father a nation. He chose that nation to build the temple and preserve the law. From that nation arose a Messiah who would eventually be proclaimed Lord across all continents. This foreordained plan of God was immensely gracious but not nearly egalitarian.

(3) *You must respond to the invitation.* Election is not just the universal invitation. It is a particular response to the invitation. God alone invites. Humans, however, under God's sovereignty, exercise freewill to respond. That's why the Bible consistently encourages those invited to RSVP. Jesus himself exhorted us to "Strive to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24). The writer of Hebrews implored, "Let us draw near" (Hebrews 4:16; 7:25; 11:6). Clearly, the weight is God's responsibility. Nonetheless, his call is not complete without our response. Again, this is nothing new. As Joshua led the chosen people into the Promise Land, he exhorted them with this famous challenge: "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

(4) *God knows who will respond.* God doesn't force your hand but he does see it under the table. In other words, he knows what you will do before you ever do it. This may sound mysterious but every parent has had the same experience. You can see a kid about to jump, touch, cry, or succeed. It's the same with God only he sees further out. The New Testament calls this *foreknowledge*. The Greek word literally means "to know beforehand." 1 Peter 1:1-2, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are **elect** exiles ... according to the **foreknowledge** of God the Father." The elect who respond to God's invitation are seen by God long before they ever come to God, long before they were ever even born! That's where the word *predestination* comes into play. It is a rare Greek word (*prooridzō*), used only six times in the New Testament. It means "to determine beforehand." The root is where we get *horizon*. It basically means "to set the boundary." God determines the boundaries of who will be saved and who will not. He sees who will respond and who will not. His call is to all; his election is for those he sees will step into his predetermined boundaries of salvation. Paul summarizes it this way, "For those whom he **foreknew** he also **predestined** to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he **predestined** he also **called**, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:29–30).

## The Purpose

All this makes sense except for one thing. If God's predestination sets boundaries of salvation, then his election should be corporate not individual. In other words, God declares beforehand the *kind* of people who would be saved. If, however, God starts *naming* those who are saved, it looks like he's playing favorites. Those he likes go to heaven; those he doesn't take the down elevator. To be fair, God is God. He gets to do that if he likes. He just isn't like that—not according to the Bible. His love is perfect and universal (Matt 5:48). To use the common

parlance of the Bible, “God shows no partiality” (Deut 10:17; 2 Chron 19:7; Job 34:19; Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; 1 Peter 1:17).

So what do we do with individual predestination? Both Old Testament and New highlight names of individuals God selected, elected, and predestined. The list is long:

1. Abraham (Neh 9:7)
2. Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:19ff; Mal 1:2-3; Rom 9:10-13)
3. Pharaoh (Exo 9:16; Rom 9:17)
4. David (1 Sam 16:1-14)
5. Josiah (1 Kings 13:1-3)
6. Cyrus (Isa 41:25; 44:28; 45:1-13; 2 Chr 36:22ff)
7. Jeremiah (Jer 1:5)
8. John the Baptist (Mal 4:6; Isa 40:3; Luke 1:17ff)
9. Jesus (Isa 42:1; Matt 12:18; Luke 9:35; Acts 2:23; 4:28)
10. Judas Iscariot (Psa 41:9; 69:25; 109:8; Mark 14:10; Acts 1:20)
11. Apostles (Luke 6:13; John 6:70; 15:16)
12. Paul (Acts 9:15; 13:2; Rom 1:1; Gal 1:15; Eph 3:7)
13. Rufus (Rom 16:13)

What do we do with that list? For starters, read it. Even a cursory reading reveals that each individual was predestined to a task, not a destiny (with the possible exception of Iscariot). Abraham was called to birth a nation and Pharaoh to release that nation. David was chosen to lead a kingdom and Cyrus was to restore that kingdom from captivity. John was destined to baptize Jesus and Jesus to die on a cross. Iscariot was fated to betray Jesus and the other Apostles to testify to his resurrection. Paul and Jeremiah were elected from birth to preach a message for which they would suffer.

A second thing we should do with this list is to put our own names in it. Not everyone gets the same invitation but all are invited. Not everyone gets the same call, but all are called. God has a practical purpose for your life. This is not to say that God has one specific thing you are to do in your life-time. Rather, in every season of your life, God wants to meet you at the intersection of your gifts, passions, and experiences to use the unique you to glorify him. There is something right here, right now that you (and only you) can do for God’s honor. Discover that and you will find your voice, your passion, and your purpose.

#### **Key Points:**

- According to Jesus “election” is God’s invitation plus a person’s response.
- Predestination is God setting the boundary of salvation and seeing beforehand who would enter in.
- Individuals are predestined to a task not a destiny.

**Action Step:** Identify what you (alone) are uniquely qualified to do for God. Share this with a friend or mentor who can help you put actionable steps to carry it out.

**Further Resources:** Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (1970).