

# Salvation and the Sovereignty of God

**Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He [*God*] will bring about at the proper time—He [*God*] who is the blessed and only Sovereign [Potentate], the King of kings, and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.** (I Timothy 6:12-16)

## Introduction

Definitions of *sovereignty* include supremacy of authority or rule, and complete independence and self-government. Is God sovereign? Is God the supreme ruler of the universe and all that is in it? Is He completely self-governing and independent of any and all other counsel? Most children of God (brethren) acknowledge, at least to some degree, that God is omnipotent (all-powerful, all-mighty), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere), and immutable (unchanging). We see the many miracles in the Bible and believe that God can do anything He wants to do because He is God. Despite this understanding, however, many brethren think, at least to some degree, that their own will is greater and more powerful than God's will. So much so, that many believe and teach that God's decisions are dependent on what we desire or decide to do or not to do. Is this true? Is God sovereign or not?

There seems to be as many Christian denominations and sects as there are religions in the world. One doctrine that separates Christian denominations is the doctrine of salvation. There are numerous ideas as to what salvation is or means, and just as many ideas as to who or how one becomes saved or gets to heaven. Regardless of all the differences concerning salvation, most Christians hold to the view that salvation is an act of free will—it is entirely up to the individual whether or not he or she is saved.

The purpose of this study is to look beyond (or set aside, if necessary) traditional Christian thinking and, instead, see what the Bible says about God's sovereignty and salvation. What is salvation and how does one become saved? Does Scripture support the position that salvation is an act of free will? How does the will of God fit into the picture?

This study is dependent on taking God at His word—everything that God wants us to know about Himself and how He expects us to live is provided in the Bible (II Timothy 3:16-17). Though by no means an exhaustive study, many verses and passages are presented to show what Scripture says about God's sovereignty and His role in our salvation.<sup>1</sup> Hopefully, this study will lead to a greater understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> All references are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible* (1996) unless otherwise noted. Words in brackets are either equivalent words from the *King James Version* (KJV) or, if in italics, were added by the author for clarification.

God, so that our faith, worship, and walk are based on a solid scriptural foundation rather than on Christian or church tradition, or on our own understanding and logic. All efforts have been made to present the verses in their context, but the reader is encouraged to look up the references to see whether these things are so.<sup>2</sup>

## **What Must I Do to be Saved?**

Before a person can have any hope of understanding God's word, he or she must be a child of God. How does one become a child of God? First of all, we are sinners by nature and, therefore, children of wrath deserving of judgment and eternal separation from God (eternity in hell). However, and thankfully, God provided a remedy for our hopeless condition by sending His Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins on the cross. His death paid the penalty of our sin, and His resurrection saves us for eternal life. The only thing we need to do to be saved from the penalty of our sin and become a child of God is to *believe the gospel of salvation*.

What is the gospel, or good news, of salvation? The Apostle Paul states it very simply and completely in I Corinthians 15:1-4.

**Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.**

Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that the first and most important thing that he taught them was the gospel of salvation: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and arose from the dead (see also I Corinthians 2:1-2). He also reminded them that they received this doctrine as truth, were standing on or holding to this truth, and were saved because of it. Furthermore, Paul reminded them that, because it was true, their belief was not in vain or worthless. This proclamation of the gospel did not apply only to the Corinthian believers—it is the gospel for today.

The word *gospel* means good news. This implies that good news was necessary; our situation must have been not so good to start with. The fact that Christ died for our sins means that we are sinners. There are many people, including professing Christians, who really do not consider themselves sinners (i.e., they're not bad enough to be called a sinner). But what does Scripture say?

**As it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one." (Romans 3:10-12)**

**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)**

So, the gospel of salvation begins with the assumption of a need for salvation. We are sinners and Christ died for our sins. However, dying for our sins was not enough to satisfy God's requirement for sin. After Christ shed His blood for us, which was a sacrifice pleasing to God (Romans 3:25; Ephesians 5:2),

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<sup>2</sup> A number of verses and passages are repeated throughout this study to support the point being emphasized.

He was buried and then God raised Him from the dead. Christ, who was the perfect (sinless) Son of God took our sins—individually and mankind in general—upon Himself and paid the ultimate price (II Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13-14).

**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation<sup>3</sup> in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.** (Romans 3:23-26)

**Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work [to be saved], but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.** (Romans 4:4-5)

**But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.** (Romans 5:8-11)

**For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 6:23)

Christ's death was not only physical but spiritual. In our natural sinful condition, we are separate from the perfect and almighty God—we fall short of His glory. By taking our sins upon Himself, Christ became separated from God (Philippians 2:5-8; Matthew 27:46). Christ paid the price (God's required price) for our sin by descending into hell (Acts 2:31). However, God demonstrated His power over sin and death by raising His Son from the dead. Christ's resurrection, then, was victory over sin and death (I Corinthians 15:55-57; Ephesians 1:18-21; Philippians 2:8-9).

The good news for us sinners, therefore, is that God sent His Son Jesus Christ to not only to be human like us, but to remain sinless, die for *our* sins as an acceptable sacrifice to God, be buried, and be raised up from the dead. The only thing we need to do to become saved from the consequences of our sin—to receive the gift of salvation—is to believe the gospel of salvation (I Corinthians 15:1-4). Believing the gospel is essentially thanking God for what He has done for us through Christ. *Do you believe Christ died for you?*

**In Him [Christ], you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.** (Ephesians 1:13-14)

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<sup>3</sup> A sacrifice to reconcile God's required payment for sin (Ephesians 5:2).

**For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)**

## **The Sovereignty of God**

What does our salvation have to do with the sovereignty of God? Did we choose to be saved, or did God choose us for salvation? To help answer these questions, we should first try to understand what the Bible says about God. Is God truly sovereign?

### **The Attributes of God**

According to Scripture, God is omnipotent (all-powerful, all-mighty), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere), and immutable (unchanging).<sup>4</sup> These words are not found in the Bible, but these attributes of God, described in the following verses,<sup>5</sup> form the basis of understanding His sovereignty. The verses and passages are presented without commentary—please read them for what they say and rely on the Holy Spirit for understanding.

#### ***Omnipotent***

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)**

**Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless.” (Genesis 17:1)**

**And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26)**

**“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Revelation 1:8)**

**Then I hear something like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.” (Revelation 19:6)**

#### ***Omniscient***

**The Lord looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all, He who understands all their works. (Psalm 33:13-15)**

**O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, You know it all. (Psalm 139:1-4)**

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<sup>4</sup> Other attributes of God include that He is ageless (Revelation 1:8; Psalm 102:27), He does not become weary or tired (Isaiah 40:28-29), and He does not lie (Titus 1:2; Numbers 23:19).

<sup>5</sup> These are just a few representative verses. God’s sovereign nature is testified to us throughout the entire Bible.

**Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them. (Psalm 139:16)**

**Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite. (Psalm 147:5)**

**The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good. (Proverbs 15:3)**

**Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding? (Isaiah 40:13-14)**

### ***Omnipresent***

**Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. (Psalm 139:7-8)**

**“Am I a God who is near,” declares the Lord, “and not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?” declares the Lord. “Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:23-24)**

### ***Immutable***

**God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Numbers 23:19)**

**Of old you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end. (Psalm 102:25-27)**

**In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:17-18)**

**Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:17)**

### **The Ways of God**

We are sinful creatures, and our knowledge and understanding of anything righteous is limited by our sin. We have nothing by our own experience that can compare to God. However, we can and should accept by faith that the ways of God are righteous and exceedingly greater than our own.

**All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless. To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?... “To whom then will you liken Me that I would be his equal?” says the Holy One. (Isaiah 40:17-18, 25)**

**“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)**

**Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)**

**For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. (I Corinthians 1:26-29)**

## **The Will of God**

Who is in charge? Is God subject to our will, or are we subject to His will? The answers to these questions affect not only how we pray to and worship God, but also how we live each day.

**But He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does. (Job 23:13)**

**Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast. The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation. (Psalm 33:8-11)**

**The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty [kingdom] rules over all. (Psalm 103:19)**

**But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. (Psalm 115:3)**

**Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps. (Psalm 135:6)**

**The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil. (Proverbs 16:4)**

**The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)**

**The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. (Proverbs 16:33)**

**Many plans are in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand. (Proverbs 19:21)**

**The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes. (Proverbs 21:1)**

**There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord. (Proverbs 21:30)**

**For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back? (Isaiah 14:27)**

**“Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’.” (Isaiah 46:9-10)**

**So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)**

**All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?” (Daniel 4:35)**

**In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:26-28)**

**What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use [dishonor]? (Romans 9:14-21)**

**What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened [blinded]; just as it is written, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day.” (Romans 11:7-8)**

**For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening [blindness] has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “the Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.” (Romans 11:25-26)**

**...In Him [*Christ*] also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His [*God's*] purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will. (Ephesians 1:10-11)**

**For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)**

## Predestination

To predestinate is to destine or determine in advance, or to foreordain. When verses speak of predestination, they are used in reference to salvation as we will see later in this study. However, the Bible is filled with descriptions of God's power of predestination. Consider all the prophecies in the Bible, whether they be the direct words of God or of the prophets of God. Prophecies concerning events up through Pentecost have already been fulfilled exactly as spoken (e.g., Luke 24:27, 44; Acts 2:14-18, 22-36). We can be assured that prophecies for events that have not occurred yet will be fulfilled in due time. Brethren, the declaration and subsequent fulfillment of prophecies are not a matter of God knowing what will happen in the future—the prophecies were made and have been or will yet be fulfilled because God planned it that way in the first place.

**Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast. The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.** (Psalm 33:8-11)

**For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?** (Isaiah 14:27)

**“Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’.”** (Isaiah 46:9-10)

## Salvation

When God's sovereignty is challenged, it is usually on the subject of salvation. It comes down to the matter of free will or choice. “Did I choose God, or did He choose me?” or, “God offered the gift of salvation to me and I chose to accept it.” On one hand, the question of who does the choosing does not even matter, because a person who is saved is completely saved regardless if he or she understands how God worked it out (Ephesians 1:13-14; Colossians 2:10). On the other hand, however, the answer most likely affects how we view God, worship Him, pray to Him, conduct our daily walk, and be witnesses of His salvation to those around us. In other words, if we believe that we are saved of our own free will, can we truthfully place God at the forefront of our lives and depend on Him to do things according to His will?

### Salvation is a Gift of God

There is nothing we can do to earn the favor of God or His salvation (Romans 4:4-5). Instead, God offers salvation to us as a gift. No one earns a gift, and no one deserves a gift. God offers this gift of salvation on the basis of His love, mercy, and grace toward us as demonstrated through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son for us. This gift is beyond comprehension and is truly indescribable (II Corinthians 9:15).

**For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 6:23)



**For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)**

**He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:5-7)**

*Mercy* refers to not getting what we deserve. Because of His love toward us God is being merciful by not condemning us for our sins. *Grace* refers to the undeserved favor of God. We do not deserve to be saved and are not worthy of the death of Christ for our sins, but God favors us anyway because of His love toward us. Salvation truly is a gift of God. Because it is a gift, there is no room for boasting in ourselves—we are to boast only in the Lord for what He has done (I Corinthians 1:26-31).

Not only did we not earn our salvation, we did not earn the many blessings that automatically apply to us when we believe the gospel of salvation. We are told that we have been blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3), which are bestowed on *every* believer by the grace of God through His love on the basis of Christ's shed blood for our sins. Consider the following blessings and meditate on the incredible gift of salvation.

- Forgiveness of sins (Romans 3:23-25; Ephesians 1:7)
- Eternal life (Romans 5:21; 6:22-23)
- Peace with God—we are reconciled to Him (Romans 5:1, 10-11)
- Chosen in Christ (Ephesians 1:4)
- Called by God according to His purpose (Romans 8:28-30; Philippians 2:13)
- Adopted as a child of God (Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 3:26; Ephesians 1:5)
- Member of the true church, which is the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 1:22-23)
- Member of the household of God (Ephesians 2:19-22)
- Holy and blameless in Christ (Ephesians 1:4)
- Sealed by the Holy Spirit—we have eternal security and cannot lose our salvation (Ephesians 1:13; Romans 8:38-39)
- Indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5; 8:11)
- Alive in Christ (Romans 6:7-11; Ephesians 2:5)
- Regenerated (a new creation)—we are born again, made alive, made new (Titus 3:5; II Corinthians 5:17)
- Seated with Christ in the heavenlies—we are citizens of heaven (Ephesians 2:6; Philippians 3:20)
- Complete in Christ (Colossians 2:9-10)
- Justified—we are declared not guilty, just as if we had never sinned (Romans 3:26; 4:25; 5:1, 9; 8:30; Titus 3:7)
- Sanctified—we are set apart by God as sacred to Himself (Romans 6:22; I Corinthians 1:2; 6:11)
- Glorified—we are made holy (Romans 8:30; Ephesians 1:4)
- Considered righteous by God (Romans 4:5, 22-25; 5:17)
- Riches of God's grace and glory (Ephesians 1:7, 18)

- God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:10)
- Nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:31-39)

### **Our Spiritual Condition Before Salvation**

To understand our role and God's role in our salvation, we should realize or remind ourselves of our spiritual condition prior to believing the gospel of salvation. Although we did not know or understand our condition, the following truths describe how we stood regarding our relationship with God.

- We were separated from God because of our sin (Romans 3:23).
- We had one nature—the sin nature. We were unrighteous and could not understand the things of God. As such, we could not even seek for God (Romans 3:9-18; 8:5-8; I Corinthians 2:14).
- In our natural condition, we were hostile toward God and were unable to please Him (Romans 8:7-8).
- We were helpless and enemies of God (Romans 5:6-10).

If these things were not enough, we were dead in sin (Colossians 2:13) and children of Satan. We could not be any farther from God.

**And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.** (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Most people do not consider themselves to be sinners. They may do some bad things, but assume or hope that their good deeds outweigh the bad. Recall the self-righteous Pharisees who accused Jesus of being with the "sinners" (Matthew 9:10-13). They did not consider themselves to be sinners even though they had corrupted the Law of Moses and were pious hypocrites (Matthew 23). No one is guilty of committing just one sin, but it only takes one sin for a person to be a sinner.

Think about it, brethren. In our natural sinful condition, we did not seek for God and it was impossible for us to understand that Christ died for us. We were enemies of God and lived in accordance with Satan's ways. Furthermore, God considered us to be dead in sin, and no dead person has ever decided to become alive again. Not even Christ—it was God the Father who raised Him from the dead (Ephesians 1:18-21; Acts 2:22-24).

### **How are We Able to Believe?**

If (because) we only had the sin nature and were dead in sin, how were we able to believe the gospel of salvation? Was there some spark in us, or a speck of good in us, that allowed us to choose life over death? No, because dead means dead. No one can understand the things of God without having His Holy Spirit.

**But just as it is written, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him." For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even**

**so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ. (I Corinthians 2:9-16)**

Just as it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to believe the things of God after we are saved, it was the Holy Spirit who enabled us to believe the truth of salvation in the first place. By the working and foreknowledge of God, He actually sanctified us by the Holy Spirit *before* we believed the truth.

**But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (II Thessalonians 2:13-14)**

Brethren, please note the order presented in the above passage as Paul reminded the Thessalonian believers (and all members of the body of Christ) how they were saved. The Apostle Peter said the same thing to the Jewish kingdom brethren in I Peter 1:1-2.

1. We who believe (brethren) were chosen by God from the beginning for salvation.
2. We were sanctified by the Holy Spirit.
3. We had faith in the truth—we believed the gospel of salvation.

Who gets sanctified by the Holy Spirit in order to believe the truth of the gospel? Those whom God chose from the beginning for salvation (we will look further into this in the next section). Where does our faith come from? Was it already in us and was triggered by the Holy Spirit? This cannot be the case because we only had the spirit of the world in us prior to being sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Actually, the Bible says that even our faith is a gift of God through Christ (Hebrews 12:2).

**So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17 [KJV])**

**For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. (Romans 12:3)**

## **Who Chooses Whom?**

Do we really accept Christ as our Savior, as so many invitations to salvation plead, or are we accepted in the Beloved when we believe (Ephesians 1:6 [KJV])? Do we receive Christ as our Savior? Yes, by the will of God when we believe the gospel of salvation (Romans 5:11; Colossians 2:6; see also John 1:12-13). Nowhere in Scripture are we exhorted to accept Christ, receive Christ, or even commit our lives to Christ to be saved. An invitation to salvation should make it clear that we are lost in sin and that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and raised again. Simply by *believing* these truths, which we can do without going forward, raising our hand, asking for prayer, or being baptized, we receive Christ and are

accepted in Him by the power of God. Only *after* we are saved can we commit our lives to Christ by desiring to walk worthy of our calling to salvation (Ephesians 4:1-3; Colossians 1:9-10; Romans 12:1-2).

Many believers take credit, at least to some degree, for their salvation because they consider it to be an exercise of free will by making a decision for Christ, or accepting Christ as Savior, or inviting Jesus into their heart, or being baptized, etc. Why is it important to us to think this way? Perhaps it is because we want to be in control of our destiny. Perhaps it is because we have an ingrained difficulty with receiving gifts—we often feel obligated to pay for gifts in some manner. However, to want to be in control or to pay for the gift of salvation is a form of earning our salvation (Romans 4:4-5; Ephesians 2:8-9). It is also a form of boasting, because we think we're better or smarter than those who did not choose to be saved. Furthermore, if we were saved by our choice, why would it not be possible to change our minds and lose our salvation?

Brethren, remember our condition before salvation: how can our natural spirit (the spirit of man, or our sin nature) understand the gospel of salvation or a dead person choose life? Remember the work of the Holy Spirit: He sanctifies us so that we can believe the gospel of salvation. In truth, our salvation was and is by the will of God. He chose (predestined) us for salvation *before* the world began; we believed the gospel of salvation and were saved because God elected and called us to salvation. The following verses and passages demonstrate God's role in our salvation.<sup>6</sup>

**But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.** (John 1:12-13)

**"For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes."** (John 5:21)

**"All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out."** (John 6:37)

**"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."** (John 6:44)

**"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."** (John 6:63-65)

**"For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the earth.' " 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 13:47-48)

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<sup>6</sup> Although God's message and requirements to become His children have changed through the ages (dispensations), the process of salvation has remained the same: He chose all those who would belong to Him before the foundation of the world; He enabled them to believe the truth through sanctification of the Holy Spirit; and those who were chosen or appointed to eternal life believed the truth.

**Among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:6-7)**

**And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)**

**Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies. (Romans 8:33)**

**And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among the Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. (Romans 9:23-24)**

**And Isaiah is very bold and says, "I was found by those who did not seek Me, I became manifest to those who did not ask for Me." (Romans 10:20)**

**To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. (I Corinthians 1:2)**

**God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (I Corinthians 1:9)**

**For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (I Corinthians 1:26-31)**

**However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? (Galatians 4:8-9)**

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would 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, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:3-6)**

**Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will. (Ephesians 1:11)**

**For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)**

**When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He [God] made you alive together with Him [Christ], having forgiven us all our transgressions. (Colossians 2:13)**

**We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you. (I Thessalonians 1:2-4)**

**But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (II Thessalonians 2:13-14)**

**Who [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. (II Timothy 1:9)**

**He [God] saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:5-7)**

**Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. (James 1:17-18)**

**Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those [Jewish kingdom believers] who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (I Peter 1:1-3)**

Think on these things, brethren. The following statements should be considered when one evaluates his or her role in salvation.

- We were saved by the will of God and not by our own will (John 1:12-13; Acts 13:48; Romans 10:20; Ephesians 1:11; 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-7; James 1:17-18).
- God foreknew us and chose us *before* the foundation of the world—we were predestined to believe the gospel of salvation and become His children (Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:4-5, 11; Colossians 3:12; II Thessalonians 2:13; II Timothy 1:9; I Peter 1:1-2).
- Scripture refers to believers as the *called* and the *elect* of God—we were called by God to believe the truth of salvation (Romans 1:6-7; 8:28-30, 33; I Corinthians 1:1-2, 9; II Timothy 1:9).

- Individuals are saved because God drew each one to Himself (John 6:44, 65); and, those whom He has drawn to Himself will believe the truth (John 6:37, 44; Acts 13:48; Romans 8:28-30).
- God began a good work in us and will perfect it; He initiated salvation in us through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and will fulfill it completely (Philippians 1:6; Romans 8:28-30; II Thessalonians 2:13-14; I Corinthians 1:9).
- We love God because He first loved us; we are naturally dead in sin, so we are only able to love God because, through love, He made us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4–10; I John 4:10).
- We are born from above, or born again (regenerated). If our physical birth was not an exercise of self will, how could we be born again by our own will? (John 1:12-13; Titus 3:5–7; I Peter 1:3, 23).
- We are a new creation—creation is an act of God and of His will (II Corinthians 5:17).

What is our part in the salvation process? As shown throughout this study, our part is actually believing the truth of the gospel of salvation. Many of us can remember the moment our eyes opened to this truth. For me, it was a very special experience as an 8-year-old boy when my mother shared the gospel with me.<sup>7</sup> In the next few days I told many people I knew, including my third-grade teacher, that I was saved (unfortunately, few had any idea what I was talking about). It was about 12 years later that I realized God's role in my salvation, and that was a wonderful moment, also.

Is there room for boasting if God chose us for salvation? Not for anything we have done (Romans 3:27; Ephesians 2:8-9). However, we can boast or glory in Christ for what God did for us through Him (I Corinthians 1:30-31).

Despite all the verses and passages presented above, is it possible that God only chooses people for a specific job or office, and not for salvation, as some teach? We see in Scripture that God did choose people for specific jobs, and He still does (Ephesians 4:11-13; Romans 13:1-7). Pharaoh was chosen so that God could demonstrate His power through him (Romans 9:17). Judas was chosen by God to be the vessel of Christ's betrayal (Matthew 26:20-25; 27:9-10; John 13:18, 26; 18:1-9). These men, and many others named in Scripture, were chosen by God as vessels of dishonor (Romans 9:21).

All those chosen for specific honorable purposes, such as Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptist, Mary, the eleven disciples plus Matthias, Paul, etc., were also God's children. Can we really think that God's plans for these people were dependent on them choosing God in the first place? Is it not more honoring to God, and humbling, to admit that those whom He has chosen for honorable use He also chose for salvation? Did Paul, the chosen Apostle of the Gentiles (Galatians 1:1; Romans 11:13), choose God on his journey to Damascus to destroy the church of God, or did God choose him (Acts 9:15-16; Galatians 1:13-16; I Timothy 1:12-16)? Paul most certainly was not seeking God, and could not have fulfilled the responsibilities of his God-given office without being saved. Paul was saved by the will of God, and his salvation is an example for all who are saved today (I Timothy 1:16).

### **Does God Desire Everyone to be Saved?**

The preceding verses and passages explain God's role in our salvation. They indicate that salvation is by the grace of God, that He chose whom He will save before the foundation of the world, and that He

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<sup>7</sup> It was an occasion that I actually deserved and expected some type of disciplinary measure; instead, my mother used it to explain that Christ died for my sins.

enables them to believe the gospel of salvation through the sanctifying work of His Holy Spirit. However, there are some verses that many believers interpret to mean that God desires every person to be saved and that it is entirely up to us (by our own will) to accept the gift of salvation and be saved. With all the preceding verses in mind, read the following verses (and look them up to read the context in which they are written) to discern whether they override everything else God has revealed about Himself, or if they might have a meaning that is not readily apparent unless taken together with the rest of Scripture.

### ***John 3:16***

**For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

Perhaps the most well-known verse in the Bible is John 3:16, and it is usually used as the gospel of salvation. Furthermore, it is thought to mean that whoever decides to believe in Jesus will be saved. Brethren, this verse does not say what to believe about Christ other than that He is the Son of God. It does not contain the gospel of salvation (I Corinthians 15:1-4)—it is not referring to the future redemptive work of Christ on the cross that was not revealed until Paul. It does, however, verify the fact that whoever believes in Him will not perish (spiritual death; eternity in hell) but have eternal life. This is a promise for all believers, so the verse should be more appropriately used in terms of our assurance of salvation and guarantee of eternal life in Christ.

Does John 3:16 say that we can choose to believe God by our own will? Earlier in the same book we are told that we are saved by the will of God and not of our own will (John 1:12-13), and later Christ says we can only come to Him if God draws us to Him (John 6:44). Therefore, this verse should not be construed to mean that salvation is dependent on our choice.

### ***I Timothy 2:3-4***

**This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.**

In I Timothy 2:4, we read that God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. This verse may be used more than any other to prove that salvation is our choice. Does this verse really mean that, because so many are not saved, God is not doing as He desires and that believing the gospel of salvation is totally up to us? This interpretation is contrary to what we know about the will of God in Job 23:13, Psalm 115:3, Psalm 135:6, Isaiah 46:9-10, etc., and the many verses listed above explaining God's role in choosing us for salvation. Either God is contradicting Himself, or this passage means something different than seems to be apparent. Let us look at the context of this verse.

**First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. (I Timothy 2:1-6)**

What is this passage saying? We are exhorted to pray for all men, including kings and all who are in authority (see also Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-15). Why does God want us to do this?



- So that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity
- This is good and acceptable in the sight of God

Brethren, if God desired everyone to be saved, then everyone would be saved.<sup>8</sup> It is absolutely true that Christ died for the sins of everyone as implied in the last verse of this passage (Romans 3:21-26; 5:6). However, the benefits of Christ's death apply only to those who believe the gospel of salvation (Romans 3:26; 4:23-24; Ephesians 1:13-14). For those who do not believe, His death condemns them to eternity in hell because their sin is unforgiven—they are not justified and remain enemies of God (Romans 4:23-25; 5:1-2, 6-11; Revelation 20:11-15).

Based on all the verses that say that God does everything according to His will and that He accomplishes everything He desires, then this passage probably means that God desires all *types* of people, regardless of their station in life (even kings!), to be saved. God does not show partiality; we, too, should not think highly of ourselves and consider others as unworthy of salvation (Romans 12:3-5). God demonstrated His mercy and gracious love by saving Saul of Tarsus (subsequently known as Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles), who was the chief of sinners and Christ's chief enemy (Acts 9:1-6; I Timothy 1:12-16). From our perspective, therefore, if he could be saved, then anyone can be saved.

### ***Matthew 7:7-8***

**“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”**

We see in Romans 3:10-18 that no person in his lost sinful state seeks God. Like so many of Christ's lessons and illustrations, the full realization of the promise in Matthew 7 will be for kingdom believers in a future day. He reiterated similar promises to His disciples (Matthew 21:21-22; John 14:12-17), but they were not able to apply them until after they received the power of the Holy Spirit (John 20:21-23; Acts 2:1-4). The record in the book of Acts testifies to the fact that Christ's promises were being fulfilled.<sup>9</sup> The promise in Matthew 7 was for the kingdom believers, and cannot be implied to mean that an unsaved person can seek or find God, let alone get what he asks for.

### ***Romans 5:18***

**So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.**

Is everyone justified—declared righteous as if they had not sinned—as suggested by this verse? No. This passage in Romans 5 is a summary of the preceding chapters in Romans, and explains why all men stand guilty before God in their sin because the consequences of Adam's sin have been imputed to all mankind, and that God can righteously judge all men because the death of Christ was for all sins past, present, and future. Personal justification, however, applies only to those who believe that Christ died for their sins (Romans 3:22-26; 4:23-25; 5:1-2).

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<sup>8</sup> Many professing Christians believe that everyone will go to heaven; or, for those who do not, it is because they chose not to go to heaven. However, Scripture does not support these positions.

<sup>9</sup> Examples of the manifestation of miraculous sign gifts are recorded in Acts 2:4-6, 43; 3:6; 4:29-33; 5:12-16; 6:8; 8:6-7; 16:18; 28:3-5. However, sign gifts passed away with the completion of Christ's revelations to Paul and the setting aside of Israel by God (I Corinthians 13:8-13; II Corinthians 12:1-7; Colossians 1:25-27; Romans 11:25).

### ***II Peter 3:9***

**The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but all to come to repentance.**

Who is being referred to here? Peter was writing to Jewish kingdom believers (I Peter 1:1; II Peter 1:1; 3:1), and the passage this verse is from is describing the end of the great tribulation and God's judgments prior to Christ's return. Basically, this verse is a reassurance to the elect of Israel that God will fulfill His promise to save them at that time and not judge them along with the rest of mankind.

### ***I John 2:2***

**And He Himself [*Christ*] is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.**

This verse can be explained the same way as Romans 5:18. Christ's payment for sin was not only for the Jews, whom John was writing to, but also for everyone. Again, actual justification applied only to those who were saved.

### ***Revelation 3:20***

**"Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me."**

John was writing to Jewish believers (likely to professing believers, also), perhaps of his time but more applicably to those in the future, who were awaiting the Messiah's kingdom of heaven on earth (Revelation 1:4-7). The seven churches in Asia to whom the book of Revelation is addressed<sup>10</sup> may or may not have existed at the time; however, the book will have a significant application to prophetic churches that will be in existence between the time when the church that is the body of Christ (believers of today) is caught up to be in heaven (often called the *rapture*), and the time when Christ physically returns to earth to set up His kingdom.<sup>11</sup> In the message to the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22), the members are exhorted to be zealous and repent because they do not understand that what they have is from God instead of their own works. Therefore, instead of being an invitation to salvation, Revelation 3:20 appears to be more of an exhortation to kingdom believers to repent of their sinful ways in order to obtain full fellowship with Christ (see also II Corinthians 7:9; II Timothy 2:25-26). This explanation only scratches the surface of the full meaning of this and other passages in Revelation, and it is left to the reader to explore further.

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<sup>10</sup> Actually, John wrote to the angel of each church. Angels are not associated with the church of this dispensation of grace (the body of Christ) or with local churches. Paul wrote directly to the brethren, whether to the churches or to individuals, in each of his letters.

<sup>11</sup> We do not know exactly when these churches will be established, but they are Jewish churches with a kingdom hope (Revelation 1:6; Exodus 19:5-6; I Peter 2:9—Paul never refers to members of the body of Christ as a kingdom of priests). Therefore, they *may* not have coexisted with churches of this dispensation of grace in cities outside of Israel where Jews and Gentiles were saved in accordance with the gospel of grace and were equal in the body of Christ. It is more likely that the establishment of these churches and the difficulties they will endure will occur sometime after the rapture and apparently will occur over an extended period of time.

## **Matthew 22:14**

**“For many are called, but few are chosen.”**

Does this verse mean that God calls everyone to salvation, but that only those who make the choice to believe are saved and, therefore, chosen? This interpretation does not pass the test of Scripture. In the parable of the context of this verse, Christ was addressing Israel and their future earthly kingdom; it was not about a call to individual salvation. Israel was the chosen nation of God, called out to be separate from the other nations. However, only some individual Jews were saved (Romans 11:7-8, 25; John 13:18).

One of the main differences between Israel and the body of Christ is that only *some* members of Israel’s family were saved, whereas *every* member of the body of Christ is saved. As for us, members of the body of Christ, Scripture says we were called according to God’s purpose (Romans 8:28); through God’s faithfulness we were called into fellowship with His Son (I Corinthians 1:9); and we were called by God through the gospel of grace, to eternal life, and into the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4; Colossians 3:15; II Thessalonians 2:13-14; I Timothy 6:12). Indeed, we are referred to as *the called* of God (I Corinthians 1:24). God does the calling and the saving. However, nowhere are we told that God saves only some of whom He has called to salvation (see Philippians 1:6), nor are we told that we have the power or will to say “no” to God’s calling (see John 6:37; Romans 8:28-30).

## **Why Should We Share the Gospel of Salvation?**

One may ask, “If we are individually predestined for salvation, and God saves only those whom He has chosen, then why should we even bother to witness to others?” Believing the gospel of salvation is the third step in God’s process of salvation: 1) chosen for salvation; 2) sanctified by the Holy Spirit; then 3) believing the gospel (II Thessalonians 2:13; see also I Peter 1:1-2). Each person who is saved actively participates in the process by believing the gospel. Many remember the very moment they believed because salvation truly is a life-changing event. To see one’s self as the sinner whom Christ died for can be emotionally overwhelming.<sup>12</sup>

For us to believe the gospel, we must first hear it or read it (Romans 10:17; Ephesians 1:13-14; I Corinthians 15:1-4). So, in God’s order of things, He uses His own children to be witnesses of His saving grace in order to save those whom He has chosen. God has committed to us the message of His reconciliation—He made peace with us through the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:10)—and has made us ambassadors (representatives) for Christ. God has chosen His people to share the gospel of salvation and to teach believers how to grow in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

**Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the work of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:18-20)**

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<sup>12</sup> An emotional experience is not proof of salvation, because our emotions can be deceiving. Some brethren do not remember when they first believed the gospel of salvation, but they believe it and are certain of their salvation (Romans 8:16-17).

**Conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person. (Colossians 4:5-6)**

But to whom do we witness if God is only going to save those whom He has chosen? From our perspective, no one is so bad or so different that he cannot be saved. Besides, we do not know the mind of God or whom He has chosen for salvation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ to everyone. It is up to God who will believe the gospel and be saved.

### **Is God Unfair?**

Is it unfair that God chooses only some people for salvation? We must remind ourselves who God is and that He is sovereign.

As humans, with a sin nature contrary to God, we have a tendency to question God and His will. It is natural to question why God does what He does, or who chose whom, or why some people are saved while most are not. It is also natural to think that we have control over our own destiny. But then, why would anybody choose not to accept God's gift of eternal life over the alternative?

We cannot know the mind of God because He is the perfect and righteous Almighty God (Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33-36). Even as God's children, our minds and our logic are tainted by sin. Therefore, we are in no position to question God and, indeed, should not question His will. However, we can accept by faith those things revealed by God about Himself that we cannot comprehend or explain. This is His desire for us as we worship Him, pray to Him, live for Him, and be witnesses of His saving grace.

**"For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:27)**

**All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?" (Daniel 4:35)**

**What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use [dishonor]? (Romans 9:14-21)**

**... "It is the Lord; let Him do what seems good to Him." (I Samuel 3:18)**

It is difficult for our minds to grasp that God has mercy on whom He desires, and that He hardens whom He desires (Romans 9:18). However, consider the following examples that further describe God's sovereign will.

- When Israel was told to enter their promised land, God did not tell the people to evangelize the current occupants. Instead, Israel was to displace the occupants, which in some instances included God's command to kill everything that breathed (Deuteronomy 7:1-6; 20:10-18). All people and nations other than God's chosen nation were His enemies because God had given them over to sin (Romans 1:18-32).
- Judas was chosen by Jesus to be His disciple for the purpose of denying Him. Judas' actions and the consequences occurred as had been prophesied (John 6:70-71; 13:18; Matthew 27:3-10).
- The people of Israel rejected and demanded the death of Christ, not only as prophesied but in accordance with the predetermined (predestined) plan of God (Acts 2:22-24).
- At the beginning of this dispensation of grace, God hardened (blinded) the nation of Israel so that, as a nation it cannot understand the things of God. This is a temporary blinding that continues to this day; all of God's promises and prophecies concerning Israel will resume after the rapture (Romans 11:7-12, 25-27; II Corinthians 3:14-15).

Brethren, we are in no position to ask God "What have you done?" (Daniel 4:35). Please consider that if God did not choose us for salvation, then no one would be saved. Personally, it is extremely humbling to realize that God chose me for salvation before the foundation of the world.

### **How Should We Respond to God?**

If God is truly sovereign, as Scripture seems to indicate, what should be our response to God? Should we continue to question Him or should we believe Him? Should we reject His counsel or try to change His mind if it is not according to our will, or should we praise Him for doing things according to His will? Brethren, the answers to these questions are very important. How do you respond to God?

**...“It is the Lord; let Him do what seems good to Him.”** (I Samuel 3:18)

**“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone. Now therefore, our God, we thank You, and praise Your glorious name.** (I Chronicles 29:11-13)

**Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of your lovingkindness, because of Your truth. Why should the nations say, “Where, now, is their God?” But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.** (Psalm 115:1-3)

**Always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father.** (Ephesians 5:20)

**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!** (Philippians 4:4)

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.** (I Peter 1:3)

**“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”** (Revelation 4:11)

## God's Will or Our Will—Does it Matter?

Because of our sin nature, people, including believers, find ways to use Scripture to prove or disprove just about anything they want to fit a preconceived or desired idea. Scripture that does not fit or seems to contradict what we want to believe is often changed to mean something other than what God intended, or is avoided entirely. As stated before, every sincere effort has been made to use the many verses and passages presented in this study as God intended. However, it is fully recognized that God's ways are beyond our comprehension, and our sin nature prevents us from completely understanding all aspects of God's sovereignty. That is why the reader is exhorted to study these Scripture verses and passages with a prayerful attitude and a desire to be guided by the Holy Spirit, to see whether these things are so.

Do you believe that you, who were dead in your sin, chose God by your own will, or did He, by His grace, choose you? Do you believe you are wiser than the billions of other people who were not smart enough to choose salvation, or do you believe He saved you despite your ignorance of the truth? Do you believe that God only knew that you would choose Him and that He based all His plans on that foreknowledge, or that He knew you as His child in Christ before the foundation of the world? Did you find God, or did He find you? Is God in charge or are we in charge? Is God mostly sovereign or completely sovereign?

Does any of this matter? Does our understanding of God's sovereignty have anything to do with how we worship God or conduct our daily walk with Him? Yes, because our walk as believers depends on how we view ourselves before God. God is either sovereign or He is not. God is either in control or we are. Please consider the following questions.

- Are we thankful that we decided to accept God's gift, or are we thankful that God saved us by His grace (Ephesians 1:3-7; 2:4-9; II Thessalonians 2:13)?
- When we pray, do we want things done according to our will or according to God's will (Romans 8:26-28; Philippians 4:6-7)?
- If someone believes the gospel of salvation after we witness to them, do we take the credit or should we give praise and glory to God for what He has done (Titus 3:5-7)?
- When we are faced with important decisions or actions, do we depend on our own desires and good judgment, or should we desire to make decisions in accordance with God's will (Ephesians 5:15-18; Colossians 3:1-3)?
- When studying (or reading or hearing) the word of God, do we rely on our own understanding or should we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:15-19; 3:14-19)?
- Do we seek to overcome the power of sin in our lives through our own strength, or should we yield ourselves to God so that we walk worthy of our salvation (Romans 6:12-13; 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:1-3; Colossians 1:9-12)?
- Do we control our own lives and accomplish things by our own strength and will, or do we humbly realize that it is God who is working in us in accordance with His will (Philippians 1:6; 2:12-13)?

Brethren, we are subject to God's will; He is not subject to our will. For this we should thank and praise Him and our Lord Jesus Christ.

## God's Sovereignty and Our Responsibility

Hopefully, this study has shown that God is sovereign in all things and that His sovereignty is defined and demonstrated throughout Scripture. Unfortunately, the breadth of God's sovereignty is often avoided, and even preached against, by pastors and Bible teachers because it is misunderstood and is a sensitive doctrine to them and to most believers. Perhaps this is because God, as described in Scripture, is not the God whom many believers want to think about. Brethren, God is the author of love, which was fully demonstrated by sending His Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins. Furthermore, He is the righteous and just Almighty God.

It is natural, but incorrect, for believers to disregard the doctrine of God's sovereignty in general and regarding salvation in particular. It might be surmised that, if we were to believe it, there is no point to even bother to do or think about anything if God will accomplish His will regardless of what people do or think. Are we simply robots or pawns in a grand game? No. Brethren, God's thoughts and His ways are beyond our understanding or comprehension—they are contrary to our way of thinking. As part of His sovereignty, God holds us (all people, actually) responsible or accountable for our thoughts and actions. This may be even more difficult to grasp, because it is not logical in our minds.

Because of God's grace and sovereign will, He is working through all believers and will accomplish His will through us (Philippians 1:6; 2:12-16; Ephesians 2:10). At the same time, we are exhorted to walk worthy of our salvation (Ephesians 4:1-3; Colossians 1:9-12). Paul's letters are full of instructions on how we ought to live (II Timothy 3:16-17),<sup>13</sup> which proves that we are not robots. In fact, because believers have two natures—the nature of man (sinful) and the nature of Christ (perfect)—we actually have choices each and every day how we are going to live. For every situation that comes up, we can either give in to sin or we can respond as those who are alive from the dead by yielding ourselves as instruments of righteousness to God (Romans 6:12-13).

We have plenty of examples throughout Scripture of the people of God living according to their own will, and the results are not good. Israel's history is mostly a record of what not to do (I Corinthians 10:1-13). Paul chastised the Corinthian believers, whom he loved deeply, for being carnal (men of flesh) and babes in Christ (in a negative sense because they were unable to tolerate sound doctrine) because of their prideful divisions, sexual immorality, and many other problems (I Corinthians 3:1-3). Additionally, Paul severely reprimanded the Galatian believers, whom he had ministered to during at least three visits,<sup>14</sup> as being foolish for turning away from the message of God's grace through Christ and submitting themselves to the Law of Moses as encouraged by false teachers (Galatians 1:6-10; 3:1-3). Why would Paul do this if we were simply robots? It is because we are Christ's representatives and should live accordingly (II Corinthians 5:14-21).

It is true that God is working out His predetermined plan through all nations and everyone—believers and unbelievers. It is also true that He only chose some to be saved from the consequences of their sins. But consider the history of mankind: as a whole we have always rejected God. God does not cause people to reject Him and His word. People reject God by not believing what He has said and by

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<sup>13</sup> For example, take a few minutes and read the book of Ephesians. The first three chapters tell us what we have in Christ, and the last three chapters tell us how we ought to live because of what God has done for us through Christ.

<sup>14</sup> These were during Paul's multiple journeys to Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium recorded in the book of Acts.

worshipping a god or gods of their imagination—they consciously exercise and defend the will of their sin nature.

- In the beginning of mankind, God revealed Himself through His creation. This does not mean that He presented His plan of salvation in the stars as some teach (Deuteronomy 4:19; Jeremiah 10:1-3); it means that mankind's existence and that of everything in the universe was proof of a creator. How did mankind respond? They worshipped the creation rather than the Creator (and still do today), so God turned them over to their sin (Romans 1:18-32). In an exercise of their will, therefore, they rejected God.
- God made Adam and Eve sinless—they were perfect. It appears that they were made with a free will. When directly tempted and deceived by Satan, Eve succumbed to sin.<sup>15</sup> Adam, who had been personally commanded by God not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, followed Eve's lead and disobeyed God's command (Genesis 3:1-7). Unlike Eve, however, Adam was not tempted by Satan and had no excuse. Both received consequences for their sinful actions. The most significant consequence of Adam's sin—spiritual death—was imputed to all mankind (as revealed through Paul), just as Christ's work at the cross was imputed as payment for all sins past, present, and future (I Corinthians 15:20-23; Romans 3:21-26; 5:15-19).
- Between Adam and Moses, prior to God revealing His righteous requirements through His Law, mankind continued to live in sin and were enemies of God—they consciously and freely continued to worship everything except God. At the time of Noah, Noah was the *only* child of God on the face of the earth (Genesis 7:1). Noah walked with God, and he and his family were saved from the destruction of the great flood, which was God's judgment for the sinfulness of the descendants of Adam (Genesis 6:5-8). The inhabitants of the earth were evil and corrupt, and Noah could not have walked with God and be a righteous man apart from the will of God because God had turned mankind over to their sin. He was a child of God by the working of the Holy Spirit and walked by faith (Hebrews 11:7).
- Even after the flood mankind continued to be sinful and enemies of God—very few people walked with God by faith (by the will of God). Consequently, as part of God's predetermined plan, He raised up a nation for Himself—Israel. God worked mighty miracles for His people to escape slavery in Egypt, gave His righteous commandments and ordinances to them (the Law of Moses), raised up prophets to hold His people accountable and to reveal His plans, sent His Son Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah, and then bestowed the power of the Holy Spirit on Christ's disciples. As a nation, what was their response? They disregarded the miracles, disobeyed the Law, worshipped other gods, killed the prophets, crucified their Messiah, and rejected the witness of the Holy Spirit by stoning Stephen (Acts 7). The people of Israel consciously rejected God throughout their history, so God hardened (blinded) the nation from being able to believe the truth of God—a condition that continues to this day (Romans 11:25; II Corinthians 3:14-15). Thankfully, however, throughout that time there were some who did believe the truth of God and were counted as righteous—by the will of God (Romans 11:7).
- What about today, in this dispensation of grace? The full meaning of Christ's accomplishment at the cross has been revealed to us. The gospel of salvation has been made known to perhaps

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<sup>15</sup> No one can sit in judgment of Eve because no other person besides Christ Himself has been directly and personally tempted by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11). Satan is a skillful liar and, indeed, is the father of lies (John 8:44).



more people in the world than at any other time. However, mankind continues to seek after knowledge and continues to worship everything except God (I Corinthians 1:18-25). Many people consciously reject the gospel of salvation, even though they cannot believe it because the Holy Spirit had not sanctified them. Those who are saved today are saved by the grace of God according to His predetermined will.

Mankind, therefore, has not changed since the beginning. The end result, brethren, will not be good. Because the unsaved continue to live in sin, all, since the beginning, will stand before Christ at the great white throne judgment and will be judged for their sin. *All* of them will be judged guilty and cast into the lake of fire for eternal punishment (Revelation 20:11-15).

Is this fair? By our human thought process, we are often quick to say “No.” However, at the same time, most people demand justice—we expect people to pay for their wrongdoing. Although those who die unsaved were not chosen for salvation and could not believe the truth of God, they will be judged for their sin. One way or another all unbelievers consciously live according to the desires of their hearts, which are in accordance with their sin nature and contrary to the will of God. All actively worship the god or gods of their imagination (I Corinthians 8:4-6; Galatians 4:8),<sup>16</sup> or someone or something other than God (even atheists worship something; e.g., themselves, mankind, knowledge, technology, the universe, etc.). God has proven Himself to be longsuffering by presenting Himself to us in every way possible and yet mankind has rejected Him at every turn and lives according to sin and the ways of Satan—mankind is without excuse (Ephesians 2:1-3).

As we have seen, God works through unbelievers, also, to accomplish His will. Let us look at some examples where unbelievers acted according to the will of God yet were held accountable by God for their actions.

- Christ’s death was predetermined by God—it was His plan from the beginning—and yet He held the people of Israel responsible (Acts 2:22-23). The people even claimed responsibility for crucifying Christ (Matthew 27:19-25). God also held Pilate (and the Gentiles) responsible even though he was doing the bidding of the people (Acts 4:27-28).
- Moses pleaded with the Pharaoh of his day to release the people of Israel from slavery so that they could go to their own land, and Moses warned him of God’s judgments if he did not let the people go. Pharaoh witnessed many mighty miracles of God and yet did not believe the word of God through Moses and refused to let the people leave Egypt. Finally, his entire army was destroyed by God while chasing the defenseless Israelites (Exodus 14:21-29). Through acts of his own will (Exodus 7:14), Pharaoh continued to disregard and challenge the witness of God, yet he was being used by God all along, according to His plan, to demonstrate His own power and might (Romans 9:17; Exodus 7:1-5).
- By His will, God used the King of Assyria to conquer Israel because of their disobedience and idol worship. God then destroyed his army and judged the king for taking credit for his victories (II Kings 19:32-37; Isaiah 10:5-14).

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<sup>16</sup> Like the Scribes, Pharisees, and false prophets of Christ’s time on earth, many Christian denominations and people profess to believe in God, but their doctrines and traditions prove that the God of their worship is not the Almighty God of the Bible (Colossians 2:16-23). Although they claim to know God, God does not know them (Matthew 7:21-23).

- God used King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to subdue Israel for their disobedience to God (Jeremiah 25:1-11). He plundered Israel and took many of the people captive to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed himself to be a god and was worshipped as a god. God punished him for his arrogance to the point where he was eating grass like cattle in the fields. By an act of grace, God brought Nebuchadnezzar to repentance and changed him, which could only have happened through the work of His Holy Spirit (Daniel 4:28-37).

Members of the body of Christ will also be held accountable to God. We will stand before the judgment seat of Christ where our works<sup>17</sup> and the motivation of our hearts will be judged (Romans 14:10-12; II Corinthians 5:10; I Corinthians 3:12-15; 4:4-5). Therefore, we need to examine our motivation for serving God. Do we do the right thing to gain something, or do we do the right thing because it's the right thing to do and as thanksgiving for what God and our Lord Jesus Christ have done and are doing for us? Some believers do things for God in order to obtain more rewards or crowns, or a greater position in heaven (this is the subject of another study). By their actions, they are consciously or unconsciously trying to outperform fellow brethren and give the impression that they are earning their salvation—pride is fueling their service to God.

Although God began a good work in His children and will complete it according to His will, we are exhorted to live according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh, and to walk worthy of our salvation (to work out our salvation). Because of the old sin nature that remains in us, we are capable of committing all the sins for which the unsaved will be judged; instead, our lives should exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:13-26).

**So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.** (Philippians 2:12-13)

**Therefore I [Paul], the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called [salvation], with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.** (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Our motivation will be judged at the judgment seat of Christ, but God disciplines us while we are alive because He loves us and wants us to grow and be strengthened in His love (Hebrews 12:4-11). As part of God's sovereign will and predetermined plan for us, we are not robots who blindly do right or wrong—all believers make conscious choices each day whether to follow their own will or God's will as revealed to us in His word. Brethren, we are accountable to God when we follow our own will. Consider the following examples of men of God.

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<sup>17</sup> Our sins are forgiven, so we will not be judged for them at the judgment seat of Christ where only believers will stand (only the Apostle Paul writes of this judgment). Our worthless works (translated as "bad" works in the NASB and KJV), however, appear to be works that we do through self-centered or even self-righteous motivation—to gain some type of reward(s). These works, whether considered to be like gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, will all burn so that only those works performed by God through us will remain (yes, even gold is vaporized by fire—I Peter 1:6-7).

- Moses, a mighty prophet of God, did not want to be the leader of the people of Israel as God asked. However, God used him anyway to accomplish all His will in leading His people out of Egypt and during the 40 years they spent in the wilderness. One final act of arrogance by Moses, however, prevented him from entering into the promised land—God held him accountable for his action (Numbers 20:6-12). Despite this, Moses was considered to be a faithful servant of God (Hebrews 11:24-29).
- King David was blessed greatly for his faithful service to God. However, through the prideful exercise of his will, David committed adultery and then tried to cover it up by murder. David repented of his sins against God, but his son through the adulterous relationship was taken by God. Despite these grievous sins, God accomplished His will through David and considered him to be a man after His own heart (Acts 13:22).
- Peter is an example of God’s gracious forgiveness. Peter was chosen and given authority by Jesus to be the leader of the 12 apostles (Matthew 16:16-19). When Peter was told by Jesus that he would deny Him three times before the rooster crowed, Peter responded with self-assurance by saying he would not do that (Matthew 26:34-35). And yet, Peter denied knowing Jesus just as Jesus had said he would (Matthew 26:69-75). Our will says we will do (or not do) something, especially if warned ahead of time, but what Jesus said would happen did happen. This is an example of God’s sovereign will and His grace. Peter did not lose his favor with God for his sin, but he wept bitterly when he realized what he had done. Furthermore, Peter did not excuse his denial because he only fulfilled what Jesus said would happen. He knew his responsibility, and God may have used this event to humble Peter to prepare him for his service to God.

Brethren, God is completely sovereign, and has and will accomplish His will in all things. All people are accountable for their thoughts and actions. Despite our sinfulness, however, the blessings that believers have as a result of our salvation will come to full fruition when we obtain our place in heaven through death or the rapture (Ephesians 1:3; 2:4-7; Philippians 1:6; 3:20-21; Colossians 3:1-4; I Corinthians 15:50-58; II Corinthians 5:5-9; I Thessalonians 4:13-18).

## Summary

Brethren, to summarize this study, we should remind ourselves of the following truths as they are presented to us in Scripture.

- The gospel of salvation is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead.
  - We must believe this gospel to be saved from the consequences of our sin.
  - By believing this gospel we are admitting that we are sinful and need salvation; it is like saying “thank you” to God for what He has done for us through Christ.
- We are saved by the grace of God through faith apart from works.
  - No one deserves to be saved.
  - No one can earn salvation.
  - Salvation and eternal life are gifts of God.
- Those who believe the gospel of salvation were chosen by God before the foundation of the world.
  - No one can believe the gospel through their own understanding.

- We can only believe the gospel if the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, which enables us to believe the truth of God.
- There is no room for boasting.
  - We are not to boast in our salvation because we did not earn it.
  - We are not to boast that we were chosen when others were not—it is God’s doing, and His ways are beyond our understanding.
  - We should be thankful to God and our Lord Jesus Christ.
- We should humbly share the gospel of salvation with others and leave the results to God.
  - Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.
  - We are ambassadors of Christ; God has committed to us the word of reconciliation.
- We should walk worthy of our salvation.
  - We should live by the Spirit instead of according to the flesh.
  - We are responsible for our thoughts and actions.
  - All believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Brethren, if God had not chosen us for salvation, then no one would be saved. A former pastor of mine<sup>18</sup> described God’s sovereignty in the process of salvation in this way (I forget his exact words, but this is close):

Think of salvation as passing through a doorway. As we approach it we see “Whosoever believes the gospel of salvation” written over the top. After we pass through it and look back we see “Chosen before the foundation of the world.”

Dick Johnson  
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<sup>18</sup> Win Johnson, a true friend and mentor, who was pastor of the independent Berean Church in Thornton, Colorado.