

# What? God choosing us?

The idea that somehow God should choose those who are to be His, which comes in Romans, Ephesians and elsewhere, raises questions. Isn't it we who choose God? And at first sight it seems unfair (as Paul himself recognises in another passage, Romans 9:14-23). Yet it comes in the Bible many times. As well as Ephesians 1 it is emphasised in Romans 8-9 and 1 Peter 1. It is a strong theme in our Lord Jesus' teaching in John 6 (for instance, verses 37 and 44). How, then, are we to make sense of this?

1. The place to start is with a humbling truth: the effect of sin in our lives and on our minds is such that without God's help we can't turn to Him. As Jesus put it: *No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him* (John 6:44). Paul told the Christians at Ephesus that they had been *dead in [their] transgressions and sins... but God made [them] alive*. A dead person can't do anything; the work has to start with God! We are not saved by our works - i.e. anything we do - but by God, from beginning to end. In the gospels Jesus is consistently recorded as opening the eyes of the blind, a picture of what God does when a person comes to know Him. If you are a Christian today, look back on the events that led you to that place. Did it actually begin with you, or things external to you? And, knowing what you now do of your own heart, can you honestly say turning to God would have come naturally to you had not God been at work?

2. A second starting place is that God is Himself Almighty. He is ultimately in control. This is demonstrated time and again in the Bible, for instance by means of prophecy and fulfilment (He says what He's going to do before He does it). That does not mean He is directly responsible for evil, and of course it raises difficult questions. We can't say, for instance, exactly how He exercises that control, or why He should allow all the things that He does. But even though it raises difficult questions, those questions aren't as hard as those we'd have if He weren't in ultimate control.

3. Having said this, the Bible also insists that we are responsible for our actions. In the same section where He teaches that *No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him* (John 6:44), Jesus also issues an invitation to all: *my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life* (John 6:40). That is a general invitation, to all! Both truths are simultaneously true: we are responsible for our actions, and God is in ultimate control. The Bible teaches them both together. J.I.Packer, in his excellent book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, which explores these issues, says it's a bit like light existing as both waves and particles: that looks like a contradiction but the physicists tell us both are true! (In passing, you don't need to be a Christian to be puzzled by this: even non-Christian neuroscientists and philosophers puzzle, for instance, over how we can be free to act while our brain functions are determined by molecular interactions.) We must never take the fact of God's ultimate control as an excuse for fatalism (as is the case in some religions); Paul's agony in Romans 9:1-5 should teach us that, as does his passionate concern to make the good news of Christ known, rather than just sit back.

4. Putting these together, the following is helpful: no-one will be in heaven but for the grace of God; no-one will be in hell but by their own fault.

5. We may not find any of this at all easy to understand, but we can recognise it in our own experience. Do you see prayer being answered? That is a reminder that God is in control. Do you face genuine choices? That is a reminder that you are responsible. Looking back on life, can you see how God has led you? A reminder of His control again. See Genesis 50:20, Romans 8:28, Acts 4:27, 28.

6. If you are not a Christian, but thinking about all this, perhaps you have a sense that God is drawing close to you, calling you to Himself. Many have had that experience: "The Hound of Heaven" as the poet Francis Thompson called Him. Recognise that you will need His help to turn to Him, to understand about Him, and ask Him for it! "*Lord, I believe; help me overcome my unbelief*" (Mark 9:24).

7. In the end, we must let God be God - that is Paul's point about the potter and the pot (Romans 9:20-21). Thinking about it honestly, the question which matters is not, "what would I like God to be like?" but "what is God *actually* like?", even if there are aspects it is hard for us to grasp. Remember these things: He is not playing with us (He entered our world to save us, even dying on a cross); and He is infinitely greater than our finite minds can grasp (see Romans 11:33-26). He is God, and He can be trusted.