

Election

Is Fair

by René López

When speaking about issues like election, predestination, and human choice, the question, “Is God fair?” inevitably comes up. For centuries, both theologians and laymen have argued whether or not God predestines people to eternal life (or both to eternal life and eternal damnation). Other questions related to this issue are:

“Does God’s election guarantee that people will come to faith in Christ and receive eternal life?”

“How does one reconcile free choice and predestination?”

“If God knows who will accept Him ahead of time, how do we have a choice?”

The answers that we find in Scripture are clearer than many would like to admit.

ELECTION DOES NOT GUARANTEE JUSTIFICATION

First, one must concede that God elects some and not others, and He often does not share His rationale for doing so, especially when the predestined person is sinful (Rom 9:17-23). The following are some men that illustrate the fact God doesn’t share His rationale for choosing sinful humans: Abraham, Jacob, Jeremiah, Jesus’ disciples, and Paul the apostle.

Second, however, is the question of whether election guarantees justification or eternal life. Although a number of elect people come to faith and are ultimately justified (as the previously mentioned group demonstrates), Scripture never logically assumes or shows that an elect person (or nation) will *always* become justified or receive eternal life. Election and justification are not synonyms in Scripture. Hence, being *elect* does not necessarily result in being *justified*.

The Greek verbs and noun (**eklegomai**, **eklogēe**, or **eklektos**) translated “to choose,” “to elect,” or “election,” occur a total of fifty-one times in the NT. It is neither possible nor necessary to look at all usages here. Examples can be given to show that an elect person or nation is never guaranteed justification. In the OT, God chose the nation of Babylon to discipline Israel (see Habakkuk). Likewise, He chose King Cyrus of Persia to help Israel and to subdue the nations (Cyrus is even called God’s “shepherd” and “anointed” in Isa 44:28 and 45:1). But neither of these sovereign choices proves anything regarding individual or corporate justification.

A famous passage used to support the idea that God predestines people to eternal life is Romans 9. Countless theologians and pastors use this chapter to prove the predestination of individuals based on God’s choice of Jacob over Esau. But this could not be further from Paul’s point.

Interpretive evidence found in the immediate and overall context in chapters 9–11 shows otherwise. We must remember that these chapters are contextually addressed to respond to the Jewish question of why God chose to bless the Gentiles and to abandon Israel, not how God is predestining anyone to eternal life (see 9:24-26; 10:19-21; 11:11-36). Thus, Paul’s purpose for writing chapters 9–11 is two-fold: (1) To vindicate God for temporarily excluding national Israel from His present plan in light of His promises to the church in 8:28-39, and (2) To curb the arrogance of Gentiles who have received mercy, since Israel in the future will again be grafted into God’s plan. Paul’s answer covers God’s dealing with Israel’s past (Rom 9:1-29), present (Rom 9:30–10:21), and future (Romans 11).

Having the context in mind helps us see why God chose Jacob over Esau. The issue here is God's sovereign choice to make and bless one nation above another: Jacob (representing Israel) over Esau (representing the Edomite Gentiles). But this choice does not guarantee that everyone belonging to a certain group will be justified. Clearly, all Israelites are not heaven-bound and neither are all Gentiles. This choice, nevertheless, proves God's right to choose, which was not influenced by anyone. Hence, before the children were even born, or had done any good or evil, God chose. God makes this clear by going against the cultural norm of the day where the younger would serve the older. Instead, His sovereign choice in the matter was that, "*The older shall serve the younger*" (Gen 25:23). Hence, the Edomite descendants of Esau served the Israelite descendants of Jacob (1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:14; 1 Kgs 11:15-16; 22:47). Through God's choice, Jacob receives the blessing. Although individuals are free to choose or reject God, being sinful they reject Him (Rom 3:10-12, 23), unless God reaches out to them first. But that was an issue already addressed by Paul in the wrath, condemnation, and justification section of Rom 1:18-4:25, not here. Although God elects Israel and rigorously pursues them by grace, He does not coerce them to believe in the Messiah who guarantees them eternal life (which is the reason they found themselves in this predicament). Individuals have an option to receive or reject Jesus Christ for eternal life, or else how could anyone make sense of Paul's point regarding Israel in Rom 9:33-10:4?

GOD ELECTS FOR SERVICE, NOT SALVATION

Although God secures the eternal destiny of those within the elect who believe (OT saints believed in the coming Messiah for eternal life), the main point here is a sovereign choice to separate a group of people for His service, in order that they preach justification and bring about the salvation of the nations (Rom 11:25-36).

Hence, God's choice of Jacob (Israel) over Esau (Edom) represents national election, as seen in Mal 1:2-3, "*Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.*" The term *hated* here is an idiom understood as *loving less* (Gen 29:30-31; Matt 6:24; Luke 14:26; John 12:25). The two concepts of *love* and *hate* here are not to be viewed as feelings but a decision God took to bestow His mercy on Jacob's, not Esau's, descendants. Paul's point here is to show that God remained true to His electing purpose in passing judgment on Esau's descendants, the Edomites, who rightly deserved it. Instead, He had mercy on Jacob's descendants, the Israelites, who also rightly deserved judgment, but received grace (unmerited favor). Thus, since God's electing purposes and promises to Israel (Rom 9:6b) cannot fail, this should put their worries to rest, which was the point that gave rise to this entire section (Romans 9-11).

Also, as a result of God choosing Isaac over Ishmael (Rom 9:7-9), and then choosing Jacob over Esau (vv 10-13), the question of God's fairness naturally arises: *Is there unrighteousness with God?* Paul strongly replies: Certainly not! (cf. Rom 3:4; 6:1). The issue here is not God's justice but His sovereign choice to have mercy on those He elects to serve Him in some specific task. He has mercy on whomever He wills, as He indicated to Moses (Exod 33:19). Therefore, it really does not depend on man's conduct (i.e., "not of him who wills, nor of him who runs"), but is solely based on God who shows mercy. God is not unfair to choose one over another since His choice is based strictly on mercy; rather, we should wonder why God chooses *anyone* to serve Him (since He doesn't need anyone). Election is clearly unto service for Him. In fact, Israel was chosen to call others (Gentile nations) to God's blessings (Gen 12:3; 18:18-19; Exod 9:14, 16, 29; Ps 72:17; Jer 4:2), which they failed to do, and therefore incurred God's curses (Deut 28:15-29:28).

GOD ELECTS TO CALL OTHERS TO BLESSINGS

We must always keep in mind that contextually God's choice to have mercy on one nation over another has nothing to do with selecting individuals to justification, but to call others to blessings. Romans 9 clearly refers to earthly privileges and promised blessings that include the preaching of the message of eternal life. God's bypassing of Ishmael and Esau does not mean they could not be eternally saved. However, those that form part of spiritual Israel, who inherit the promises of God (cf. 9:5), are the elect that also place their faith in Christ and who become blessed and have the responsibility to call others to these blessings. Even though Romans 9-11 refers to the historical destiny of different nations and not individual salvation, Paul is obviously concerned for every Israelite's justification (Rom 2:1-4:25; 9:1-6, 30-33; 10:1-4; 11:26-27). However, the issue here is calling a nation to blessings in order to share those blessings with others. But since they failed, God saw fit to elect another group called the Church (composed largely of Gentiles) to accomplish this task (Rom

11:11-25). Fortunately for Israel, because God is gracious He will again return to them and fulfill His promises and plans (Rom 11:23-32). How incredible is God (Rom 11:33-36)?

So is God fair? Absolutely. In fact, He is the standard by which we measure fairness. However, the content of Romans 9–11 is not concerned with His fairness in terms of eternal destinies of individuals, but with the amazing grace and mercy He has shown in choosing us to serve Him.

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