

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 46

KEY TERMS: ELECTION, PART 7

One Scripture that is used as a proof text by Calvinists to “prove” divine election to justification salvation is 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14. This epistle is providing guidance to the believers in Thessalonica concerning persecution, the rapture, the day of the Lord, and the antichrist.

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

Chosen, αἰρέω, means to choose or select for the purpose of showing special favor to or concern for someone. It is in the middle voice meaning that God chose these believers for Himself out of His concern for them post justification salvation. Almost everyone who understands God's choice as always referring to justification salvation misinterprets this verse. It doesn't help that most of them are either amillennial or postmillennial and replace Israel with the church. They also fail to understand the dispensational basis for understanding God's plan for mankind. Many of them do not believe there will be a Tribulation to be saved out of, but this Scripture must be interpreted according to context. It has nothing to do with justification salvation but it has everything to do with saving these believers from the wrath of God during the horrors of the day of the Lord. This is an example of the use of salvation meaning physical salvation in a temporal sense. Part of God's appointed plan for believers is that they will not be subject to the wrath of God that is coming in its own appointed time. The salvation Paul writes of here is temporal salvation; he is quite literally telling them that they will be saved from the wrath of God because they are believers and set apart as a result of their faith in Christ. In his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul specifically said, twice, that believers would be spared the wrath of God as it would be imposed on the world in judgment during the Tribulation period.

1 Thessalonians 1:10 ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues [ῥύομαι] us from the wrath [ὀργή] to come.

1 Thessalonians 5:9 ⁹For [ὅτι, because] God has not [οὐ] destined [τίθημι] us for wrath [ὀργή], but for obtaining salvation [σωτηρία] through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Rescues, *ῥύομαι*, means to rescue from danger with the implication that the danger in question is severe and acute. “For (*hoti*, ‘because’) introduces another reason why believers should prepare themselves. God’s intention for them is not the wrath that will come on the earth in the day of the Lord, but the full salvation that will be theirs when the Lord returns for them in the clouds. The wrath of God referred to here clearly refers to the Tribulation; the context makes this apparent. Deliverance from that wrath is God’s appointment for believers. This temporal salvation comes through the Lord Jesus Christ just as does eternal salvation” [Thomas L. Constable, “1 Thessalonians” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 706-707]. The “full salvation” Constable refers to here is the third tense of salvation, glorification and the “eternal salvation” he refers to is the first tense of salvation, justification. Understanding the three tenses of salvation is crucial to properly interpreting the Bible. Temporal salvation refers to being saved out of the Tribulation and from the wrath of God.

It may have been better to start this verse with the English word “because”; it explains the preceding context. God has “not destined” [*οὐ τίθημι*] believers for wrath but rather He has destined them to be delivered from the wrath of the Tribulation by virtue of the faith in Christ Jesus. Destined, *τίθημι*, means to cause someone to experience [something] with the implication of subjecting a person to that something. In this case, however, the meaning is negated; therefore, Paul is saying these believers are not going to experience the coming wrath.

Here is a typical example of misunderstanding 1 Thessalonians 2:13 to refer to justification salvation rather than to temporal salvation. “Paul told the Thessalonians that he gave thanks to God because ‘God chose you to be saved.’ Though the verb ‘chose’ (*eilato*) is uncommon in the New Testament (used only here, Phil 1:22 and Heb 11:25 [neither of which even remotely pertain to justification salvation and refer to making a true choice by Paul]), Paul apparently used it in this context as a synonym of the more common *eklegomai* (cf. 1 Thess. 1:4; Eph 1:4 [but if Paul wanted to use that word he certainly wasn’t shy about using it in other places]), meaning to ‘select’ or ‘elect’. Salvation is always the result of the active grace of God. No one earns it on the basis of works or beliefs. Salvation is the result of God’s choice to make salvation available” [D. Michael Martin, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Thessalonians*, p. 251]. This commentary illustrates the confusion most people have between justification salvation, sanctification salvation, and temporal salvation as life is lived out in the world. Notice the imposition of the commentator’s presupposition concerning election into his commentary. In order to maintain his theology, he must insist that Paul didn’t really write what he meant to write; he surely meant to use the word *ἐκλέγομαι* instead of *εἴλατο* so this commentator makes the change in his commentary and then defines Paul’s intent

according to the change he made. Paul was expressing the special care and concern God has for those who are in the Son.

Here is a more Calvinistic explanation of this Thessalonian verse. "...God's choosing is the cause of salvation, but the means comes about by the sanctifying work of the Spirit and the verbal proclamation of faith in the truth...Divine election is proclaimed throughout the Scriptures. God chose or decreed before the ages (1 Cor. 2:7), from the ages (Col. 1:26), and 'before the foundation of the world' (Eph. 1:4). Election is clearly Pauline revelation, that is, that God called men to a salvation to which He had before chosen them" [Mal Couch, *The Hope of Christ's Return: Premillennial Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 232-233]. Nothing this man wrote here has anything to do with the Scripture he is commenting on! This commentator was a dispensationalist and a champion of literal hermeneutics, yet he gets the interpretation of this verse wrong. Why? He gets it wrong because he abandoned literal hermeneutics and ignored the context in order to allow his Calvinistic theological presuppositions to override the correct interpretation by forcing those presuppositions into this text in favor of the doctrine of election as Calvinists incorrectly define it. His theology clouded his mind and blinded his eyes to the context which is so important in understanding this verse. Dr. Couch once wrote, "After several years of study I became a frothing-at-the-mouth Calvinist!...I became absolutely committed to the concepts of the sovereignty and providence of God, election and predestination, efficacious grace, the decree (and decrees) of God, and the doctrine of total depravity"[Mal O. Couch, *The Conservative Theological Journal*, 4, no. 12 (August 2000): 189-190]. To say the least, it seems that becoming that rabidly faithful to a theological system can be detrimental to one's hermeneutics. To Dr. Couch's credit, he goes on in this article to repudiate Limited Atonement also known as Particular Redemption in favor of unlimited atonement, but he relies on all the faulty arguments Calvinists use to support the other four points of normative Calvinism. But as I have noted, to ascribe at the same time to Unlimited Atonement and to the doctrine of the divine election of those who will be saved is to support contradictory doctrines. Not only that, true five point Calvinists view men like Dr. Couch as very confused theologians because they know all five points are interrelated and live or die together.

It's clear that in the interpretation of this verse, context rules and the proper interpretation can be sacrificed on the altar of theological hermeneutics if they are substituted for literal hermeneutics. For those of us who are interested in understanding the Bible as God had it written, we simply must adhere to literal hermeneutics no matter where that leads us. If we do that, then we must be willing to change our theology if the text leads us in that direction. Far too often, Calvinists have proved to be much more faithful to their theology than they are to correctly understanding and interpreting the Word of God.

Acts 13:48 is a verse commonly used to support the doctrine of divine election although it does not use the words from the word group under consideration.

Acts 13:46–48 ⁴⁶Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷“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.’ ” ⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed [τάσσω] to eternal life believed.

Once again, context must be considered in understanding just what it means that “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed”. Appointed, *τάσσω*, means to assign one to a particular task, function, or role. It refers to arranging or putting in order, and it can mean to ordain. This verse is used as a proof text for divine election.

Chapter 13 of Acts is a study in contrasts between those who reject gospel truth and those who prepare themselves to hear the gospel and therefore be in a position to be granted eternal life based on belief. There are two different sets of these contrasting situations; one is presented in the beginning of the chapter and one at the end which includes the verse in question. In verse 7, the proconsul Sergius Paulus “sought to hear the word of God.” He was responding to the light God placed in his life. Subsequent to hearing the Word, he believed (v. 12). The contrast is with Elymas the magician who opposed Paul and Barnabas and sought to prevent the proconsul from believing the gospel (v. 8). Elymas was subsequently blinded by the Lord which thwarted his opposition (v. 11). This incident occurred in Cyprus and the next event occurred in Pisidian Antioch. Paul preached the gospel in the local synagogue (vv. 14-41). As the evangelists left the synagogue “the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath” (v. 42). The group who wanted to hear more consisted of “many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes” (v. 43). The next Sabbath the Jews began opposing them after “nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord” (vv. 44-45). Paul rebuked these Jewish men and said they were not only repudiating the Word of God, but they were also judging themselves to be “unworthy of eternal life” (v. 46). In verse 48, the Gentiles have responded to the light Paul presented them in the gospel and those who believed were then granted eternal life. The Gentiles who believed were those who “had been appointed to eternal life.” Therein lies the question; Calvinists insist that those who were appointed to eternal life were elected by God in eternity past and that is why they believed on that day.

The context of Acts 13 does not suggest that conclusion. In the first instance, one man, the proconsul, clearly believed as the result of hearing the Word of God and observing

the authenticating miracle of blindness imposed by God through the apostle on the disbelieving magician. In the Roman man's sight, Paul, his message, and his God were authenticated and deemed to be truthful, powerful authorities. Neither man, the proconsul and the magician, was coerced into either belief or disbelief by God, Paul, or Barnabas; they each made volitional decisions. One man was open to the light provided by God through the Word of God as preached by the evangelists and one man rejected the light. In the second instance, at least some of the Jews rejected the preaching of the gospel while others responded to the light and wanted to hear more. Some of them subsequently believed. "The positive response of the Gentiles seems to be antithetically parallel with the self-condemnation of the unbelieving Jews. That's why commentators like Henry Alford and J. Vernon Bartlett argued that *tetagmenoi* should be translated: 'as many as were *disposed* to eternal life believed.' It is not that a divine power appointed them to eternal life. It is that, unlike the unbelieving Jews, these people had prepared themselves for eternal life, by seeking out the truth about the gospel" [Shawn Lazar, *Grace in Focus*, (Sept. & Oct. 2014): 7]. In both situations, people made volitional decisions to believe or not to believe. Election to justification salvation in eternity past is not proved in any way by this text.

There is a grammatical issue at play in this verse. The form of the word for "appointed" is *τεταγμένοι* which is a verb, perfect, passive or middle participle. Context has to determine whether or not the verb is passive or middle. If it is passive, then the subject simply has the action performed on it. If it is middle, then the subject is participating in the action that is being done to it. Calvinists want this word to be passive because that supports their theology in which God gives the unbeliever the faith to believe because they are one of the elect people of God. If they are not elect, they can never come to faith because God will not give them the faith to receive eternal life. The unbeliever's involvement in the salvation process is totally passive and dependent on God's sovereign choice. But if the word is in the middle voice, the unbeliever makes a volitional, affirmative choice of his own will to believe and he is then granted eternal life. To the extent that a person makes a volition decision to believe, the subject is participating in the action being done and that renders the verb in the middle voice and not in the passive voice. No one saves themselves, of course, and I am not saying that, and Romans 4:4-5 makes it perfectly clear that exercising faith in Christ is not a work. People are, however, when exposed to the light of gospel truth, capable of deciding whether or not to avail themselves of the free grace gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal life that is found only in Christ Jesus. Faith is the vehicle through which God graces the believer with justification salvation which is His work alone; God alone saves us and regenerates us. Our only role is to believe.

Which is it? Is "appointed" in Acts 13:48 in the passive voice or is it in the middle voice? Given the fact the Scriptures tell us over and over again that salvation is the result of

belief and no Scripture tells us that God gives the unbeliever the faith to believe, although these theologians try to make Ephesians 2:8-9 say that faith is the gift rather than salvation, "appointment" must be in the middle voice. It is interesting to note that the gospel of John, the gospel of belief, never uses the words elect or election. If that doctrine is so vital, surely John would have been led to include it in his gospel. The exact opposite is true; John often and only talks of volitional belief as the operative factor in granting eternal life. Belief is a deliberate, volitional response to the gospel message of the cross. I realize that this argument from John is an argument from silence because he doesn't mention those words and therefore carries little weight, but the omission of those words must be significant to some extent. Scripture cannot contradict Scripture and belief rather than election is the foundational event for salvation. Therefore, it is appropriate to view the appointment to eternal life in Acts 13:48 as an appointment made by God based on the exercise of belief on the part of the unsaved person. God's decision to elect those who are in Christ was made in eternity past; it is His intended plan to save all who believe and those who respond to the gospel and come to faith receive the appointment to eternal life and thereby become a member of the elect group of those who are in Christ. Through belief, the saved person has availed himself of this precious appointment and that renders the word middle voice. This is in accordance with Ephesians 1:4 where it is recorded that God's plan was to elect all those who would come to faith and therefore be "in Him."

The Calvinist oriented commentaries simply assume the word is passive. "Those who have been ordained to eternal life believe....Here it [τάσσω] refers to God's sovereign work over salvation, where God has assigned those who come to eternal life. The passive voice indicates that God does the assigning. It is as strong a passage on God's sovereignty as anywhere in Luke-Acts...he [God] is the active agent in bringing Gentiles to himself..." [Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts*, pp. 464-465]. It is instructive to note in this commentary there is no discussion whatsoever about whether this word is in the passive or in the middle voice; Calvinist theology makes the discussion moot because it must always assume the passive voice in soteriological matters. No Calvinist writing a commentary on this verse could ever believe the word is in the middle voice because that invalidates their theological presuppositions.

Here is another example from a commentary that simply assumes the passive voice in the word. "In the Greek, this is a perfect, passive participle of *tasso* and can be translated 'the ones who have, through a process, been fixed, ordained, or determined to eternal life.' This implies the sovereign work of God in salvation. J. A. Alexander believes it is scandalous the 'violent attempts which have been made to eliminate the doctrine of election or predestination from this verse'" [Mal Couch, *A Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 310-311]. To play off of Dr. Couch's translation, it would

be more textually accurate to translate this “the ones who have, by volitionally exercising belief in Christ Jesus, been previously appointed to eternal life.”

Let's examine one more verse used as a proof text for the Calvinist understanding of the doctrine of election and that is Matthew 22:14.

Matthew 22:14 ¹⁴“For many are called, but few are chosen [ἐκλεκτός, choice].”

This verse is part of a larger pericope concerning the rejection of the Lord by the ruling religious authorities of Israel and the selection of a new group of people who would not reject Him. This new group would consist of those who willingly respond to the invitation. I do not think this parable is particularly meant to be representative of the actual Wedding Supper of the Lamb which is how some dispensationalists and many others interpret it. It is simply representative of a royal wedding banquet. It is a parable contrasting unbelieving Israel with those who would come to faith after Israel rejected their Messiah. It ends with truth about those who are prepared to enjoy the kingdom and those who are in the kingdom but have not properly prepared themselves for it.

Matthew 22:1–14 ¹Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. ³“And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. ⁴“Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, “Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.”’ ⁵“But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, ⁶and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. ⁷“But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. ⁸“Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. ⁹“Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.’ ¹⁰“Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. ¹¹“But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And the man was speechless. ¹³“Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

The first thing of note here is that a call to participate in the wedding feast had gone out to the people but they were “unwilling” and refused to come. Subsequently, the King pronounced them “not worthy” (v. 8). We have already noted the same type of

voluntary rejection of the gospel message when Paul said to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch upon their repudiation of the gospel they had judged themselves “unworthy of eternal life” (Acts 13:46). There is no element of coercion or of prior selection to individual justification salvation in this verse and, in fact, corporate election is the subject. The religious authorities of Israel willingly, knowingly rejected the offer of national salvation Christ brought to them at His first advent and they led the people into rejecting Him as well. The call, or invitation, was then made apparently to all who could hear both “evil and good” (v. 10). All who responded to the invitation were brought in. No one was forced in or dragged in or coerced in; they all made a volitional decision to respond to the invitation.

This is a picture of the state of the world as it exists in this age. Israel rejected their King and has been temporarily set aside while the gospel call is being extended to the world with many people both good and evil responding to it. We must say, however, that although national Israel rejected their King, individual Jewish people can and do come to faith. Verse 14 is presenting the truth that the gospel call has gone out to many, I would say it has gone out to the world, but only a relatively few people respond to it. Those who respond are not chosen to believe but rather they are the choice people in and of Christ Jesus based on their belief in Him. Positional, corporate election is in view here. All who respond and believe by virtue of their belief become the choice ones in Christ and they make up the church universal. The verse would be more accurate if it was translated, “For many are called, but few are choice.” There is nothing in this pericope about God choosing anyone for anything. People were invited who declined and other people were invited who accepted and there is no element of predetermination or choosing for either situation. People chose their own response.

The man who responded but did not have the proper wedding clothes seems to be a believer, he did respond and get in, but he did not have the proper clothing. In Revelation 19:8 the fine linen worn by the saints represents their righteous acts. This is possibly, and I can't be dogmatic about this, a truth concerning rewards and not salvation.

“The broader context of this parable and its aphorism confirms the appropriateness of this translation. It is one of a group of three parables the Lord Jesus gave after His triumphal entry at the beginning of the passion week, and in all three He declared His rejection by His own ‘choice people.’ In accusing Israel of being unwilling to accept His invitation extended to them for three years, He made it clear the invitation is going out to all whom the king will then qualify to be His select guests, although their previous condition was both ‘evil and good.’ Thus, in effect He set in contrast God's ancient choice nation and the new ‘choice people’ to whom the kingdom of God would be given, an idea explicitly declared in the previous context: ‘Therefore I say to you, the

kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it' (Mt. 21:43). There is a strong irony in Christ's aphorism: the choice nation is being set aside and indiscriminate invitees ('evil and good') become choice by God's gracious plan" [C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation*, p. 320].

In contrast, the common way for a Calvinist to understand this is that, "The gospel is proclaimed publicly to all people, but only the elect receive it, Jesus says (Mt. 22:14)" [Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, p. 683]. "The term [call] is also used for the *gospel call*, the invitation to all people to put their faith in Christ. In this sense, God (usually through preaching) calls some people who are not finally saved, as well as some who are. Effectual calling...cannot be resisted, but the gospel call can be and often is. Thus 'many are called, but few are chosen' (Matt. 22:14)" [John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, p. 941]. These two men claim that everyone can hear the gospel but only those God elected to justification salvation in eternity past can respond to it and they must respond and believe. This parable says no such thing. Instead, all who hear may place their faith in Christ and accept the invitation or they may reject Him and His invitation but the choice is theirs. If they choose to believe, they become part of the elect by virtue of their faith in Him and as one of the elect, they are choice ones in Him. After that, each individual believer will be judged based on the works he has done for the Lord and accordingly rewarded or not (1 Cor. 3:11-15).