

## The Doctrine of Reprobation

### Intro:

Having shown that the doctrine of election – though unpopular and offensive to the natural man – is a biblical doctrine, a question that often arises in response is something like this: “If God elects a particular people in Christ for salvation, what are we to make of those who were not elected?”

There are two responses to this question, and though both are nevertheless hard to swallow apart from submission to the Word of God, one is much less offensive, and goes something like this: those whom God did not elect for salvation before the foundation of the world were simply “passed over,” much like what happens when two captains are picking their teams for a friendly match of football: one captain “picks” his team out from the mass of fellow-students; those he does not ‘choose’ are simply ‘passed over.’ It’s nothing personal. Those not on his team were simply not chosen.

The second response to the question of why the non-elect are not elect is indeed easy to explain, but almost impossible to accept, and simply goes something like this: God not only chose whom He would save (i.e. the “elect”), He also chose whom He would condemn (i.e. the “reprobate”).

The words of Arthur Pink are helpful in clarifying these two views:

[In light of the doctrine of election], the thoughtful Christian will naturally ask, And what of those who were not “ordained to eternal life?” The answer which is usually returned to this question, even by those who profess to believe what the Scriptures teach concerning God’s sovereignty, is, that God passes by the non-elect, leaves them alone to go their own way, and in the end casts them into the Lake of Fire because they refused His way, and rejected the Saviour of His providing. But this is only a part of the truth; the other part—that which is most offensive to the carnal mind—is either ignored or denied.

In view of the awful solemnity of the subject here before us, in view of the fact that today almost all—even those who profess to be Calvinists—reject and repudiate this doctrine, and in view of the fact that this is one of the points in our book which is likely to raise the most controversy, we feel that an extended inquiry into this aspect of God’s truth is demanded. That this branch of the subject of God’s sovereignty is profoundly mysterious we freely allow, yet, that is no reason why we should reject it. The trouble is that, nowadays, there are so many who receive the testimony of God only so far as they can satisfactorily account for all the reasons and grounds of His conduct, which means they will accept nothing but that which can be measured in the petty scales of their own limited capacities...

Now all will acknowledge that from the foundation of the world God certainly foreknew and foresaw who would and who would not receive Christ as their Saviour, therefore in giving being and birth to those He knew would reject Christ, He necessarily created them unto damnation. All that can be said in reply to this is, No, while God did foreknow these would reject Christ, yet He did not decree that they should. But this is a begging of the real question at issue. God had a definite reason why He created men, a specific purpose why He created this and that individual, and in view of the eternal destination of His creatures, He purposed either that this one should spend eternity in heaven or that this one should spend eternity in the Lake of Fire. If then He foresaw that in creating a certain person that that person would despise and reject the Saviour, yet knowing this beforehand He, nevertheless, brought that person into existence, then it is clear He designed and ordained that that person should be eternally lost. Again; faith is God’s gift, and the purpose to give it only to some, involves the purpose not to give it to others. Without faith there is no salvation—“He that believeth not shall be damned”—hence if there were some of Adam’s descendants to

whom He purposed not to give faith, it must be because He ordained that they should be damned.<sup>1</sup>

In the words of John 6, we might say that Pink's words are a "hard saying – who then can accept it?"

Interestingly, the sixth chapter of John contains not only the offensive words regarding humanity's inability to come to Christ for salvation (vv. 44-45, 65), but also the Savior's own offensive words with regards to Judas and his being foreordained to destruction (vv. 61, 70-71).

In case we're wondering if perhaps Jesus was speaking vaguely in a one-off sermon, He repeats His crystal-clear words later in 13:18-19, quoting a Scripture that was written almost 1000 years prior:

"I am not speaking of all you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, "He who at My bread has lifted his heel against Me."<sup>2</sup> I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am He."<sup>3</sup> (citing Psa. 41:9)

The apostle Peter seems to have come to the same Spirit-enlightened convictions as his Master. In Acts 1, where the disciples need to appoint a twelfth<sup>4</sup> apostle to replace Judas, Peter offers his theological explanation as to why Judas could have done such a treacherous thing to Jesus:

"Brothers, the Scriptures had to be fulfilled,<sup>5</sup> which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us and

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, Kindle edition, location 1185-1212.

<sup>2</sup> Literally, the Greek says, "I know whom I have chosen; but in order that (ἀλλ' ἵνα) the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'The one eating My bread lifted up upon/against Me his heel.'"

<sup>3</sup> Again, John uses the Greek phrase ἐγὼ εἶμι (*egō eimi*), which, translated literally, is simply "I AM."

<sup>4</sup> Of course, there are theologically significant reasons for this, which we cannot explore here. Suffice it to say, that the apostles are about to become the "new Israel", through which God will save His elect once His Spirit is poured out upon them on Pentecost (cf. 1:8; 2:39).

<sup>5</sup> For those familiar with Luke, "must" is one of his most theologically important words. The word (δεῖ, *dei*) is here in the imperfect tense, which may be woodenly translated, "were having to be [fulfilled]."

was allotted his share<sup>6</sup> in this ministry...For it is written in the Book of Psalms, ‘May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it’; and ‘Let another take his office.’”

This echoes the very words of Solomon in the book of Proverbs:

- 16:4 – “The LORD has made everything<sup>7</sup> for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.”
- 21:1 – “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wills.”<sup>8</sup>

This by no means negates man’s own free will and responsibility in making decisions, however:

- Prov. 16:1 – “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue belongs to the LORD.”
- Prov. 16:9 – “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.”

This is a mystery that we must humbly submit to by faith. That we are free to make choices that nevertheless – must!! – accord perfectly to God’s eternal and unchanging decree is something that is far above anything we could ever understand or make sense of. To do so we must trust that God is perfect not only in knowledge, but also in wisdom and love; we must believe that this is the absolute best scenario for all things to redound to His eternal glory and praise!!

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<sup>6</sup> The Greek word for “allotted” (*λαγχάνω*, *langkanō*) has strong predestinarian tones to it. BDAG defines it as follows: “attain by lot, be appointed by lot, be chosen by lot; of what comes by the divine will.” Interestingly, in the very next verses (vv. 24-26), the disciples pray to God to reveal who the twelfth apostle should be, appealing to His very sovereignty in even the outcome of their casting lots (cf. Prov. 16:33 – “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”)

<sup>7</sup> “Everything” ( *כֹּל*, *cōl*) is fronted for emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> “Wills” is certainly an adequate translation. However, the Hebrew verb (*יָפֵת*, *khafēts*) almost always carries the sense of pleasure and desire (cf. NLT = “He guides it wherever He pleases.”), which is consistent with Paul’s ideas of sovereign election in Ephesians 1: God chooses the elect according to the “good pleasure” of His will. God is passionate, not indifferent, in all that He does for His glory!!

This idea of “concurrency” – namely, the twin truths that (1) man is not a robot carried along by the forces of fatalism, and (2) God’s sovereign decree must and inevitably be carried out – is seen most clearly in biblical account of “the hardening of Pharaoh,” as chronicled in the OT book of Exodus and reiterated by the apostle Paul in the NT book of Romans.

The story actually begins in Genesis 15, where in making a unilaterally redemptive covenant with Abram, the LORD promises Israel’s patriarch that after His people are held as captives and slaves in a foreign land, He will – with a strong and mighty display of His sovereign might – deliver them and bring them into the land He promised Abraham. Indeed, YHWH sets Himself over and above all false and would-be gods as the One who alone “declares the end from the beginning” (Isa. 46:10)!

The story picks up in Exodus, where Moses tells us that God is indeed fulfilling His promise to Abraham to “multiply his seed” (Exo. 1:7; cf. Gen. 12:1-3). Yet, this great “host” is nevertheless in a foreign land, under a new Pharaoh, one who was certainly no friend to Joseph or his kinsmen Israelites. Fearing a revolt from this unstoppably growing multitude, the self-proclaimed god-monarch begins to deal severely with them: he decrees the genocide of all newborn males and enslaves the Israelites as a nation to harsh treatment and unbearable labor.

To the first-time reader, that perhaps might seem like God’s promise to Abraham might go unfulfilled at this point. But for the seasoned Bible reader, we know that nothing can stop God from accomplishing all His purposes (Isa. 46:10).

*That* YHWH will accomplish His purposes is not shocking to anyone who reads their Bible. But *how* He declares He will do so is baffling, and we confess confounds the most seasoned Bible reader: YHWH promises Moses that He is going to harden Pharaoh’s heart in such a way that guarantees not only the deliverance of His people from the clutches of Egypt, but the exaltation of His name to the ends of the earth through Egypt’s demise.

Of course, many will say, “But doesn’t the Bible teach that Pharaoh hardened *his own* heart?”

This is indisputable. Moses clearly teaches this. But when we examine all the evidence, we see that the emphasis clearly is upon not *Pharaoh's* hardening of his own heart, but rather *YHWH's* hardening of Pharaoh's heart:<sup>9</sup>

- Three times YHWH declares that He Himself<sup>10</sup> will actively<sup>11</sup> harden Pharaoh's heart (Exo. 4:21; 7:3; 14:4).
- Six times YHWH actually hardens Pharaoh's heart (Exo. 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8).
- Seven times the hardening is expressed as a divine passive with YHWH as the implied subject (i.e. Pharaoh's heart "was hardened" by YHWH, Exo. 7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35; 14:5).
- Only three times we are told that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exo. 8:15, 32; 9:34).

Taylor writes,

Divine-hardening and self-hardening are interwoven, but God's action is primary and initiatory: the first five citations (in Exodus 4 and 7) all focus on God's action; the important point of Pharaoh's self-hardening only appears in the three verses of Exodus 8 and 9.

That God is ultimately responsible for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is clearly seen in Paul's own Holy-Spirit-inspired words in Romans 9. Immediately after declaring God's unconditional and electing love for Jacob and not Esau (9:6-13), Paul doubles down on his argument lest he be misunderstood, citing this time Pharaoh in verses 14-18:

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<sup>9</sup> This concurs with Justin Taylor's findings. See his "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart" on the Gospel Coalition's website.

<sup>10</sup> In 4:21, Moses uses the emphatic **אֲנִי** (*va'ani* = "I, I Myself") to show that the agent of hardening is not to be questioned. YHWH will "Himself" do this to Pharaoh.

<sup>11</sup> Moses uses the hiphil form for the verb (**קָזַח**, *khazaq*), which means that YHWH will "cause" Pharaoh's heart to be strengthened. As the NET notes, "cause to be strengthened" carries the idea of "making stubborn or obstinate." It has the idea, "I will make strong his will," or "I will strengthen his resolve," recognizing "the heart" as the location of decision making.

For [God] says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”<sup>12</sup> So then, it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then, He has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever He wills.

Though these words are difficult to believe, they are not difficult to understand. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, simply and clearly says that it was not Pharaoh who hardened Pharaoh’s heart but God who sovereignly and willfully hardened Pharaoh’s heart. And He did all this for the sake of the glory of His name.

Since Paul knows how offensive this is to the natural heart, he continues his argument in verses 19-24 to pre-emptively shut down any further questioning of God’s sovereign will and predestined purposes in election and reprobation:

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have You made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared<sup>13</sup> for destruction, in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory – even us whom He has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

If we ascribe God’s utter sovereignty in electing a people for glory (9:23), Paul says we need to realize that God has also elected people for wrath (9:22). We can’t have it both ways.

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<sup>12</sup> Paul is citing Exodus 33:19 here.

<sup>13</sup> Paul uses a perfect passive participle (*κατηρτισμένα*) here to highlight God’s prior activity. That is, they were “prepared *beforehand*” for destruction, just like Judas or Pharaoh.

That God is sovereign in hardening the hearts of men to accomplish His perfect will is not limited to individuals like Judas or Pharaoh.<sup>14</sup> This phenomenon is also seen in the account of Israel's enemies in the promised land:

- Josh. 11:18-20 – “Joshua made war a long time with all those kings. There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon. They took them all in battle. For it was the LORD's doing<sup>15</sup> to harden their hearts, so that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the LORD commanded Moses.”

If we follow the grammatical logic of these verses, we must conclude that God willed not only the destruction of Israel's enemies, but also hardened their hearts against Israel to ensure their ultimate and promised destruction.

The apostle Peter basically says this very thing in his first epistle:

- 1 Pet. 2:7-8 – “So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and ‘A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.”

In Psalm 115:3 we read, “Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases.” The question is, do we actually trust our God's perfect goodness, love, and wisdom enough to let the emphatic “all” really mean “all”?<sup>16</sup>

When Paul explains God's predestinating ways in Ephesians 1, he says that God works all things out “according to the purpose<sup>17</sup> of Him who works all things

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<sup>14</sup> As anyone who has read Moses' account of Israel's deliverance by YHWH out of the clutches of Pharaoh and Egypt, we see that God had also hardened the hearts of many of Pharaoh's officials as well.

<sup>15</sup> The Hebrew literally reads, “For from YHWH it was to cause to be strengthened their hearts to gather in battle against Israel in order that they might be devoted to destruction [a hiphil of *kherem*]...”

<sup>16</sup> The word “all” is fronted in the Hebrew for emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> The Greek word (*πρόθεσις*, *prothesis*) has strong predestination tones to it. BDAG translates it as “placing before; plan, purpose, design.” The [aorist] participle it is attached to (*προορίζω*, *prooridzō*),



according to the counsel of His will” (v. 11). Again, are we willing to let “all” really mean “all”?

After spending three difficult chapters explaining God’s sovereign plan of salvation for His elect, including the difficult doctrine of God’s active hardening of the vessels He predestined for destruction, he concludes with words that are meant to humble our proud hearts and shut our accusing mouths:

For God has consigned all<sup>18</sup> to disobedience, that He may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable are His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Or who has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.

The question I think we need to ask is not, “Is this taught in the Bible?”, for it clearly is. I think the question we need to ask is, “Are we willing to let God be God?” It does not matter if this is hard to accept. It does not matter if we think it is unfair. And it certainly does not matter what we feel about this. In light of the clear teaching of Scripture, will we bow our knee to the God of Scripture and kneel before His inerrant Word? Or will we in our perceived superior wisdom look haughtily down our noses and stand above God and His Word?

#### What the Bible does **not** Teach Regarding this

1. That God takes innocent creatures, makes them bad against their will, and then eternally damns them.
  - Scripture clearly teaches, in the words of Spurgeon, that salvation is all of God, and damnation is all of man. As Pink says, “In determining to punish

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literally means “to determine in advance,” and is where we get our word “horizon” from. God, as it were, lays out His sovereign will like a horizon, which He sovereignly brings to pass in time and space.

<sup>18</sup> This is not a proof-text for universalism. The context of chapters 9-11 clearly and indisputably means that “all” is referring to both Jew and Gentile (cf. chapters 1-3). This is not double talk to my previous assertion that “all” in the other texts (e.g. Eph. 1:11) literally means “all things.” Context is always king.

the non-elect, God did them no wrong, for all He simply did was give them up to their own heart's lusts (cf. Psa. 81:12; Rom. 1:24, 26, 28)."

2. That God refuses to save those who earnestly seek salvation.

- Again, as Pink says, "The reprobate have no longing for the Savior, and see no beauty in Him that they should desire Him. They will not come to Christ – why then should God force them to?"<sup>19</sup>

3. God does not compel the wicked to sin, as the rider spurs on an unwilling horse.

- To the reprobate, God merely says, in effect, that awful word, "Let them alone" (Matt. 15:14).<sup>20</sup>

4. This doctrine does not conflict with God's goodness.

- As Pink notes, though not elected unto salvation, the non-elect nevertheless receive God's underserved mercies in common grace and providence (e.g. Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17).<sup>21</sup>

5. We do not know who either the elect or the reprobate are.

- Thus, we must freely, impartially, and indiscriminately love all liberally and preach the gospel to all freely.

### Practical Applications of this [Difficult] Doctrine

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<sup>19</sup> Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, Kindle edition, loc. 1520-1527.

<sup>20</sup> As Michael Horton says, "If we are to be saved, God must graciously grant us faith; if we are not to be saved, God need only leave us to our own decision. Though some Scriptures speak of sinners hardening their own hearts, no Scripture speaks of sinners *softening* their own hearts. Human beings are alone responsible for their hardness of heart, but God alone softens and re-creates the heart of His elect. From his *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples*, Kindle edition, loc. 5015-5022.

<sup>21</sup> John Frame chastises those Calvinists who hesitate to say to unbelievers, "God loves you," thinking God loves only the elect. But we can say, with Scripture that God has loved them in many ways, by giving them life, health, and various measures of prosperity. Since we do not know who the elect are, these very kindness ought to be brought to their attention, in the hopes of motivating them to turn to Christ for salvation. See his *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2013), 237-241, where he compares God's general love for all versus His saving love for the elect.

1. Nothing should humble God's people more than this doctrine, for we know that, humanly speaking, we not only had 'no merit' before God, we had much more 'anti-merit' than most of the people who will spend an eternity enduring God's infinite wrath against their sin.
2. The flip side of the coin is that God's people should offer Him ceaseless and abounding praise for choosing us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be His vessels of mercy that receive the salvation He purchased for us.

We close, fittingly, with the words of hymnwriter Augustus Toplady:

*A debtor to mercy alone / Of covenant mercy I sing;  
I come with Your righteousness on / My humble offering to bring.  
The judgments of Your holy law / With me can have nothing to do;  
My Savior's obedience and blood / Hide all my transgressions from view.*

*The work which Your goodness began / The arm of Your strength will complete;  
Your promise is Yes and Amen / And never was forfeited yet.  
The future or things that are now / No power below or above;  
Can make You Your purpose forego / Or sever my soul from Your love.*

*My name from the palms of Your hands / Eternity will not erase;  
Impressed on Your heart it remains / In marks of indelible grace.  
Yes I, to the end will endure / Until I bow down at Your throne;  
Forever and always secure / A debtor to mercy alone.*