
Please note, excurses at the end on the internet: “Why are some people chosen and others not?”...

III – Passport application - This week I applied for a passport. I filled in the form on the internet. I filled out another form to get an original of my birth certificate. I had to get photos that were the right size... I had to get a witness to sign things. I had to fill in all these details and they had to be right. I had to book an interview at the Post Office. I had to take two forms of ID with me. It ALL had to be right. She looked over my forms. She checked my ID, by birth certificate. Then she signed it. I thought it was all good. Then she showed it to the woman next to her and said: “Does that look OK to you?” The other woman said: “No – it has to be redone.”

ONE piece of information wasn’t quite in the right place on the form. I had to redo it all again. Don’t you hate forms like that?! Everything has to be JUST RIGHT or it’s totally rejected. Some people think that way about heaven and their relationship with God. Think of the question:

Question 1: Can we be absolutely certain of heaven?

Some people say “I hope so.” I hope I’ve lived a good enough life. I hope I’ve done everything right and God lets me in.” But the Bible teaches us that we’re saved by God’s grace. We’re saved not by how good we are, or by getting things “right” and “correct”. We’re saved by putting our faith in Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast.”

True believers understand that it is our faith in Jesus that gives us absolute certainty that we WILL go to heaven. Guaranteed.

BUT, many ask, can a Christian fall away? What if I don’t keep up my faith? What if I slip? What if I’m not faithful enough? What if I get led astray? What if I face suffering and can’t hold up under the pressure?

So our 2nd question is “Is there a chance I could fall away from God?”

Let me begin at Romans 9:6-8. Paul is upset in Romans 9 because so many of God’s people, Israel, had fallen away from God by not accepting Jesus as Lord. Israel are God’s chosen nation, and are called “God’s people”, but not all of them are saved.

6...For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ... 8In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.”

What does that mean? I’ll use a diagram to help explain it:

Diagram: Covenant → Elect (subset circle of covenant people)

Everyone born into the nation of Israel are COVENANT people. (The orange circle) They are Israelites. They live under the covenant, or contract, of God’s law. They are circumcised. They live as God’s people, in God’s covenant, but many of them do not believe in the promises of God. They do not have faith. And only those who have true faith are true Israelites. The Elect. (The blue circle) It doesn’t matter that they live under the law, or that they’re circumcised, or that they’re born into an Israelite family. What matters is that their faith is Jesus, the promised Saviour from God.

For us today, many people are born into Christian families or join a Christian church. They get baptised. They share in the Lord’s Supper. They are COVENANT people. They are sharing in the covenant community of God’s church. But many are not TRUE believers. They are not “the elect” because they do not have true faith in Jesus.
So who is who? How do we know the true believers from those just sharing in the covenant life? And the answer is: “We don’t know”. Only YOU and GOD know your true heart. Only YOU and GOD know where your true faith is. You can be a part of God’s covenant people each week, come to church, share in communion, be baptised, confirmed, be in ministry. But only YOU and GOD know where your true heart is and if you truly put your faith in Jesus. Only YOU and GOD know if you are the elect, if Jesus is your personal Lord and King, if you believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, if you truly take up your cross daily and follow Him. Only YOU and GOD know. But if you ARE a true believer, part of the elect people of God, God promises that while you may stumble at times, you will not fall. 1 Peter 1 (1-5) says:

“... To God’s elect, ... 5who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation...”

This is the promise and encouragement for those who truly believe. God promises to shield the elect with his power.

So, Question 3: How do we make sure we are in that group called “the elect”? And stay there?

III –Let me talk about my marriage as an example. I have a good marriage. A strong marriage. I care about my marriage. We are more than just members of a marriage covenant. We are in love. We are truly married in our hearts. So I could say, “I’m fine”. I’m in the 50% of marriages that don’t end in divorce. I listen to my wife. I take part in the housework, we raise our children together (so we share the blame!) I would even say I’m a good husband. But the thing is, a good husband, a loving husband, NEVER stops giving of themself in that relationship. They NEVER say: “It’s all fine” and then sit back and drift along in their relationship. They make SURE every day that their marriage is strong. They make every effort.

Do I “keep going” to EARN the love of my wife? Do I keep because I’m AFRAID I’m going to lose her? No. I keep going because that IS marriage.

And 2 Peter 1 says that this IS Christianity - this IS what it means to be “the elect” of God - Never stop putting in the effort. Verses 3-11:

“3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness... For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ... 10Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, 11and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

Never stop building on your knowledge of God, never stop seeking love, adding self control. Not in order to GET to heaven. But because you are ALREADY a citizen of heaven! We don’t work for our salvation. We work BECAUSE of our salvation. True believers are WORKERS and not DRIFTERS. We work, we put in the effort, NOT to be saved, but BECAUSE we are saved.

Effort! Work! Not drifting along. God’s elect, the true believers, WANT to keep going. We LOVE to keep going. Because it is who we are. And we CAN keep going because, as verse 3 says, he has given us his everything we need.

Well, there are perhaps two responses to all this:

1. Number one is to say: “I don’t think I’m saved.” I’m not sure I’ve understood the gospel. I’m not sure I believe Jesus died for me and rose from the dead.

If this is the case, then we need to pray together. You and I, or you and another mature Christian you know, need to sit down and talk about the gospel and pray for God to help you receive and understand the gospel. So if you are not sure you have received the gospel of Jesus, please talk to me or someone who can help today.
2. Or you could be saying: I understand. I believe. I am certain of heaven. But I have doubts sometimes. I find it hard to make the effort each day to mature in my faith. I hear these warnings and I’m afraid that I am drifting further and further away. I feel that there are times, perhaps even today, when I’m in danger. I feel like I COULD fall away.

If you are thinking that, let me say this – that is a good thing to be saying. Because it means you’re listening to God’s warnings. If you realise there is a problem, it means you’re listening to God. Let me use one more illustration here.

III – Rooftop. Imagine being on the rooftop of a 30 storey building. It’s a long way down. If you fall off, you will die. But all around the edge of this building there are warning signs and safety fences, telling you of the danger and protecting you. Warning you not to go near the edge. Letting you know the consequences if you fall.

This is how God warns us of hell. Plenty of signs. Plenty of warnings. What the Bible tells us is that true believers read the warning signs and pay attention to them and take them seriously. God’s people LOVE to see the warning signs and they take notice of them. And because they see the signs and take notice, they will NEVER fall. And God will NEVER let him fall. And God won’t allow anyone to push him off. It’s like when a good driver sees a warning sign to slow down, he loves to read it because he knows it’s there to protect him. And he obeys. And he’s kept safe.

The only way to come off that building is to set a deliberate path of disobedience. To ignore the signs one after the other, and jump over. To deliberately reject God to his face, knowing the consequences. Not accidentally, but deliberately. And Hebrews 6:4-6 has a serious warning about this:

“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened... who have shared in the Holy Spirit... if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

That is a real warning. A real danger. If you see the warning signs, take them seriously. Today, maybe as a true believer, you’ve heard a warning. Seen a danger sign. Realised that there might be a problem. THAT is the sign of a true believer. Listening to God, hearing the warnings and asking for help. And that is why you can be confident of heaven. That is why you may stumble, but you will not fall. Because you listen.

So let me say the same thing to you if this is your response – we need to pray together. Or find another mature Christian and pray with them. Ask for God’s help and guidance. Keep listening to the warning signs and the dangers, because they are real.

3. But perhaps there’s a 3rd category. Perhaps there are those who are happy and OK with their Christian life as it is at the moment.

Well, let me say I think that 2 Peter 1 challenges us here. 2 Peter 1 says: “Keep going! Press on! Make EVERY EFFORT! Are you comfortable with your level of self control? Are you satisfied with your knowledge of God and his Word? Press on! Never stop making the effort! When was the last time you read a good Christian book, or enrolled in a course to deepen your faith, or trained in how to share your faith with others? When was the last time you read the Bible cover to cover, or prayed every day for a month? Why should we do these things?

It’s about you and me becoming more like Jesus every day. THAT is the sign of the true believer.

It’s great to be a part of the covenant people of God. Even to share in signs like baptism and the Lord’s Supper. To be at church each week. To be a part of this community – this family of God. But being a true believer, being “the elect” of God, is a matter of the heart. Of true faith. Of wanting to be more like Jesus every day. So be all the more eager to confirm your calling. To show that it’s true. To make it clear. To show it’s real. Make every effort. Leave no room for doubt. And if you’re unsure, or if you’re drifting, reach out for help today.

Let’s pray.
**Excurses –**

**Why does God only save some people? Why one person and not another?**

Imagine an orphanage. A couple arrive and adopt one child. Take them home. Care for them. Look after them. Love them.

What about all the other children at the orphanage? Is it fair that they were left behind? Do you think it was unfair of the couple to only take one child?

This is the grace of God. The amazing thing is not that he only chooses SOME of us. The amazing thing is that he chooses ANY of us at all! WHY does he love us enough to save any of us after the way we’ve treated him? This is God’s grace. It is amazing that he even saves some.

NOW, imagine that this orphanage is no ordinary orphanage. It’s an orphanage for children who have murdered their parents. Why would a couple adopt a child who had murdered their parents? This is what God has done for us. He has adopted us as people who were his enemies. Terrible sinners. Murderers in our hearts, liars, cheats, adulterers... God adopted us at our worst. It’s amazing he even cared.

So, why not just adopt everyone?

Two things to think about –

1. **free choice.** We have free choice and we can choose to utterly reject God.
2. **Who are we to question God’s reasons?** This is what the book of Job is about. God says to Job, when Job questions God over his actions: “Will the one who contends with the almighty correct him?” (Job 40:1) Again God says to him: “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” (Job 40:8). Job finally finds the wisdom to say to God: “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.” (Job 42:3). We cannot begin to understand God’s justice, but we do know that surely a God who is prepared to give his Son for us to save us, it loving and just and fair. Surely we can trust his reasons, even when we cannot understand them?

One final thought. The well known preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was once talking to a lady who was having trouble with one particular verse in the Bible. She said she couldn’t understand Malachi 1:2-3 (also in Romans 9:13) when God says: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Spurgeon said he had trouble with this verse a well. He asked her “What is your problem with this verse?” The woman replied: “When he says ‘Esau I hated’”. Spurgeon responded with something like: “I have no problem with that part! The part I have a problem with is when he says ‘Jacob I loved’!”

Don’t you think it’s amazing that God would love ANY of us after the way we have treated him and continue to treat him? Isn’t it amazing he loves us at all?!

Why does God choose or elect some and not others? That seems to be an impossible question to answer, since we are not God ourselves! But the harder question is perhaps: “Why does God choose to save anyone at all?” That is REALLY a hard question!

If that’s not enough of an answer for you, just remember that God calls us as Christ’s ambassadors to bring the gospel to all nations. (2 Corinthians 5:20) God’s desire is for all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). And whilst we may not be able to understand why some respond to the gospel and others don’t, we do know that God wants all people to hear the good news about Jesus. We must answer that call to take that message to our world.