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QUESTION 20

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**Question 20** Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

**Answer** God having, out of His mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life,<sup>1</sup> did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.<sup>2</sup>

1. According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).
2. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe (Rom. 3:21-22).

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**W**e have thus far traced the history of man from the state of innocency (see Appendix A), in which he was created, to the state of sin and misery, into which he fell. With this question of the Catechism we begin to see unfolded before us the wonderful account of God's mercy to sinners. Here we see *how* He brings them out of the estate of sin and misery, and into the estate of salvation.

### ELECTION

It is of God's mercy or grace *alone* that there is a way of escape for sinful men. It is also by God's power *alone* that sinful men are enabled to make escape from the estate of sin and misery. Thus we come to what Reformed Christians usually call the doctrine of God's *unconditional* (or *unmerited*) *election*. This doctrine teaches: (1) that

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FIGURE 15.1



God has chosen out of the total number of lost men, a certain portion (or, number) to be saved; (2) that God does not choose these persons because of anything good in them. God's election is unconditional because He does not find some condition in the elect that He does not find in the non-elect; (3) that God has chosen these people to be saved through Jesus Christ alone. They cannot be saved,

in other words, except by being—in due time—brought to Christ, justified, adopted, etc; (4) and that this unconditional election was made from all eternity. In other words, it always was God's purpose to save these persons—even before they were born, yes, even before the world itself was created.

We cannot illustrate all of these points. But we can see the principal emphasis in figure 15.1.

All toys are equal. One is no better than the other. None deserves to be chosen by Shorty more than the others! Why then does Shorty say, "I'll take *this* one?" The reason cannot be found in the toys, since there is no difference between them. The condition of one was just the same as the condition of the other! The reason for choosing "this one" rather than "that one," then, must be found entirely in Shorty. This illustrates what we mean when we say that God's election is unconditional. We simply mean that the reason for God's choosing this man, and not that man, is not in them, but in God only.

## A HATED DOCTRINE

There is no doctrine that has been more hated by sinful men. And yet, neither is there any doctrine more clearly taught in Scripture. The Bible says that God "hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world . . . having predestinated us unto the adoption of children . . ." (Eph. 1:4-5). The very word "predestinate" simply means to determine beforehand the destiny of a person. "Ye have not chosen me," said Jesus to His disciples, "but I have chosen you" (John 15:16). Anyone with even the least knowledge of the Bible will cer-

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tainly realize the importance of this truth! "Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time," said Joshua to the Israelites, "even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor; and they served other gods. And I took your Father Abraham . . ." (Josh. 24:2-3). "The Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself," said Moses, "above all the people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6). Even when we come to what the Scripture says about those who were, and were not, true believers within the nation of Israel, it is the same. "Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for, but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded" (Rom. 11:7). "Even so," says Paul, speaking of himself and others who had believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, while many Jews had rejected him, "then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5).

WARNINGS AGAINST MISUNDERSTANDING

The question that always arises in our minds as we think about this doctrine of unconditional election is this: *why* has God chosen *this* man and not *that* man? Or in other words it seems to sinful men as if this were not quite fair! But the truth is that all men deserve damnation. And if all men deserve damnation, it cannot possibly be "unfair" if they get what they deserve! God does no wrong to any when He gives some men the punishment they deserve, while giving others the mercy they do not deserve. "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" says Jesus (Matt. 20:15). It is wicked to complain against God when He gives some men what they deserve. Another question that arises is this: the doctrine of unconditional election seems to make salvation completely "automatic." In other words, as some say, "If God has chosen me to be saved, then I will be saved no matter what I do." This is a common reaction among sinners. But it is entirely wrong. For when people think of election in this way, they do not think correctly. The Bible does *not* teach that men will be saved "automatically." It does not teach that men will be saved "no matter what they do." The Bible teaches that God has "chosen us in him," that is, in Christ. God has chosen men for a certain destiny, yes, but He has also chosen them

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for a certain relationship which leads to that end. As Paul says, "Whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). In our Catechism studies we will presently go on to see how God's elect are brought, step by step, to their appointed destiny. But here we simply need to see the fact that this idea of being saved "no matter what we do" is a false idea. If a man is elect, it does matter what he does. For he must repent of his sins, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved according to His plan.

It is for this reason that the Catechism speaks of the elect as being saved in the "covenant of grace." In lesson 10 we considered the "covenant of life," or (as it is also designated) "the covenant of works." There we saw quite clearly that no man was "automatically" lost. No man was brought to an estate of sin and misery for no reason, and without any regard to anything else. Rather did we see that all men who are brought into the estate of sin and misery were brought into that estate because they were created in union with Adam, and because they sinned in Adam and fell with him in his first transgression. So it is with the second covenant. For just as God originally dealt with all men through Adam, the representative head of the whole human race, in the covenant of life; so God now deals with His elect people through Jesus Christ, the representative head of the new race of God's people, in the covenant of grace. Looking at the matter this way: (1) the parties in the covenant of grace are the Father and the Son (as a representative person); (2) the condition of this covenant is that Christ (by partaking of human nature) fulfill all the demands of the law in order to receive the promise of life to give to His people; and (3) the promise of the Father is to grant eternal life to all those represented by Jesus Christ. It is only in union with Christ, therefore, that any benefits are given to sinful men. And this means that no one can possibly receive any benefits unless he repents, believes, etc. (except, of course, in the case of infants or insane persons).

Another reaction is commonly observed. People say, "If I am not elected then there is nothing that I can do about it, no matter how much I might want to be saved." The thought here is that a man could want to be saved and that God would not want him saved, or that a man could be willing to come to Christ but that He would not be

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willing to receive him if he did come. This does seem logical to the human mind, darkened by sin as it is. But we can be sure from the teaching of the Bible that things are not what they seem to man's sinful mind. As a matter of fact the Bible clearly teaches that (a) no man wants to be saved in the way that God requires, unless and until God gives a new heart. "Thy people shall be willing," says the Psalmist, "in the day of thy power" (Ps. 110:3). (b) The Bible also teaches that no man who wants to be saved in God's way—who is willing to come to Christ, in other words—will be lost. And (c) the Bible also teaches that those who do not want to be saved by coming to Christ in repentance and faith are wholly to blame for this fact. They cannot say they are unwilling to come because God did not elect them. No, the unwillingness is entirely due to their own sinful preference for not coming to him.

The doctrine of unconditional election is awe-inspiring. It is mysterious (we cannot fully understand all that is involved). But the important thing to realize is that this is what the Bible teaches; God has chosen some men, and not others. And He has done this without any injustice. He has done this so that there will be two, and only two results. On the one hand there will be some who are saved. And when they at last reach heaven they will say this: "I owe it all to God: I did not deserve this. But God chose me, and to him alone be the praise." But, on the other hand, there will be others who are lost. And when they at last reach their sad destination they will only be able to say this: "It is all my own fault. I deserve this. I deserved it because I sinned in Adam and fell with him. But I also deserve it even more because I did not want to come to Christ in true repentance and faith. I did not choose Christ, and to me alone be the blame." It is only when we see these two things—on the one hand, no ground to boast (not even one little thing of self); and on the other hand, no ground to complain—that we can begin to understand the importance and wonder of this doctrine. And, as far as any personal difficulties are concerned, let us always put this truth first—if we really want to be saved in God's way, then we need not fear—"give diligence to make your calling and election sure," says Peter, "for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall; for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10-11).

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REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Give a clear statement of what is meant by "unconditional election."
2. Why has God chosen the persons He has chosen?
3. When has God chosen them?
4. What are the truths concerning this doctrine shown in figure 15.1?
5. Is this doctrine plainly taught in Scripture? If so, where? Give an example.
6. Is unconditional election unfair to those who are not elected? Why?
7. Does election make salvation "automatically certain" for the elect? Why?
8. How are the elect saved?
9. What are some of the things that the elect will certainly do?
10. Why must the elect come to Christ?
11. Can all who want to be saved be saved? Explain.
12. What two great truths does this doctrine help us to see?