

THE
**GOSPEL
PROJECT**

SAVED

Life in the Face of Death

Ed Stetzer
Trevin Wax

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ABOUT THE GOSPEL PROJECT

Some people see the Bible as a collection of stories with morals for life application. But it's so much more. Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it's also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters—even a love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus. This is *The Gospel Project*.

When we begin to see the Bible as the story of redemption through Jesus Christ, God's plan to rescue the world from sin and death, our perspective changes. We no longer look primarily for what the Bible says about us but instead see what it tells us about God and what He has done. After all, it's the gospel that saves us, and when we encounter Jesus in the pages of Scripture, the gospel works on us, transforming us into His image. *We become God's gospel project.*

ABOUT THE WRITERS



Trevin Wax is managing editor for *The Gospel Project* and the author of *Clear Winter Nights*, *Gospel-Centered Teaching*, and *Counterfeit Gospels*. He has served in pastoral roles in the United States and Romania. He and his wife, Corina, reside in Middle Tennessee with their three children.



Ed Stetzer is the president of LifeWay Research Division, a prolific author, and well-known conference and seminar leader. He is the author of “The Exchange,” a blog with *Christianity Today*. In addition to being the executive editor of *The Gospel Project*, he is the lead pastor of Grace Church in Hendersonville, TN, a congregation he planted in 2011.

Barry Cram adapted this material for use with small groups.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Welcome to *The Gospel Project*, a gospel-centered small-group study that dives deep into the things of God, lifts up Jesus, focuses on the grand story of Scripture, and drives participants to be on mission. This small-group Bible study provides opportunities to study the Bible and to encounter the living Christ. *The Gospel Project* provides you with tools and resources to purposefully study God's Word and to grow in the faith and knowledge of God's Son. And what's more, you can do so in the company of others, encouraging and building up one another. Here are some things to remember that will help you maximize the usefulness of this resource:

GATHER A GROUP. We grow in the faith best in community with other believers, as we love, encourage, correct, and challenge one another. The life of a disciple of Christ was never meant to be lived alone, in isolation.

PRAY. Pray regularly for your group members.

PREPARE. This resource includes the Bible study content, three devotionals, and discussion questions for each session. Work through the session and devotionals in preparation for each group session. Take notes and record your own questions. Also consider the follow-up questions so you are ready to participate in and add to the discussion, bringing up your own notes and questions where appropriate.

RESOURCE YOURSELF. Make good use of the additional resources available on the Web at www.gospelproject.com/additionalresources and search for this specific title. Download a podcast. Read a blog post. Be intentional about learning from others in the faith. For tips on how to better lead groups or additional ideas for leading this Bible study, visit: www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject.

GROUP TIME. Gather together with your group to discuss the session and devotional content. Work through the follow-up questions and your own questions. Discuss the material and the implications for the lives of believers and the mission to which we have been called.

OVERFLOW. Remember ... *The Gospel Project* is not just a Bible study. *We* are the project. The gospel is working on us. Don't let your preparation time be simply about the content. Let the truths of God's Word soak in as you study. Let God work on your heart first, and then pray that He will change the hearts of the other people in your group.

Session 1

Because We Are Chosen

The ultimate final cause of our election is that the immense goodness of God and the righteousness of Christ offered to everyone should be everywhere magnified and exalted, not because God has any need of our praise but because by our praise many come to the salvation and blessedness that he offers to all.¹

MARTIN BUCER

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

Even if you know absolutely nothing about football, you could watch a little league game and pick up on the fundamentals. You'd get the gist, right? There are two teams and one ball. Each team gets a few chances to advance the football and score a touchdown. And then they take turns. Oh, and they tackle each other, too. Simple, sweet, and very enjoyable—especially if your son or grandson is playing on the team!

But if you were to be invited to a college football game, you would get more than just the fundamentals. You would gain an entire experience! The massive stadium, the thousands of fans, the history behind the rivalry—this is where your perspective would change a great deal. You would be forced to see the bigger picture.

Describe a time in your life when you gained a bigger vision of something important. In what ways did that change your attitude, emotions, and behavior?

Sometimes we cling to a very small and simple version of Christianity: “If I just ask for forgiveness and I’m a good person, I go to heaven when I die.” For some, that is the entire story. It’s short and sweet. But we need to gain a bigger picture—a bigger vision—of how God is working His plan in Christ for our good and for His glory. When we understand this truth, our experience with God expands. It changes everything.

Those who are in Christ have been chosen by God. Far from leading to pride or never-ending debates, the doctrine of election is a spiritual blessing in Christ. It humbles us, assures us, and leads us to give all glory and praise to our missional God. When we understand the Bible’s teaching on election, we’re able to see the big picture of salvation from God’s perspective. God is at work in Christ, working out our salvation for His glory and the furthering of His mission.

Throughout the week engage these daily study sections on your own. Each of these examines what it means to be chosen by God. There are three daily readings to prepare you before your group meets for this session. Interact with the Scriptures, and be ready to interact with your small group.

1

Election Means God Chose Us

³ Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens. ⁴ For He chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love ⁵ He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will, ⁶ to the praise of His glorious grace that He favored us with in the Beloved.

EPHESIANS 1:3-6

In verse 4 we find what's called the *doctrine of election*—God elects (or chooses) us in Christ. This doctrine can easily make people nervous for many reasons. But it doesn't have to. Think of it this way. Remember when we were kids, and there was a going to be a game played with two teams? The two best players were captains, and they would pick their teammates—one by one. At some point, everyone was picked—even the worst players.

Well, that's what this passage teaches us—except there are no “worst” players. We're all sinners, but God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world “to be holy and blameless in His sight” (v.4). God picked us, and Scripture is clear that God did so not because of us but in spite of us (see 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

How does it feel to be picked for something? How do you respond to this biblical truth that God picked you in Christ to be holy and blameless?

We can try to figure out why God would choose us, but to a certain degree, this will always seem mysterious. So mysterious, in fact, that good biblical Christians offer different explanations.

Review these views of election:

Conditional Election. Some people say election is based on God's foreknowledge of one's faith; in other words, election is conditional depending on a person's choice. Since God is omniscient (all-knowing), He knows all things before they happen, even from eternity past. Therefore, His choice to number someone among the elect is because He knew that person would respond to the gospel in faith and persevere in holy living.

Unconditional Election. Others say God chooses the elect unconditionally, or apart from any consideration of a person's actions, whether good or bad. God, being omniscient, simply chooses some to come to faith in Christ and be saved, without regard to merit or works. This displays His sovereignty, but we can't know why He might choose one person over another.

Corporate Election. Still others understand God's election to mean He chose a class of people—all those who would trust in Christ for salvation, or all those who are "in Christ" (v.3). In this perspective, individuals themselves are not the elect but a group is chosen by God. This believing community has been chosen to receive the promises and spiritual blessings that come through Jesus. It's argued that corporate election in the New Testament corresponds to the corporate election of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament.

If we're honest, we'll recognize how undeserving we are no matter which one of these views we lean toward. There is no cause for boasting. For His electing purpose, we should thank God: "But we must always thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God has chosen you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13).

How does God's choosing you in Christ before the foundation of the world encourage you to live a holy and blameless life in God's sight?

2

Election Means God Has a Plan

⁵ He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will.

EPHESIANS 1:5

Predestination is a biblical word, but what does it mean? Is it scary? Is it controversial? It shouldn't be because it's a function of God's love. Nothing should be scary or controversial about that.

If you want to make predestination simple, here it is. Theologian J. I. Packer offers three words. "God saves sinners."² That includes all of us. That's it. By God's initiative, God does the saving. That doesn't mean we're not responsible to respond to Him. But God saves sinners for His glory so we can say, "God, thank You for saving me. May You receive the glory, the honor, and the praise."

God has a plan for you: you're going to be like Jesus. God looked before you were ever born. He saw you receiving Christ as your personal Savior and Lord. He said, "That one's going to be like Jesus." ... If you're predestined to be like Jesus, *of course* you will be like Jesus. What is foreknown in heaven cannot be annulled by hell. It's predestined; *it is settled!*³

ADRIAN ROGERS

What we must point out, however, is that in order to fully communicate God's Word, we must respond to God's electing, predestining work. In the original Greek translation, Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence. It says we're elected and predestined, and when we believe, we're sealed with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 1:13 says, "When you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed in Him, you were also sealed with the promised Holy Spirit."

Let's look at some other passages that speak of God's plans. In Jeremiah 1:5, God told Jeremiah, "I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations." In Romans 8:29, Paul wrote, "For those He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers." In Ephesians 1:11, Paul also said, "We have also

received an inheritance in Him, predestined according to the purpose of the One who works out everything in agreement with the decision of His will.”

How are you affected by the truth that your salvation isn't an accident but the result of God's plan?

Did you know that, according to the New Testament, all Christians are adopted? Nobody has ever been born into God's family; we've all been adopted. When God chose us, He made a decision about us ahead of time—to bring us into His family because having us in His family brings Him pleasure. He has redeemed us from slavery and adopted us as His children because He loves us and He delights in us.

Galatians 4:4-7 makes this clear:

⁴ When the time came to completion, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

The inheritance of God is ours through our adoption as His children. Jesus told His disciples, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you. I appointed you that you should go out and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give you” (John 15:16). The plan of God, the mission of God, to send His Son to save sinners translates into a plan of action for His adopted children. We've been appointed to go out and produce fruit that will last—to proclaim the good news that Jesus came to seek and save the lost in order that the lost may be found.

What are some specific actions that would reflect the blessing of your adoption through Christ into God's family?

3

Election is About God's Glory

³ Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens. ... ⁶ to the praise of His glorious grace that He favored us with in the Beloved.

EPHESIANS 1:3,6

The first and last thing we see in this passage is a focus on God. When we consider how God has blessed us, it's not hard to see why we should want to bless Him. The Scripture says He's blessed us "with every spiritual blessing." Every good gift "in the heavens" has been granted to us through the greatest gift of all—Jesus Christ. When we're "in Christ," it's as if we're already raised from the dead and seated on a heavenly throne along with our Savior (see Eph. 2:6). We're blessed beyond measure because we're in Christ. How can we not be grateful, thankful, and overflowing with blessing toward the One who blesses us in Christ?

**What are some examples of spiritual blessings we receive from Christ?
How do these spiritual blessings encourage you to praise God?**

Finally, we arrive at the purpose for God's electing work. It doesn't revolve around us, but it does include us. We've hinted at this before, but now Scripture lays it out. The focus here is God's glory.

Election helps us see how big God really is. Sometimes we can become satisfied with a small faith—like it's just about us. But with this doctrine in view, we can't say, "Look at me." We must say, "Look at God!" The God of all the universe is our Father—He adopted us! In love He predestined us. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world so we may be holy and blameless in His sight. Why? So that we may praise Him for His glorious grace that has been given to us in Jesus Christ! God alone deserves all the glory for our salvation.

In what ways does the doctrine of election show us God's glory and His grace?

In what ways have you been reminded of the bigness of God and His massive, redemptive story?

GROUP STUDY

Warm Up

Take a moment to read these quotes about election and predestination from the world of church history and leadership. Each quote sheds light on a different view or angle from which we can learn. For the purpose of this group time, it isn't about one idea trumping the other. Instead, allow these different understandings of election and predestination to complement one another. Charles Spurgeon, a famous preacher in the 19th century, was once asked how he reconciled predestination with free will. Spurgeon just looked at the person who asked him the question and calmly said, "I do not try to reconcile friends."⁴ Let that sink in as you begin your discussion.

In predetermining how salvation would be accomplished, the primary object of predestination was Jesus Christ himself. But in order to bring his saving work to pass, it was necessary for God secondarily to foreordain all the essential means of accomplishing this.⁵

JACK W. COTTRELL, THE FOREKNOWLEDGE VIEW

God predestines all events, yet not in such a way that violates genuine human freedom and choice. God meticulously "sets the table" so that humans freely choose what He had predetermined.⁶

KENNETH KEATHLEY, THE MIDDLE-KNOWLEDGE VIEW

Election refers to God's choosing whom to save. It is unconditional in that there is no condition man must meet before God chooses to save him. Man is dead in trespasses and sins. So there is no condition he can meet before God chooses to save him from his deadness.⁷

JOHN PIPER, THE UNCONDITIONAL VIEW

In what ways have you attempted to understand this biblical truth in the past? Did you lean more towards avoiding or embracing it?

Which notion helps you understand the doctrine of election in a way that is helpful and meaningful to your calling?

Discussion

First John 3:1 states, “Look at how great a love the Father has given us that we should be called God’s children. And we are!” There it is. How great a love the Father has given! We can love God, go to church, put money in the offering plate, and help serve in different ministries, but that doesn’t earn us any kind of right standing with God. Nothing we do can make us a good person before God. The Father has given us a great love; the Father has called us His children. The best thing we can do is recognize it for what it is, and praise Him in return.

During this time you’ll have an opportunity to discuss what God revealed to you during the week. Listed below are some of the questions from your daily reading assignments. They will guide your small-group discussion.

1. Describe a time in your life when you gained a bigger vision or larger view of something important. In what ways did that change your attitude, emotions, and behavior?
2. How does it feel to be picked for something? How do you respond to this biblical truth that God picked you in Christ to be holy and blameless?
3. How does God’s choosing you in Christ before the foundation of the world encourage you to live a holy and blameless life in God’s sight?
4. How are you affected by the truth that your salvation is not an accident but the result of God’s plan?
5. What are some specific actions that would reflect the blessing of your adoption through Christ into God’s family?
6. What are some examples of spiritual blessings we receive from Christ? How do these spiritual blessings encourage you to praise God?
7. In what ways does the doctrine of election show us God’s glory and His grace?
8. In what ways have you been reminded of the bigness of God and His massive, redemptive story?

Conclusion

Grasping the doctrine of election biblically—recognizing the work God has done since before time began to bring about your salvation and sanctification—will enlarge your vision of the greatness of our God. This will help you understand who you are in Christ. This will help you understand the depth of God’s love on display in your salvation. This will help you praise the One who held back nothing to make you His child. God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, and He calls us to respond and to believe.

Spend some time praying this for you and for your group:

“God, teach us how to live by this truth in a way that keeps us humble.
Help us recognize Your sovereign plan as You open doors for us to
build relationships with the lost. Thank You, God, for inviting us to share
in Your mission for reaching the world with the gospel. Amen.”

1. Gerald L. Bray, ed. *Galatians, Ephesians*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 245.
2. J.I Packer, “Introductory Message,” in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* by John Owen (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 4-5.
3. Adrian Rogers, *What Every Christian Ought to Know* (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 59-60.
4. Quoted in Lewis A. Drummond, *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition* (Nashville: B&H, 2001), 122.
5. Jack W. Cottrell, *Perspectives on Election* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 115.
6. Kenneth Keathley, *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 208.
7. John Piper, “What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism,” *Desiring God*, March 1998, Accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-we-believe-about-the-five-points-of-calvinism>
8. Quoted in Thomas C. Oden and Mark J. Edwards, eds., *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 113.



Rescued from Ruin



Scripture, from beginning to end, declares that sin destroys. Because of the fall, life ends with death. But Scripture is equally clear that before time began, God planned a rescue mission. In the outworking of His plan, He calls sinners to salvation. We respond to His call with repentance from sin and faith in Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection secure our salvation. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are united to Christ, from whom we receive life in the face of death.

6 SESSIONS

Because We Are Chosen

Because We Are Called

Because We Have Repented

Because We Believe

Because We Are United

Because We Are Forever

The Gospel Project invites you to dive deeper into the things of God, lifts up Jesus, focuses on the grand story of Scripture, and drives you to be on mission. This small-group Bible study provides opportunities to study the Bible and to encounter the living Christ. And what's more, you can do so in the company of others, encouraging and building up one another.

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