**Obedience & the Election of Grace**

*by Jeremiah Cox*

Obedience, election, and grace are Biblical terms which are intimately related. The evidence for their cohabitation is overwhelming. The three cannot be separated without contradicting God’s revelation. Still, there are those who suggest the sovereignty of God does not allow man any role to play in his salvation, so obedience is insignificant. Also, if salvation is by grace, some suggest, it must be by grace alone, for obedience nullifies grace. If salvation is according to grace, it must completely depend upon God’s election of the individual, and therefore leaves those not elected without hope. Yet, this contradicts God’s desire for all to be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), and what the Bible says about the choice man has regarding his salvation – *“And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely”* (Revelation 22:17). How are obedience and the election of grace related?

In Romans 1-8, the apostle Paul penned the truth concerning the universality of sin (cf. Romans 3:9, 19-20, 23), and the following need for salvation by *“grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith”* (Romans 3:24-25). This section of scripture revealed the wisdom of God in the meat of the gospel plan of salvation for man. Paul began this masterful epistle with the recognition of the source of this power of God to salvation – *“the gospel of Christ”* (Romans 1:16). The faith through which one accesses God’s grace (cf. 5:2) is elicited through the communication of this gospel to its subject (cf. Romans 1:17; 10:17). This provoked many of the Jewish people – ethnic Israel whom God chose as His covenanted people. For, they were a special and privileged people who did not appreciate the thought that lowly Gentiles, who *“were not a people”* (1 Peter 2:10), would be included as gospel subjects – *“for the Jew first and also for the Greek”* (Romans 1:16). The aversion toward the gospel content – namely the view of the Christ – which the Jews possessed led to these words of Paul – *“It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles”* (Acts 13:46).

Romans 9-11 served as Paul’s successful effort to parry the objections to the gospel the Jewish people espoused. They refused to let go of the Law of Moses and all its connections with ethnic Israel in order to humble themselves before the Messiah and His law. In doing so, three objections were raised against the doctrine of Christ which brought accusations against God if the gospel were true. Paul effectively refuted these alleged contradictions, using the content of the Law to do so. Chapter 9 covered these objections. Simply put, the Jews accused God of unfaithfulness to ethnic Israel, and unrighteousness and unfairness in His rejection of them. However, Paul explained that, in His sovereignty, God determined righteousness would be pursued and attained through faith in Christ – *“but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the Law”* (Romans 9:31-32). The only cause for God’s rejection of them was their own unwillingness to submit to the very Christ who came through their lineage to save them – *“But to Israel he says: ‘All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people’”* (Romans 10:21).

*“I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin”* (Romans 11:1). As he explained before, God had not rejected ethnic Israel as a whole. Rather, He rejected those who did not have faith. Those who had faith in Christ, and therefore submitted to the gospel, God accounted their faith for righteousness and accepted them. These are described as the remnant – *“Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved’”* (Romans 9:27). Paul, a Jew, had not been cast away by God. For when the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus and told him, *“Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do”* (Acts 9:6), he did so, *“calling on the name of the Lord”* (cf. Acts 22:16).

Paul explained, *“at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace”* (Romans 11:5). But, what does he mean by, *“according to the election of grace.”* It is clear that the remnant was elected as a matter of the unmerited favor of God bestowed in the gift of His Son (cf. Romans 6:23). It is further noted that the *“remnant”* were a people predetermined to receive salvation by grace, as Isaiah prophesied beforehand, and as Paul wrote in his epistle to the church at Ephesus – *“just as He chose us in him before the foundation of the world…having predestined us to adoption as sons…by which He made us accepted in the Beloved”* (Ephesians 1:4-6). However, it must be understood that the predetermined election of grace was not an arbitrary one expressed toward individual persons. The remnant which would be saved included all who would have faith in Christ, and submit to His will. Paul wrote, *“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to* ***everyone who believes****”* (Romans 10:4). The remnant would be a group of people classified, not according to individual identity, but adherence to conditions placed by God.

Once again, Paul explained this by turning to the content of the Old Testament. This time he alluded to the account of the prophet of God, Elijah – *“Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, ‘Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life’? But what does the divine response say to him? ‘I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace”* (Romans 11:2-5). After his victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (cf. 1 Kings 18), Elijah was troubled by Jezebel’s threat, and thought he alone was faithful in Israel. God assured him he was not alone, but there were seven thousand like him who had not served Baal. These are paralleled with the *“remnant according to the election of grace.”* How were those in the days of Elijah elected? How were they accepted by God? God had said, *“You shall have no other gods before Me…you shall not bow down to them nor serve them”* (Exodus 20:3, 5). Those who obeyed this command were accepted by Him. They had not earned God’s favor, for the truth stood even then concerning the universality of sin (cf. Romans 3:23), but they had faithfully submitted to God’s requirements. So it was with the remnant of Israel in the last days. On Pentecost, Peter preached the gospel of Christ, and *“those who gladly received his word were baptized”* (Acts 2:41). Those who did not, God did not accept.

In His love for mankind, God determined to provide an escape from death to which sin leads. In His sovereignty, God alone made the choice regarding the people who would receive this Divine favor – *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,* ***that whoever believes*** *in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16). However, the majority of people will not be saved, because *“they have not all* ***obeyed*** *the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has* ***believed*** *our report?’”* (Romans 10:16). They refuse to be a part of *“the election of grace,”* being disobedient to the Divine command. Men are elected by God’s grace when they obey the gospel of Jesus Christ.