

Joy Designed

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by [Tony Reinke](#)

Topics: [Joy](#)



Left to ourselves, we are stuck in the mud of our *total depravity* — the centripetal wrapping of our affections around ourselves. We turn away from God for our joy, and choke ourselves with the slavery of self-glory. Like hot ocean water spinning off hurricanes of hostility into the world, our depravity spawns lies against one another, bitter envy, heated relational breakdowns, wicked acts of terror, and world wars.

The big question is whether God will simply stand back and let all this depravity devolve into deeper and deeper chaos? Will he simply wash creation with a flood and flush man down a cosmic sewer and be done with it all? Or will he break in to fix the mess? He has the power to intervene, but does he want to? Will he inconvenience himself to step in and stop the downfall of this self-twisted mankind bent on self-destruction?

To answer these questions, we hit pause on the human drama unfolding on earth to look up into heaven and back into eternity past. The depravity in man's heart did not catch God by surprise. Before giving Adam the command not to eat from the one tree, God knew what would transpire. It was tragic and terrible, and yet it was not outside of his plan.

With this backdrop in place, we now consider the grace of God in his cosmic strategy. God reaches into the drama we call human history to choose for himself a people who will not be left to their own self-chosen self-destruction. And he uses one common human metaphor to help us understand his heart and his work.

Hosea

Hosea is a stunning book, filled to the brim with all the depravities churning in the soul of even the most religious — lust, rebellion, idolatry, it's all there. And yet this tiny Old Testament book is not merely a tool for diagnosing the heart, and not only a tragic story about the insufficiency of claiming membership in the right religious group, but it's also a relational story about a husband (Hosea) and his marriage to a sexually promiscuous wife (Gomer) and their wayward children.

The book of Hosea will snap your heart like a pencil. The promiscuous wife, who you hope will become a reputable wife, instead returns to her adulteries and lewd indulgences. What could hurt worse? This is not prime-time television drama, but a metaphor of what Israel has done with their loving God. This is a parable, acted out in the flesh. God's relationship with Israel is seen in Hosea's dysfunctional marriage to Gomer, and intensifies the picture of how deep Israel's sins have cut down into the heart of God.

Anguish and despair cry out from the pages, but as in many other blood stories, it's ultimately a story of redemption, idiomatic of how we understand God's sovereignty and election, so essential to the apostles, there's little hope of understanding the language of divine sovereignty or so-called "Calvinism" without understanding the heartbreak of Hosea.

The God of Hosea is an electing God. He chooses. He initiates. The book of Hosea is a book about marriage, *because* it's a book about election ([Hosea 9:10](#); [11:1](#); [13:5](#)).

Unconditional Election

This sovereign desire of God, in eternity past, to gather a people for himself, is what Calvinists have called "unconditional election," the U in TULIP. Out of all the God-ignoring sinners, God chose a people for himself. He is their father, and they are the object of his eternal love and affection and delight. These sinful elect did nothing to earn God's action. The sinful elect are not "more worthy" of this grace. That's why it's called *unconditional*. There is no favoritism.

Election takes a slightly different form in the Old Testament (where God elects for himself a physical nation), compared to the New Testament (where God elects for himself individuals, a spiritual people). But as we will see, the two are deeply connected.

Ultimately, God desires to elect for himself a chosen people, not merely the nation of Israel, but also individuals from among the Gentile pagan nations ([Hosea 1:1–2:23](#)). To prove this point, the apostle Paul will cite Hosea ([Romans 9:22–26](#)).

The language holds true across the Bible. God can make this promise to sinners: “I will heal their apostasy. I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them” ([Hosea 14:4](#)). This is the heart behind God’s electing love. To paraphrase Puritan Thomas Boston, God’s sovereign love will make a net to infallibly catch souls. God will tenderly allure his chosen by his unrelenting sovereign grace ([Hosea 2:14–23](#)).

Delighting to Love

To a reader of the Old Testament, the theme of God’s electing love in Hosea finds its way into the storyline of the Old Testament in other beautiful places, like this one:

Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. ([Deuteronomy 10:14–15](#))

God’s election in Scripture is predicated on this foundational phrase: he “set his heart in love” on his chosen people ([Deuteronomy 7:7](#); [10:15](#)). It’s the same language used in Scripture to describe a man’s pursuit of a woman to be his wife. When it comes to election, God’s language is vivid and strong, writes John Piper, who amplifies the translation of [Deuteronomy 10:15](#) to its fuller meaning: “The LORD delighted in your fathers to love them.” To be elected is to be deeply loved by God ([Colossians 3:12](#); [1 Thessalonians 1:4–5](#)).

God delights to love. His electing love is deeply personal — with the intensity that most of us can only perceive in the picture of romantic attraction that fans into the flame of marriage. But this love is not to be confused with the royal wedding of the solemn-faced who seem irritated to have had their day disrupted by stiff and stifling pageantry. Quite the contrary.

The Old Testament teaches us a lot about God’s love. God’s love is selective — his electing love is not general love, but exclusive. God’s love is voluntary — God is not bound to love anyone or everyone in a territory like the pagan gods of the day. God’s love hunts — it seeks out for those

to enter into a relationship of mutual delight. And God's love is spontaneous — “it is not caused by any worth or attractiveness in its object, but rather creates worth in its object.”

In other words, God does not choose every sinner to be his elect. Why? That is a question we cannot get answered beyond Paul's rhetorical question in [Romans 9:22–23](#). God's choice is his indisputable prerogative. But what we do know is that unconditional election is deeply personal. God sets his unstoppable love on certain sinners. This was his plan from eternity past: Depraved souls stuck in the unceasing cycle of sin and death will be the object of his love ([Ephesians 1:3–23](#)). It speaks not to merit in the sinner, but to the magnificence of his love.

Pure Act of Pleasure (for Glory)

But is this merely an act of a pardoning judge who is disconnected, distant, and reluctant? Or has he really drawn this close to us? Does God really delight to elect?

A passage that communicates the essence of God's heart in election is found in the New Covenant prophecy of [Jeremiah 32:41](#): “I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.”

It means God chooses people, not simply out of pity for their depravity, but as objects of his delight. They will be the objects of his special love.

In the history of the church, few theologians have grasped this reality more deeply — or been more deeply grasped by it — than Puritan Thomas Goodwin. The seventeenth century theologian defines election as God's “pure act of good pleasure.” And he encourages Christians to “consider that God, in choosing you, not only loved you, but *delighted* to love you. It was not barely an act of will that he would choose some, he cared not whom, as being indifferent about it; but it was an act of love, and not of love only, but of good pleasure and of delight too. . . . God rejoiced over you from everlasting, in his intentions to do you good, with his whole heart and his whole soul.”

God loves like this because our happiness is at stake. And even more, because his glory is at stake. Goodwin wrestles with how to say this best, eventually expressing it like this: “Look one way, and you think he loved us as if he regarded nothing else; look on the other side, and the glory of his grace does so appear that we seem to be forgotten, and God's glory alone shines in it.”

This two-fold plan is wrapped into one glorious knot. From one angle it looks like the spotlight of attention has been focused on the elect, as God's pure act of pleasure in choosing particular sinners for himself. From another angle, it's as if the elect fade away as the splendor of God's sovereign grace takes center stage ([1 Peter 2:9](#)). And it's both! Goodwin is on the verge of a magnificently glorious truth. In election, God pursues his own exaltation by inviting sinners to enjoy him forever.

We can put some of the pieces together here. Unconditional election reveals God's purposes, including these four simultaneous intentions:

- Election is the first stage of God's unfolding intention to delight in his chosen.
- Election is the first step of God's aim to magnify his sovereign grace.
- Election is the first step of God's intention to woo the hearts of his depraved people with God-centered delight.
- Election is God's foundational act to ensure his delight in the elect, the expression of his glory, and the joy of the elect, are all braided together into one purposeful end.

At this point in redemptive history, in eternity past, God has placed on his elect an inestimable value, giving them worth beyond all the gold in the universe, beyond any personal cost to draw them to himself. Twisted, sinful, and depraved though they will become in their sin, God's chosen people are precious to him.

But we have gotten ahead of ourselves.

Images of Grace

So how do we picture this reality?

Perhaps we can imagine unconditional election like hunting. A hungry grizzly bear sits blissfully focused on a berry bush. A camouflaged hunter hides 100-yards away in tall grass, watching through a tranquilizer rifle sight. Sinners set their delights on petty things of the world while God tracks. We don't understand. We don't see him. He knows us and pursues. The elect are ignorant, stuck in their shortsighted interests, as they are singled out and hunted.

But this is all too impersonal, too random.

Any way we think of it, we get thrown back on the marriage metaphor.

Unconditional election is the very first step toward a wedding, planned in eternity past, that no sinner on earth can perceive. This goes back as far as the story of a wedding can reach. It is the first sight of a woman by a man from across a crowded room, a sight that will lead to a conversation, a conversation that will lead to a relationship, and a relationship that will lead to marriage vows.

But in this case, the marriage metaphor of election cannot begin with the attractive beauty of the bride. God makes his initial move toward his bride while she is morally unattractive. She is Gomer. In appropriately raw language, to be elected by God is to be a specially chosen whore pulled from a brothel. We cringe at the language of the dark side of the beautiful wedding metaphor. But we cannot make sense of election without it. In eternity past, God makes up his mind. He will elect for himself spiritual adulterers who are depraved, and he will love them to himself, and for eternity. This act of unmerited love will make the marriage language of Hosea shine in brilliant grace and point forward to an unfolding marriage-love connection to eventually be revealed in greater detail ([Ephesians 5:22–33](#)).

Looking back to God's election in eternity past, God's pursuit is settled and resolved. God initiates this love by his pure spontaneity — his own unconditional and self-determined initiative. There is nothing in the elect, no beauty, no value, nothing within them to attract God's love. Anything from God for the happiness of sinners is entirely unmerited. The worth of God's elect is established by God's delight in setting his love on them.

At this point, God's heart swells with eager delight to redeem a people to enjoy. Knowing our total depravity, this truth should leave us totally staggered and in awe of his love. He earnestly loves those he has predestined to save. But he cannot express his full delight in his elect before they are created, and certainly not after the Fall, with hearts dead and stuck in sin. God's delight in the elect is incomplete at the point of predestination.

And we are far away from a wedding day. There is so much more to say about *how* he will do this and *why* he is doing it in the first place. But the wedding plans are set in motion. There will be a wedding.

So what's next?

Action Required

God's sinful children need more than promises and plans. Just like in Hosea, God will not merely woo us with words; he will draw us with deeds. For God to find his full delight in his elect children, and for them to delight in him, he must take redemptive action. Electing love has always obligated redemptive feats, like a rescue out of Egypt and through water in the first exodus ([Deuteronomy 4:37;7:8](#)).

For now, God's eternal delight in his chosen elect is bursting in marriage metaphors, but it's also met by the darkness of depravity. His plan now hinges on a new redemptive act, a second exodus.

When the time is right, an elect Son will arrive, a Son led by the Spirit and relished by his Father. He will stride out of Egypt's sand and step through water ([Hosea 11:1](#); [Isaiah 42:1](#); [Matthew 3:16–17](#)).

“God pursues his own exaltation by inviting sinners to enjoy him forever.” [Tweet](#)

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- [The Van Gogh that Breaks My Heart](#) (Introduction)
- [The World's Joy-Tragedy](#) (Total Depravity)
- [Joy Designed](#) (Unconditional Election)

Sources: Thomas Boston, *The Works of Thomas Boston*, 8:146. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Multnomah: 2000), 128–9, n7. The entry on צְדָקָה in Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Zondervan: 1997), 280–1. Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: 1863), 1:109; 6:175; 7:248; 9:424. Mark Seifrid on Romans in G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Baker Academic: 2007), 647. D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Crossway: 2000), 18. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Baker Academic; 2003), 3:561–9. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (P&R: 1992), 1:242.

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