

“Appointed to Eternal Life” (Acts 13:48)

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“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing, and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48 NASB).

What a fascinating Scripture! A simple, plain, and clear statement. This verse has provoked my theological curiosity even as a teenager, when I first started reading the Bible. Throughout my spiritual journey, I have pondered over the meaning of this verse. The brief article presented here is not a theological discussion of the meaning of this verse, but rather a simple investigation of the text from an exegetical point of view, to accurately understand its plain sense.

We are always tempted to cloud the clear and obvious meaning of a Scriptural statement by imposing theological “isms” and “systems” on it. Theological analysis may be necessary at times to probe the meaning of a text. But that should only be secondary to the primary exegetical focus. What does Acts 13:48 say? How do we understand the meaning of “appointed” to eternal life? This verse expresses one of the great enigmatic truths of Scripture. Though the question of *divine appointment* to eternal life may be mysterious and incomprehensible to our minds, we believe it as God has declared it in His Word. I see that clearly taught in this text.

Acts 13:48 summarizes the response of the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch to the powerful preaching of the Gospel by the Apostle Paul. This contrasts with the Jewish animosity to the Gospel. They chose to repudiate the Gospel, and by so doing, judged themselves unworthy of eternal life (Acts 13:46). They brought the verdict on themselves by their own choice. But when the good news of salvation was offered to the Gentiles, they rejoiced and glorified the word of the Lord (they honored it as a message from God); and as many of them as had been *appointed* to eternal life believed.

The Meaning of “Appointed” in Acts 13:48

The Greek verb *tasso* (the perfect passive participle form of the verb is used in this verse) is translated as “**appointed**” in most translations (NASB, NKJV, ESV, HCSB, NIV, NET; “**ordained**” in KJV, RSV, Darby). Most scholars agree that the sense of the word is “ordained” or “appointed” and that is certainly the sense in which we must understand it. Since nothing in the text or context requires a different sense, we should go with the ordinary sense of the word. Interestingly, the Latin Vulgate version reads, “as many as were preordained.”

The Greek verb *tasso* was a popular military word meaning “to arrange” or “to assign” (assigning or arranging a body of soldiers in regular military order). Darrel Bock in his superb exegetical commentary on Acts has some perceptive comments about the word *tasso* in Acts 13:48: “Those who have been ordained to eternal life believe. The word (*tasso*, ordain) appears four times in Acts (13:48; 15:2; 22:10; 28:23; in the rest of the NT; Matt.28:16-17; Luke 7:8; Rom.13:1; 1 Cor.16:15-16). In the other contexts in Acts, it means “appoint” or “assign” to

something. Here it refers to God's sovereign work in salvation, where God has assigned those who come to eternal life..... The passive voice indicates that God does the assigning. It is as strong a passage on God's sovereignty as anywhere in Luke-Acts....." (*Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on The New Testament, 464-65).

One of the foremost New Testament scholars of the last century, F.F. Bruce, points out that there is papyrus evidence for the verb *tasso* in the sense of "inscribe" or "enroll" (*The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on The New Testament, Footnote 72, 283-84). Bruce also cites examples of similar usages from Rabbinical literature which means "written for eternal life". The idea of enrolled in the book of life is found in several passages in the Bible (Ex.32:32-33; Ps.69:28; Phil.4:3; Rev.3:5; 13:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; 22:19).

The verb translated "**appointed**" is in the perfect tense in Greek, which describes an action that was completed in the past with continuing results. The verb is in the passive voice (an instance of "divine passive") and God is the subject though the text does not say who appointed them to eternal life. We also do not read here about *when* the *appointment* was made (though it can be found elsewhere in Scripture, e.g., Eph.1:4). But the verse clearly states that those who had been *appointed* believed. The grammar requires that their appointment took place before they believed. The statement is a confirmation of God's sovereignty in salvation. Possession of eternal life involves both divine appointment and human faith. Luke sees no contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Both truths are clearly affirmed in this text.

The evangelists were only harvesting the wheat that God had already prepared. We may well confess that we do not understand how the dual emphasis of divine choice and the human choice intersect, but they do relate to one another. The human responsibility of believing is shown to coincide with what God has sovereignly planned. This is a truth that stands out in this text.

Can "Appointed To" Mean "Disposed To" in Acts 13:48?

Some commentators (e.g., Alford, Adam Clarke, Maclaren etc.) who are opposed to the idea of divine appointment/election/predestination in relation to salvation, have tried to downplay or soften the meaning of "appointed." To them the word "ordained" or "appointed" simply means "**devoted to,**" or "**disposed to.**" They would have the words rendered, "as many as were disposed unto eternal life believed." Maclaren takes "ordained" as meaning 'adapted' or 'fitted. "The reference then would be to the frame of mind of the heathen, and not to the decrees of God" (*Exposition of Holy Scripture*, 11:48). Alford considers the Greek participle form "appointed" as in the middle voice (and not in the passive voice as it is usually taken), giving it a completely different understanding. In this case it is not to be seen as "appointed" or "ordained", but as something closer to "marshalled themselves, prepared themselves, or disposed themselves" (*The Greek New Testament*, II:153).

Those who support the “disposed” or “devoted” view see the Gentiles in Acts 13:48 as God-fearing Gentile proselytes who had already put their faith in God and were interested to know more about God’s revelation of grace (13:42-43). They were already disposed favorably to the Gospel. It is these who believed the message Paul preached. They were disposed to eternal life. According to Vance, this is an instance in which people can prepare or position themselves to respond favorably to any future truth of God if they remain open and receptive to the truth God is revealing to them right now (*Other Side of Calvinism*, 347). Hence, there is no divine appointment here, only human disposition, devotion, and frame of mind - “as many as turned themselves toward eternal life believed”, or “as many as disposed themselves toward eternal life believed.”

Some who are opposed to the idea of divine appointment in salvation try to see several things that Acts 13:48 does not say. To them, the verse has a degree of ambiguity. They are not willing to see what the text clearly states. Opposing the Calvinistic doctrine of Unconditional Election seems to be their main mission and they analyze this text with a theological grid than looking at the plain sense of the verse. Laurance Vance’s explanation of this verse is a typical example of this trend (Vance, *Other Side of Calvinism*, 347).

As Bruce observes, “we cannot agree with those who attempt to tone down the predestinarian note of this phrase by rendering “as many as were disposed to eternal life” (F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, Footnote 72, 283). Human disposition toward God or eternal life is an unscriptural doctrine. In our total depravity, we do not prepare ourselves to receive the grace of God. Those who believed in Jesus and received eternal life from Him all ascribe the credit to God’s grace, and His grace alone. Even when people have spiritual disposition and inclinations it does not always result in belief and salvation. Some people may have a favorable approach to the Gospel. But they embrace eternal life only by the sovereign operation of the grace of God upon their hearts. I am reminded of Lydia’s conversion. While Paul preached to her, the Lord opened her heart so that she became a faithful disciple (Acts 16:14-15).

John Gill’s explanation is helpful:

“Moreover, the phrase of being “disposed unto”, or “for eternal life”, is very unusual, if not a very improper, and an inaccurate one; men are said to be disposed to an habit, or to an act, as to vice or virtue, but not to reward or punishment, as to heaven or hell; nor does it appear these Gentiles had any good dispositions to eternal life, antecedent to their believing.....admitting that there are, in some, good dispositions to eternal life, previous to faith, and that desiring eternal life, and seeking after it, be accounted such, yet these may be where faith does not follow; as in the young rich ruler , that came to Christ with such an inquiry, and went away sorrowful: as many therefore as are so disposed, do not always believe, faith does not always follow such dispositions.....” (“Acts 13:48: Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible”, *StudyLight.org*).

In all its occurrences in the New Testament and in extra-biblical literature, the word *tasso* is never used to denote an internal disposition, inclination or devotion arising from one's own self. In its usage in Acts 13:48, we have no reason to believe that the Gentiles disposed themselves to embrace eternal life. Such a notion goes against biblical soteriology (the doctrine of Salvation). Saving faith is not something that resides in all humanity to some degree and, therefore needs to be stirred up or directed to the proper object.

What Shall We Say Then?

My only interest in this paper was to explain a verse that was fascinating to me from my early Christian days. Its simple meaning communicated God's sovereignty in saving me and I appreciated it even before I had any exposure to systems of theology. Even today, I enjoy the plain and simple meaning of this verse apart from any theological framework. At the same time, I acknowledge the fact that the meaning of this verse has theological overtones. As we delve deep into its meaning, it naturally takes us into the mysteries of the sovereign grace of God in the outworking of God's redemptive plan.

I enjoy reading the comments of William MacDonald on Acts 13:48. MacDonald was a dispensational commentator who wrote most of his works in a simple style for Christian believers. I consider his comments as well balanced theologically and highlight the basic theology in this verse.

"This verse is a simple statement of the sovereign election of God. It should be taken at its face value and believed. The Bible teaches that God chose some before the foundation of the world to be in Christ. It teaches with equal emphasis that man is a free moral agent and if he will accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he will be saved. Divine election and human responsibility are both scriptural truths, and neither should be emphasized at the expense of the other. While there seems to be a conflict between the two, this conflict exists only in the human mind, and not in the mind of God" (*Believer's Bible Commentary*, 1623).

Do you think God wants to choose you, and the devil also wants to choose you, but your choice is the tie – breaker? My friend, that is not what Acts 13:48 teaches. "As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." I do not know about you, but I don't want to boast and say, "Jesus could not have done it without me!"