



Do I choose God or does God choose me?

Why would God choose me?

Who, me?

It was summer in the inner city. Anthony, Karly, Amber, and Jensen were with their suburban high school youth group for a work mission with some of the poorest and least-advantaged kids in a city more than a thousand miles from their homes. Their youth group was in charge of leading a vacation Bible school for the children of Hope Community Church, which met in a building that had more bullet holes than anyone cared to count. Each day, a small team from the youth group was in charge of introducing the Bible verse and theme for the day, then choosing songs, skits, and stories to illustrate that theme. The four were drinking ice water at the table in their hosts' non-air conditioned home while planning tomorrow's theme.

"So how are we supposed to convince these kids that God chooses them?" asked Jensen.

"Yeah," said Karly. "Most of them have never had anybody choose them before. They won't have any idea what we're talking about."

Amber sighed and fanned herself with her notebook. "If there's anything I've learned in the three days we've been here it's that these kids are smart. There's something in their eyes that says they know more than any kid should."

"But it's not 'good' stuff," lamented Anthony. "They know dads leave and moms go to jail; that big brothers get shot, and grandmas fall down the stairs and can't take care of you anymore. You end up living with 10 other kids you aren't related to in a foster home."

“Or you hit the streets and join a gang to get by,” Amber jumped in. “You’re right. Nobody’s choosing these kids. When I went to Sunday school I learned that God was like a heavenly Father. That worked for me because I know my dad loves me. Even since he and my mom divorced he stays close to me. Sometimes we even have dinner together as a family. He chooses to be with me.”

Karly tapped her pencil to her chin. “A few of these kids have been adopted. Maybe we can talk about God choosing them like an adoptive mom chooses her new child. We adopted my brother from an orphanage in Guatemala when he was three. It was pretty cool. We love telling him the story that he was chosen by us even when his biological parents couldn’t any more.”

“But what about the other kids in the room who will never be adopted?” Anthony insisted. “Won’t they wonder what’s wrong with them? The last thing we want to do is alienate them more. We’re supposed to be helping!”

Ice clinked in glasses as they sipped in silence.

Jensen’s face lit up. “How about the Uncle Sam poster changed to show Jesus: I WANT YOU!” The other three only stared. “Okay, okay. Bad idea. I’m grasping here.”

“We all are, Jensen,” sighed Karly. “Maybe we should read the Bible verses again and see if anything comes to us.”

“Good idea, Karly. You read the first passage, and I’ll take the second one,” said Amber. “Jensen, you’re the artist in the group. Draw anything that comes to mind as we read. The rest of us will take notes as we go. Ready?”

And so everything has being because
of God’s love.

—Julian of Norwich, *Meditations with Julian of Norwich*.¹² Julian of Norwich was a 14th-century mystic who received 16 visions and wrote about God’s goodness, love, and being in us.

START THE CONVERSATION

Does the Bible get in the way of Jesus’ message?

One of the loveliest aspects of the New Testament is Jesus’ willingness to teach everyone who was receptive, including the disempowered and social outcasts. In fact, some of those who were receptive were the people who did not already believe they had the answers and who were not invested in the status quo. How does one offer this part of the Bible story to people who—like the fictional children from the lesson’s story—have not experienced dependable love and security? In what ways can the language and examples of the Bible, couched in an ancient context, get in the way of someone today understanding it? In what ways can they be welcoming? If you were one of the kids sitting around the table in this story, what suggestions would you make?



BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

How do we enter the conversation?

Despite a long history of animosity between Jews and Samaritans, in John 4:7-42 we have a story of Jesus sitting alone by a well and engaging a Samaritan woman in conversation. Jesus did not scorn to teach a Samaritan woman, who by virtue of her gender and her community would have been dismissed by most Jews of Jesus' day. Jesus chose to open the conversation, to choose *her*.

TALK IT OVER

Suppose you find yourself talking with someone from your school who feels alone and is in a great deal of emotional pain. You would like to comfort this person by sharing Jesus' message. How would you act? What words or gestures would you use?



Jesus chooses all of us. We have the opportunity—as the Samaritan woman did—to stay and listen and learn how to live. We do not have to become someone other than we are right now before becoming a disciple. Jesus no longer walks among us as a man, however. How can we enter the conversation? How can we invite others to join us?

I have wandered in pursuit of voices that
drew me, yet led me nowhere.

Now let me sit in peace and listen to Your
words in the soul of my silence.

—Rabindranath Tagore, *The Heart of God: Prayers of Rabindranath Tagore*.¹³ Tagore was an Indian poet, musician, and thinker who received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913.

What about those whose need is great?

Isaiah 49:8-16 gives us a series of comforting affirmations of God's dedication to God's chosen people: God will answer. God will call them out of darkness and guide them home from all directions. They will not be troubled by weather, hunger, or thirst. God is more faithful to God's people than a nursing mother to her child. This could provide great comfort and joy for those who accept that God has chosen them. What, however, would it mean for people who *are* troubled by darkness, weather, hunger, and thirst? Is it likely that someone who is homeless, for example, would feel "chosen"? How can people who are deeply in need trust and rest in God's faithfulness to them—regardless of life's struggles?

TALK IT OVER

Why is it so difficult to accept that God has chosen us? What kinds of experiences would make this easier to accept? More difficult? What is our responsibility toward those who have reason to feel left out of God's love?



MY LIFE

Is unconditional love a prerequisite?

Perhaps you can think of students from your school who would have little or no experience with unconditional love and acceptance. Maybe this is you or one or more of your friends. How

TALK IT OVER

How did Jesus break down barriers that separated people so that they were receptive to what he taught?



would this reality impact a person's ability to accept that he or she is chosen by God? If an individual does not feel chosen and loved by someone, how is this person likely to behave toward others? Not experiencing love could easily lead to unlovely behavior, which is likely to lead to more rejection. Is unconditional love experienced in life a prerequisite for the ability to believe that God loves unconditionally?

REALITY CHECK

[T]OTAL MEMBERSHIP IN THE SEVEN LARGEST MAIN-LINE PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS—UNITED METHODIST, EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN, EPISCOPAL, PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA), DISCIPLES OF CHRIST, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, AND AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES—FELL A TOTAL OF 7.4 PERCENT FROM 1995 TO 2004, BASED ON TALLIES REPORTED TO THE YEARBOOK OF AMERICAN AND CANADIAN CHURCHES.

—Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Some Protestant churches feeling 'mainline' again"¹⁴

POINT COUNTERPOINT

Can evil change?

One winter's day a farm-hand found a snake frozen stiff with the cold, and moved by compassion he picked it up and put it in his bosom. But with the warmth its natural instinct returned, and it gave its benefactor a fatal bite. As he died he said: "I have got what I deserve for taking pity on an evil creature."

—Aesop, *Fables of Aesop*¹⁵

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (Mathew 5:44-45)

This story shows that even the greatest kindness cannot change a bad nature. Aesop is thought to have been an ugly, misshapen slave from the 6th century B.C.

Imagine a conversation between Jesus and Aesop. What do you think they would say to one another?



FYI

Why would God choose me when I don't even like myself?

A 2001 poll conducted by the magazine *Campus Life* revealed that 52 percent of readers struggled with depression, but only 16 percent had been diagnosed with the illness. Readers reported feeling a sense of shame over being depressed since Jesus promises abundance in a truly faithful life. The *Campus Life* report, however, stresses that doubt and other issues of spirituality usually are “the result of depression, not the cause” and that if you are depressed, talking with a pastor or other professional counselor is the most useful response.¹⁶

Jesus gives us a lived example of unconditional love for others. As a part of the body of Christ, what does it mean to have unconditional love for ourselves?

Take a few minutes to write down examples you've encountered of unconditional love.

Talk with your group about how those examples apply to loving yourself.

RESOURCE

National suicide and depression hotlines are available from anywhere in the United States and Canada. Visit www.befrienders.org/support/helplines.asp to locate these numbers.

CHALLENGE

Take a few minutes to imagine one specific thing you can do this week to demonstrate unconditional love for someone you know—and then do it.



PRAYER

*Dear Lord,
Help us to believe you have chosen us. Then, please help us to live our lives in a manner that demonstrates our joy in your gift. Amen.*