

Treasuring God for Selecting Us

By David de Bruyn

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.
(Eph 1:4-6)

We began last week by looking at 1:3 which is a summary of the first three chapters. We saw that the theme is to love God for all He is for us in Jesus. And we saw in Jesus God is all positive toward us, God is comprehensive – He covers every need we have, He is concerned with the eternal and He is concerned with the spiritual.

Now, Ephesians 1:3-14 is actually one sentence – it is the longest sentence in the N.T, to my knowledge. Each verse really begins with a follow on from the end of the previous verse. So verse 4 begins as an explanation of God has blessed us. “according as” is the clue.

And what is at the top of Paul’s list when it comes to spiritual blessing? The blessing of election and predestination. We are to call God ‘blessed’ because of election. How sad that Paul’s first thought when He was explaining why God is blessed, his crown jewel of rejoicing in God, has become such a theological battlefield. Were it not for man’s faulty logic in creating all kinds of theological systems, we would probably read Ephesians 1:4, and with Paul say, “Blessed be God for choosing us!” That is the approach I want to take tonight – to read it in the context of praising God. Election is not something to be feared, or to be fought over, it is something to be rejoiced over.

Now let me just insert something here about what I call the danger of theological name-calling. In discussing the subject of God’s election, people resort to trying to classify each other’s views instead of focusing on Scripture. People are generally more attached to title than they are to teachings. It’s a lot easier to say – ‘Oh he’s a Calvinist, or –he’s an Arminian, than it is to simply deal with what the text. I am not defending any man-made system here. I do not claim to be a Calvinist or an Arminian because those terms mean different things to different people. Of course, correctly understood, one is more or less Calvinistic, or more or less Arminian, but those terms still have a lot of unhelpful baggage. Furthermore, I am not fond of being pigeonholed and ‘classified’ by those who are too lazy to find out what the Bible says, and prefer to make everything in the Bible a case of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. When we get into this habit of trying to classify everyone, we actually inhibit our own growth. We come to texts like this, and our mind goes to our ‘theological camp’ before it goes to interpreting the text. It prejudices our interpretations. And it is because we are more interested in ‘belonging’ than we are in ‘believing’. Instead of trying to put a theological name of what we are going to look at, let us simply call it the teaching of Ephesians 1:4-6.

So, we see firstly...

The Fact of Election

What is Paul saying here? I believe he is saying in plain language what we read in plain language. If you are a believer – God chose you before the foundation of the world, in Christ.

I really believe if we will allow these words to stand in the context of treasuring God for all He is for us in Jesus, we will find great joy in what Paul is teaching. But is the personal election of the believer to salvation what Paul is teaching here? Again, because man's logic so often gets in the way, people have tried not to explain these verses, but to explain them away. Here are some examples:

1) God elects the church, not individuals

It is like saying the coach chose the soccer team. I am in the soccer team, but he didn't choose me, he chose the soccer team. Well obviously, he had to choose individuals to make up the soccer team.

Similar to this theory is the one that says:

2) God chose Christ, not individuals

So, this is just a variation of the same idea. He chose us 'in Christ'. I believe this refers to the sphere of election. In other words, whoever God chose in Christ, He chose to salvation, because to be in Christ is to be saved. God chose a bride for Christ, in Christ. But it just begs the question – how did we end up chosen in Christ? It doesn't deal with the question, it effectively raises another one:

3) God elects us to service, not salvation.

Answer: There is no Scripture to support this idea. 2 Thes 2:13 says the very opposite. What is clear is that God predestinates us to be like His Son. But predestination is not the same thing as election – choosing. Furthermore, how can one be chosen for a task, without choosing the individual? Can I say to someone, "I need people to cut my grass. I choose you to do it. But I am not choosing you; I am choosing what you will do."?

Probably the most popular theory used today to explain election is the one that says...

4) God elects based upon our choice

Basically, this says- "God looked down the corridors of time, saw who would respond positively to the Gospel, and then essentially worked backwards and said – "OK, now I choose them". Now, I don't believe this is what Paul is saying. I think God certainly knew when He made His choice what all our choices would be, probable, potential and actual.

But the phrase 'before the foundation of the world' is intended to eliminate human action as the primary motive for the choice. God's knowledge of our choices may well have been involved, but to say God chose on the basis of our choice is to make a statement that the Bible does not explicitly support. John 15:16 is where Christ emphasizes that His choice is not a reaction to ours:

“Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.”

What we have to see, is that when we approach election, philosophy gets in the way. Philosophy is man’s wisdom that says things like “It can’t be! It must be! God would never! God must!” We approach election with a lot of philosophical baggage which we may have inherited from our church background, our family, our culture – many possible sources. And sadly, very few people let the text say what it says without embellishing on it, or totally taking its teeth out.

The text says:

God individually elects us to salvation.

God, before you were in existence, by His foreknowledge, made the choice of you as a believer. This is the fact of election. We read of it elsewhere:

“But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth:”(2Th 2:13)

You’ll notice there Paul mentions 3 parts of our salvation – the Father’s choosing, the Spirit’s drawing and our believing. They are not to be taken apart from each other. But what is clear is God has chosen us to salvation.

“Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.” (1Th 1:4)

Again, recall – Paul is not on the defensive with this doctrine, He is using it to cause us to exult in God. It shows you how far we have come from what God intended when we do not immediately rejoice with Paul when we read it.

Why is this an exceedingly positive thing? Why should thinking on our individual election to salvation cause us to praise God?

- 1) God’s sovereignty in any area of life fills us with great comfort. When we speak of God’s sovereignty in regards to death, we are comforted. When we speak of God’s sovereignty in regards to sickness, or finances, or circumstances – we are comforted. We are glad such things are in such powerful, good, trustworthy hands. Now, would you not want the same to be true of your salvation? Would you not want the most important thing of all – that you are saved, to be under the sovereignty of God? Of course. We gain great joy and peace, when having believed, we turn around and see – God chose us. It’s been in His hands all along.
- 2) God choosing can be compared to the choosing in our love relationships. When we choose someone, or someone chooses us, for a wife or a husband or for a friend, do we begin to object: “Why didn’t you choose so and so? Why me?” No,

the reaction is actually very humbling. “Why me? I feel so privileged. I am so glad they chose me.” It speaks of great love, not of capricious, fickle, whimsical, random choosing. There is great love here. So, in that light, we can have great joy in this wonderful mystery – before the world began, God chose me. That fills me with great peace – that He is in control, and great love –because He loved me before I was born. V5 – He predestined in love. God’s choosing was not a cold, fickle thing – it was done with love, knowing all possible things.

Now, I will give you two proofs that in your heart, you probably already believe this, two things that prove you do believe that God is sovereign in salvation

1) *You pray for people’s salvation.* Why would you pray and ask God to save people, if you believed it was out of His hands? Why would you bother asking God if God was saying, “It’s not up to me at all! It’s all up to them!” Well, you don’t believe that, because in your heart, you believe in God’s sovereignty in salvation. You apply your belief in God’s sovereignty as consistently in salvation as you do in other areas of human life. Prayer is based on God’s sovereignty.

2) *You thank God for saving you.* You would never think of saying to God “God, I’m so glad I came to my senses and saved myself!” No – when you pray – ‘thank you Lord for saving me’ – you admit that God was sovereign in your salvation. Do you give yourself the glory for your salvation? No, in your heart you believe in God’s sovereignty in salvation.

Well, there is no doubt that God has chosen believers – that is the wonderful fact of Election but that raises the question – why?

The Foundation of Election

Here we must tread extremely carefully, and go no further than the Bible says. The Bible has not given us a lot of information as to why God chose. Our only clue is in I Peter 1:1-2. Here, election is said to be according to God’s foreknowledge. Now, notice something. It does not say – elect **because of** foreknowledge. God’s choice was not limited to, or constrained by, His foreknowledge. It does not say ‘elect **in spite of** God’s foreknowledge’. God did not ignore His foreknowledge and just make a capricious choice. No, it says elect ‘according to’ His foreknowledge. God made this choice in harmony with, in agreement with, His foreknowledge. God knows all things possible, probable and potential, and in union with this foreknowledge, God made the choice.

Now, that raises the question, what does ‘foreknowledge’ mean? Here we have to say we don’t fully know. If you say – His foreknowledge of who would believe – that’s a possibility, but it’s not stated explicitly. Foreknowledge doesn’t always mean simply knowledge ahead of time. Christ is said to be foreknown by God in I Peter 1:20, and there it obviously means more than God simply knew Jesus ahead of time. It means an intimate love relationship. So, foreknowledge could mean God loved us personally before the world began. The fact is we are wrong to speculate what it means. In fact, most of the

controversy has begun here. People have defined what God's foreknowledge is – without Scripture's authorization.

But we must trust this phrase in verse 5- 'according to the good pleasure of His will'. God's purposes, God's good pleasure are always good. That was why He did it. He is sovereign. He knows best. He always does right.

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25)

Furthermore, it glorifies God's grace (v6). God choosing His enemies to be His children glorifies Him as a good, gracious God. So we don't know all the reasons, we only know it was done according to foreknowledge; it was done by a loving, just, good God who knows all things probable and possible, and it glorifies Him as gracious. It does not, as some say, slander Him as being partial. So, we must agree with Moses:

"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Deu 29:29)

The Focus of Election

Now, Paul points out that this election had a goal – that we might be holy and blameless before Him. Romans 8 carries this idea as well:

"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." (Rom 8:29)

I like Dr Mark Minnick's teaching on this which likens these concepts to the three bases of a baseball diamond.

Base 1- Foreknowledge – this is the basis on which God chose. This came first.

Base 2 – Predestination – this is the purposes God had in mind for our choice. This came second, according to Romans 8:29. Predestination is the purpose God had in choosing.

In other words, I could choose a house for the purposes of renovating it and re-selling it. That's the purpose I have in mind for choosing it. I predestine it for renovation and reselling. But the basis for choosing it might be something else – its size, its interior, its neighbourhood. So the basis for our election is God's foreknowledge – that's base 1 – then the purpose for our election is predestination. What was God's purpose? To be conformed to the image of His Son. That's His purpose, or as it's put here – to be holy and blameless before Him. How? By being adopted into God's family, with all the privileges of a natural-born child. This will enable us to imitate and resemble the firstborn.

Base 3- Election – this was the action God took. So God had a basis for the choice which we do not know. God had a purpose for the choice – to make us like His Son. God made the choice in love, before the foundation of the world.

Well, many are very nervous when it comes to these teachings, so let's try and address some of

The Fears of Election

Firstly, notice again that Paul does not anticipate objections. He continues in the momentum of praising God. Fears regarding election are things we have created through human speculation, not through taking the Word at face value.

Let us answer some common ones:

Objection: What about human responsibility?

This passage does no violence to human choice. Paul is simply not dealing with it here. He sees no contradiction, why should we? He sees no objection, why should we? He is rejoicing in the Father's absolute control over our lives, particularly our salvation. Other passages deal with human responsibility to repent and believe, some even put them in the same verse. When you read Acts 16:31, "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,*" do you immediately begin shouting – 'what about election? What about election?' Surely not. However, here the emphasis is on the divine side. Paul is giving us reasons to worship God; he is not giving us the human condition for salvation. His theme here is to worship God, and God's part is that He chose us. The universal call of the Gospel, the fact that Christ died for all men, is not contradicted by election.

It is like when we read Scripture dealing with God's sovereign acts in the world. Do we turn around and say, "What about prayer? What about prayer?" No, there is no need to do that. Prayer and God's sovereignty are mixed in an incomprehensible way. We needn't try to balance them out, or always call for the one when the other is present.

Some people treat verses on election like acid. They feel they must have the alkali of man's responsibility to quickly neutralize this verse. Why do that? Why not be excited over the fact that God is in control over everything, even over our salvation. Paul begins by exulting in how God did not leave our salvation to chance, to our whim, but got started on it before the world began.

Objection: If God elects individuals, it means He elects people to hell.

Answer: That is not true. That is a human misunderstanding of divine election. The Bible does not seem to teach divine reprobation, or election to hell. That is logical inference, not a Scriptural exegesis. Human logic must submit to explicit statements of Scripture. God does not state that He elects to hell, only that he elects to salvation.

Objection: I'm uncomfortable with the idea of God electing some, and not electing others. It sounds like He is a respecter of persons like He is partial.

Partiality would only be possible if all men deserved mercy. ("Deserve mercy" is, of course a contradiction in terms.) But if all are guilty, mercy to any is grace. That God would select some rebels out of the world is not unfair, it is unfairly good that He would choose any of us. You must approach election viewing man not as innocent, but as guilty and condemned already. We must see election as grace, not as a warping of justice. A rescue by God on some is not unjust, it is grace. Furthermore, all men are given the opportunity to receive the Gospel. Election does not nullify man's responsibility. So no man can stand before God and use election as an excuse.

To balance the objection - are you uncomfortable at the idea of man rejecting God? Who is more desirable? Who ought to be choosing whom? And yet, we know that God has chosen those who, apart from His drawing, would not choose Him.

Objection: Believing that God chose me will cause pride.

Answer: Does believing that God has blessed you cause pride? It can – if your heart is not right. It is not the teaching of God's grace that causes pride – it is our sinful hearts that can receive any teaching the wrong way.

So, what comes out of this? If we are following Paul's thoughts, we are rejoicing in a balanced view of election. We rejoice that God is sovereign. We thank Him for being in control in this most crucial area. We say gladly – Salvation is of the Lord.

There's Great Security. God is in control of our eternal destiny.

There's Great Optimism. It inspires evangelism. If we know that God is in control of this it gives us purpose and stability in sharing the Gospel. We pray for others' salvation, not because we believe God has left it all up to man, but because we delight to know God is sovereign here too. We go out, knowing God is active in men's hearts. God is drawing men and women to Himself. That gives us great boldness and encouragement.

There's Great Love. Finally, election ought to humble us and fill us with love. It is the strangest thing to me – that the doctrine which ought to cause the most humility, often causes the most pride. The problem is not in the doctrine – it is in the hearts of men. But read with me in Deuteronomy 7 to see God's view:

The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deu 7:7-8)

What is He saying – don't boast in your election because you did not have anything to do with it. Don't emphasise – "God chose ME". Emphasise – "GOD chose me"! Boast in the God of your election! Don't treasure election as a doctrine. Treasure the God who elected you. Treasure the God who chose you in love. Election is about love. That's why it is at the top of Paul's list – God chose us because He loved us.
