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HE CHOSE US

Ephesians 1:4

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Ephesians Lesson 3

He Chose Us
Ephesians 1:4

Do you rejoice in the doctrine of God's sovereign election? Do you consider it a precious blessing from Him? You should because Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, did! When he exclaimed (1:3), "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ," the first blessing he goes on to mention is (1:4), "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...." We cannot praise God properly for His great salvation if we deny or dodge the truth of His choosing us.

There are many professing Christians who openly deny the doctrine of election. They always claim to be "moderate" or "balanced" in their views! Many others give a brief nod to the doctrine, but they quickly skirt around it because it is divisive and difficult to understand. But I would agree with Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*God's Ultimate Purpose* [Baker], 1979, p. 84) and long before him, John Calvin (*John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians* [Banner of Truth], 1973, p. 25), who both pointed out that dodging what the Holy Spirit has put in Scripture for our understanding is sin. It is our business to come to grips with the inspired Word and allow it to speak to our hearts in the manner that God intended.

In order to do that, we must approach this truth with the right spirit before the Lord. If we come proudly to debate and prove that we are right (no matter which side we are on), we approach it wrongly. Rather, we must come with submissive hearts to God and His Word, asking Him to open our eyes to truth that the natural man cannot understand. If we come contending against God's sovereignty because we think that it denies our free will, the words of Paul rebuke us (Rom. 9:20), "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" God put this truth front and center for our encouragement and upbuilding in the faith. But we must come with submissive, teachable hearts.

When you take Ephesians 1:3-4 together, Paul is saying:

One of the greatest spiritual blessings that God has given to us is that He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before Him.

Without any argument or apology, Paul begins enumerating our blessings in Christ by stating that God chose us and He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ (1:4-5). Limiting ourselves to verse 4, note first:

1. The doctrine of God's choosing us for salvation is one of His greatest blessings because it guarantees our salvation.

What does *election* mean? Wayne Grudem (*Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], 1994, p. 670, italics his) defines it as: "*Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.*" The Greek verb translated "chose" means, "to select or pick for oneself" (all Greek lexicons). Note three things that stem from our text:

- A. No one is ever capable or inclined to choose God unless God first chose him.

Election is *unconditional* in the sense that God did not base His choice on His foreknowledge of whether certain people would choose to believe in Christ. If He had done so, it would be a denial of His grace, because then their salvation would be based on something which *they* did in and of themselves. But Scripture is clear that salvation is totally by God's grace (unmerited favor; Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 9:11-18; 11:5-6).

Also, if God's choosing us were based on His foreknowledge that we would choose Him, then He really didn't choose us at all. Rather, He only would have responded to our choosing Him by then choosing us. But this would make God's plan of salvation depend on the choices of fallen sinners, rather than on His purpose and glory. It would be puzzling as to why Paul plainly states, "He chose us," if in fact, it were the other way around.

As Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out (*ibid.*, p. 83), there are only two possibilities: Either God chose us according to His good pleasure, "entirely apart from anything we have ever done or said or thought." Or, He chose us because He foresaw that we would

choose Him. He says, "There is no third possibility." (Norman Geisler tries to propose a third alternative in *Chosen But Free* [Bethany House], pp. 53-55. But he misrepresents the Calvinist view, never deals with the biblical meaning of *foreknowledge*, and uses faulty argumentation throughout. James White, *The Potter's Freedom* [Calvary Press], capably refutes Geisler on this point in chapter 2, "Determinately Knowing.")

Also, as Calvin points out (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Eph. 1:4, p. 198), "We were all lost in Adam; and therefore, had not God, through his own election, rescued us from perishing, there was nothing to be foreseen." In other words, God would not have foreseen any lost people choosing of their own free will to be saved, because Scripture is clear that by nature we all were "fast bound in sin and nature's night" (Charles Wesley, "And Can it Be?"). As Paul drives home (Rom. 3:10-12), "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one." Scripture also piles up metaphors such as being spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), blind (2 Cor. 4:4), deaf (Matt. 13:14-15), lame (Luke 14:21), hardened (Eph. 4:17-19), and enslaved (John 8:34-36; Rom. 6:6), to show that as sinners, we had no inclination or ability to choose Christ or believe in Him.

Invariably, those who deny God's sovereign, unconditional election also have to deny that sinners are unable to come to Christ by themselves (theologians call this, "total depravity"). They try to argue that God has given "prevenient" grace to all, so that they are able to respond to the gospel invitation. Otherwise, they say, it would be a sham for God to command men to believe in Christ when He knows that they are unable to do so.

Such reasoning fits with human logic, but not with the revealed Word of God. Jesus plainly stated (John 6:65), "no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." *No one can* means, *no one is able*. Clearly, the Father did not grant this to everyone, or Jesus' statement would be needless. Jesus also said (Matt. 11:27), "no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Knowing the Father depends on the Son

of God choosing to reveal Him to the individual, which He does not do for everyone. But, what are the very next words out of Jesus' mouth? "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Jesus saw no contradiction between saying, "No one can know or come, unless I will it; therefore, come!" Neither should we! When Paul says, "God chose us," we pervert Scripture if we twist it to mean, "We first chose God."

B. It is only through Christ and what He did for us, not through anything in us, that we may be saved.

Paul says, "He chose us *in Him*." As we saw in verse 3, all of the blessings that we receive from God come to us "in Christ." Calvin explains (*Commentaries*, p. 198, italics his), "if we are chosen *in Christ*, it is *not of ourselves*. . . . In short, the name of Christ excludes all merit, and everything which men have of their own; for when he says that we are *chosen in Christ*, it follows that in ourselves we are unworthy."

I regret having to detract from such glorious truth to refute error, but because error floods into the church, I must. Some say that verse 4 does not teach that God chooses individuals, but rather that He chose Christ and those who believe in Him, not individually, but in a group sense. Thus we make ourselves part of "the elect" when we choose Christ.

It should be evident that such teaching is only trying to dodge the plain meaning of the words of inspired Scripture. "He chose us" is not ambiguous! The "us" refers to persons or individuals in the church. There is no hint of Paul meaning, "What I'm really saying is that God only chose Christ and then we chose Him, so God really didn't choose us." Paul adds, "He chose us *in Him*," to show that all of the spiritual blessings we receive center in Christ.

Spurgeon put it this way (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 1986, 38:355): "God called us in Christ. He justified us in Christ. He sanctified us in Christ. He will perfect us in Christ. He will glorify us in Christ. We have everything in Christ, and we have nothing apart from Christ." Again, the point of these words, "in Him," is to take our thoughts away from anything in ourselves and to focus us on the merits and love of our Savior, who gave Himself for us. Although we must believe to be saved, salvation is

not to be traced to our faith or to anything else in us. Rather, salvation is to be traced to God's eternal purpose through Jesus Christ and all that He did for us. We were not chosen because of anything in us, but rather we were chosen in Him. Bless His name!

C. The blessing of salvation is part of God's eternal plan to glorify Himself.

Paul adds that God chose us "before the foundation of the world." He adds this time element because in this extended sentence (1:3-14), he is talking about God's plan for the ages to glorify Himself through His plan of salvation. It is inconceivable that the all-wise Creator of the universe would create the world and place people on it without some sort of predetermined plan for the ages! We would say that a builder who tried to build a house without any sort of plan in mind beforehand and without any ability to accomplish his unplanned house was inept and crazy. Surely, then, God did not create the universe without a plan and the ability to carry out that plan. He would not leave such an important plan dependent on the rebellious will of humans.

And, when man fell into sin, God didn't say, "Oh no, now I have to modify My plan!" If He had done so, then He would be a changeable being, not the immutable Sovereign of the universe. And, if He is not sovereignly in control of all events who knows whether He may have to change His plan again in the future? How could we even know whether His promises and plan would finally prevail, if He is not sovereign over all things, including the evil deeds of men?

This phrase, "before the foundation of the world," is there for our comfort and assurance, so that we will bless God for His choosing us. It means that you were not an afterthought in the mind of God! It means that He set His love on you long before you ever existed or even before the world existed! It means that your name was written in the Lamb's book of life before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8; 17:8)! If your salvation depends on your choice of God, you can never be assured of it. But if it depends on God's choice of you before He created the world, then it is a sure thing. The God who planned it before the world began will bring it to completion.

Some argue that if God chose us for salvation apart from anything that we do, it will lead people to say, "Then we can live as we please." But our text shows that this is not so.

2. The doctrine of God's choosing us for salvation is one of His greatest blessings because it guarantees our becoming holy and blameless before Him.

First, we must deal with a technical difficulty: do the words, "in love," go with what precedes or with what follows? Many scholars understand the words to go with the preceding, "that we would be holy and blameless before Him in love" (KJV, NJKV; although the NASB, ESV, and NIV put the words with what follows). Taken this way, "in love" would refer to our love for God and for one another as a manifestation of God's choosing us. The reasons for connecting the phrase with the preceding words are (Harold Hoehner, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* [Victor Books], ed. by John Walvoord & Roy Zuck, 2:617), "(1) In this context the modifying phrases always follow the action words (vv. 3-4, 6, 8-10). (2) The other five occurrences of 'in love' in Ephesians (3:17; 4:2, 15-16; 5:2) refer to human love rather than divine love. (3) Love fits well with holiness and blamelessness, for this would denote a balance between holiness and love."

On the other hand, to connect the words "in love" with what follows fits well with God's predestining us "to adoption as sons ... according to the kind intention of His will." In other words, God's predestining us was not a mechanical, arbitrary process, but rather, it stemmed from His great love (Rom. 5:8). So it is difficult to decide. Both are true biblically: God's choosing us will result in our growth in love; and, His choosing us stems from His special love for His elect (Eph. 5:25; John 13:1; Deut. 7:7-8).

God chose us "that we would be holy and blameless before Him." Paul connects God's calling or choosing us so that we will be holy in at least two other texts. In 2 Timothy 1:9 he writes that God "has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity." And, in Romans 8:29-30 he writes, "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He

predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

By the way, the word “foreknow” in the New Testament does not mean simply to know in advance. In that sense, God foreknows everyone who has ever lived. Romans 8:29 (also, Rom. 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:2, 20; Acts 2:23) refers to God’s advance choice to know certain individuals in a relationship of love. Clearly, Paul is distinguishing those on whom God set His purpose to save from the rest of humanity. Thus God’s foreknowledge contains the concept of His foreordination of people and events.

God chose us to be holy and blameless. Both of these words look at our sanctification, but from slightly different angles. To be *holy* is to be set apart to God from all sin and from the evil influences of this world. We are to be distinct from the way that the world thinks and distinct from the values of those who are enslaved to greed and various lusts. *Blameless* means to be without spot or blemish. Paul says that Christ’s aim for His church is (5:27) “that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.” To be blameless is to have integrity. It means that you are the same in private as you are in public. You think and act the same when no one is watching as you do when the eyes of others are upon you.

Paul adds that we are to be holy and blameless *before Him*. That is the key, to live all of your life openly before God, knowing that (Heb. 4:13) “all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.” You live in the presence of God (“*coram deo*”). You have fellowship with the living God, knowing that He knows your every thought, word, and deed. Therefore, you quickly confess any sin and appropriate His cleansing blood (see 1 John 1:1-10).

While it is true that we will never be completely holy and blameless before God as long as we are in this body of sin (Rom. 7), if we are God’s chosen people, we will be growing in holiness. And, however you interpret the phrase “in love,” the essence of holiness is love, because “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10). Love is the supreme virtue of the Christian life (1 Cor. 13). It leads the list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

Sometimes we wrongly picture a holy person as being somewhat relationally challenged. We may think of a hermit or monk, who distances himself from others and hardly speaks to others. But biblical holiness requires that we love one another, especially in our families and in the local church. We treat others as we would want to be treated. Paul links God's choice of us with our holy, loving behavior in Colossians 3:12-13: "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you."

Conclusion

I originally thought that I should deal in this message with some of the common objections that are raised against the doctrine of election. But to do so would detract from the apostle's aim for our text. (You may read many such defenses of election by going to monergism.com, under the subject, "Election.") Paul does not debate the matter or apologize for it or tiptoe around it. He states it as plainly as language could put it: "*He chose us.*" That is one of the greatest spiritual blessings that God has given to us because it guarantees our salvation and our holiness. You won't experience the joy of that blessing if you fight with God's Word over it.

In his wonderful book, *A Pastor's Sketches* ([Solid Ground Christian Books] vol. 1, p. 244, italics his), Ichabod Spencer, a Brooklyn pastor in the first half of the 19th century, tells of a pastor who had preached on the sovereignty of God. After the service, a well-educated woman came up to him and thanked him for his sermon. She said, "O sir, it has done me good. All my life I have been troubled with the doctrine of election. I have studied it for more than twenty years in vain. But now I know what has been the matter,--*I have never been entirely willing that God should be God.*" Spencer concludes, "And when you are entirely willing that 'God should be God,' election will trouble you no longer."

I found that to be true in my experience about 40 years ago. I thought that I was fighting Paul in Romans 9:18, where he argues, "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." Paul next anticipates the argument of those who fight against the doctrine of election (Rom. 9:19): "You will

say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'" In other words, if God sovereignly chooses those whom He saves and passes over the rest in their sin, how can He blame unbelievers for not believing? I used to go around and around with Paul, thinking, "Come on, Paul, answer that question!" I thought that his answer was a cop out.

Then one day it was as if God tapped me rather strongly on the shoulder and said, "You're not fighting with Paul. You're fighting with Me! I did answer the question. You just don't like My answer!" His answer is (Rom. 9:20), "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?"

I realized that I had not been willing to let God be God. I repented and submitted to what God's Word plainly teaches (Eph. 1:4): "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him." The doctrine of election became a source of joy and comfort in my Christian life. I pray that you will let God be God, submitting to His Word that is given for your joy in Christ, so that you will rejoice in the doctrine of election!

Application Questions

1. How can a person know if God has chosen him/her for salvation?
2. Why is the doctrine of election essential if we want to glorify God? How does the denial of it detract from His glory?
3. One main argument against election is that if God only chose to save some, He doesn't love everyone. Your response?
4. Some Christians say that we should avoid doctrines such as election, because they are so controversial. Why is this wrong?

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