

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

GLORY TO OUR SOVEREIGN GOD

Ephesians 1:11-12

By

Steven J. Cole

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Ephesians Lesson 7

Glory to Our Sovereign God Ephesians 1:11-12

Whenever Scripture presents a doctrine that is intended to lead us to praise and glorify our great God, but certain men attack that doctrine, it is a sign of the enemy at work. Satan is opposed to anything that exalts God and humbles proud man. So when the truth of God's Word is proclaimed in a way that brings us to absolute dependence on His sovereign grace, the enemy attacks. Such is the case with the doctrine of God's sovereignty as it relates to our salvation.

Several popular authors and Bible teachers in recent years have attacked God's sovereignty in our salvation, which they label as "extreme Calvinism." Invariably, these writers claim to be balanced or moderate, neither Calvinist nor Arminian. But then they proceed to espouse Arminianism without the label so as to deceive those who don't know any better. In so doing, they rob God of glory and give some of His glory in saving us to fallen sinners.

Paul begins this letter to the Ephesians with an exclamation of praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, because He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (1:3). The first blessing that the inspired apostle lists is (1:4), "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." Then (1:5) he immediately adds, "In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will." Those verses obviously emphasize God's sovereignty as the main reason behind our salvation. The practical result (1:6) is, "to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

Then Paul turns to the work of God the Son in redeeming us through His blood (1:7). But he still can't get away from the truth that our salvation is rooted in God's will (1:9), "according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him." But, that's not enough. Paul keeps hammering on this theme in our text, emphasizing that the reason we have an inheritance in Christ (1:11) is that we have "been predestined according to His purpose who works all things

after the counsel of His will." The emphasis is on God's will, not on our will. Again, the bottom line practically is (1:12), "to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory." The doctrine of God's sovereignty as the underlying cause of our salvation is all about praise and glory to His name!

If you think that if this is a hobbyhorse of mine, I want you to understand that it is because it was the consistent theme (hobbyhorse, if you will!) of the inspired apostle, who wrote at least 13 New Testament epistles. This theme is in all of his epistles, except one. He expounds on the theme of God's sovereignty in salvation in Romans 9-11. It is significant that Paul's climax in those chapters is an exclamation of praise to God (Rom. 11:33-36).

God's sovereignty in our salvation is also the dominant theme of 1 Corinthians 1-2, where Paul humbles the pride of worldly "wisdom," and shows that God's way is the foolishness of the cross. Three times (in 1:26-28) Paul repeats, "God has chosen," and his bottom line is (1:29), "so that no man may boast before God." Then he adds (1:30-31), "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

In Paul's next epistle, he states (2 Cor. 4:4) that "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Then (4:6) he adds, "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Paul compares our salvation to God's creation of light by the word of His power. Just as He spoke light into existence because it was His purpose to do so and light came into existence because of His sovereign will (light didn't have to cooperate with God in the process!), so He spoke and our blind eyes were opened. Note also that it is all about "the knowledge of the glory of God." If He did it all, then He gets all the glory. If we helped Him out, then we share His glory.

Go to Paul's next epistle, Galatians. In 1:15-16, Paul describes his own conversion: "But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was

pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood" Paul was zealously pursuing his Jewish religion and persecuting the church. He was not dissatisfied with his religion or investigating Christianity. Rather, God sovereignly intervened in Paul's life because God had set Paul apart before he was born.

Ephesians is Paul's next epistle, and we've already seen his emphasis there. In Philippians 1:6, Paul assures his readers, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." The fact that Paul just mentions this in passing, without any elaboration, shows that he had taught the Philippians that God had begun the work of salvation in them and that He would complete the process. In fact, when Luke describes the beginning of the Philippian church, he says (Acts 16:14), "and the Lord opened her [Lydia's] heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." Paul also tells the Philippians that it was granted to them to believe in Christ (1:29). Faith is God's gift; it does not originate within us.

When you go to Paul's next letter, he states (Col. 3:12), "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Again, he simply mentions in passing the doctrine that God chose us for salvation, without explanation or defense. Obviously, Paul had grounded these believers in this basic truth.

In Paul's next letter, we find the same thing. He writes (1 Thess. 1:4), "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you." No need to explain, because he had already explained it. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul writes to the same church, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth."

In 1 Timothy, Paul does not specifically mention God's choosing us. But he does mention in passing the "chosen angels" (5:21), and that Timothy had been called to eternal life (6:12). Paul also (6:15) praises God as "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords."

In 2 Timothy, Paul exhorts Timothy to join him in suffering for the gospel, and then adds (1:9) 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.” He also explains (2:10), “For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.” Paul suffered so that all of God’s elect would come to salvation.

Paul opens his next letter, Titus (1:1), “Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God....” Out of all of his letters, it is only in the short letter to Philemon, which deals with a specific issue of receiving back a runaway slave, that Paul does not mention God’s sovereignty in our salvation. I have not taken you to the many other references to this theme in the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, James, and Jude. (See, *Foundations of Grace*, by Steven Lawson [Reformation Trust], who traces these truths through both the whole Bible.)

Why is there this emphasis on God’s sovereignty in the matter of our salvation? Because it humbles our pride and it leads to God’s glory. Any view that has us helping God out in the process, even with faith that supposedly originates with us, detracts from God’s glory because we then had a share in our salvation.

To come back to our text, Paul is continuing his flow of thought from 1:10, namely, that God has purposed to sum up all things in Christ. His plan for the ages is to reunite under the lordship of Christ all that has been damaged by man’s fall into sin. This includes bringing two disparate groups, the Jews and the Gentiles, together in one body in the church. This theme runs through our text and into verses 13-14. In verse 12, Paul mentions “we who were the first to hope in Christ,” a reference to the Jews. God had chosen the Jews as His special people when He chose Abraham, about 2,000 years before Christ. Chronologically, the Jews were the first to hope in Christ as Savior (Matt. 10:5-6). But, Paul goes on (1:13-14) to show that the Gentiles (“you also”) had received the Holy Spirit of promise when they had believed, just as the Jewish believers had. He is given as the common pledge of inheritance for both groups (“our,” 1:14). In 1:11-12, Paul is saying,

Our sovereign God purposed to save us so that we would be to the praise of His glory.

1. God purposed to save us.

Paul piles up words to make this point clear: “predestined,” “purpose,” “counsel,” and “will.” It is only reasonable that the Sovereign Creator of the universe had a plan for His creation and that He is capable of fulfilling His plan. Note two things:

- A. God’s purpose centers in Jesus Christ, in whom we have every spiritual blessing.

The sentence begins with “in Him.” Paul has used “in Him” (or, “in Christ”) in 1:3, 4, 7, 9, and 10. All of God’s blessings center in and come from Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross. We have nothing apart from Christ, but in Him, we have all of God’s blessings. Our salvation should lead us to an increasing spiritual understanding of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4).

- B. God’s purpose was to choose us to obtain an inheritance in Christ.

The Greek word translated “we have obtained an inheritance” occurs only here in the New Testament and is difficult to interpret, as seen by the various translations. It literally means, “to be chosen by lot,” and it relates to the concept of an inheritance that is chosen by lot (Num. 26:55). This does not imply “random chance.” The Bible teaches that God sovereignly determines the outcome of the casting of lots (Prov. 16:33). The sense of the verb here is “to be destined, appointed, or chosen” (Buist Fanning, unpublished class notes, Dallas Seminary). Thus the NIV simply translates it, “we were also chosen.”

Since the verb is passive and there is no direct object, some interpret it to mean that we who believe are God’s inheritance or portion, a common theme in the Old Testament and one that Paul mentions in Ephesians 1:18. But in the more immediate context (1:14), Paul says that the Holy Spirit is the pledge of our inheritance. The parallel in Colossians 1:12 states that we “share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” So, it is difficult to decide between these options, since all of them are true biblically. But, in line with the truth of Ephesians 1:3, 4, and 14, I think Paul means that God chose us to obtain an inheritance in Christ. The Holy Spirit is

our pledge or first installment of this inheritance, which we will fully receive in heaven. But, Paul's point is that everything we have in Christ is due to God's sovereign purpose to save us.

But, we need to ask why Paul emphasizes God's sovereignty here. One reason is to give us assurance that He will complete what He began. We know that we will finally be saved because...

2. The God who purposed to save us is sovereign over all things.

Paul says that the reason we have been chosen to receive an inheritance in Christ is that God predestined us according to His purpose; and, He is the God who works all things after the counsel of His will.

A. We are saved because God predestined us according to His purpose.

"Predestined" means, "to decide upon beforehand" (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [The University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed.], by Walter Bauer, William Arndt, and Wilbur Gingrich, p. 709). It means, "The omniscient God has determined everything in advance, both persons and things in salvation history, with Jesus Christ as the goal" (K. L. Schmidt, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], ed. by Gerhard Friedrich, V:456). The doctrine stems from the fact that God is eternal, outside of time. In eternity, before He created the world of space and time, God freely determined His purpose and plan, which is all for His glory (see John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* [Crossway Books], which contains Jonathan Edwards' essay, "The End for Which God Created the World").

As I said, I believe that the main reason Paul emphasizes this here is to give us assurance that our salvation rests on God's eternal, unshakable purpose, and not on anything in us. Also, as verse 12 makes clear, Paul wants all the praise and glory for our salvation to go to God alone.

But, some have objected to the doctrine of predestination because, they argue, it destroys our free will. It makes us robots or puppets. I don't like the term "free will," because it is widely misunderstood. None of us are absolutely free; we do not make any choices with complete freedom. I did not choose to be born as a

white male in 1947, to American parents who had just become Christians. All of that was determined. And, we all make choices based on many factors that are outside of our immediate understanding. We choose based on our upbringing, our culture, our knowledge, our life experiences, and many other factors. We are responsible to God for the choices we make, but we do not make those choices from a position of absolute freedom.

While the Bible teaches that God foreordains or predestines everything that happens, including sin and evil, it also teaches that He is not the author of evil or responsible for it. Joseph's brothers committed a great evil by selling him into slavery. They did it on one level, yet on another level, God did it for a higher purpose (see Gen. 45:5, 7, 8; 50:20). Evil men crucified the sinless Son of God, and they were responsible for their actions. Yet, at the same time, God purposed and predestined to put His Son to death on the cross (see Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Isa. 53:4, 10). If God predetermined the cross, then He necessarily predetermined the fall of man into sin. If anyone objects that God did *not predetermine* the fall, but only *permitted* it, then I ask you the question that John Calvin asked such objectors: Did He permit it *willingly* or *unwillingly*?

B. We are saved because God sovereignly works all things after the counsel of His will.

Again, objectors try to argue that "all things" couldn't possibly mean, "all things." If it did, it would rob us of our "free will" and it would make God the author of evil. They argue that terrible events, whether it be on a widespread scale, such as the Holocaust, or on a personal level, such as rape or a tragic accident, are not included in the "all things" that God works after the counsel of His will (Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right* [Global Gospel Publishers], pp. 292-293, argues that God could not have anything to do with such tragedies). Some say that catastrophes such as earthquakes and hurricanes are outside of the "all things" of Ephesians 1:11. They can't square these events with a "God of love."

But Paul states here that God "*works* all things after the counsel of His will." *Works* means that He actively brings these things to pass. The Bible is clear that the "all things" includes inanimate things, such as fire, hail, wind, rain, snow, and lightning (Ps. 148:8; Job 37:6-13; 38:22-30). It includes wild animals (Ps. 104:27-29) and

even seemingly chance events, such as the casting of lots (Prov. 16:33). God controls the affairs of nations and the rise and fall of powerful world leaders (Job 12:23; Dan. 4:34-35). He ordains all of our days before we were even born (Ps. 139:16; Job 14:5). (See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], pp. 315-351.)

Also, those who argue against God's sovereignty over all say that it would mean that God holds us accountable for things that He predestined to occur or for things that we are not able to do (such as, believe in Christ), which would be unjust. These scoffers fail to note that Paul anticipated this very objection in Romans 9:19. His answer (Rom. 9:20) is pretty clear: "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?"

If you deny that God works *all things* after the counsel of His will, you rob believers of the comfort that He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). It would be a scary universe indeed if some things are not under God's sovereign control! The Bible rather presents a universe under the sovereign control of a wise, loving, omnipotent God who will judge all evil in His perfect time and plan. A god who is not in control of all the evil things that happen is not the God of the Bible! We can trust Him to keep His promises because He works all things after the counsel of His will. But, there is another important application:

3. The end of our salvation is that we would be to the praise of God's glory.

There are two important things to note here:

- A. Salvation is first and foremost about God's glory, not about us.

We are so man-centered that we mistakenly think that salvation is all about us. Thank God, salvation does rescue us from His awful judgment and give us eternal life in heaven! But, we need to understand that it is primarily about His glory. He saves us by His sovereign grace so that we will be to the praise of His glory. He owed us nothing but judgment, but He gave us infinite love and mercy. Even if we suffer terribly in this life, we can only praise and glorify Him for His sovereign grace!

- B. The test of sound doctrine with regard to salvation is that it gives all glory to God and none to us.

Those who emphasize our “free will” and our faith, which they say we can exercise apart from God’s gracious intervention, undermine God’s grace and glory. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote (*God’s Ultimate Purpose* [Baker], p. 225), “In every view of salvation the place given in it to the glory of God provides the ultimate test. The proof that it is truly scriptural is that it gives *all* the glory to God.”

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, it is evidence of the enemy at work that the clear, straightforward, inescapable truth that Paul sets forth here even needs to be debated among those who claim to believe in Christ. The truth that our sovereign God predestined to save us according to His purpose and the assurance that He will bring it to pass because He works all things after the counsel of His will, should fill us with great joy. We should bow before His throne, lost in wonder, love and praise.

We should join the apostle Paul in exclaiming (Rom. 11:33-36), “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Application Questions

1. Why is it essential to affirm (with Jonathan Edwards) that God’s glory is the end for which He created the world? Does this imply that He is a cosmic egotist, as some charge?
2. Why is “free will” a misnomer? How can the concept be stated more accurately?
3. Cite some biblical examples that show that God is sovereign over evil and yet not responsible for it.
4. Some argue that everyone can believe in Christ if they choose to do so, and that such faith is not a gift from God. Why does this undermine God’s grace and glory?

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