

The Letter Of Paul To The Ephesians

*⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.
(Ephesians 1:7-10. ESV)*

Message 3

Every Spiritual Blessing - Election

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Ephesians 1:4

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles to Ephesians 1:4. Last week we looked at Paul's very unconventional eulogy. Paul got started on a traditional element of both Jewish and Christian liturgy and he quite literally found himself carried away in an explosion of praise and adoration. As I mentioned last week, a liturgical eulogy is supposed to be one sentence – Solomon's was only 23 Hebrew words – but Paul is overwhelmed in his contemplation of God's grace in our redemption through Jesus Christ and he goes on to explicate EVERY SPIRITUAL BLESSING with a 202 word explosion of praise. He went 10 times longer than he was supposed to. I have some sympathy for that – I know what it feels like to see something in God that is so wonderful you just can't shut up about it but I also know that we can only sit for so long so we'll take 7 Sundays to work through what Paul has to say as he defines for us "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places". We begin this morning with the doctrine of election. Hear then the Word of the Lord:

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:3-5. ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

My plan this morning is to focus in on verse 4. I read to from verse 3 so that you can see how verse 4 came into being. Paul started talking about every spiritual blessing in verse 3 and that

caused him to want to extrapolate and define what he meant by that and the first point of explication, the immediate fount of all these subsequent blessings is in Paul's inspired mind, the doctrine of election. I've read to you verse 5 because it shows how Paul understands all these subsequent blessings as having their immediate and logical source in the doctrine of election. But for today I want to simply use verse 4 to define election and then we will have to deal with some objections to the doctrine and then having done so we will ask lastly why this doctrine was such a catalyst for praise and doxology in the mind of the Apostle Paul. Let's begin with the definition. How does it seem that Paul understands the doctrine of election? Let's look again at verse 4:

Defining Election

⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love (Ephesians 1:4. ESV)

I think it is very clear that Paul is giving us a three part definition of election. First and foremost I think he means to define election as:

1. The choice of Almighty God

Even as HE CHOSE US. Those three words change everything, don't they? He chose us. Jesus said that to his disciples:

¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit (John 15:16. ESV)

Salvation begins with the choice of God. One of the things you need to know is that the doctrine of election is not a New Testament invention. In fact, I would argue that you cannot understand election unless you have read and understood the Old Testament. The doctrine of election is picked up and handled in the New Testament on the assumption that you have become familiar with the doctrine as defined in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament God CHOOSES Israel to be his people. They don't choose him, He chooses them. Look at Deuteronomy 7:6-8. This is probably the most important Old Testament text for understanding the doctrine of election. Don't read it off the screen; find it in your own Bible and highlight it. If you didn't bring a highlighter, repent, and then borrow one from your neighbour. Let me read to you:

⁶“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. **The LORD your God has chosen you** to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:6-9. ESV)

It does not take a rocket scientist to see that how Paul treats election in Ephesians 1 is informed and shaped by how the doctrine is treated in the Old Testament and particularly here in Deuteronomy. At the heart of the doctrine of election is the idea that God chooses people from out of the mass of rebellious humanity. Stick a piece of paper or a bookmark in this passage and go back to Ephesians 1. The second part of Paul’s definition is that this choice of Almighty God is:

2. Based on His Sovereign Will and NOT on any worth or merit in us

Look again at what Paul says:

⁴even as he chose us in him **before the foundation of the world** (Ephesians 1:4a. ESV)

God chose us in Christ BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD – what does Paul mean by that? He means that God chose us before we had done anything either good or bad. Just like in Deuteronomy where it says that this choice was NOT because Israel was greater or stronger or better than the other nations – on the contrary, they were smaller and weaker and less commendable than the other nations. The choice of God is emphatically declared to be UNRELATED to any potential worth or merit in us. The reason belongs to the secret counsel of God’s will. Paul says that emphatically in verse 11, look there quickly:

having been predestined **according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will** (Ephesians 1:11. ESV)

God predestines people on the basis of the counsel of his will – NOT on the basis of personal worth and merit. But, you might say, if you were a very careful reader of Deuteronomy 7, doesn’t God say there that his choice of Israel goes back to promises made to the Patriarchs? Indeed he does say that, flip there again:

⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people ... ⁸but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, ... (Deuteronomy 7:6-9. ESV)

Aha! Granted it was not because of the present merit of the people of Israel but the text says that God's election of them in some way is traced back to a promise made to the patriarchs. Perhaps there was some deserving merit in them. Paul addresses that question in Romans 9. Look at Romans 9. Speaking about the promise made to Jacob who became Israel Paul says this; you recall that Jacob had a twin brother Esau who was NOT chosen; and so Paul says:

when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call—¹²she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Romans 9:10-13. ESV)

In the Old Testament the promise of election was given to Jacob and not to Esau while both remained in their mother's womb. Before Jacob had done anything good or bad, God elected him according to the purpose of his own Sovereign Will. Whether you like this doctrine or not, it cannot be denied that in the Old Testament and in the New, election is the choice of God on the basis of His Sovereign Will and emphatically NOT on the basis of any worth or merit in us. You can 'not like that', but you cannot deny that it is the teaching of Holy Scripture. Few things in the Bible are taught as emphatically as this.

Thirdly, it seems clear that Paul's definition of election is that election is the choice of Almighty God on the basis of His Sovereign Will, emphatically not on the basis of our worth and merit and it is election:

3. Unto holiness and intimate, loving service

Look again at verse 4:

⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love (Ephesians 1:4. ESV)

The Bible is so clear on this; God did not save you simply "from hell", ultimately God saved you unto holiness that you might serve before him in love. Again, all of that can be seen in the

Deuteronomy passage and it can be seen in numerous other passages, think of Exodus 19 for example. Look at what God says there; when God is forming his people into a nation he says this:

and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:6. ESV)

He doesn't say: "I've chosen you so that you do not follow the way of your neighbours as they charge head long into hell", he says: "I've chosen you to serve before me as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Think about that. How much would the appearance of the Evangelical Church in North America change if we understood this one single fact? That God chose us, not just to save us from hell but to save us unto holiness and loving service? God chose us in order to work holiness into us. That is why all true Christians are in some stage of the sanctification process. Sanctification is just a big fancy word that means progressive and increasing holiness. If you are truly saved then you should be getting a little more honest every day. A little more faithful every day. A little more generous every day – your tax returns if lined up year by year should show an increasing commitment to the worship of God and care of others – that is true of every real believer – is it true of you? Are you honestly, honestly – this might be those most important question you have ever been asked – are you honestly more generous, more faithful, more joyful, more forgiving, more honest and more peaceful than you were the day you made your public profession of faith? If the answer is not a resounding yes than you need to be very unsure about the reality of your conversion. God is good at what he does. If He chose you then He chose you as a canvas for the display of his grace. He means to make you like Jesus. So, you need to ask yourself the question: do I look more like Jesus today than I did the day I made my profession of faith? That question, honestly asked and considered, may be the catalyst for your true conversion. If God chose you then he has been at work in you and he who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete in the day of Christ Jesus. Look for that work in your life and if you can see it, rejoice over it. If you can't see it, cast yourself upon the mercy of God and seek his grace.

Now before we conclude this discussion of Paul's definition just look quickly at the last couple of words in verse 4: "before him, in love."

There is some discussion in scholarly circles as to whether the “in love” bit goes with the next verse or concludes this verse, but the majority of scholarship favours it as concluding the thought of verse 4. Paul is saying that God has chosen us to the end that we would serve **before Him in love**. Those four little words tell us the end and the attitude. The end is that we will serve before the face of God for all eternity. The Apostle John said that too:

his servants will worship him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. (Revelation 22:3-4. ESV)

That’s the end. You were saved FOR INTIMATE SERVICE AND WORSHIP. The attitude is “in love”. Listen to me friends, election is NOT the destruction of love – election does not make us robots or squirrels who serve God because we have no other option – election restores to us our ability to live before God as we were originally created to do. It restores to us the ability to choose God and to love his will and we will delight in that – freely, wilfully, as a gesture of love for all eternity. God has elected us and set us free so that we can choose to obey him. The real Christian, who has been set free from sin and death, now and increasingly DELIGHTS in HOLINESS and OBEDIENCE. Now, increasingly, by one degree of glory to the next and in eternity fully, exclusively and perfectly. You have been chosen to worship and serve before the face of God in love for all eternity and you will love it!

Now that is how the Apostle Paul defines election but we cannot simply end there because this doctrine, clear as it is, consistently taught as it is in both Old Testament and New, is not a widely held or taught doctrine in the modern day evangelical church. It used to be. It was firmly believed by our Baptist forefathers I can tell you that. In our original confession of faith our forefathers said:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, **some men and angels are predestinated**, or foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ, to the praise of His glorious grace; **others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation**, to the praise of His glorious justice’...

Those of mankind that are predestinated to life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, **out of His mere free grace and love without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving Him thereunto**. (The Baptist Confession of Faith 1689. Section 3, Paragraphs 3 and 5)

That used to be the common belief of Evangelicals. It differs very little from what can be found in the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians or the Savoy Declaration of the Congregationalists. Only the Methodists used to disagree with this but now almost everybody disagrees with this despite the fact that it is clearly and consistently taught in the Bible. Why is that? I suspect it has little to do with understanding the text – the text is remarkably clear – and everything to do with digesting the text. There are some truths which even though clearly taught, are very difficult to swallow. So it is here. Let's spend just a few minutes looking at the two most common objections to this teaching.

Common Objections

The most common objection is that:

- i. The doctrine of election is unfair

Often this objection is phrased in the form of an analogy that goes something like this: “Suppose 4 men fell into a pool and they couldn't swim and so they began to drown. Suppose another man came by the swimming pool and he decided to rescue two men and to let the other two drown. He could have saved all four, but he didn't. That is unfair and it reveals the man to be cruel and unloving.”

Have you ever heard an analogy like that? So how do we answer that? Well first of all, it is very dangerous to do theology by means of human analogy as though God were exactly like us. God is not like us and we are in no position to judge God. God is not like a man who stumbles upon 4 other men drowning in a pool. For one thing God created those men and knows everything there is to know about them. For another thing God built the pool and put up a sign saying: “Stay out”. For another thing God sent lifeguard after lifeguard to communicate the correct safety procedures when near the pool. So the analogy doesn't really work and it doesn't say as much as needs to be said for it to constitute an intelligent argument. Let me illustrate its short comings by suggesting another equally valid analogy. Suppose there were 4 men bent on thievery and mischief in the City of Orillia. Each night they would break into cars or homes and steal valuables and then sell them in order to make money for buying drugs. Suppose another man, Mr. Goodwill, were to make contact with two of those men and take them out for coffee. Suppose he were to argue

winsomely and persuade them to give up their life of crime. Suppose he enrolled those men in a substance abuse program and after that paid for them to go to trade school and after that gave them well paying jobs in a factory that he owned. And suppose that the other two men carried on in their chosen folly. Eventually they were caught by the Police and brought to trial. Suppose they argued before the judge that he should let them off because really it was Mr. Goodwill's fault for not treating them with the same generosity with which he treated the other men. What do you think the judge would say to that? He'd say that was just about the stupidest thing he had ever heard. A rich man has the right to be generous and kind to whomever he will without falling under obligation to be similarly generous to all people equally. God is in this particular way like a rich man and he is likewise under NO OBLIGATION to be equally generous to all guilty rebels. He told us that about himself a long time ago:

¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Exodus 33:19. ESV)

Fundamental to an understanding of who God is - is the understanding that he is a God who shows mercy to whom he will show mercy. To understand God you have to understand that he elects according to the purpose of his will and who are you to find fault with God?

Is that too Old Testament for you? Paul says the exact same thing in Romans:

¹⁴What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. (Romans 9:14-16. ESV)

The universe is not run by FAIR – it is run by God and God shows mercy to whomever he chooses according to the counsel of his will.

ii. The doctrine of election is fatalistic

"If God chooses and if everything happens according to God's Sovereign will then people are really just puppets and life is meaningless and vain". Have you ever heard that? I've said that. That was my opinion in seminary. I tried to convince people of that and preached sermons on that in my 20's. I just couldn't understand how God's Sovereignty and human responsibility

could co-exist and so I didn't believe that they did. I believed that God's Sovereignty had to be limited by man's free will. I believed that to suggest otherwise was to risk fatalism. I was wrong and years of Bible study finally convinced me of that. The Bible frequently presents these two truths as being parallel and compatible, often in the same passage and verse, consider as one example Acts 2:23:

²³this Jesus, delivered up **according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed** by the hands of lawless men. (Acts 2:23. ESV)

Peter says in the same verse: "The crucifixion of Jesus happened because God meant for it to happen. He predestined it. And yet YOU are responsible for it. You killed him and you will be judged accordingly." How do those things go together? How can something happen because God predestined it and yet happen because of the sinful and morally responsible agency of human actors? It's hard to understand that and yet the Bible says that these things run parallel – they are both true and the one being true doesn't make the other less true. Theologians refer to this with a word borrowed from the sciences; they call it an antimony. An antimony is when two truths appear at first to be contradictory and yet they are both empirically and provably verifiable. For a complete discussion of that see the first message in the X Marks The Spot series – we don't have time to re-preach that sermon here. The bottom line is that a belief in God's Sovereignty over all things including our salvation is not inconsistent with the belief that people make real choices for which they will be held accountable. That is just one of those truths that is hard to grab hold of as a human being locked within the confines of space and time. God is Sovereign – he chose us – and yet, we make real decisions for which we are held accountable. No one can say: "I didn't get to heaven because God made me sin." Everyone on that day will say: "Surely the Judge of all things is Holy and does all things well." No one is forced to sin by God and no one is sent to hell because they are not elect, they are sent to hell because they wilfully chose to ignore God's commands and to lift themselves up as a law unto themselves. Election is not fatalism.

More than defining election and even more than defending election, my ultimate goal – and the Apostle Paul's ultimate goal – is to help you see election as a catalyst for rejoicing and praise. Election is not just a doctrine to be accepted and defended – it is to be the wellspring of doxology. Let's end then by looking at why election is a reason, even THE REASON to praise and magnify Almighty God.

The Doctrine Of Election As The Catalyst For Praise

Very briefly, the doctrine of election is the catalyst for praise because:

- i. Election is the immediate cause of every other blessing I receive in Christ.

Paul will make that connection in the very next verse and then he'll do it again in verse 11 – he will say again and again ‘the reason we have all these good things is because God chose us in order to be good to us.’ Listen to that again, ‘God chose us in order to be good to us.’ God chose you in order to shower his goodness upon you. He didn’t save you to sit in your sin with a bus ticket to heaven sewn into your underwear – he chose you to set you free, to bring you into an intimate relationship with him, to make you strong by grace, to make you holy by his Spirit and to give you an eternal inheritance among the saints of light. If that doesn’t light your praise fire than your wood is wet.

- ii. Election debases the pride of man and exalts the glory of God’s grace

The biggest barrier to praise is the fact that we think far too much of ourselves. The single greatest hindrance on the prayers of this church is the pride of her people. We think – let me make that more specific – I think too much of myself to give God the praise that he is due. In my quiet moments I am inclined to think that God is really lucky to have me. In my quiet moments when the flesh is strong in me I am inclined to think that the reason I put faith in Jesus Christ when others around me did not is that I am smarter and more naturally holy than many others. That disgusting, abhorrent, sinful pride is the single greatest reason that I do not praise God with the abandon and gratitude that I should. So when I am brought by the Word of God to consider the Sovereignty of God in my salvation I feel a change come over me. I feel a bend in my knee and I get a frog in my throat and I am put in the posture of worship and thanksgiving. God gets bigger and kinder and more merciful and I am lost in praise, in adoration and in gratitude. That’s when I begin to worship.

- iii. Election provides the only rational motivation for sacrificial mission and persevering prayer

Think about that. Our forefathers went to Africa and India as missionaries, packing their belongings in COFFINS for the voyage overseas. 30% of missionaries died in the first year of their overseas service. Most mission organizations insisted that the husband went first and only if he survived the first year could he send for his wife and children – most of our forefathers went to the mission field EXPECTING TO DIE in very short order. Why did they do that? Because they believed in God’s Sovereignty over salvation! They read a verse in the Bible that said:

⁹After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, **from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10. ESV)

They believed that God had ordained praise from among every tribe and tongue and nation in the world and so they went to see that he had it. They knew it would work because they knew what God had ordained. If you didn’t believe that God had worshippers among the Telagu speaking people in India then you would never have got on that boat with all your belongings packed into a pine box coffin and your wife and kids standing on the pier waiting to follow you SHOULD YOU SURVIVE THE FIRST YEAR. That would be crazy if the salvation of Telagu people had not been ORDAINED by the Sovereign Decree of Almighty God.

Let that put courage into you as you consider foreign missions. And let that put perseverance in you as you pray for lost loved ones closer to home. If I thought that the salvation of my loved ones depended on their ability to make a good choice I would have long ago despaired. Thanks be to God that it does not! I may not be able to turn their hearts with decisive arguments but God still diffuses quickening rays! He still saves men and women who were dead in their trespasses and sins. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. And all God’s people said. Amen.

