

Ephesians 1.4

The Blessing of Election

Reader's Digest story about a girl who had been adopted.

God is not stuck with you to put up with you. He chose you when there was nothing lovely in you so that you would be His and He would be yours, and in this relationship He would fashion you into a delight by sovereign grace.

God chose us out of a deplorable condition. Everywhere that this word is used in the NT the choice is made out of a larger group (Lk 6.13). Jesus chooses the twelve out of the larger group of followers. Matthias is chosen to replace Judas rather than Joseph (Acts 1.24). When we consider election to salvation we understand that God has chosen us out of a mass of humanity that is fallen in sin and is in a state of misery, separated from God, subject to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to eternal pain in hell (SC Q. 19).

This tells against any notion of conditional election, such as the Arminian teaching that God foresees faith or merit in us and then chooses us upon that basis. What God sees are people, "dead in trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Eph 2.1-3). The transition from this sorry condition to glory in Christ does not begin with "but you, being rich in faith." That's the perverse reasoning of Pelagius. The transition says, "but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us!" (2.4). It is all of grace, and not of us. It is all of God, and not of us. Therefore, it is "to the praise of His glorious grace" (1.6).

It's not like God opened up a country club and then went to another country club to recruit members for His club. It's more like God opening a country club and going to a homeless shelter to find members for His club. God chose us out of a deplorable condition, to the praise of His glorious grace.

God chose us with personal interest in us. Some have tried to diminish the personal nature of God's choice by pointing to the plural "us," as though God chose a group of people to whom I, as an individual, just happen to belong because of what I have done. This is very similar to the Arminian teaching that God's election is based on my merits or my faith, since the reason that I'm in the group that God chooses is *because of* something that I've done. This is sometimes called "corporate election" as opposed to "individual election." Some have pointed to the phrase "in Christ" as further support for corporate election, saying that Christ is the chosen One, and we are chosen by virtue of His election. How do I get "in Christ"? they ask. "By faith" is their answer. So they explain away the doctrine of election by saying that I get into Christ by my faith, then God chooses Christ and all those who are united to Him. In that way I'm elect.

If this is the case, then every blessing that is enumerated is not experienced individually, but only corporately, because all of these are to "us" (plural), and all of them are "in Christ." So my forgiveness is only corporate, not individual (whatever that would mean!). My adoption is only corporate, not individual. My inheritance and sealing by the Holy Spirit is not an individual experience. By the time we've made all of these blessings merely corporate, and not individual, it seems that all of our excitement and enthusiasm over the tremendous grace of God has dissipated by our philosophical musings to decommission God as sovereign over us, in order to retain our autonomy as arbiters of our own destiny.

The fact is, we don't have to choose between corporate and individual. We do experience these blessings together corporately, but we experience them together as individuals, not just as nameless and faceless parts of a corporation. The middle voice ("indirect middle of a self-benefactive type" Larkin) of the verb "to choose" which is used here indicates the personal interest that God takes in choosing us. As we saw above, He does not choose us based upon our merits. But He does choose us with perfect knowledge of who we are. In righteousness He justly looks on us with anger for our sin and rebellion, but in mercy, He looks on us with compassion, and for His own purpose and by His free reign, He chooses us for Himself. This choice is not the impersonal choice of a businessman who commissions a ship regardless of the crew just because He knows the ship's captain. This is the personal choice of each member of the crew, as well as the choice of the captain Himself, the Lord Jesus.

Of course, we are chosen "in Christ." God, being holy, would have nothing to do with sinners unless Christ agreed to be their head and representative before the Father. The Holy One, whose eyes are too pure to look upon sin would not choose us for Himself apart from the death of Christ that cleanses every sin and the perfect life of Christ that clothes us in God's righteousness. Because God eternally elects sinners, the Bible speaks of "the blood of the eternal covenant" and of the "lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world." So yes, we are chosen in Christ. You and I as individuals are chosen by God, so of necessity we had to be cleansed. God's personal interest in your salvation means that He ordained you to mercy *and* He ordained Christ, before the worlds in order stood, to make atonement for your sins. God's sovereign election of you to salvation was not done with disinterested benevolence, but with personal interest and meticulous care to all of the details necessary to make His decree of your election in eternity a reality in your experience in history. God chose us with personal interest in us, to the praise of His glorious grace.

God chose us unconditionally. The phrase "before the foundation of the world" not only tells us that His decision was before time, in eternity, it also indicates that His choice was not dependent on anything in the creature. This is the same point Paul makes in Romans 9 with relation to the choice of Jacob over Esau "though they were not yet born." The point is not just the timing of the choice, but that the choice was not based on something in the boys, but by something in God. Paul says "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls" (Rom 9.11).

As I mentioned earlier, Arminians teach that God's choice is based on foreknowledge. They would appeal to Romans 8.29 "For those whom He foreknew He also predestined"; and to 1 Peter 1.1-2 "elect exiles . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." The problem with their reading of these texts is that they are defining "foreknowledge" according to their philosophy handbooks instead of from the Bible. They believe God's foreknowledge in these passages refers to God's knowledge that these people will believe in Jesus. So God looks down through the corridors of time and sees all who will do the right thing, namely, believe in Jesus. Once He sees that they have met this one condition, then He chooses them for salvation. Some Arminians of course must go further, since they believe that a person can believe for a little while and then renounce their faith in Christ. So at one point in their life they are saved, but then they can jeopardize this by not believing later. So God, in foreknowledge must not only see that they believed in Christ, but that they persevered in their belief. Thus, the Arminian believes that God chooses him on this condition, that He believes and then remains faithful to that decision to the end of his life. In Systematic Theology this is called conditional election.

This view of foreknowledge is philosophical and impersonal. It imagines that God's foreknowledge is simply a fact gathering mission to determine who is a worthy member of His team. But these texts do not say that God knew about His elect before the foundation of the world. The Bible says that He knew them. God foreknows everyone by the philosopher's definition of foreknowledge. He knows the stats on every person who has ever

been conceived. But this is not Paul's or Peter's point in saying "whom He foreknew" and "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." The point is not that God knows about the elect, but that He knows the elect. When God says to Israel, "You only have I known of all the nations of the earth," (Amos 3.2) God is not saying that He is ignorant of the other nations. Of course, He knows all about them. What He is saying is that He has a special regard for this nation, Israel. When God's Word says that He foreknew the elect, He is saying that He had a special regard for each person He chose. The Bible often uses the word for knowledge to refer to much more than intellectual comprehension of facts. When the Bible says "Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived," we don't imagine that somehow Adam and Eve conceived children by intellectual exercises. We recognize that "to know" is being used of a personal and intimate knowledge. Some have suggested that a more accurate translation of προγινωσκω would be "fore-love" rather than "foreknow" in these contexts.

Now, having said this, let's be clear that God loved us, not because we were worthy of His love. He didn't see some remarkable attribute in each of us and feel compelled to love us. The motive of His love was from within Himself, not from within us. He had a special regard for us because He chose to, not because we chose Him. I had one guest preacher in a previous church that I served who was touching on election and referred to us as "God's choice people." Now, that statement may be fitting in some contexts, but it is certainly not an accurate summary for the doctrine of election. It is a terrible perversion of the doctrine of election. To be choice means to be a cut above the rest. The implication is that God owns us because we are a cut above the rest of humanity. That only encourages sinful pride and boasting, the very things the doctrine of election should destroy. Paul reminds us in Romans 9:16, "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."

It is not like God comes into the classroom and says, "Ok children who wants to go to heaven, raise your hands." Then all the good little boys and girls raise their hands. Then He says, "Why! that's a fine choice you've made, I'll just take all of you who raised your hands. . . . To hell with the rest of you!" It would be more like God coming into a room and saying, "Ok children who wants to go to heaven, to live with Me in My house, raise your hands." And suddenly the whole class is foaming at the mouth, cursing God and raising their fists in His face, challenging Him to take them to that awful and boring place called heaven. I know you think that's an exaggeration. You're saying, ok wait a minute. I know people who aren't Christians that would never behave that way toward God, in fact most would like to go to heaven. My friend, they would like to go to a heaven of their own design—a heaven where they can continue to run life their own way—a heaven where they are the center of everyone's praise. They don't want God's heaven. They are dead in trespasses and sins. Let's not forget or downplay God's description of fallen humanity in Romans 3, where he says in verse 11 "no one seeks for God." They may seek for many gods to soothe their disenchantments with life, but they do not seek the true and living God revealed in the Scriptures and incarnate in Jesus Christ. Him they avoid at all costs—even the cost of hell. So when God enters the classroom and says, "Raise your hands if you want to go to heaven," and all of the children rise up against Him, what does He do? Despite their hatred of Him—despite their hostility toward His law—He fixes His affection of whomever He wills and chooses them, "in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of Him who calls" (Rom 9.11). In Systematic Theology this is called unconditional election.

The language of God's will and purpose runs throughout this text. "He chose us," "He predestined us," "according to the purpose of His will," "the mystery of His will," "according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time," "having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will." Our praise is to be excited by the knowledge that our salvation is all of God, without appeal to our performance. Our praise is fueled by the assurance that we have from God's unconditional love and choice of us. "Such language functions to give believers assurance of God's

purposes for them. Its force is that God's choice of them was a free decision not dependent on temporal circumstances but rooted in the depth of His nature. To say that election in Christ took place before the foundation of the world is to underline that it was provoked not by historical contingency or human merit, but solely by God's sovereign grace." (Lincoln, 23) *Sola Gratia! Soli Deo Gloria!* God chose us unconditionally, to the praise of His glorious grace.

God chose us for Himself. "That we should be" indicates God's purpose. Depending on how one treats the syntax of the phrase "in love", we can discern either two or three purposes in election. If we take "in love" with verse four as the KJV, then we have three purposes in election "holiness, blamelessness and love." If, with the ESV, we take "in love" with verse 5, then we have two purposes.

"Holy and without blemish" are distinct concepts, but both relate to our belonging to God. Holiness indicates that we belong to God, that we have been separated from the common to the sacred. "Without blemish" is sacrificial terminology. God's requirement for sacrifices that were brought to Him under Moses was that they should be without spot or blemish. As we are given to God, it is as "living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God"—that, Paul says, is worship. Because God chose us to be holy, Paul can confidently refer to all believers as "saints" in verse 1.

Anxiety of appearing before the Presbytery alleviated by fact that no one is expected to be able to answer all questions perfectly and to everyone's satisfaction. However, what if your examination had to be flawless? Would you want to take an exam in which your answers not only had to be correct, but had to also be complete to the satisfaction of all? That is God's standard. "But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Pet 1.15-16). Or, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5.48). God doesn't adjust His standards to our level of performance. Now that might make us very uncomfortable. It may make us tremble at the thought of the great and terrible day of His judgment, when every tribe and nation and language and people are gathered before the Great White Throne to be judged by the all knowing and righteous judge. But here is good news. Here is comfort. Here is assurance. Even more—here is confidence to boldly stand in the judgment, not that you are better than other men, but that God has chosen you before the foundation of the world that you should be holy and blameless before Him. "The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

My friend, when the blast of God's judgment sweeps the wicked into a merciless eternity, will you stand? You say, "Preacher, how can I know since it is not of him who wills or runs, but of God who shows mercy? If what you say of God's sovereign election is so, how can I have assurance for that day?" Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. Beloved, your faith in Christ, which is a gift from God, is proof of your eternal election. It is not the cause of God's love for you. Faith is not the cause of God's choosing you. But faith is the evidence of your election. Paul said to the Thessalonians, "For we *know*, brothers, loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1.4-5). I know you are elect because I can see the impact of the gospel on your life. God's Spirit made His Word effective in your heart and with full conviction you believed. Do you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? Then do not fear that God has not chosen you. That faith is the hallmark of His election. God chose you for Himself. He made you holy that He might delight in you as a work of Sovereign Grace. God chose us for Himself, to the praise of His glorious grace.

God chose us out of a deplorable condition. God chose us with personal interest in us. God chose us unconditionally. God chose us for Himself. God chose us to the praise of His glorious grace.

I want to close with some implications of the doctrine of election for our Christian lives. First, election and evangelism. I had a seminary president who claimed that Calvinism was the death of evangelism and missions. That is not only historically inaccurate, it is perverse reasoning. Folks, if I believed that at the end of the day people come to Christ because they are convinced that it is the best thing for their souls, then I'd resign the preaching ministry and suggest that we recruit ministers, not from seminary, but from sales workshops. But even with the best salesmen on the job I'd still despair of any success in evangelism because the Bible tells me, and my experience with people demonstrates, that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked beyond our discovery. The only hope that I can find that sinners can be turned from rebellion to the love of God is Sovereign Grace. God is the only One I know that can take a heart of stone and exchange it with a heart of flesh. In that filthy city of Corinth, full of Pagans, idolaters and sexually immoral people, God said to Paul, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18.9-10). It appeared that there was no one for God in Corinth when Paul arrived. But God had His elect, and this was all the encouragement Paul needed to keep preaching, so that the elect would come to faith. The doctrine of election is great encouragement to evangelism. It reminds us that salvation is a work of God from beginning to end; and nothing is impossible with God. It keeps me from looking at someone who appears hopeless and writing them off. The doctrine of election also preserves the gospel because I don't need to adjust the truth to appease my audience. I just proclaim the gospel and trust God with the results. A friend of mine was recently sent home from Vanuatu by Wycliffe Bible translators because he refused to get on board with their "contextualization" of the Bible. They wanted him to change the message of the Bible so as not to offend Muslims. Muslims are offended at the idea of God being called Father, so find a different word than Father. Muslims are offended at the idea of Jesus as the Son of God, so come up with a different translation for "Son of God." Why would you do this? Well, if I don't believe in the sovereignty of God in salvation, but I believe that it is up to me to get people to make a decision, then maybe I need to curtail the offense of the gospel so that more people will embrace it. You can see that my seminary president was wrong. Far from being the death of evangelism, Calvinism is the great impetus for evangelism and missions. We go because God has said, "I will be exalted among the nations."

Second, election and humility. God saved us in such a way that all of our boasting would be in the cross of Christ, in the grace of the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit as Lord and giver of life. When I worked at UPS in Raleigh there were several guys from a Freewill Baptist College that I worked with. They hated the doctrines of grace, especially unconditional election. I asked one of these guys one day, "What's the difference between you and your brother who does not believe?" He said, "I was smart enough to believe." Now his professors may have wished that he had found a better way to articulate Arminian theology, but he was at the heart of it. According to Arminianism men are distinguished by what they have done. Whether you want to say "smart enough," "wise enough," "humble enough," or "good enough," doesn't really matter. At the end of the day you are saying that *you* are the difference between you and someone else. But according to the Bible the difference is God alone. His gracious and saving purposes make all the difference. "'Tis Not that I did choose Thee, for, Lord, that could not be; this heart would still refuse Thee, hadst Thou not chosen me. Thou from the sin that stained me hast cleansed and set me free; of old Thou hast ordained me, that I should live to Thee." May God's sovereign grace humble us and turn us from our self-centered boasting to give God all praise and glory.