

Ephesians 1:4

Introduction

“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...” That’s Ephesians 1:3. Then in verse four, without taking any breath for air, Paul immediately begins to *describe* in exquisite, breathtaking *detail* these spiritual blessings with which the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has blessed us in the heavenly places in Christ. Let’s pray that God would enlighten the eyes of our hearts (cf. 1:18). “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...”

I. “Even as He chose us”

Here is the single spiritual blessing from which all other spiritual blessings *flow*. This spiritual blessing is the well spring and the fountain head from which all other spiritual blessings flow. “Even as He chose us.” Brothers and sisters, this is where everything *started*. This is why we can know that what God started, *He* will see through to its completion (cf. Phil. 1:6). “He... chose... us.”

It’s really so very *simple*. And yet somehow we’ve managed to complicate matters. We’ve muddied the waters, and made this most beautiful of spiritual blessings into something questionable and debatable – something that Christians have actually fought over throughout the centuries. My prayer is that God would help us to reclaim the Bible’s teaching about election not as an academic point for “scholars,” but as the source of all our deepest, most sublime joy and confidence. May God help us to reclaim the Bible’s teaching about election not as something we believe but generally avoid, but rather as something we believe, and cherish, and proclaim with all of our being. May God help us to reclaim the Bible’s teaching about election not as something debatable and impossible to understand, but rather as something that we can truly take hold of, and grasp, and cling to in humble faith. “He... chose... us.”

When Paul says that God chose us, he’s *celebrating*, and *blessing* God for what we call today the doctrine of Election.* Already in the Old Testament, there was great emphasis on the fact that Israel was God’s people *because* He chose them. When God chose Israel, it wasn’t an arbitrary, random, emotionless, mechanical choice. It was the expression and the outworking of God’s *love*. God was setting His love on Israel – His choosing, electing *love*. When God chose Israel, He was selecting only them *from out of* all the surrounding nations. God chose Israel *from out of* all the nations of the earth. When God chose Israel, there was nothing in Israel to deserve, or even to invite His choice. Instead, God chose Israel – *in spite* of Israel. We see all three of these things summed up in Deuteronomy.

- ✓ Deuteronomy 7:6–7; 9:6 (cf. 4:37; 10:14–16; 14:2; 9:4) — 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. It was *not because you were more in number* than any other people that the LORD

* The Greek word for “chose” is “eklegomai” (verb). The noun is “eklektos” and can be translated “the chosen,” or “the elect.”

set his love on you and *chose you*, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but 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... Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, **for you are a stubborn people.**

- ✓ Malachi 1:2-3 — “I have loved you,” says the LORD. But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved [chosen] Jacob but Esau I have hated [not chosen]. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert [I have chosen to judge Esau for his sinful pride and wickedness].”

When God chose Israel, He was setting His *love* on Israel. When God chose Israel, He was selecting them *from out of* all the nations of the earth. When God chose Israel, His choice was very much *in spite* of every reason in the world why Israel should not have been chosen. Really, all that needs to be said is this: “God *chose* Israel.” Isn’t that it? Isn’t it simple? That one, small word, sums up so very much.

And now Paul writes to the largely Gentile church in Ephesus, and he uses this same, very familiar language – “Even as He chose *us*.” The difference *here* is that God is not choosing a nation, but rather individuals. This is not a corporate election of a group, but rather a personal, **individual** choosing. When Paul says in verse 3 that God has blessed *us* with every spiritual blessing in Christ, he’s not talking about a corporate blessing of the church. No! He’s saying that these blessings have come to every single one of us individually and personally. When Paul says in verse 5 that *we* have been adopted as sons through Jesus Christ, he’s not talking about a corporate adoption of something called the Church. He’s saying that each one of us individually have been personally adopted into God’s family. When Paul says in verse 7 that *we* have redemption through Christ’s blood, he’s not talking about a corporate redemption of the Church. He’s saying that the redeeming blood of Christ has been applied to each and every one of us personally and individually. When Paul says in verse 7 that *our* trespasses have been forgiven, he’s not talking about the corporate forgiveness of a group. He’s saying that every single one of us has been personally and individually forgiven. When Paul speaks in verse 12 of those who were the first to hope in Christ, he’s not talking about a corporate, group hope. He’s talking about specific individuals like you and me who have personally placed all our hope in Christ. When Paul speaks in verse 13 of those who heard the word of truth and believed in Christ (13), he’s not talking about a corporate, group hearing and believing. He’s talking about specific individuals just like us who personally heard the Gospel, and who have personally placed our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And finally, when Paul speaks in verse 13 of those who have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, he’s not talking about a corporate sealing of a group of people. He’s talking about the fact that each one of us have personally and individually been sealed by the promised Holy Spirit. †

† When Paul says “we,” and “us,” and “our,” these aren’t corporate references to a “group” called the church. Instead, they express the reality that God’s saving blessings are blessings we’ve all experienced individually, but also *in common with* each other. As *individuals* who have all of these saving blessings *in common with* each other, we then make up the *corporate church*. So there is something corporate here, but the first and the main emphasis is on *individuals* just like *you* and just like *me*. (Every time there’s a “we” or an “us” we could actually translate, “each one of us.”) In the Old Testament you can talk about the election of a “group” because this group can be clearly defined – it’s all the physical seed of the twelve sons of Jacob; cf. Deut. 4:37; 10:14). But in the New Testament, when the Church is made up of Jews *and Gentiles* from *all different* tribes and nations of the earth, it’s impossible to

In the Old Testament, the elect nation of Israel was defined by ethnic background. So when God chose the *nation* of Israel, it didn't mean that every single individual Jew would be saved. But in the New Testament, the Church is not defined by ethnic background. Instead, now the Church is defined by God's election of individuals. So *now* when God chooses *each one of us individually* in Christ, this *is* the guarantee that all of us will ultimately inherit eternal *salvation* (Rom. 8:29-30). This is something very different from the corporate election of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. Paul writes:

- ✓ 2 Timothy 2:10 (cf. Titus 1:1-2) — Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that *they* also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

Now there were also elect individuals in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Kings 19:18). God's spiritual elect have existed at all times throughout all the history of the world. But it was only with the coming of Christ, and the full unveiling of the Gospel that God's choosing of *us* as individuals could be fully and unreservedly celebrated.[‡]

When Paul borrows the familiar language of the Old Testament, he does this because this language communicates the beautiful, wonderful truth that God has set His *love* on *us*. In Romans, Paul uses the word "foreknew" as a synonym for "chose."

- ✓ Romans 8:29 — For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

We could say, "But I thought God foreknows everyone?" At least in this case, though, God only foreknows *some*. And that's because the word for "know" can refer in the Bible to a loving *relationship*.

- ✓ Hosea 13:4-5 (cf. Judges 3:1-2; 1 Sam. 1:19; Job 19:13-14; Psalm 55:13) — But I am the LORD your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior. It was I who *knew* [cared for; NASB] you in the wilderness, in the land of drought.

If we take things a step further, the word for "know" can refer to a loving and relational *choice*.

- ✓ Genesis 18:19 — For I have *known* him [chosen him], that he may command his children and his household after him.
- ✓ Jeremiah 1:4-5 (cf. 1 Pet. 1:20) — Before I formed you in the womb I *knew you*, and before you were born I *consecrated you*; I *appointed you* a prophet to the nations."
- ✓ Amos 3:1-2 (cf. Rom. 11:2) — You only have I *known* of all the families of the earth.

talk about the election of the Church unless you first assume the election of individuals – otherwise there would be no Church there in the first place.

[‡] In the Old Testament, there's a strong emphasis on God's choice of the *nation* of Israel. In the New Testament, God's choice of the nation of Israel becomes the backdrop for thinking about God's choice of *individuals* who together make up a New Israel – or Israel as it was always meant to be.

So when Paul says that God *foreknew* us, he's expressing God's choice in the language of God's *love*. He's saying that before we were born, God expressed His love for us by choosing us. God *foreknew* us!

- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 1:4 — We know, brothers *loved* by God, that he has *chosen* you.
- ✓ 2 Thessalonians 2:13 — We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers *beloved* by the Lord, because God *chose* you as the firstfruits to be saved.
- ✓ Colossians 3:12 — Put on then, as God's *chosen* ones, holy and *beloved*, compassionate hearts.

When God chose us, it wasn't an arbitrary, random, emotionless, mechanical choice. It was the supreme expression of God's love. God has expressed His love for us not just as a wish or a feeling, but as a sovereign, electing *choice*. That's the only way for us to understand what Paul writes in Romans 8:38-39:

- ✓ Romans 8:38–39 — For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the *love* of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Brothers and sisters, God's love for *us* is not just His wish, it's His choice.

When Paul borrows the familiar language of the Old Testament, he does this to show us that God has set His love on us by selecting us *from out of* a vast multitude of people. God didn't choose us because there was no one else to choose. On the other hand, God has not chosen the whole world. "He chose *us*." It's God's choice of us that marks us out as special and set apart from all the rest of the world.

Finally, when Paul borrows the familiar language of the Old Testament, he does this in order to show that when God set His *love* on us by selecting us from *out of* a vast multitude of people, He did all of this *in spite of* us – when there was nothing in us to deserve, or even to invite His love. Here is beauty unspeakable. Here is the most high, and the most sublime of all loves. "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*..."

II. "Even as He chose us in Him"

It was no light and trivial thing for God to choose us. God could choose us only in light of and because of Christ's suffering and death in our place. It's only through our connection with Christ as the sacrificial Lamb of God that God's choice of us could be the real, and powerful, and effective choice that it is. This isn't to say that God chose us *because* He saw that we would be "in Christ." The point is that when God chose us, His choice included the *means* to make His choice powerful and effective in our lives. When God chose us, He also chose and appointed Jesus to be the one *in whom* we should find salvation. Peter says of Jesus:

- ✓ 1 Peter 1:20 (cf. Acts 2:23) — He was foreknown [chosen and appointed by God] before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.

God could not choose us apart from Christ. God could only choose us “in Christ.” And so we learn that when God chose us, He chose us with the full knowledge of all that it would *cost* Him – the death of His one and only, beloved Son. How *could* He? How could He choose *us*? Here is truly a love that defeats and frustrates every attempt to ever put it fully into words.

III. “Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”

What’s the point of saying that God chose us *before* the foundation of the world? I suppose you could say that there really is no “before” and “after” in God. God is eternal. He is not bound by any time. So *why* say that God did something before the foundation of the world if “before” and “after” are really all the same to God? Paul writes of Jacob and Esau:

- ✓ Romans 9:11–12 (cf. 2 Tim. 1:9) — Though 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 him who calls— she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”

So when Paul says that God chose us long before we ever existed – even before the foundations of the world were laid – his point is that God’s choice of us was completely *independent* of anything at all in us. God chose us “before” we had ever done anything good or bad. God chose us “before” we had ever displayed any faith or any unbelief. Therefore, when God chose us, Paul says, His choice was not based on anything at all in us. It had nothing to do with anything at all that He foresaw in us. In the midst of all other questions, may this truth never be doubted. May this truth be firmly fixed forever in our minds and in our hearts.

In the face of the Bible’s teaching, we may ask: Then why did God choose me if it had nothing to do with anything at all that He foresaw in me? Why did God choose me if His choice was completely independent of anything at all in me? Well, we know that His choice is not something cold and mechanical, or random and arbitrary. So then what was the basis of God’s choice? *Why* did God choose us? Here’s the Bible’s answer. The reason God chose us can only be found in the *infinite, unfathomable* depths of **God Himself**. And it’s into this wonderful, comforting truth that all of our faith is finally resolved, and all of our questions finally “answered.” As Paul will say later, we’ve “been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things *according to the counsel of his will*” (1:11).

- ✓ Romans 11:33–36 — Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How *unsearchable* are his judgments and how *inscrutable* his ways! “For *who has known the mind of the Lord*, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

What God has delighted to reveal to us is not why He chose us, but that He has, in fact, *chosen* us.

IV. “Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love.”

Once again, we see that God didn't choose us because we were holy and blameless. To the contrary! He *chose* us *in order* that we should be holy and blameless. If God had not chosen us, we could not and would not ever be holy and blameless before Him in love. But *since* God *has* chosen us, we can be and will be holy and blameless before Him in love.

Now the ground of all true holiness and blamelessness is *faith* and *trust* in Jesus. Holiness and blamelessness before God is all *one with* faith. You can't have one *without* the other. So to say that our holiness and blamelessness before God is the result of God's free and gracious choice, but *not also* our *faith* is contrary to this verse and to all of Scripture. God has *chosen* us *in order* that we should have the *faith* whose ultimate *fruit* is *holiness*. This is the only way to make sense of Peter's words:

- ✓ 1 Peter 1:5 — By God's *power* [we] are being *guarded through faith* for a salvation *ready to be revealed in the last time*.

Jude says the *same* thing, but now from the perspective of faith's *fruit*.

- ✓ Jude 24 — [God] is able to *keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy*.

Once again, we're meant to understand that God's choice is where everything *started*. God's choice was not conditioned or influenced by anything at all in us, or by anything at all outside of God. God's choice is the *root, and the source, and the wellspring* of *all* other spiritual blessings – of even our faith (cf. Eph. 2:8-9). So now, more than ever, we see that God's choice is our ultimate comfort and guarantee that we will persevere in obedient faith until that day when we stand before God holy and blameless in love (cf. Eph. 5:25-27; Col. 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 1:7-8). Many translations connect "in love" with the next verse: "In love he predestined us" (NASB; ESV; NIV; HCSB; NLT; NCV; cf. Hendriksen). But I take the position of Calvin, who says: "I prefer connecting it with [verse 4], as [showing] that the perfection of believers consists in love [love for God and love for neighbor]" (cf. NET; NRSV; NKJV; O'Brien; Hoehner; Thielman; Lincoln; Hodge; Bruce). Another commentator puts it this way, "The consummation of holiness is perfect love" (Bruce). And so the goal and end of God's choosing us in Christ before the foundation of the world is our full perfection in Christ on the day of the Lord Jesus (cf. O'Brien).

- ✓ Colossians 1:21–22 — And you... he has now reconciled... in order to present you *holy and blameless* and above reproach *before him*.
- ✓ Ephesians 5:25–27 — Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... that he might present the church *to himself* in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be *holy and without blemish*.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:7–8 — You are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, *guiltless [blameless]* in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, it's really so very simple. "**He... chose... us.**" And yet somehow we've complicated things. We've muddied the waters, and made this most beautiful of spiritual blessings into something questionable and debatable. Since there is much surrounding this doctrine that is mysterious, and difficult to understand and that can only be resolved through a faith that "believes, nor questions how"[§] – *therefore*, we seek for ways to deny it. Some say that God has not personally chosen each one of us as individuals, but that His choice was of an impersonal, corporate "thing" called the church. Others say that God chose us individually and personally, but that He chose us *because* He first looked into the future and saw that we would choose Him. Some have said that God chooses *everyone*, and so Paul cannot be making a distinction between those who are chosen and those who are not chosen, but rather between believers who *know* they are chosen, and unbelievers who have not accepted and embraced their election by faith (Karl Barth; but see Hendriksen and Hoehner). And finally, there are those who basically say that the doctrine of election is just a big, mysterious contradiction that none of us can understand and that we should for the most part ignore.

Ultimately, all four of these approaches are related to what we know today as "Arminianism." They flow not from the Scriptures, but from human logic and rationalism. They rob God of His **glory** by elevating man and diminishing the magnitude of God's grace.^{**} They rob us of our truest comfort and **confidence** by making our salvation to depend ultimately on us rather than on God alone. They rob us of our truest **joy** by denying that God has loved us absolutely unconditionally. They rob us of our most powerful **motivation** to live holy and blameless before God in love since our holiness and perseverance in the faith is simply the certain *fruit and evidence* of our election (cf. 2 Pet. 1:3-11). They rob us of our only source of **peace** as we think about the reality of hell, because if our faith is not ultimately resolved in the God who works all things after the counsel of His will, then we're left either with a world of *chance*, or with a God whose salvation purposes are constantly thwarted. Ultimately, when we deny God's sovereign and gracious choice, we rob ourselves of the chance to have a heart so **trustful** in its affection to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as to know that His ways are good and right simply because they are His ways (cf. Braune; p. 47; Rom. 11:33-36).

One might say that our church is "Calvinistic" (and not Arminian) because we believe this is the only understanding of Scripture that is finally faithful to *the Gospel*, to our own *spiritual well-being*, and to the *glory of God*. My prayer is that God would help all of us to reclaim the Bible's teaching about election not as an academic point for "scholars," but as the source of all our deepest, most sublime joy, and confidence, and peace. May God help all of us to reclaim the Bible's teaching about election not as something we say we believe but generally avoid, but rather as something we believe, and cherish, and proclaim with all of our ransomed powers. May God help us all to reclaim the Bible's teaching about election not as something debatable and impossible to understand, but rather as something that we can truly take hold of, and grasp, and cling to in humble faith.

[§] "Alleluia! Sing to Jesus"; William Dix

^{**} Calvin writes of God's election: "This is the true fountain from which we must draw our knowledge of the divine mercy. If men should evade every other argument, election shuts their mouth, so that they dare not and cannot claim anything for themselves."

- ✓ Ephesians 1:3–4 — 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, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love.

“To thee, O Lord, alone is due
All glory and renown;
Aught to ourselves we dare not take,
Or rob thee of thy crown.
Thou wast thyself our Surety
In God’s redemption plan;
In thee his grace was given us,
Long ere the world began.”

(Augustus M. Toplady, 1774; revised by Dewey Westra, 1931; quoted in Hendriksen)