

Sermon Series: *The Book of Ephesians*



What Is the Doctrine of Election?

The Deepest Reason Believers Enjoy the Blessings of Salvation

(Ephesians 1:3-6 ESV)

³ 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, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Introduction

The passage before us this morning is one that is wrapped in blessing. It begins with blessing and it ends with blessing. And the blessings which Paul has in mind are all the blessings which attend salvation through Jesus, which are the greatest blessings anyone could have.

The question which begs to be answered is how do these blessings come to those who are saved? If I were to ask you who are believers this morning, how is it that you came to receive all the blessings of your salvation? How would you answer?

You might say, "Well, I heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and I believed it." That would be a very good answer. However, that's not how Paul answers the question. In this text before this morning, Paul takes us back to something that happen before you ever believed in Jesus. He tells us there is an even deeper reason for why you received the blessings of salvation. Paul takes us back in time to a place even before Jesus himself walked this earth.

We could also ask the question another way. Why did you believe the gospel and your brother didn't? Why are you a believer today and your neighbor is not? Why are you trusting in Jesus and another member of your family is an atheist? Why, when you heard the gospel, did you believe it and the person standing next to you did not?

The text before us this morning forces us to think about a topic that has come to be known as **the doctrine of election**. Some of you may be very familiar with this doctrine while others of you may have never heard the term. If you are not familiar with the term, then you should know that this teaching and the debates and disagreements surrounding it down through the centuries of church history has been the source of division, separation, and wounding.

For example, you may have heard of George Whitefield and Charles Wesley. Whitefield was one of the primary evangelists in the Great Awakening of the mid 1700's which began here in New England. Charles Wesley is the founder of the Methodist Church. They were the best of friends. However, as they each came to different understandings of this doctrine, their disagreements became heated and finally they separated in a very sad way.

The persistent controversy surrounding it is probably *the* very reason you've never heard of it. I think most preachers simply avoid it because it's too controversial and because it has been mishandled with the wrong spirit. However, it is not good practice to avoid or ignore what God has plainly revealed. This is one of the blessings of preaching through entire letters. You get the blessing of learning all that God intends for you to learn, or at least begin to think about.

If you read through our [Statement of Faith](#) you will learn that we believe in the **plenary** inspiration of the Bible. That means that we believe that **all** of it is inspired by God the Holy Spirit, even the hard texts. If this is true, then it would be wrong of us to avoid certain portions

of Scripture just because they are hard, or just because they have caused controversy in the past.

It is certainly true, that there are many hard texts in the Bible. Any serious student of the Bible who consistently reads God's word will find in it certain texts which boggle the mind. The doctrine of election may be the chief among them. If you make it a habit of regularly reading the Bible, and I believe every one of you should, then you will again and again read texts that challenge most, if not all, of your most deeply held beliefs.

This is good because it is clear evidence that God, through his Spirit, is at work within you molding and shaping you into his image, by renewing your mind and causing you to think like he thinks. If you read the Bible and never have to wrestle with anything you read, then you're either already completely perfect, or you've not understand a single sentence.

I should also say that good and godly Christians have very different understandings of the doctrine of election and each can point to specific Scriptures as the basis of their view point. One of my professors in seminary once said, "You should always be tweaking your theology."¹ At first I did not like what he said, but he went on. "Not on the primary doctrines of the gospel and of salvation or on the things are unquestioningly clear—such as what is sin and what is not, but as you study the Bible and as you grow in Christ, you may find that you will perhaps change your mind on the secondary and tertiary issues."

The doctrine of election is one of those issues. Your salvation does not depend upon what you believe about the doctrine of election. This is not to say that this doctrine is unimportant. It most certainly *is* important. It is massively important to our understanding of God and his nature and the degree to which we will praise him and trust in his power. However, differences of opinion on this issue ought not to be cause of division, or separation, or verbal wounding. We are each at different places in our spiritual journey, so we must be patient and kind with one another while always "speaking the truth in love" for the sake of mutual edification.

This doctrine is massive and the questions it will raise are deep and significant. This morning I will only have time to introduce us to this issue. My primary aim is define the doctrine and explain it based upon this text in Ephesians. After doing that, then we may look at texts from other portions of Scripture.

Remember the sermon from last week. The doctrine of election is listed as the first blessing among many which come to believers through Jesus. Remember this doctrine is grounded in love (v.5). If it lands upon us in any other way than blessing and causing us to experience God's love and praise his glorious grace, then we have not received it as God through Paul intended it.

¹ Dr. Bruce Ware in Introduction to Theology.

The Doctrine of Election

The word 'doctrine' simply means 'teaching.' So the doctrine of election simply refers to all the places in there Bible where this subject is addressed. What we are talking about? Let's define it. What is the doctrine of election? Here's my definition of election:

Doctrine of election: *refers to God's choice, before the foundation of the world, of which condemned traitors he would save, through faith in Christ, not based upon any foreseen faith or inherent goodness in themselves, but solely based upon the purposes of his own will, to praise of his glorious grace.*

Who?

I take this definition directly from Ephesians 1:4-6. Who is the primary actor in election? You will notice that election begins with God the Father. Paul tells us in verse 4 that God the Father is the one who decides who will receive the gracious, undeserved gift of salvation through Jesus.

Ephesians 1:4 (ESV)

⁴ "even as **he** chose us in him..."

Who is doing the choosing? God the Father is. Election refers to the choice of God, not the choice of man. When we discuss the doctrine of election, we are talking about the activity of God and the choice he has made regarding the application of salvation. This is a truth that we would not know of if it had not been revealed to us by God through Scripture.

When?

When did God make this choice? He made this choice "*before the foundation of the world.*"

Ephesians 1:4 (ESV)

⁴ "even as he chose us in him, **before the foundation of the world...**"

This means that before God ever created anything, he made certain choices. As he considered what kind of world he could create, he made specific decisions. God had a plan before he created anything. Like any wise builder, you need to make certain choices before you begin to build. The shape of the building is determined by the prior decisions and choices. The choices concerning the doctrine of election were made *before the foundation of the world*.

What?

What exactly did God choose? Verse four tells us that God chose "**us**," that is God chose particular individuals.

Ephesians 1:4 (ESV)

⁴ "even as he chose **us** in him, before the foundation of the world, that **we** should be holy and blameless before him,"

God chose **us**, "in him," that is in Jesus, "that **we** should be holy and blameless before him." Being "holy and blameless" refers to salvation. This means that before the foundation of the world God chose specific persons to be saved through Jesus.

It is at this point that theologians begin to differ. The question is who exactly is the "us" and the "we?" Some theologians, would say the "us" and the "we" are *specific individuals, particular persons*. This seems to me to be the most obvious meaning. This means that before the foundation of the world, as God decided whom he would save, he thought of specific persons. He thought of Matthew the tax collector, Peter the fisherman, Paul the tent maker, Lydia the seller of purple clothes, Liz the violinist, Vinny the carpet-layer, and Todd the teacher. And he chose them to be saved through Jesus.

- The **implication** of this understanding is that God, not the individual, is the decisive reason for why anyone is saved.
- The **problem** with this view is that not all individuals are saved, and so this means that God decided in advance that he would not save all individuals.

In order to avoid this problem, which appears to be in conflict with some other Scripture verses indicating that God desires all to be saved,² theologians interpret the "us" and the "we" to be *a undefined group of people* and not specific individuals. In other words, they understand God to be electing all people who would one day put their faith in Jesus. Meaning God chose the group "all believers in Jesus" and elected them to be saved without any reference to which particular individuals would be in that group. For example, it would be like God saying "I choose the Boston Red Sox to be saved." God is electing a group and then it's up to individuals to choose to put themselves in that group by believing in Jesus.

- The **implication** of this understanding is that the individual, not God, is the decisive reason for why anyone is saved.
- The **problem** with this view is that it is impossible to think of a group without thinking of the specific persons who make up that group. This is especially true of God whose knowledge is perfect and comprehensive. I can think of the group 'Boston Red Sox,' but I can't help thinking about the specific individuals who make up that group, like Ortiz, Pedroia, Napoli, & Victorino. How is it possible that an all-knowing God who is choosing a group of people would be unaware of exactly which specific individuals would be in that group?

² Ez 18:23, 32: 33:11; 2 Ptr 3:9; 1 Tim 2:4.

What does Paul mean by “us” and “we” in his letter to the Ephesians? Is he thinking of particular persons, or an undefined group?

How?

How did God make this decision? Upon what basis would God make this choice? Would God choose persons based upon something within them or something within himself? In other words, did God look down the corridor of time and choose persons based upon the *future exercise of their own free will* in choosing to believe in Jesus, or did God base his choice solely upon *the exercise of his own free will*? Verse 5 answers this question for us.

(Ephesians 1:4-5 ESV)

⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, **according to the purpose of his will,**

God's choice of whom he would save is “**according to the purpose of his will.**” God's choice of whom he would save is solely based upon the exercise of his own free will. God chooses who he will save according to the purpose of his own will and not according to the purpose of anyone else's will. This means that there is nothing within man that determines God's choice of whom he will save. What determines whom God will save is his own internal purposes and will.

At this point many cry foul and say that this is not fair. Here we can be helped by other Scripture. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, addresses this very issue. Paul remembered the twins Esau and Jacob and he considered God's choice of Jacob and rejection of Esau.

(Romans 9:11-13 ESV)

¹¹ 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—¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Paul points out that God made his choice of Jacob over Esau *before* they were born. This choice was made at a time *before* they had done anything either good or bad. Jacob had done nothing *good* which might have been the basis of God *choosing* him. And Esau had done nothing *bad* which might have been the basis for God *rejecting* him.

Paul is illustrating the main point about election, *it is solely based upon the exercise of God's free will.* God does not choose based upon any *foreseen acts* whether they be good or bad, but chooses whom he will save based solely upon the purposes of his own will, as is says in Romans 9:11, “**in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works...**” To which we may be tempted to respond, “That 's not fair.” Paul continues.

Romans 9:14- (ESV)

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

God's choice in election is not based upon human will, but upon God's will alone. We like to talk about human free will, but we never want to talk about divine free will. Whose will is most free, the human will, which is plagued by sin, or the divine will, which is holy and pure?

When Moses asked God to show him his glory, God responded by saying,

Exodus 33:19 (ESV)

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

God is free to show grace and mercy to anyone he chooses. He is not obligated to be gracious or merciful to anyone who is a sinner.

Romans 9:17-21 (ESV)

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

19 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" 20

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" 21

Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

The answer Paul expects is, "Of course he does. Of course the potter has authority over the clay." God chose to be gracious to Moses, who was a murderer, and he chose to harden Pharaoh, who was an idolater. Moses did not deserve God's grace, but Pharaoh certainly did deserve God's judgment. God was not obligated to give grace to Moses and neither was he unjust to withhold it from Pharaoh.

His actions toward both Moses and Pharaoh have been the basis upon which **his name has been proclaimed throughout the whole earth** from that day down to this very day. And if this is the way God has chosen to operate in this world, then who are we to tell him any differently? Who are we to tell the God of this universe what he should or should not do? Who are we to condemn God for being gracious to one who does not deserve it and for executing judgment against someone who does?

Why?

The last phrase of the definition relates to the question why God would do this? Why would God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain persons to be saved through Jesus, solely based upon the purposes of his own free will and nothing in them? Verse 6 answers that question. He did this **“to the praise of his glorious grace.”**

(Ephesians 1:4-6 ESV)

⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, **to the praise of his glorious grace.**

The purpose of God’s will was that those he chose to save should *praise his glorious grace!* God decided to save people in such a way that it would be a glorious demonstration of his grace. This means that the salvation he chose to give is completely undeserved, it is all of grace and purely a gift.

This truth is critically important. If you miss this truth, then you will not understand the goodness of this doctrine. The persons whom God has elected to save are *undeserving* persons. The persons whom God chose to save were rebels, not righteous ruling elite. The elect do not deserve to be saved. God does not owe them salvation. The fact that God chose them is *completely an act of God’s glorious grace.*

The word ‘grace’ connotes the idea of *undeserved kindness*. It means unmerited favor. It refers to the kindness of God that overflows into active blessings in salvation which are given as a gift, not based upon anything worthy in the receiver but only because of a tender-hearted, loving disposition within the Giver, who is God the Father.

The persons whom God has elected to save, are rebellious, traitors who have 10,000 times looked God in the face and said, “I don’t need you, I don’t trust you, I don’t care about you.” They have willfully turned away from him and intentionally disobeyed him. The elect are those who have first been condemned, and have no grounds to place any demand upon God at all. Sinners have no right to salvation. God does not owe salvation to any of the elect, not a single one of them. They are all condemned traitors.³ They are guilty of crimes against God which justice would demand be paid only by the penalty of death.⁴ If God chose to leave every sinful human in their just place of condemnation, he would wrong not one of us.

(1 Kings 8:46 ESV)

⁴⁶ “... for there is no one who does not sin—

(Ecclesiastes 7:20 ESV)

³ Rom 3:23.

⁴ Rom 6:23.

²⁰ Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

(Mark 10:18 ESV)

¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

(1 John 1:8 ESV)

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

(Romans 3:10-19 ESV)

¹⁰ as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one."

¹³ "Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

¹⁴ "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known."

¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

This is the natural condition of the whole of humanity. We are all sinners. We are all condemned. We are all rebellious toward God. None of us, if left to ourselves, would seek to know God, much less, press on to love him. We, in our sin-sick natural condition, are dead in our hearts toward God.⁵ We by nature love darkness.⁶ We are naturally slaves of sin.⁷ We are born into this wicked world as citizens of the kingdom of darkness.⁸

Yet these are the very ones whom God has elected. These are those to whom God has chosen to grant salvation. These dead persons are the ones whom God has chosen to bring to life. The elect are not some special class of high powered super-righteous elites. They are simply

⁵ Eph 2:1.

⁶ Jn 3:19.

⁷ Jn 8:34.

⁸ Col 1:13; 1 Ptr 2:9.

the slaves whom God in his glorious grace has chosen to set free. The elect are those who have been traitors against God and yet God in his incomprehensible love has chosen these to be the objects of his glorious grace.

The doctrine of election is God's choice of which convicted criminals on death row he would chose to pardon. He did not chose them because of any goodness in them, because there was none. The only thing that was within them was rottenness and filth. He chose them simply because he, according to the purpose of his own will, decided to love them by pouring out on them the blessings of his great glorious grace and eternal love.

(Deuteronomy 7:6-8 ESV)

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. ⁷ It 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, ⁸ 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."

Last night I shared this verse with David my son and I asked him, "How does hearing this make you feel?" He said, "Incredibly loved and special. It makes me think, 'Why did he chose to love me?'"

This is exactly how the doctrine of election should make us feel. It should make us feel overwhelmingly blessed and loved and cherished and it should cause us to praise the glory of his grace. God doesn't just love you today. He has loved you since before the foundation of the world.

There is nothing within us that caused God to choose us. He didn't love us because of great and awesome personal qualities. If we have an admirable qualities, then we have them because he chose to give them to us. He doesn't love you because of anything you ever did. He loved us because he chose to love us and he chose to love us before he ever created us. Believers, this ought to cause you to praise his glorious grace, because we certainly deserve none of his love... and yet he has loved us with an everlasting love (Jer 31:3).

So what's the deepest reason for why you are a believer in Jesus? Because of you chose to believe in him or because He chose you before the foundation of the world?

And if you are not yet a believer, then believe this today and you too can know the love of God. Put your faith in Jesus and God will apply these blessings to you. Believe this gospel and God will give you all these blessings of salvation. By faith step into this great mystery, and you will find yourself swimming in an eternal ocean of love.