

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON SIX)

“CHOSEN BY GOD”

(PART TWO)

EPHESIANS 1:3-5

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:

4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.

In the previous **Lesson**, we observed that in verses **four** and **five** of **Ephesians one**, Paul begins to explain to the Christians in Ephesus how all the “*spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*” have become theirs. He does so by informing them of what God has previously done in order that they may possess and enjoy all the exceeding riches of His grace. He writes, “*According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.*”

In these two verses, the Apostle introduces the ideas of election and predestination. If we are to be faithful to the Word of God, we must grapple with these concepts. We cannot dismiss them or pretend that they do not exist, because the Bible refers to both of them often and explicitly. As we approach these mysterious concepts, it is important for us to adopt the right approach. This is so because there is perhaps no biblical doctrine that has provoked more controversy in theological circles than these two.

It is important for us to understand that predestination is not the same thing as election, although they are closely related. Predestination has to do with God’s decrees concerning **anything**. Election is a **specific type of predestination**. Election deals with God’s choosing certain persons in Christ for the purpose of salvation and to be adopted into the family of God. We may define election as “a decree of God, before creation, in which He chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of His sovereign grace.” The Scriptures make it very clear that Election to Salvation is in no way conditioned by or dependent upon anything that distinguishes the saved from the unsaved prior to the day of their effectual calling to become members of the family of God.

Romans 9:21 makes this very clear: “*Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?*” It is “*of the same lump*” that both the saved and the unsaved are constituted. There is no difference between them, for in **Romans 3:21-22** we read, “*But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*” In the sight of God, the elect have nothing inherent in their character to make them to differ from the non-elect. Wherever we imagine we can detect differences, we have to ask the question that Paul asked in **1 Corinthians 4:7**, “*For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?*”

The grace of God does not **find** persons willing, rather it **makes** them willing, for none would be willing otherwise. This is what Paul is trying to tell us in **Romans 9:15-16**: *“For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then **it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.**”*

The **New Living Translation** renders the verses as follows: *“I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose.”* **So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it.”** It should be borne in mind that the first part of this sentence is a quotation from the Old Testament - **Exodus 33:19** to be precise. **This demonstrates that God has always acted on this principle.**

Brothers and sisters, we are not elected to salvation because God **foresees** that we will believe, but because He **foreknows** that none will believe. In fact, had it not been for the Election of God, the Lord Jesus Christ would have died in vain. As Augustine said: *“Man is converted not because he wills to be, but he wills to be because he is ordained to election.”* There are persons who testify *“I owe my election to my faith.”* My testimony is that *“I owe my faith to my election.”*

In order to highlight the points that we have made concerning election and predestination, we will consider **Acts 13:44-48**:

44 *And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God.*

45 *But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming.*

46 *Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles.*

47 *For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.*

48 *And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: **and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.***

Persons have tried to lessen the force of verse **48** by using all kinds of clever arguments. But these are all futile. The Word of God is very clear: *“As many as were ordained to eternal life, believed.”* It is significant that Luke mentions the fact of election here almost in passing. It is as if this were the normal occurrence whenever the gospel is preached.

There are at least **four truths in this verse** that we desire to highlight:

1. Believing is the **consequence** of God’s decree. Believing is not the **cause** of God’s decree. In other word, it is not our faith that causes God to ordain us to eternal life. Rather, it is our ordination to eternal life that causes us to have faith. Luke does **not** say *“as many as believed were ordained to eternal life.”* He says, *“as many as were ordained to eternal life, believed.”*
2. All persons are not ordained to eternal life for the verse says, *“**as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.**”* If all men without exception were ordained to eternal life by God, then the words *“as many as”* would be a meaningless qualification.
3. The “ordination” spoken of here is not an ordination to service or to any other external benefit, but to salvation, for the verse says that they were *“ordained to eternal life.”* **The ordination was to salvation itself.**
4. The verse makes it clear that all who were so ordained believed. **There was not one who was so ordained that did not believe.** This indicates clearly that all who are thus ordained by God to eternal life, will most certainly believe and be saved.

Those who oppose the doctrines of predestination and election as we have outlined them, invariably try to find some reason, **apart from** God’s own will and purpose which **motivates** Him to grant salvation to sinful men and women. They desperately search for something or other to credit fallen, unregenerate sinners with which entitles them to receive mercy and grace at the hands of their Creator.

So, we ask the question, “Why did God choose the persons that He did?” What was it that was in those who were elected unto salvation that so touched the heart of God that He could not help but elect them?

Why did God choose the persons that He did? Was it perchance because of good works that they had *performed*? Certainly not, for it is written, “*There is none that doeth good, no, not one*” (**Romans 3:12**). Was it because they were desperately seeking after God? No, for it is written again, “*There is none that seeketh after God*” (**Romans 3:11**). Many would argue that it was because God foresaw that they would believe? Is this really so? “Does the Scripture support such a view?” Assuredly not, for how can those who are “*dead in trespasses and sins*” (**Ephesians 2:1**), believe in Christ? How could God foreknow some persons as believers when belief was impossible to them?

Brothers and sisters, unless God makes a prior decision to save an individual, he or she will never be saved! It is God who makes the decision to save. That is Paul’s perspective in his epistle to the Ephesians. He wants the Ephesian Christians to be convinced of the fact that God’s election of them is not an afterthought on His part but an eternal forethought.

We human beings tend to think of the grandeur of the world with all its amazing wonders and then turn our attention to ourselves and think of ourselves as insignificant. But Paul in Ephesians, reverses that order and informs us that even before the creation of the world, God had His attention directed towards us. In fact, Paul is implying that, in the mind of God, the world was created by Him in view of His choosing a people for Himself in Christ!

Every genuine Christian can trace their spiritual roots, not merely to three or four generations back, but to eternity when they were chosen by God in Christ. This realization should give us a great sense of assurance and stability. The most recent Christian convert, the weakest Christian, the fumbling, stumbling Christian, has his or her roots in the eternal purposes of God. No matter how insignificant we think we are, no matter how marginalized we may be, we are able to take comfort in the reality that the creator of the universe had us on His mind and set His love upon us before the foundation of the world.

It is important that we understand and appreciate that the reason why God loves us is not because Christ died for us. If that is what we believe then we have perverted the gospel. The gospel informs us that the reason that Christ died for us is because God loves us! He did not love me and set His desire upon me when I first began to seek Him. It was because He loved me and set His desire upon me that I began to seek Him! The reason why God loves me is not because I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Saviour. The gospel truth is that I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Saviour because God loved me first! And His reason for loving me is because He loves me!

This is the reason that Moses advanced to the children of Israel when He was attempting to explain why God had set His love upon them and chosen them. In **Deuteronomy 7:6-8** we read the following:

6 *For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.*

7 *The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people:*

8 *But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

The reason is still the same thousands of years later: “He loved you because He loved you!”

But what is the blessing of being loved by God and chosen by Him before the foundation of the world? Paul’s answer is “*all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*” The benefit to us of knowing this truth is **every spiritual blessing**. All the riches of God’s grace are poured out upon us from the fountainhead of our being chosen by God in Christ before the foundation of the world. God pours His eternal purposes into our souls because He elected us from eternity.

What effect should this great truth have on the person who comes to know about it and appreciate it? The words of our Lord to Simon the Pharisee in **Luke 7:40-47**, give us a clear indication of what the effect should be:

40 And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on.

41 There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty.

42 And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?

43 Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged.

44 And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.

45 Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

46 My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

47 Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

Brothers and sisters, the person who knows that he or she has been forgiven much, will inevitably love much. The person who feels that he or she has been forgiven little will inevitably love little. If we believe that without us contributing our portion, God would not have been able to save us, we will never be able to praise Him for His glorious grace as we ought to. But when we know that we had absolutely nothing to contribute to our salvation except sin, shame and disgrace, we will be moved to give Him all the glory and all the praise.

Why were we “*chosen in him before the foundation of the world?*” The reason Paul advances is “*that we should be holy and without blame before him.*” God has saved us; He has sanctified us and He sees no blemish in us, as far as our **position** is concerned. Positionally, God already sees us as being holy and without blemish because He sees us as we are in Jesus Christ. He sees us covered with the righteousness of Christ. **Practically**, the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, is carrying out His work of ongoing sanctification. He gives us the desire to live a life that is pleasing to God. When we yield to His promptings, He puts sin out of our lives and produces His own fruit in our lives. Thus, we are increasingly being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ in an **experiential** way. This is the **practical** purpose of His grace. His love will only be satisfied when we are conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. The full realization of our practical Christlikeness will occur when our Lord returns. John refers to this in **1 John 3:2**: “*Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*”

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to execute the process of bringing our **imperfect practical state** into line with our **perfect positional state**. As John states in **1 John 4:17**, “*Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.*”

The Message renders the verse as follows: “*This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day — our standing in the world is identical with Christ's.*” The goal of every genuinely saved person is to be increasingly more like Jesus Christ. And the driving force of our desire is love — His infinite love for us and our growing love for Him.