

# QUESTION #36: "WHAT IS ELECTION?"

## (Ephesians 1:3-14)

5.17.20

### HOUSEKEEPING

As of today, we have had 36 - three dozen - "big questions" asked in the course of this series. We introduced this series back on Sunday, May 5, 2019! - so over a year ago. But I have had a blast with it, and I hope it's been a great joy for you all as well. I have loved this series because these have been your questions, and that has stretched me to look at issues that I might not have otherwise considered. So, thank you for the great range of questions you have provided. We have the question on the biblical concept of election today, and then we close things out next week with a look at creation in terms of two opposing viewpoints: young earth vs. old earth.

Now while we will be starting a new series on the last Sunday of this month (which you'll be hearing more about next week), I will always be interested in any other questions you might have, so by no means does this mean that doing sermons based on your questions has to end. You can continue to submit any questions you want and, as the opportunity presents itself, I will bring them out in a sermon.

But for now, before we go any further, let's begin our time together with a moment of **PRAYER**.

### INTRODUCTION

Once had a professor back in school who said that systematic theology was mankind's attempt to put God in a box. What he was getting at is that theology - the study of God - in trying to answer every question about God and figure out every angle instead comes up with answers that make sense to the theologian. In other words, the theologian becomes the filter through which God is understood. Now at the end of the day, the theologian may feel like he has come to understand all the truth about God, but in so doing has confined God to only those things which he can understand. He makes God fit into his notions. Folks, studying God doesn't work that way.

Now, on the one hand, every Christian is encouraged to study the Scriptures to learn all the truths they can about God. In fact, in Acts 17, citizens of the Greek city of Berea were commended when, after hearing Paul's preaching to them, they *examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true - Acts 17:11b*. And among the apostle Peter's very last words were these: *[G]row in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ-II Peter 3:18a*.

But on the other hand, is the very necessary acknowledgement that we are never going to know everything about God - not even close. Even with our enhanced abilities in heaven, we will still be finite beings existing, by His love and grace, alongside an infinite God. In fact, a number of recent commentators have suggested that continued learning about God during our eternity in heaven may be just one of the ways in which we will be continually offering Him our praise and worship. Even then, though, there will be aspects of God that will always remain an eternal mystery for us. Today's topic may be one of those.

Today we will be looking at the biblical concept of election - what it means and how it works according to Scripture. And to do that, we are going to look at some necessary definitions to build on as we move forward:

- 1) The first is to be "elect." In the biblical sense, what does that mean? Well, the Greek word means "to be picked out" or "chosen." In practical terms, this means either an individual or a group called by God to a particular ministry or relationship.

- 2) It follows then that "election" itself refers to God's sovereign, gracious act of choosing people to receive his salvation.

A great biblical example of these definitions is the nation of Israel. As Moses said: ***"To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the Lord set His affection on your ancestors and loved them, and He chose you, their descendants, above all the nations - as it is today"*** -Moses, ***Deuteronomy 10:14-15***. Notice how Moses puts this together: First, he notes that everything in heaven and earth belongs to God. And second, within that complete ownership, God chose to "set His affection" on the nation of Israel. This was absolutely not because they were the best or the brightest, and certainly not because they were the biggest. They were all but three of those. It was simply because it pleased the Lord to do this as a means of accomplishing His perfect will and His perfect plan. That was the only reason that God acted toward Israel as He did.

Now, the concept of election brings with it two equally important concepts to talk about - both having to do with God: first, His sovereignty and second, His grace.

OK, so what are we talking about when we mention God's sovereignty? When we talk about God's sovereignty, we are very simply stating that, in every way possible, God rules. He and He alone is the King overall. It is His absolute right to rule over all things precisely how He wants to, with no limitations to that rule or to His choices. But there are a couple of good reasons why God has that right. First of all, God made everything:

- 1) ***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth - Genesis 1:1.***
- 2) ***Through [God] all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made - John 1:3.***

And second of all, according to Scripture, all that everything He made belongs to Him; in other words, God owns everything:

- 1) As God Himself said to Job: ***"Everything under heaven belongs to Me"*** - ***Job 41:11b.***
- 2) Everything belongs to God- including us! As Job observed: ***"In [the Lord's] hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind"*** - ***Job speaking, Job 12:10.***
- 3) And, as the psalmist noted: ***In [God's] hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to Him The sea is His, for He made it, and His hands formed the dry land - Psalm 95:4-5.*** In other words, all of creation, from top to bottom and everything in between, belongs to the Lord.

OK, so God is sovereign. And it is out of that sovereignty that He proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah: ***"Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please'"*** - ***God speaking, Isaiah 46:9-10.*** So as a consequence of God's sovereignty, He declares two fundamental outcomes: (1) His purposes will be accomplished, and (2) He will do everything that pleases Him to do.

Now for the next part - God's grace. We have in past times defined God's grace rightly as "undeserved favor," the idea of favor being expressed to another totally at the inclination and instigation of the one bestowing the favor. In other words, the recipient of the grace has done nothing to deserve such favor. It is the completely independent choice of the one extending the

favor.

## TEXT & ANALYSIS

Of course, the Bible is chock-full of verses that tell us of the grace of God but, for our purposes, let's go through the Scripture again that was read to us earlier from Paul's letter to the Christians at Ephesus, Ephesians 1:3-14, and let's do it in a step-by-step, thought-by-thought way, to begin to understand what the biblical concept of "election" is all about:

- 1) ***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ - 1:3.***
  - a) Notice that, for everything that Paul is about to share, it is all deserving of praise to "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."
  - b) Notice that, for everything that Paul is about to share, he considers it all to be connected to what Christ accomplished in the name of the Father.
- 2) ***For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will- to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One he loves-1:4-6.*** OK; so now here's where "election" begins to come in:
  - a) Paul says that God "chose us" - He "picked" us.
  - b) Paul says that God chose us "before the creation of the world."
  - c) Paul says that God chose us before the creation of the world to "be holy and blameless in His sight" - in other words, chosen to be made holy and blameless. Because we could never accomplish that on our own, being born sinners, this is referring to the justification for our sins that Christ offered by His death on the cross. This is totally the work of God and refers to the outcome achieved versus any holiness inherent in us - which, by the way, would be none.
  - d) Paul says that all of this - choosing us, predestining us for adoption to sonship through Christ - is a praise to "His glorious grace" which God has completely freely given through His Son, the "One He loves," and further, that all of this was in accordance with His pleasure and will. It's what He wanted to see done - before we ever came to be.
  - e) What an amazing picture of grace - actions conceived before the creation of the world to make it clearly understood that this was based solely on God's grace and on no human merit (long before any humans even existed to attempt to earn merit).
  - f) And notice what else Paul says: that we were predestined to be adopted as sons, to be granted sonship of the Father - kids of the King! Here Paul makes a bow to Roman society: In that world, sons were adopted both to carry on the family name and to maintain ownership of property. But, most importantly, as a result of adoption, the one being adopted was no longer under any obligation to his natural father but only to his adopted one. Similarly, when we are adopted into the Father's family, that now becomes the focus of a Christian's obligation. No longer is there any obligation to the natural father - **the** devil.
  - g) And all of this - again - is ultimately for the honor and glory of God.
- 3) ***In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on (KJV: "abounded***

toward”) us. *With all wisdom and understanding, He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment - to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ - 1:7-10.* This section recounts the place that Christ plays in our salvation:

- a) He was a physical sacrifice who shed His blood in our place to pay the price for our redemption.
  - b) His blood paid the price for forgiveness of our sins.
  - c) All this was done "in accordance with the riches of God's grace."
  - d) God's grace was, in the NIV, "lavished on us." The Greek tells us that God's grace was provided richly so that we would have an abundance of grace, without thought of a specific measure (in other words, no sense of "this much and no more"; instead, God's grace was, and is, without limit).
- 4) *In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation -1:11- 13a.*
- a) The bar God sets for everything He does: "conformity with the purpose of His will for the praise of His glory." That is the reason we were elected.
  - b) Our putting our hope in Christ was also for the praise of His glory.
  - c) We were included in everything that Christ means.
- 5) *When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of His glory -1:13b-14.*
- a) To ensure our choice and all that we have to look forward to, the Holy Spirit seals the result of our election - our redemption as part of God's possession.
  - b) Again, the same bottom line: the praise of God's glory.

A wonderful companion Scripture to this section of Ephesians is found in Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, specifically in chapter 8, where he writes: *[W]e know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called (elected) according to His purpose. For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified - Paul, Romans 8:28-30.*

Some very cool things to consider from this passage:

- 1) The word "foreknew" is not simply acknowledging that God would have known me looking ahead into the future from before the world was created. It is referencing something much more intimate - a deeply personal and loving relationship (think how Adam "knew" Eve), already instituted by God long before I ever came to be - again underscoring the truth of God's complete and total grace in electing me for salvation.
- 2) So as God loved me in the context of personal relationship, He also from within that relationship predestined me to become like His Son. And as this was His plan to conform me, He then called me; having called me, He justified me (declared me "not guilty" because no wrongdoing was found in me as a result of His Son's washing away

my sins); and, having justified me, He then glorified me by the life of His Son which conformed me into an image that would be both pleasing for Him but an absolute worship of praise to Him.

## APPLICATION

There are really only two possibilities when it comes to God's gracious gift of salvation through the redemptive work of His Son, Jesus Christ. Either:

- 1) We are saved through our efforts along with God: God offers salvation and we accept; in other words, God does His part and we do ours. Another way it has been explained is that God chose me for Himself, Satan chose me for himself, and then I cast my vote to break the tie. The problem with this: Our efforts are part of the process of salvation, making our participation a vital part of the process (in other words, salvation is not all of God). And let's face it: If God somehow needs our help, needs our participation, to accomplish something, He just quit being God. God, being God, needs no help from anybody. And even worse, this scenario considers Satan on an equal plane with God.
- 2) OR (the other possibility) - We are saved through God alone, as Paul described it:
  - a) *[I]t is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast - Paul, Ephesians 2:8-9.*
  - b) *[W]hen the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy - Paul, Titus 3:4-5a.*

What the concept of "election" illuminates, magnifies and proclaims to the heavens is the indisputable grace of God, in that my coming to faith in Him through the Lord Jesus Christ is solely a complete, total work of Him - a work initiated before the world began. Think about it like this: Once upon a time, Jesus approached a tomb outside the ancient village of Bethany. Inside lay the lifeless body of a dear friend of His - a man named Lazarus. Jesus stood before the tomb and, according to the gospel of John, *called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go" - John 11:43-44.* Now think about it: Could Lazarus have had any grounds upon which to say, as the men were removing his grave clothes, "Jesus couldn't have done this without me"? No way! Lazarus was dead. There was no life in him that could have done anything. The same thing was going to be true for us, too. There was no spiritual life in us that would have allowed us to do anything to move us toward God. Jesus did it all - because God elected to do it all - for us! You know what? Knowing that God in His perfect grace reached out to me in such a way is a truth and love too great for words.

But knowing this doesn't change anything that any Christian is called to do: sharing our faith, praying for the salvation of others. In fact, it makes those even more important, because we can pursue those activities to underscore for others the same indescribable grace that allows us to know the God and Savior we proclaim. In fact, it is God's "amazing grace" towards us that should be the "fuel" that propels us to reach out with the gospel to everybody around us.

## CONCLUSION

Now certainly election can be a difficult concept to understand, and certainly minds much greater than mine have for centuries attempted to reckon this all out. But it certainly is not the only topic in which God's ways seem far beyond our abilities to grasp. But we need to remember the words

that God famously spoke to the prophet Isaiah that have huge implications when these kinds of topics come up: **"[M]y thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" - Isaiah 55:8-9.** Remember that God doesn't owe us an explanation - for anything. As His kids, we need to focus less on understanding Him, and more on simply trusting Him: "He said it; that settles it."

But there seems, within our limited viewpoint, to be an inherent unfairness to the idea of election. "You mean that God chose some people for salvation, but not all? How can that be fair?" Actually, the issue of fairness would be better stated like this: What would have been fair, and just, would have been that God only chose those who pleased Him, who satisfied His standards of holiness. Guess what? Nobody's chosen because nobody would be on the list that met that standard. The amazing grace is not that God chose some, but that God chose any!

And when our human limitations seem to bring us to a place of questioning how God could do something, it might serve us better to remember that, even in areas where we don't understand, we can approach those issues with our faith in and knowledge of what about God we do understand:

- 1) **God is love - 1 John 4:8b**, written by the apostle John to remind us that love is not just something that God does; rather, love is the very essence of who God is. And, as He had written decades earlier, Jesus arrived to offer mankind rescue from the hopelessness of sin specifically because, as He said, **God so loved the world - John 3:16a.**
- 2) God makes no mistakes in either His planning or in the execution of those plans; as Moses observed: **"I will proclaim the name of the Lord. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! [And why praise; why is God great?]. He is the Rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He"- Moses, Deuteronomy 32:3- 4.**
- 3) God also makes no mistakes in the words He has passed down through the ages; as David wrote: **As for God, His way is perfect: The Lord's word is flawless; He shields all who take refuge in Him - David, Psalm 18:30a.**

And underneath it all is faith. Remember what the author of the book of Hebrews said so well? **Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see - Hebrews 11:1.** In other words, a huge part of life as a child of the King is living with assurance, even if (in the case of election) it is our minds that cannot see (or understand). In the final analysis, it's not important that we know or understand. It's only important that God knows and understands. And to God, election (like all His other activities) makes perfect sense. We rest our faith in that.

So, at the end of the day, we can rest not in what we understand, but rather in Who we believe: **Not to us, Lord, not to us but to Your name be the glory, [Why?] because of Your love and faithfulness - Psalm 115:1.** And we can join the prophet Isaiah in proclaiming: **Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago - Isaiah 25:1.**

Praise indeed to God for the gift of His grace, the completely "undeserved favor" with which He elected us to be saved - and to be with Him through all eternity. Let's pray!