

## **Reading from: Ephesians chapter 1 verses 1 to 12**

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### **UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION**

We are all very familiar with the word “election”, and we all know what it means. We elect local councillors; we elect members of parliament. To elect is to choose. Election, then, we might say, is part of the ordinary landscape of our society. When we turn to the Bible, however, there is a great difference. Whereas election is as much part of the Bible’s landscape as it is of our society’s, in the Bible it is not man, but God, who elects - God who chooses. One theologian has called it “the strange new world within the Bible”: strange, very certainly, to the individual who comes with assumptions about himself as the chooser. So we need to change and adjust our thinking very seriously. If we enter the landscape of Scripture thinking that there, like here, we are the ones who do the electing or choosing, we will misunderstand everything in Scripture, and find ourselves hopelessly lost, blundering about with a map or a clue.

In the strange new world of the Bible, it is primarily God who elects - God who chooses. This is the case at almost every level. God chose to create the universe. The universe had no say in the matter. God chose to make Adam and Eve in His own image, and to place them in Eden. Adam and Eve were not consulted. When our first parents fell into sin, God chose to provide a Saviour. The Seed of the Woman (as promised in Gen.3:15) would one day be born and bruise the head of the serpent. This was God’s decision; Adam and Eve did not supplicate Him for it, but while they were still naked and ashamed, God announced it. God chose Israel out of all the

nations of the ancient world to be His people, to be the custodians of this promise of a Saviour; Israel did not volunteer, but was selected by the King of kings. And at last, and most applicable to us, in the strange new world of the Bible, God chooses which individuals will be rescued from their sins by the promised Saviour, to know Him and all the blessings He brings. If I am a Christian, if I am in Jesus Christ savingly by faith, it is because God has chosen me for such a blessed destiny; and if I insist on saying that I chose Christ, the Bible replies, “Yes, but only because He first chose you.”

Our confession of faith, the London Baptist Confession of 1689, puts it like this: “Those of mankind that are predestined to life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of His mere grace and love, without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving Him thereunto.”

The 1689 Confession here simply echoes what Martin Luther, John Calvin, and historic Protestant theology taught and has always taught from the time of the Reformation onwards. Not indeed that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers invented this doctrine, or that it was unknown until then; as with the doctrine of sinful man’s Total Depravity (which we looked at last time), so with election: Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers were simply stating afresh a long tradition of Christian belief, stretching back to the early church, and at last to the Bible itself.

In a series of sermons like this, it is important for us to grasp the connection between each sermon and the particular point

that it makes. Tonight's point - the doctrine of election - follows on closely from last week's point - the doctrine of man's depravity. There is an intimate logical as well as theological bond between the two. If, in truth, fallen man outside of Christ is spiritually dead in sin, as we saw last time, and incapable in himself of making any positive or saving response to God, then how can my salvation possibly be my own work? How can it be a matter of my own choice? The dead cannot perform living actions; and those who are dead in sin cannot live to God, unless God first raises them from death and brings them to life.

Therefore unavoidably, it is God's action, not mine, that saves me: God's action, not mine, that brings me to Christ and makes me alive in Him. Left to myself I would do nothing: just as, left to himself, a dead man will do nothing. And if it is God's *action* that saves me, then it is God's *choice* that saves me, because God only acts when He chooses to act. We can hardly believe that the infinitely wise God acts without choice. God's actions are simply His choices put into effect. Therefore, if He saves me, when I could do nothing to save myself, it can only be because He has chosen to save me - chosen to deliver me from death and give me life. And that, precisely, is the doctrine of election. It is a doctrine that surely comes naturally and easily to the Christian heart, unless that heart has been prejudiced by false teaching. As the hymnwriter Josiah Conder says:

'Tis not that I did choose Thee,  
     For, Lord, that cannot be;  
 This heart would still refuse Thee,  
     Hadst Thou not chosen me.  
 My heart owns none above Thee;

For Thy rich grace I thirst;  
This knowing, if I love Thee,  
Thou must have loved me first.

Is there any true child of God, saved from sin, who cannot sing that God-centred song?

But now let us come to the biblical basis for the doctrine. One of the clearest statements of election is found in **Ephesians 1:4-5** “He [God] chose us in Him [in Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him, in love having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.”

The apostle Paul here traces the origin of our salvation. That origin is not in time, but before time; it has its wellspring in the eternity of God Himself. The “He” in v.4 is God the Father; the “Him” is Christ. He chose us in Him: the Father chose us in Christ. And this choice was made, says Paul, before the foundation of the world. “Foundation” means literally a laying down: before God laid down the first brick in the structure of the world, He had already chosen those who were to be saved. Such is the apostle Paul’s plain and manifest teaching. And “world” in the Greek is literally COSMOS, from which obviously we get our word cosmos, meaning the universe. Those who experience the grace of salvation in time, says Paul, were chosen for this destiny before the universe was even created - chosen for salvation in the sovereign mind and purpose of the eternal God.

Here then is the doctrine of election, in all its biblical clarity. God the everlasting Father chose us in Christ the everlasting

Son, before the foundations of the cosmos were laid - before the birth of time. When the almighty Creator had not yet said "Let there be light" on the first day of creation, He had already said within Himself, within His own eternal being, "Let these people be Mine for ever in Christ My Son."

Bible scholars have often been rather perplexed to fathom what exactly Paul means when he says that the elect were chosen "in Christ". Perhaps the commentators Charles Hodge and Arthur Pink give the best explanation. They suggest that what Paul is doing is intimately fusing together Christ and the Church in the electing purposes of God the Father. Election involves a double choice of the Father. On the one hand, He chooses Christ to be the Head and Saviour of the elect; on the other hand, He chooses the elect to belong to Christ and be saved by Him. So the Father's choice of those who are to be saved is not a choice that is made, so to speak, in a vacuum. Rather the choice is made in the deepest connection with Christ. We are eternally chosen to be Christ's people, to be united with Christ, to share in the glory of Christ. And by the same token, Christ is eternally chosen to be our prince, our bridegroom, our shepherd, our elder brother, our living head. So our election is profoundly and inseparably related to Christ Himself. Therefore Paul says that we are chosen "in Christ".

Here then is this act of God, by which from all eternity, in His own timeless mind and will, He chooses in Christ those who are to enjoy the blessings of salvation. If we could trace back our salvation to its ultimate cause, we would be tracing a line that leads back beyond creation, beyond time itself, into the depths of the everlasting mind of God; and at the end of that line we would see the Son of God, Christ in all His beauty: the elect given eternally to Him, and He eternally given to the

elect. “Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the cosmos.”

There is an eternal depth to the salvation of believers. It is not some new, recent novelty that has sprung up in time; it was eternally purposed, decreed before all the ages. If you are in Christ by faith, your salvation was written into the blueprint of the universe before the first atom or the first angel came into existence. So when you look to Christ as a sinner to your Saviour, and find grace and life in Him, that is simply God’s eternal cosmic plan unfolding in your own personal case, as it was always predestined to do. There is no chance, nothing random or accidental about your salvation. You are experiencing what your heavenly Father lovingly planned in advance for you, in the mystery of His timeless love. What a sense of security and stability that should give you! A salvation that originated in time could be lost in time; a salvation that originated in eternity will endure for eternity.

Now we should observe how Paul also says in v.4 that God has chosen us “that we should be holy and without blame before him”. This of course implies that in the act of choosing us, God looked upon us as those who were not holy and not without blame before Him, but rather as those needing to be made holy and without blame. As the early church father Jerome says, “Paul does not say that God chose us before the foundation of the world *on account of* our being holy and unblemished. He chose us that we might *become* holy and unblemished, that is, that we who were previously not holy and unblemished should subsequently be so.”

This teaches us the very important truth that we are not chosen because of any good qualities in ourselves. God does not choose me because I am holy, or because He foresees I will be

holy; He chooses me in order to make me holy. Holiness is the consequence, not the cause of being chosen: its fruit, not its root. We are chosen as unholy people, in order that God might make us holy in Christ. Our being elect, then, if it is not on the ground of holiness, cannot be on the ground of good works. Cast your mind back to the doctrine of Total Depravity. Outside of Christ, in our unconverted state, our so-called good works are all nonetheless works that proceed out of hearts that are spiritually dead - dead towards God. Therefore however good those works may in a sense be, however right on the human level and useful to society, they have no spiritual worth or value in the presence of the living God. They are the cosmetic beauty of a spiritual corpse.

So then, apart from the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, all our morally good works are done in the context of spiritual death. They are dead works, from a spiritual standpoint. They do not flow from a soul in union with God and filled with the life of God. Therefore they can have no positive spiritual significance in the sight of God. That is why there can be no election to salvation on the basis of good works. We can no more be elect by good works than we can be justified by good works. If I am elect, I cannot take any credit for my election because I have done good things. There can be no boasting, no self-congratulation. The consciousness of being chosen can bring only a humble and selfless gratitude to a merciful God.

What, however, if someone says, "We are justified by faith - so why not elect by faith? If God does not elect us through foreknowing that we will do good works, perhaps He elects us through foreknowing that we will have faith. In His eternal all-seeing mind, perhaps God (as it were) looks at the future, knows that I will put my trust in Christ, and therefore chooses

me for salvation.” This of course is the view known among Protestants as Arminianism, the idea that God chooses us because He foresees that we will believe. This is what is called “conditional election” - chosen on condition of faith, as opposed to the Reformed doctrine of Unconditional Election - chosen without regard to any conditions in us.

Why, then, does Reformed theology reject the idea of a conditional election, an election conditioned on our faith? Very simply because, according to the Bible, faith is itself the free gift of God. If I have faith in Christ purely by my own choice, it would make sense to think of God choosing me on that basis. But if my faith is God’s own free gift to me, it makes no sense to say that God chooses me on condition of my faith. No, He chooses to give me faith. My very faith is the product of God’s almighty, transforming grace at work in my sinful, faithless heart. Remember once again the doctrine of fallen man’s Total Depravity. The spiritually dead can no more have living faith than they can do living works. So God does not foreknow that I will believe by my own will; rather, He foreordains that I will believe by His will.

Here are some biblical verses on faith as the gift of God:

**John 6:44** “No man can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him.”

If we wonder what coming to Christ means, the Saviour Himself says it means believing in Him. **John 6:35**, “he that comes to Me shall never hunger; and he that believes in Me shall never thirst.” Here, coming to Christ and believing in Him are put in parallel. To come to Christ is to believe in Christ, to trust Him for salvation. So, “No man can come to

Me, no one can have saving faith in Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” The word “draw” here is a very powerful work in the original Greek; it almost means to drag, as of dragging a fishnet through the sea. God the Father must cast the fishnet of His Spirit over me, and pull me in to Christ by divine strength, if I am ever to accept Him as my Saviour. Without this mighty exertion of God’s energy on my sinful unbelieving heart, I will never come to Christ - I will never believe in Him. Faith in Christ is the result of God’s own life-giving power at work in my dead will.

**John 6:65** “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.”

Christ teaches a similar lesson here. No one can come to Him, no one can believe in Him to the saving of their soul, unless such faith is granted to them by Christ’s heavenly Father. Faith is the free and sovereign gift of God.

**Acts 13:48** “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.”

If it were true that God chose us to be saved because of our faith, this verse would have said, “as many as believed were ordained to eternal life”. But it says the direct opposite: “as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” They were ordained to life, and therefore they believed. The faith was the result of having already been ordained. The lesson is very clear: God does not ordain us to life because we believe; we believe because God has ordained us to life.

So then, it will not do to say that God’s choice of us is based

on His foreknowledge that we will believe of our own volition. No one believes of their own volition; the human will is in helpless bondage to sin, and will not come to Christ. Faith itself, the Bible says, is God's own gift to sinners who are by nature destitute of faith and unable to believe. Arthur Pink sums it up thus:

“nor is *faith* the cause of our election. How could it be? Throughout their unregeneracy all men are in a state of unbelief, living in this world without God and without hope. And when we had faith, it was not of ourselves—either of our goodness, power, or will. No, it was a gift from God... Since, then, faith flows from divine grace, it cannot be the cause of our election. The reason why other men do not believe, is because they are not of Christ's sheep (John 10:26); the reason why any believe is because God gives them faith, and therefore it is called ‘the faith of God's elect’ (Titus 1:1).”

Now it is true that the Bible occasionally speaks of foreknowledge in connection with election. **Romans 8:29**, “whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” **1 Peter 1:2**, “elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” However, “foreknowledge” in the Bible does not necessarily mean knowing a fact in advance. Consider what God says of Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 1:5**: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.” If this were speaking merely of God knowing something in advance - “Before I formed you in the womb, Jeremiah, I knew all about you” - it would be saying nothing special about Jeremiah. God knows all about everyone before they are born, because God knows all things, even things future to us. But clearly God is saying something

very special about Jeremiah, something that distinguishes Jeremiah from others. “Before I formed *you* in the womb, O Jeremiah, I knew you.” It is “know” in the biblical sense of “love”.

In the language of Scripture, to know often does not mean intellectual knowledge of a fact, but love, intimacy, personal relationship. As when God says of Israel in **Amos 3:2**, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” God knows *about* all the nations; but Israel alone He *knows* - that is, chooses for Himself in love. So then, when God says of Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you”, the meaning is that God set Jeremiah apart by a special distinguishing love, before the prophet was even born. “Before I formed you in the womb, Jeremiah, I set My love on you.”

That is the Reformed understanding of Rom.8:29 and 1 Pet.1:2. “Whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son” - in other words, “those whom He foreloved, those on whom He set His heart before they were born, He predestined to belong to Christ.” “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” - in other words, “elect according to the forelove of the Father, whereby He loved us before He created us.”

And this brings us, appropriately enough, to the phrase “in love” at the end of v.4, which many scholars think really belongs to the beginning of v.5. If it belongs at the end of v.4, Paul is saying that we were chosen to be holy and blameless before Him in love. But if it really belongs to the next verse, it would then read, “in love having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself”. It could be taken either way; this is purely a question of translating the Greek. If we wonder

how it can possibly belong to the beginning of v.5, when it is clearly at the end of v.4, then we must remind ourselves that there are no verses in the original Greek. The verse divisions are a much later invention; they are simply not to be found in the old Greek manuscripts. So the phrase “in love” might belong to our humanly devised v.4, or it might be that it should really belong to our humanly devised v.5.

If we take the phrase “in love” as really belonging to the opening of v.5, as I prefer, and as for example Arthur Pink does, then we have, “in love having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself.” In that case, Paul is stating that God’s love is the driving force, so to speak, behind His choosing us. He chooses us in love. Election is not some cold, chilly, remote act of a totally unknown God; election is a loving act of the loving God. It is in love that He chooses us for salvation. Election is, as it were, drenched in the fragrance of divine love. We will never understand election until we learn to see it as an act of love. God is Love; Love Himself has chosen us.

We must therefore see divine election as an act of divine love, a choosing in love. The Bible tells us that God loves some with this special, particular, distinguishing love whereby He embraces them (unworthy though they are) into His saving purposes. As Paul says in **Ephesians 2:4-5** “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” There is this great love with which God loves those who are to be saved, a love which results in their being made gloriously alive in Christ out of the spiritual death in which they and all people exist by nature.

Why God does not express His love to all mankind in this way - why He does not choose everyone - has not been revealed to us. It is one of the secret things that belongs to the Lord our God. **Deuteronomy 29:29**, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.” All we know, all that has been revealed, is that God’s electing love is not based on our good works or our faith, for we can have neither in God’s sight unless He first acts within us to change us. We must therefore hold both these truths together, since the Bible testifies to both: that is, the truth of God’s universal love for all people, expressed in the gifts of providence and the provision of a Saviour who is freely offered, and the truth of God’s special love for His elect people, expressed in His choosing them for salvation, and granting them the gift of faith that trusts in the Saviour.

But why God chose me in particular - He gives no other explanation than that it pleased Him to do so. It is “according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace,” as Paul tells us in verses 5-6 of Eph.1. The proper response on our part is well expressed by the hymnwriter John Kent:

On such love, my soul, still ponder,  
     Love so great, so rich and free;  
 Say while lost in holy wonder,  
     “Why, O Lord, such love to me?”

Why indeed? It was nothing in me - not my works, not my faith, not anything; but it was entirely something in God - His free, sovereign, distinguishing love, for a spiritually dead man

who could do nothing to deserve that love, nor even desire it.

Now let us look at the rest of v.5. And we notice that Paul introduces the word “predestination”: God has predestined us to the adoption of sons - that is, to be adopted as sons. There is a predestination to adoption. Let me suggest two things here. First, we should never be afraid of the word “predestination”. It is a biblical word. Christians may argue about what it means, but there is no arguing that the Bible speaks of predestination. The word ought to be part of our Christian vocabulary. In fact it is used six times in the New Testament, in Acts 4:28, Rom.8:29 and 30, 1 Cor.2:7, Eph.1:5, and Eph.1:11. So let us not be afraid of the word predestination, or embarrassed by it, any more than we would be afraid or embarrassed by “justification”, “sanctification”, “adoption”, “propitiation”, or any of the other words that form part of the sacred vocabulary of Scripture.

Second, the Greek word for predestination means to settle, or fix, or determine, in advance. God has already fixed in advance the destiny of those who are to be saved. It is that they shall be adopted - they shall be God’s sons and daughters. If you are a Christian, you are adopted into God’s family, of which Christ is the head; and from all eternity, you were predestined to this adoption - predestined to be a son or daughter of God. So Paul says.

Arthur Pink has this on the relationship between election and predestination:

“Election was the first act in the mind of God, whereby He chose the persons of the elect to be holy and without blame. Predestination was God’s second act...Having chosen them in

His dear Son unto a perfection of holiness and righteousness, God's love went forth to them, and bestowed upon them the chiefest and highest blessing His love could confer: to make them His children by adoption."

Here, then, in these verses of Ephesians, is the destiny of the Christian, fixed and settled in the sovereign, eternal, unchangeable mind and purpose of God, before He created the universe: chosen in Christ to be holy and blameless; predestined in love to be a son or daughter of God. Why chosen, why predestined? Not for anything in us; not because of anything God foreknew about us - what He foreknew about us was that we would be sinful. If we were chosen to be holy and blameless, we must have been unholy and blameworthy when we were chosen; if we were predestined to be adopted into God's family, we must have belonged to another family when we were predestined - the spiritual family of Satan, to which all sinners by nature belong. Not chosen and predestined because of our good works, for we had none; not chosen or predestined because of our faith, for we had none; but chosen and predestined that we might come to faith, find salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, and then do good works as a result of having been saved in Him by the grace of God.

What does this say to us, then - this doctrine of Unconditional Election? First, what it says to those who are not yet saved, not yet Christians. If at the moment you do not accept Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Master, your only hope of doing so lies in the truth of election. If God does not choose you and draw you Christ, you will never come, you will never believe, you will never repent, you will never be saved. But if you do come to Christ, it is because God the Father has chosen you and is drawing you to His Son. In other words, we are shown

how spiritually helpless we are, if God leaves us to ourselves. We are so addicted to sin, so obstinate in living for ourselves and not for God, that unless God intervenes, we will simply go on sinning, until we sin ourselves into hell. Only the election of God can save us.

Does that mean you should just sit about and do nothing, and maybe God will save you? Surely you would not think *that*, if you took your eternal destiny seriously. If you really believed what God says about hell and heaven, surely you would do anything to escape the one and obtain the other. You would not sit around debating about predestination! If you were in a building that was on fire, would you sit down amid the flames and do nothing, because you did not know whether God had predestined you to escape? I think not. You would flee for your life. And if you successfully escaped, then you would know by manifest experience that God had indeed predestined you to escape.

Flee to Christ for salvation. If you sit about doing nothing, you know you will never be saved. No one who sat about doing nothing was ever saved. Flee for your life to Christ. Pray to Him. Call upon Him. He promises to save all who do so. “Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” (**Romans 10:13**). And then, trusting the Son of God and safe in His keeping, you will know by experience that God has chosen you. He must have - otherwise you would still be sitting about doing nothing.

But now let us consider what this doctrine says to Christians. What is the practical value to me of knowing that God has chosen me from eternity, and that this is the reason why I am a Christian? How does it minister to my soul to know that God’s

choice, not mine, is what lies behind my salvation? Martin Luther puts it like this:

“I frankly admit that, as far as I am concerned, I wouldn’t want ‘free will’ to be given to me, even if it could be. I don’t want anything to be left in my own hands by which I might make efforts towards salvation. For I wouldn’t be able to stand firm and keep my grip on salvation in the face of so many dangers and perils and attacks of demons, since one demon is stronger than all humans. No one could be saved at all on these terms. And even if there were no dangers, perils, or demons, I would still have to work without any assurance of success, fighting like a man beating the air with his fists... But now that God has taken my salvation out of my hands, and put it in His hands, making it depend on His choice not mine, and has promised to save me, not according to my own work or effort, but according to His grace and mercy, I have assurance and certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is too great and powerful for demons or any enemies to be able to break Him or snatch me from Him. ‘No one,’ He says, ‘shall snatch them out of My hand, because My Father who has given them to Me is greater than all’. So it is that if not all are saved, yet some are saved, indeed many; whereas by the power of free will, none at all would be saved, but all would perish.”

Here is my security as a Christian: the Father has chosen me and given me to Christ. If God has chosen me from eternity past, what can the future bring that He has not already determined? If God is for me, who can be against me? We tremble and waver because we do not realise how utterly safe we are the arms of God’s electing love. As Augustus Toplady said:

How happy are we  
Our election who see  
And venture, O Lord, for salvation on Thee!  
In Jesus approved,  
Eternally loved,  
Upheld by Thy power, we cannot be moved.

Amid the changes and stresses and trials of life, may God  
grant each one of us that security, for Christ's sake.