

Chosen in Christ

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[0 : 00] Ephesians chapter 1 and from verses 1 to 14. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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. 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.

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 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 : 27] 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 were heard, when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. 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.

Amen. Okay, folks, this is going to be the second of three weeks, looking at verses 3 through 14 of Ephesians chapter 1.

So the next part of this tonight, under the heading, Chosen in Christ. It's widely reported, I'm sure many of you have heard, that Mozart wrote the overture to Don Giovanni just hours before its premiere.

The orchestra handed copies just moments before the curtain went up, and by all reports, did an excellent job of that sight-reading task. I was watching an episode of Pointless this week, and they point out that while that is certainly impressive on the part of both the composer and the musicians, it isn't quite as weird as it first sounds, in that the whole point of the overture is to introduce the musical themes that are going to recur throughout the body of the work.

[3 : 08] So what you do is you write the whole of the rest of it first, and then go back and write the overture once you know what the themes are going to be. It's the last part to be composed. One commentator compares this section of Ephesians to just such an overture that introduces here in these opening verses the successive melodies that are going to follow throughout the letter.

It doesn't seem terribly likely that Paul went back and wrote it after the fact, but it certainly is the case that here he's introducing a variety of important themes for this letter.

There's lots going on in these verses. Another commentator calls it a kaleidoscope of dazzling lights and shifting colors. I think it does us good to read it through a few times so that we hear what's going on.

As Paul was quite fond of doing, he's written a single long sentence with lots of different clauses, lots of different elements all chained together that kind of gives the impression of a cascade of ideas that just kind of pour out of him without stopping for breath.

He's so excited, he just can't get these things out quickly enough. And all of this is a declaration of the praiseworthy attributes of our God, particularly that as verse 3 puts it, we have been blessed

with every spiritual blessing.

[4 : 27] So the rest of verses 3 through 14 puts bones on that summary statement of verse 3. Again, we're not going to deal with all of these different themes this evening.

Instead, we're going to pick out just a couple of facets of this glittering prism of ideas and examine those for a little while. So we've titled tonight's sermon Chosen in Christ.

And if you like, the two headings of the sermon tonight are actually both the title repeated, just with the emphasis on different words. First, chosen in Christ.

And then second, chosen in Christ. Chosen in Christ. So we focus first on the means of blessing in these verses. Paul says time and time again through this section that blessing comes in Christ.

It's there in that summary in verse 3. And then the same phrase or an equivalent comes up again and again and again in the following verses. To see in verse 4, it's for him that we were chosen.

[5 : 30] Sorry, it's in him that we were chosen. Verse 5, it's through him we are adopted. We're given glorious grace. Verse 6, and in him redemption, the forgiveness of sins. That's verse 7.

In verse 9, God's will was purposed in Christ. In verse 10, it's under Christ that the unity of all things will be achieved. Verse 11 comes back round to the idea of verse 4. We were chosen in him.

And according to verse 12, our putting our hope in Christ will be for his glory. Verse 13, the message of truth is the means of our inclusion in Christ. And it was in him that we were marked with a seal.

It is all in Christ. We said last week, there's no other source of blessing than God the Father. That's there in verse 3.

He's blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. So God, the source of all blessing. And now as we look at the rest, we see that this blessing in all of its fullness flows through Christ.

[6 : 31] It's in him that we are blessed. It's because we are united to our Savior that we have all of these manifold blessings. Even, even our election, even the choosing that verse 4 says took place before the creation of the world, even that choice that we might think would have to be the earliest thing in the process, even this is at least concurrent with being united to Christ, as Paul phrases it in verse 4.

He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. We cannot be chosen.

We cannot be among God's elect without being chosen in him, in Christ. Election depends on union with Christ. And John Stott says the juxtaposition of the three pronouns is emphatic.

God put us and Christ together in his mind. Now, union with Christ is one of those massively significant doctrines that I think is largely undervalued in the church and I suspect is one about which many of us lack any significant understanding.

But ultimately, there should be enormous comfort to us in knowing that we are in Christ. It should be a source of reassurance to us. These tremendous blessings are ours because when God our Father looks at you and me, he sees his own Son.

[8 : 09] He looks at us and sees Jesus because we are in Jesus. We are indissolubly linked to him. Now remember, this Christ in whom we are, this Christ is, as Paul points out in verse 20, seated at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly realms.

So why, according to verse 3, do we have every blessing in the heavenly realms? Well, because Christ, our representative, Christ in whom we are, is there in the heavenly realms.

We have blessings in the heavenly realms because Christ is in the heavenly realms and we are in Christ. So strong is that link. So strong is that union, that link with us and Jesus.

So genuinely, does Paul believe that God's holy people are in Christ, that in chapter 2, verse 6, he then says, God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

Paul says that we, you and me, right now, are seated, yes, in the Morton Hall in New Mills and we are also, right now, seated in the heavenly realms because we are in Christ.

[9 : 25] Folks, there should be great comfort to us in this knowledge of our union with Christ and I'm really hoping that one outcome of this series is going to be a deeper appreciation for us of that reality.

Well, let's press on. We touched briefly there on the theme of election and that theme is an important one so we turn now to our second heading considering that we are chosen in Christ.

Verse 4, 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.

That's verse 4 and then again, verse 11, 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. Now, like union with Christ, the doctrine of election is again a massively important doctrine and also like union with Christ, it should also be a massive comfort and assurance to us.

[10:36] Now, the sad reality is that this truth has been often a cause of division between Christians and has been for many a source of, I guess you could call it kind of intellectual angst rather than comfort, something that we try to kind of figure out all the nuances of and worry that we can't seem to make it all kind of hang together rather than resting in what God has said to us and being reassured by it.

See, I think, yes, the language of being chosen per se perhaps doesn't trouble us, but when Paul starts talking about predestination, lots of people start getting uncomfortable because that then starts to feel like a challenge to our free will.

If God chose me before I was born, even before the world was created, how can I say I have any choice in the matter? Indeed, how do I have any choice in anything, we might say?

And for some of us, that perspective doesn't really seem to match up with our experience. We say to ourselves, didn't I choose God?

In fact, I remember the day when I did it. I remember when I chose God. Some of you know the precise day and hour when that happened. To that we must answer, well, yes.

[12:00] Yes, you did choose him. If you belong to Christ, it is true that you have chosen him whether or not you remember the day and hour. You chose him freely. That is true.

But it is also true that you only did so because in eternity he had chosen you. No one can decide for Christ unless God has first decided for them.

But there is this real tension in the truth that's proclaimed by God's word. It is hard to marry it all up. The mystery of election isn't one that can be just kind of tied up in a nice neat package with a bow on top.

Okay, done. There it is. No, it has defied the efforts of the best brains of the last couple of thousand years to try to make it all neat and easy. So it may well not be resolved to your satisfaction tonight. It might well puzzle you until the day that you stand before God in heaven. But the fact that we can't completely square off everything and work out exactly yes, this is it just so that shouldn't prevent us from saying some things that are true and important.

[13:12] There is much that we can say confidently about this even if there are details that remain slightly tricky. And Stott very helpfully identifies three important things to say which we're going to consider for a few minutes just now.

The first is that it is to my mind at least somewhat unfortunate that we've come to call this understanding of divine election by the name Calvinism. Because the fact that that's what we call it can sometimes be taken to imply that this whole kind of system was dreamed up in 16th century Geneva.

It is not so. The historically astute would point out that Calvin was just rediscovering and re-expressing what was said before by Augustine of Hippo back in the 4th century.

But even that isn't enough. Now Stott's first point is that the doctrine of election is a divine revelation not a human speculation.

Folks, this goes back much earlier than the 16th century, earlier than the 4th century. It goes back to God's revealed word. Here it is. The Apostle Paul inspired by the Holy Spirit says God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

[14:34] Charles Spurgeon made this point really quite forcefully in one of his sermons. He said, I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and him crucified unless you preach what is nowadays called Calvinism.

I have my own ideas and those I always state boldly. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism. Calvinism is the gospel and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel if we do not preach justification by faith without works, nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in his dispensation of grace, nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah.

Nor, I think, can we preach the gospel unless we base it upon the particular redemption which Christ made for his elect and chosen people. Nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called and suffers the children of God to be burned in the fires of damnation after having believed.

Such a gospel I abhor. The gospel of the Bible is not such a gospel as that. But we preach Christ and him crucified in a different fashion and to all gainsayers we reply, we have not so learned Christ.

So this understanding of election, this Calvinism if you want to call it that, is to my mind plainly taught by God's word even if we can't fully wrap our heads around it.

[16:01] But the other thing that we need to say alongside that is that we're saying, or I at least I'm saying, we're saying with Spurgeon Calvinism is the gospel, we are not saying the gospel is Calvinism.

Sometimes word order is quite important, isn't it? You really can be a true believer in Christ whether or not you accept this understanding of God's word. You can be united to him and seated with him in the heavenly realms without believing in this understanding of his sovereign grace.

In fact, we were discussing exactly this point in the Aaron Kilwin in Kirk session on Friday, reminding ourselves there is no barrier to belief in Christ, there is no barrier whatsoever to church membership in what your understanding of this may be because our criterion as a denomination for church membership is what we call a credible profession of faith and no more.

In other words, folks, if you are a Christian, you can be part of covenant church. There should be no other barriers. If you trust in Christ, if you believe in his word, you should be a member of a church. And some of you sat here tonight should be having a conversation with me or one of the other elders about that. But I'm off on a tangent. So come back to Stott's second truth about election from Ephesians chapter one.

[17:23] He says, the doctrine of election is an incentive to holiness, not an excuse for sin. Now you can see why that needs to be said, can't you?

Because if I know God's already chosen me, then why bother? If God's grace is free and my place in heaven is secure, then what does anything matter?

You end up functionally, if you're not careful, in the same place as the atheist who says there is no final judgment, there is no God to judge, there is nothing beyond death, so do as you please.

Because if you say, I know what's beyond death and it doesn't depend on what I do, well then just like the atheist, you can say just as much, do as you please, can't you?

Well Paul says here the intention is the exact opposite of that attitude. Here's verse four again. He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

The language here, holy and blameless, it's reminiscent of the Old Testament sacrifices. Blameless here is the same as the unblemished in the sacrificial regulations that we looked at in Leviticus a few months ago.

[18:36] We get this same couplet, holy and blameless, towards the end of this letter. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless.

Now there in chapter 5, that's kind of a pointer to our state of final perfection, looking forward to the last day. But sanctification isn't something that just kind of does nothing and then waits to just snap into place as a single event on that final day.

No, that's not how it goes. Sanctification begins in the here and now. This process of becoming holy and blameless begins today or rather begins some time ago.

We are chosen to be holy and blameless in his sight. This doctrine of election does not encourage sin, no, it forbids it and it urges us to increase in holiness.

That's the purpose. The word to in verse four conveys intent, conveys reason. If you want evidence of election, if you want assurance that you are chosen of God, then look to your holiness of life.

[19:56] So we say election is a matter of divine revelation, not human speculation. We say it is an incentive to holiness, not an excuse for sin. And we say third, it is a stimulus to humility, not a ground for boasting.

I think we've fallen a few slides behind there. Now, we're saying it's a stimulus to humility, not a ground for boasting.

See, this doctrine of election can be perceived as arrogant concepts. Some would say that to proclaim, I am chosen by God, it's actually one of the most arrogant things you could ever think. Perhaps especially that's true when it's coupled with the unspoken counterparts, I am chosen and you aren't. Now, there's some truth to that perception, isn't there?

You've probably met people who really do talk about this in a way that really, really sounds very arrogant. And I think part of why it comes across as arrogant is because we're wired to assume that when anyone chooses something, it's because they think the thing they're choosing is in some way superior.

[21 : 10] Right? I mean, how do you choose which university to attend? Well, you choose the most prestigious course, you choose the one that has the most vibrant nightlife, you choose the one closest to home or the one furthest from home.

It's the same with people. How do you choose a husband or a wife? Well, you choose them because there's something in him or her, presumably many things, that make them attractive to you, make them desirable, make you want to spend time together.

And the same is true to a different degree, perhaps, with our other friendships as well. When we choose things, we choose on some kind of basis. We choose because we see an advantage in what we are selecting.

But this is one of those ways that God is not like us. One of those ways that if we take human behavior and try and just scale it up, then we go awry.

This is made abundantly clear as Moses speaks to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 7. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

[22 : 20] But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

Paul's going to come back to this in chapter 2, and it's here in chapter 1 as well. It's about God's grace, God's love, God's will, God's purpose, God's choice.

Election should be a reason for humility, not boasting. I want to add a fourth important truth alongside the three that John Starr has already highlighted for us.

And in some ways, my fourth is in some ways is an opposite of his second point. Steve Stott's rightly pointed out that election is an incentive to holiness, not an excuse for sin.

He's completely correct in that. We've established that already. But what we also need to see is that the doctrine of election should lead us to assurance, not to anxiety.

[23 : 27] Because it's also true that by God's free choice of a people for himself, we are thereby adopted, verse 5, and forgiven, verse 7. In conformity with the purpose of God's will, verse 11, we've been sealed, verse 13, with the promised Holy Spirit.

See, again, because you and I, because we choose people and we choose relationships on the basis of what we see in the other party, and because we watch people end relationships, friendships, family relationships, marriages, because we see those end because someone's hurt the other party, someone's not done enough, someone's just not bothered to keep the friendship going.

Because we see those relationships end that way, then we're sometimes inclined to think that the same is true of God in terms not just of the establishment of the relationship, but also the maintenance of the relationship.

We're sometimes tempted to wonder, have I done enough? We wonder, have I done enough in the eyes of my friends or my neighbors or my spouse? And to an extent, we need to wonder that.

We wonder, are we good enough? And therefore, we wonder likewise, are we good enough for God? Now, folks, it's right and proper that we examine ourselves, that we consider our holiness of life, that we ask, are we serving him as we should?

[24 : 56] But our status as God's holy people, verse 1 of this letter, is not based on our diligence.

It is not based on our ability to do enough to keep him on our side. No, no. All of it is in him. All of it is his work.

In Deuteronomy, Moses continues on from those two verses we already read, saying, know therefore that the Lord your God is God.

He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. Just think about that for a moment.

A thousand generations. generations. How long do you think it's been since those words were said? Counting in generations. Have we run out yet?

[25 : 57] I don't think we have. The God who has chosen you will also keep you. Verse 6 here says, this is in accordance with his glorious grace, freely given us in the one he loves.

Folks, this good news, this election, being chosen by God, this is grace. This is a gift. It is not earned.

It cannot be lost. Because of his grace, because we are in Christ, we circle back to that start, to union with Christ. In him, 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 us.

Let's pray. Lord our God, we thank you for your gift of grace. We thank you for the love that you have shown to us.

We thank you for the forgiveness of our sins. We recognize again that there is nothing in us that you should choose Jesus.

[27 : 14] We have nothing to commend ourselves in your sight. Nothing to commend ourselves even in our own sight. And yet, for reasons of your own, you have chosen us.

You have chosen to set your love upon us. And so we give you thanks. We rejoice in your gracious gift to us. We rejoice to know that we are united to our Savior.

Savior. We rejoice that in him we have redemption. Our sins are forgiven. And we have confidence as we look forward to the final day.

Because we have been sealed with your Holy Spirit. Our inheritance is guaranteed. You will preserve us to the end. Lord, may that be to us not just an intellectual theoretical truth, but a deeply felt understanding.

That we may have the comfort, the security, the assurance of your love. That whatever anyone else may say to us, whatever circumstances we may face, whatever may be our lot, that it is well with our souls, because you have chosen us for your own.

[28 : 37] Amen.