

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

(LESSON SEVENTEEN)

ELECTION: A SUMMATION

In spite of how consistently and plainly the Holy Scriptures address the subject, many persons have a difficulty accepting the sovereignty of God, especially as it relates to the matter of election unto salvation. The most common protest of the persons who object to the doctrine of election is that it does not appear to be fair. Such an objection is rooted in our human ideas of what is fair and what is not. The objection is not rooted in an understanding of true, divine justice. If we are to understand and appreciate the issue of election unto salvation, it is a necessity in the nature of the case that we set aside all human considerations and focus on the nature of God and **His** righteous standard. God is never to be held hostage to man's standard of justice. God Himself is the standard of justice.

Because God is sovereign, He does exactly what He wants to do, whenever and however He wants. Because God is Himself the standard of justice, whatever He does is just! Brothers and sisters, we must not think that God does anything because it is right for Him to do it. Rather, we must know that it is God's doing of a thing that makes the thing right! It is God who defines for us what is just and righteous, because He is by nature just and righteous and it is therefore impossible for Him to act unjustly or unrighteously. Whatever God purposes to do is just, not because of any external standard of justice, but simply because He has purposed to do it! Justice is an outflow of God's character. His justice is not subject to the assumptions of what sinful, unregenerate human beings think it should be.

If we contend that God's sovereign election is unjust because it disturbs our assumptions of what is fair and what is not, we have failed to recognize the very essence of true justice. Whatever God chooses to do is right and fair and just, **full-stop!** If God, therefore, chooses to elect those who He desires to save, it is right and fair and just for Him to do so. We must not attempt to impose our human ideas of justice unto our understanding of God's purposes and acts. Instead, we must go to the revelation of the Word of God and see how God has purposed and acted and bring our theology into harmony with the Bible. It is very important in this regard to remember the admonition of God in **Isaiah 55:8-9**: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

The sovereignty of God is emphasized in this passage. We are told that His thoughts (His purposes and intentions), and His ways (His directions), are far higher than ours. While it is true that God may be known by human beings, He is still unfathomable in the totality of His person and purposes. God reveals Himself and His purposes to us in His Word and we must bow to His Word whether it squares with our standards or not. If we fail to do so we inevitably fall into the category of persons addressed by Paul in **Romans 9:20-21**: *"O man, nay, surely, as for you, who are you who contradicts God? The moldable material shall not say to the one who molds it, Why did you make me thus, shall it? Or, does not the potter possess authority over the clay, out of the same lump to make, on the one hand, an instrument which is for honorable purposes and, on the other hand, one which is for dishonorable uses?"* (**The New Testament: An Expanded Translation**)

The idea that God is sovereign and that He is, by nature, absolutely holy, righteous and just makes it impossible for Him to act unjustly. Every thought that God thinks, every purpose that He determines, every act that is wrought by Him, is always an outflow of His holy, righteous and just character. Our understanding of this truth is critical to our understanding of everything in Scripture, including the doctrine of election. When God acts, He always does so because He wills to do so and He does so independently. He does what He desires to do without any pressure or constraint from any outside influence and His acts are always right and just, even when they do not appear to make sense to us.

In **John 15:16**, Jesus said the following to His disciples: *“Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.”* Is it possible for anything to be clearer? *“You did not choose me. I chose you.”* This is true, both in respect of our election unto salvation and our ordination into office. Jesus Christ did not choose us because we first chose Him any more than He loved us because we first loved Him. It was true then, and it is true now, it is Jesus Christ who has to initiate our fellowship with Him. He has to do the choosing. In all the cases of friendship between Christ and human beings, the origination and initiation come from Him. *“We love Him **because** He first loved us”* (**1 John 4:19**).

1 Peter 1:1-2 informs us as to the nature of our election: *“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, **Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father**, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied.”* As we have indicated in an earlier lesson, the foreknowledge of God of which Peter speaks in this passage, does not mean mere foresight. There are persons who believe and teach that God in eternity past, looked down through the corridors of time to see who would respond to His call and who would not. Those whom He saw would respond, He elected unto salvation and those whom He saw would not respond, He did not elect. This is **conditional** election, which means that God distributes His electing grace on the basis of some foreseen **condition** that human beings must meet themselves. Such an explanation of foreknowledge makes God’s decision subject to the decision of human beings. It makes God the One who is chosen, rather than the chooser. In this scenario, the purpose of God is determined by the foreseen decision of men and women. God is not the One who truly initiates the operation. If salvation depends upon the choice of men and women to use or abuse the grace of God, then it is this choice that in the final analysis is the primary and decisive one and not the choice of God! The Scriptures, however, consistently declare that God does not foresee an action or condition on our part that induces Him to save us. There is no place in the Scriptures for an election which is adjusted to the foreseen actions of men and women. The divine will is never dependent on the will of human beings to determine the outcome. Rather, election rests on God’s sovereign decision to save whomever He is pleased to save, for His own purpose. The following passages underscore this truth:

ROMANS 8:28-30

*“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called **according to his purpose**. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.”*

EPHESIANS 1:3-6

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: 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, To the praise of the glory of his grace**, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.”*

2 TIMOTHY 1:8-10

*“Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, **not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace**, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”*

If we admit that the doctrine of the Radical Corruption of man is indeed scripturally sound, then the doctrine of the Election of God must be acknowledged to be vitally important. If, as the Scriptures tell us, all human beings are *“dead in trespasses and sins”* and are *“by nature the children of wrath;”* if, indeed, they are in a state of guilt and depravity from which they are wholly unable to deliver themselves, it follows that if any of them are to be saved, God must choose those who shall be the objects of His grace. In their state of spiritual deadness, they certainly cannot choose Him!

The doctrine of Election emphasizes the truly gracious character of God’s salvation. Those persons who declare that salvation is accomplished entirely by the grace of God, and yet deny the doctrine of Election, hold an inconsistent position. The Bible consistently affirms the fact that God’s election of human beings is an absolutely sovereign one, based entirely upon His unmerited grace and favour.

As the absolute sovereign of the universe, God has the uncontested right to deal with a world of sinners according to His own good pleasure. He can justly elect some and pass others over. He can righteously grant His saving grace to one and not to another. Since all have sinned and come short of His glory, He is free to have mercy on whom He will have mercy and to harden whom He wills. *“It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy”* (**Romans 9:16 New International Version**). The reason why any person is saved, and why person **A** is saved rather than person **B**, is to be found in the good pleasure of Him *“who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will”* (**Ephesians 1:11 New International Version**).

As is the case with all of the doctrines of grace, the doctrine of the Election of God emphasizes the sovereignty and grace of God in salvation. Other views tend to emphasize the work of faith and obedience in the person who decides to accept the offered grace and, inevitably, human beings are given a share of the glory that rightfully belongs to God alone.

We may be led to ask “Why does God save some and not others?” The answer to that question belongs to the secret counsels of God (**Deuteronomy 29:29**). Only the sovereign God knows why this person receives grace, and the other person does not. What is certain is that there was nothing whatsoever in those who were elected, which could attract the favour of God or make Him partial to them. Again, we turn to the Scripture for confirmation of this truth:

ROMANS 3:10-12

“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”

ROMANS 3:22-23

“...For there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

1 CORINTHIANS 4:7 (New International Version)

“For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”

EPHESIANS 2:1-3 (New International Version)

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

Those of us who are among the elect have no basis for boasting whatsoever. We can only say with Charles H. Gabriel,

*“I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene,
and wonder how he could love me, a sinner, condemned, unclean.
How marvelous! How wonderful! And my song shall ever be:
How marvelous! How wonderful is my Savior’s love for me!”*

We can sing with C. Austen Miles,

*“I do not know what I can do, or say,
My debt of gratitude to Him to pay;
But I at least may cry, “O Christ divine!
Had I a thousand lives they should be Thine.”
But this one thing I know: That when the crimson flow
Dropped to the earth below, it fell on me.
My eyes were opened wide, I saw Him crucified,
And knew for me He died on Calvary.”*

The Bible teaches that the very faith and repentance by which we are saved do not originate with us. They are themselves the gifts of God. In **Ephesians 2:8** we read, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — **and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God**” (New International Version)*. This is confirmed by **Acts 18:27**: *“And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much **which had believed through grace.**”*

Augustine was in harmony with the revelation of Scripture when he said that “The elect of God are chosen by Him to be His children, **in order** that they might be made to believe, **not because** He foresaw that they would believe.”

Repentance is also declared to be a gift. **Acts 5:29-31** reads as follows: *“Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, **for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.**”*

In **Acts 11:18** we read, “When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles **granted repentance** unto life.”

In **Romans 2:1-4** Paul writes, “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that **God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?**” (New International Version).

As it relates to repentance, Paul’s advice to Timothy recorded in **2 Timothy 2:24-26** is instructive: “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, **in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth**, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (New International Version).

In meditating on the wonder of the grace of God, I can agree wholeheartedly with the remarks of the American theologian Loraine Boettner: “The marvel of marvels is not that God, in His infinite love and justice, has not elected all of this guilty race to be saved, but that He has elected any. When we consider, on the one hand, what a heinous thing sin is, together with its desert of punishment, and on the other, what holiness is, together with God’s perfect hatred for sin, the marvel is that God could get the consent of His holy nature to save a single sinner. Furthermore, the reason that God did not choose all to eternal life was not because He did not wish to save all, but that for reasons which we cannot fully explain a universal choice would have been inconsistent with His perfect righteousness.”

We say again that the election of those who are to be saved, is not based on God’s foreknowledge of any action in human beings. God’s foreknowledge of a person’s faith and good works is never to be looked upon as the **cause** of their election. Faith and good works are rather to be considered the **proof** of a person’s election. Whatever faith and good works a person may demonstrate indicate that the person has been chosen and regenerated. To make faith and good works the **basis** of divine election is an insult to God and a repudiation of the revelation of Scripture. This would not be pre-destination but post-destination for it places God’s purposes in time rather than in eternity. The Bible clearly teaches that our election was decided by God in eternity past:

EPHESIANS 1:3-4

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

2 THESSALONIANS 2:13

*“But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God **hath from the beginning** chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.”*

2 TIMOTHY 1:8-9

*“Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus **before the world began.**”*

I believe that if we are honest we will recognize that the very essence of the doctrine of the Election of God is that God is not moved by any consideration of merit or goodness in the objects of His saving mercy. What could be plainer than Paul’s statement in **Romans 9:16**, *“It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy?”* This declaration should be enough to settle the matter for all time. But it does not stand alone. It reflects the consistent, intentional witness of Holy Scripture.

The Scriptures clearly indicate that what God foreknows is dependent on His purpose. In other words, God only foreknows what He has pre-determined. God’s foreknowledge is a record of His will as to what will come to pass in the future. The unfolding drama of redemption is only the execution of His all-embracing plan. God’s foreknowledge of what is yet to be rests upon His pre-arranged plan.