

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS
(LESSON FIVE)
“CHOSEN BY GOD”

EPHESIANS 1:3-5

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

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

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

In our previous **Lesson**, we made the point that it is important for us to observe the context in which these three verses are located before we examine them in detail. In the first verse of the epistle, Paul informed the Ephesian Christians as to who they were. He addressed them as the “*saints*” and the “*faithful*” who are “*in Christ Jesus.*” They are referred to as “*saints*” because they had been set apart for God by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had taken them out of the first Adam and had placed them in the Last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, by an act, performed once for all time, the moment they had placed their faith in the Lord Jesus as their Saviour.

Paul also referred to them as “*the faithful*” because they had placed their confidence in the Lord’s ability to do just what He said He would do. They had considered the Lord Jesus Christ worthy of trust as to His character and motives. They had entrusted the salvation of their souls into His hands and had committed the work of saving their souls to His care. In other words, they had “*believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

The Ephesian Christians had been set apart for God by the Holy Spirit and were faithful as a result of their being “*in Christ.*” In other words, their being regarded as saints and as the faithful had absolutely nothing to do with them. Their position was based entirely on what Jesus Christ had done for them.

In the second verse, Paul had informed them of the benefits which they should be enjoying as a result of their being “*saints*” and “*the faithful in Christ Jesus.*” He did so in the words which formed the common greeting of Christians in the first-century church: “*Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*” The legacy of grace and peace was theirs. The security that the gospel guarantees is based on the fact that God grants peace through His grace. Grace is the source from which salvation flows. It is the grace of God, His unmerited favour that assures our hearts and gives us peace with Him and each other.

In verse **3**, Paul bursts forth with a song of praise: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*” He informs the Christians in Ephesus that God had blessed them with “*all spiritual blessings.*” This is an astonishing reality. There is no spiritual blessing that is lacking. All the enrichment needed for the spiritual life is already the possession of the saints.

In verses **4** and **5**, the Apostle begins to explain to us how all the “*spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*” become ours. He begins to answer that question by showing us what God has done in order that we may be connected to all the exceeding riches of His grace.

He writes, “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.”

As we prepare to consider this mind-blowing statement, let us ask ourselves some pointed questions. How is it that vile wretches such as we are, should ever have come to be referred to as ‘saints’ and as ‘the faithful in Christ Jesus?’” “How is it that we who were children of Hell, should ever have come to experience God’s sanctifying grace and tranquilizing peace?” “How is it that dead dogs such as us, should ever have come to be blessed with ‘all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ?’”

Have we come to enjoy all these benefits and so much more because one day we chose Him and made a decision to serve Him? Is it because one day we accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Saviour? Perhaps there are persons who genuinely believe that it was their choice and their decision and their acceptance that secured for them these benefits. But that is not what Paul says. He does not say that we are enjoying these blessings because we have chosen Christ, or made a decision for Him, or accepted Him as our personal Saviour. Paul does not mention anything that we have done. Nor does he speak of anything that has happened in time and in this world. He goes right back into eternity, before the foundation of the world and he starts with that which has been done by God.

Brothers and sisters, I say again that the Bible always starts with God. And if we want to interpret Scripture correctly, we must not start anywhere else, or with anyone else. We must strenuously resist the great temptation to start with ourselves and work our way up to God. We must always start with God and work our way down to ourselves. The Bible is, ultimately, the record and the explanation of what God has done for the salvation of man. It is the revelation of God’s gracious purpose towards a world of sinful human beings. It outlines what God has done in the past, what He is doing at present, what He has promised to do in the future, and the amazing outcome of it all. Paul is not here expressing his own theories or ideas; He is writing about what God has revealed to him. He is informing us that those who enjoy these spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ do so because they have been chosen by God to do so. That is the explanation of everything, so Paul begins with it. The answer to the questions we asked of ourselves earlier, is that God has chosen us. This is Paul’s categorical statement based on the revelation of God to him. Yes, we did choose the Lord; yes, we did make a decision for Him; yes, we did accept Him as our personal Lord and Saviour, but we could never have done so if He had not chosen us first, and decided on us first, and accepted us first!

Let us carefully consider the words, “according as He hath chosen us.” The words “according as” are the translation of a Greek word which means “even as” or “in conformity with the fact.” By the use of this Greek word, Paul is connecting verse 3 to verse 4. He is making the point that the saints have been blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, because God had chosen them for that purpose. The “spiritual blessings” proceed from God’s election, and take effect because of God’s election. They have their foundation in eternity, and they are therefore, neither incidental nor an afterthought of God. The “spiritual blessings” are bestowed upon us in accordance with an eternal purpose. They are the result of deliberate intention on the part of God.

The words “He hath chosen” are the translation of the Greek word **eklegomai** (ek-leg’-om-ah-ee), which means “to pick out, to choose.” The word is in a construction in the Greek which indicates that the subject of the verb acts in his own interest. In other words, the word as it is used here means “to pick out or choose for one’s self.” The saints were chosen by God for Himself. In making the choice, God was acting in His own interest! The word is used of the act of choosing some person or thing for a definite object or calling. Therefore, the selection of the saints was the act of God choosing out from among mankind, certain ones for Himself. These became His own for a specific purpose.

Paul is desirous that the Christians in Ephesus know that the blessings which God had bestowed on them was not a thing of time merely, but the issue of an election prior to their call or conversion, a blessing that came to them in accordance with a definite choice of them out of a mass of others by God for Himself.

Paul writes, *“According as he hath chosen us **in him**.”* The selection of certain ones out of the human race, for the purpose of salvation, was *“in Him,”* referring, of course, to Christ. Those so chosen out were selected with the provision and limitation that this choice would be followed by the inclusion of these persons, within the sphere of the saving work of the Lord Jesus. This in turn, would result in their position in Him as the Last Adam who would confer upon them righteousness and life, as the first Adam by his fall brought sin and death upon the entire human race. God’s choice of His elect was with a view of saving them *“in Christ.”* The whole choice and purpose of salvation had reference to Him. No one was chosen for salvation outside of Christ. Outside of Christ no one was chosen to life, and no one will be saved outside of Him.

Paul advises us that the choice was made *“before the foundation of the world.”* The word *“foundation”* is a translation of the Greek word **katabole** (kat-ab-ol-ay’), which means “to throw down or lay down.” According to the noted Greek New Testament scholar of the mid-twentieth century **Kenneth Samuel Wuest**, the word describes the act of the transcendent God throwing down a universe into space, speaking a material universe into existence which had no existence before. Amazingly, Paul is telling us that God chose us in Christ before that! What a staggering truth!

“Before the foundation of the world.” This is a very important phrase in determining the time when the choice was made. It was not an afterthought. It was not commenced in time. The purpose was far back in the ages of eternity. God’s choice to elect certain of the human race for the purposes of salvation was definitely not an act in time as some wrest the Scriptures to prove, but an eternal choice, a determination of the Divine Mind before all time. The idea of the Divine election in the New Testament is a religious idea, expressing the fact that salvation is originally and wholly of God by grace alone. In Pauline teaching, the subject of this Divine election is not the Church as an entity, but the subjects are men and women, boys and girls, designated as *“us.”*

Regarding the word *“us”* in the phrase *“He hath chosen us,”* the American theologian **Albert Barnes**, best known for his extensive Bible commentary and notes on the Old and New Testaments, made the following comments:

“The word ‘us’ here shows that the apostle had reference to individuals, and not to communities. It includes Paul himself as one of the ‘chosen,’ and those whom he addressed - the mingled Gentile and Jewish converts in Ephesus. That it must refer to individuals is clear. Of no ‘community’ as such can it be said that it was ‘chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy.’ It is not true of the Gentile world as such, nor of anyone of the nations making up the Gentile world.”

He goes on to say, *“The idea of making some ‘distinction’ between them and others, is essential to a correct understanding of the passage - since there can be no choice where no such distinction is made. He who chooses one out of many things makes a difference, or evinces a preference - no matter what the ground or reason of his doing it may be. Whether this refers to communities and nations, or to individuals, still it is true that a distinction is made or a preference given of one over another. It may be added, that so far as ‘justice’ is concerned, it makes no difference whether it refers to nations or to individuals. If there is injustice in choosing an ‘individual’ to favor, there cannot be less in choosing a ‘nation’ - for a nation is nothing but a collection of individuals. Every objection which has ever been made to the doctrine of election as it relates to individuals, will apply with equal force to the choice of a nation to unique privileges. If a distinction is made, it may be made with as much propriety in respect to individuals as to nations.”*

And yet, there is a sense in which a choice of us was never actually made, for God cannot really be said to decide upon any course of action. Any choice that God makes is as eternal as God is. The name of every Christian is as eternal as God is, for God has had that individual in His heart for as long as He has been in existence. And when was God not in existence? What a salvation! A salvation based upon an eternal choice, which extends through time, into, and throughout the eternity after time ceases. Why, then, does any genuine child of God fear that after God has saved them, they can be lost.

We were *“chosen in him before the foundation of the world, **that we should be holy and without blame before him.**”* We must be careful to note that the words *“that we should be”* do not refer to an obligation put upon a Christian to be holy and without blame in his or her Christian experience. The context here is entirely doctrinal in character. The words *“holy”* and *“without blame,”* do not refer to the Christian’s standing as a justified person, but to his or her character as a child of God. It is likely that Paul had **Deuteronomy 7:6** in mind: *“For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.”*

The word *“holy”* is a translation of the Greek word **hagios** which we examined when we dealt with the word *“saints”* in verse 1. The root means *“separated unto God.”* The verb means, *“to separate from things secular and dedicate to God.”* In our character as Christians, we are a separated people, separated from evil and dedicated to the worship and service of God. **That is what we are in the position in which God in salvation has placed us, in Christ.** The position has to do, not with justification, which is a legal position in which the guilt and penalty of sin is taken away and a positive righteousness, even Christ Jesus, bestowed, but with positional sanctification, namely, the position of the saint in the Last Adam, Jesus Christ. This is a matter of character, and is followed by progressive sanctification which Paul speaks of in chapters **4-6**, namely, growth in the Christian experience.

The Greek word translated *“without blame”* means *“without blemish, free from defects,”* as a sacrificial animal without spot or blemish.

The words, *“before Him,”* is the translation of a Greek word which means *“to see down in.”* The word speaks of a penetrating gaze that sees right down into a thing. It refers here to the penetrating gaze of God as He sees right down into our innermost being, through all of our superficialities, hypocrisies, and falseness. This refers to a present, searching gaze of God into the inner character of the saint. But this searching gaze of God into the inner character of the saint has no reference to a future judgment at the judgment Seat of Christ. And it is not a searching gaze conducted in a critical attitude which looks for faults, but a satisfied, delighted contemplation of the reflection of the holiness and spotlessness of the Lord Jesus in the character of the saint, anticipating the moment when He will present us to himself glorious, *“not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.”*

“Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen” (Jude 24-25).