

Praise God For Election(s) Ephesians 1:3-6

For the past few months, we have all been focused on some rather important elections-both here and in other parts of the world. First there was the election of our own President in November. Many believers were relieved to see a man elected who stood closer to a biblical position on issues like the protection and preservation of human life. Shortly after that, there was the fraudulent election in Ukraine which led to a world outcry and massive local demonstrations which eventually swept a Christian named Viktor Yushchenko into power. After the death of Yassar Arafat, there were elections in the Palestine Territory that many hope will lead to a softening of relations with Israel. Last weekend, we witnessed the uncommon bravery of millions of Iraqi's who not only participated in a free election for the first time in decades-but who did so at great risk and out of a desire to promote freedom in their land.

So how should we respond to what appears to be an encouraging advance toward greater freedom in the world in recent days? I say – “Let's praise God for **elections.**” **That** is not a hard thing for most of us to appreciate. Our country's history reminds us of our past pursuit of freedom and the price we have paid over the years to preserve it here and abroad. With such a legacy, we find it very natural to speak of faith and freedom in the same sentence. But if we are not careful, we can begin to confuse the two-as if the two are necessarily interdependent.

Brothers and sisters, we are truly blessed to live in a country such as the United States, but we must never forget who we ultimately are. We are Americans. But we are much more than Americans. We may have a zip code that begins with the numbers 48---. But our citizenship is found in another world. That means that regardless of our current political circumstances-whether we have much political freedom-or little, it is who we are in Christ that defines us. It is what **God the Father is** doing through us that ultimately matters! The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of this when he wrote the epistle to the Ephesians. And when he addresses them, he does not overplay their nationality or their current political situation. Instead, he focuses on their **eternal and** ultimate identity. They are saints (those who belong to God). They are the *faithful* or **ones who believe in Christ** Jesus. Typically he mentions their locality; "To the saints in Ephesus" or "to the church in Corinth." But in this case, he may have even downplayed that nuance. If you have an NIV, you will see a footnote which points out that the earliest and best manuscripts from which our Bibles have been translated do not have the words, **"in Ephesus."** Now you don't need to panic. I think there is plenty of evidence that supports the fact that this letter was indeed sent to the Ephesians-but not exclusively to the Ephesians. This letter has no specific references to people or situations at Ephesus. That is highly unusual for Paul and even more so when you realize that he spent three years with them and knew them intimately. It appears that Paul intentionally wrote this letter not only to the believers in Ephesus-but to *all* the predominantly Gentile churches throughout Asia Minor. It is likely that it was first *received at* Ephesus-and then circulated to churches in the surrounding cities. While all of Paul's letters were inspired by God and therefore written to believers in every age, this letter like no other letter was written to help the entire church of Jesus Christ-*then* and *now*-grasp their *identity* and their *mission*. Do you remember how Paul begins to do this?

Last week, we began to look at a non-stop sentence that goes from verse 3 to verse 14. It is an incredibly long sentence for two reasons. First, the content is so powerful and moving that Paul can't even interrupt his exhilaration with a comma or a period. The other reason for this

unusual sentence is that is actually a hymn—a hymn of profound praise directed to each member of the Godhead for *all* that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have done in restoring and reconciling believers. It is as though Paul is opening a treasure chest crammed full and overflowing with God's blessings. Last week we looked at the title of this hymn in verse 3—which in so many words is saying: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Tonight we want to move into stanza one and consider the specific blessings done in our behalf by *God the Father*. Let's read it out loud together:

*3 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. 4 For he **chose us** in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he **predestined us to be adopted as his sons** through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will- 6 **to the praise of his glorious grace**, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*

As I did last week—I ask the question: Do you *hear* Paul's excitement? But what is it *specifically* that moves him? Look at verse 4: For **he chose** us. [Pause] Now why is it that something that causes Paul to get so excited can be so upsetting to so many of us? "Wait a minute, Paul. It's not supposed to work that way. You see, we are enlightened Americans. And the only *right* way is when we do the choosing. When it comes to salvation—God may have a vote. And so does Satan. But it's up to us to cast the tiebreaking vote. And ultimately it has got to be our vote that matters. Anything less than that restrains our freedom—and makes us little more than robots!" Some might even suggest that it seems downright un-American. We, like our forefathers under the reign of the British monarch, King George, might even be tempted to protest: "**No damnation without representation!**"

But before we go any further, please keep one thing in mind. Neither you nor I can afford to dismiss what Paul is saying because it *seems* to violate some fondly held belief. We must not seek to put "gag orders" on texts that seem to go against what we may think is *just* or *fair*. God's Word constantly reminds us that our thoughts and ways do not naturally agree with *God's* thoughts and ways (Isaiah 55:8). So we must pause with Paul and pray—just as he does in verses 17 and 18 of this same chapter. We must pray that God will open our eyes and that we will increasingly know the hope to which he has called us. And we must *not stop* praying until this text gradually begins to do for us what it did for Paul. We must pray until God opens our eyes to this text in such a way that we can without reservation rejoice and praise God *for His election of us!*

Prayer: That God would cause us to see this text the way He wants us to. Not to seek to argue it away in order to preserve a view that makes *us* feel more in control of things. Not to proudly claim to have it figured out so we can show off our supposed intellect. But that it would so humble us and cause us to more deeply appreciate God's grace that it deeply might deeply move us, as it did Paul, to praise God with our *whole being!*

How do we approach a text that has become more of a theological battleground rather than the worship service that Paul had in mind. I suppose we could go back and review the debates over this passage by theologians over the centuries. We could talk about the early church controversy between Augustine who held to a strong view of election and predestination over against Pelagius who claimed that every man was his own Adam and thereby must determine his own destiny, We could go back to the time of the Reformation and reflect on the debates

between the followers of John Calvin and the followers of James Arminius over *who* chooses *whom*. And today the same debates continue. Now there is a time and a place to have those discussions and to learn some of the important lessons that have emerged from those discussions. But not in this text. This text is not about winning an argument-its about fighting your way to awe, and wonder, and worship, and praise. To that end, there are three important truths in these verses that ought to cause you to praise the Lord for His electing grace. I encourage you to seriously think about them tonight and this week. The first truth is....

I. Election reminds us that God is ultimately Sovereign.

Notice again verse 4: "**For he chose us in him before the creation of the world...**

How easy it is for us to struggle with this instead of allowing it to bless us! I have already pointed out the main problem is that as fallen sinners, we naturally don't think God's thoughts after Him. But let me add another wrinkle to that problem. If we are not careful, our own history and legacy as Americans can hinder our thinking here. How can that be? Let me illustrate by asking you a question: If you were to take a survey at work, at your school, in your neighborhood, or at your local shopping mall-and you were to ask people: **What is the one value shared by all Americans? What is the one ideal that unites us all in spite of whatever differences we have?** The answer? **FREEDOM.** That has been America's cry from the days of the American Revolution right up to last week's elections in Baghdad. But here is the problem. How do you *define* freedom? If you define it (as most do) as the right of self-determination-you have a definition that may work up to a point (depending on what other ideas and ideals are shaping it), but this definition is going to run into some serious problems. It is one thing to be free from the tyranny of a political tyrant like a King George or an Adolph Hitler or a Saddam Hussein. It is something entirely different for a person to become free from the tyranny of *sin!* Freedom from a political tyrant can be noble-although it can also run amuck as it has in post-modern America where it has become the right to do *anything I* please. But the other kind of freedom, freedom from the tyranny of sin-now that is humanly impossible!!

Our problem is that when we hear that God is the *One and Only Sovereign God*, it reminds us too much of a dictator rather than a Savior. But that is because we don't realize our own desperate condition and how much we need a *Sovereign* Savior who is absolutely in control of all of His Creation---even *fallen* Creatures!

Brothers and sisters, election is not some human idea concocted by Augustine or Calvin or modern day reformed theologians. It is a biblical doctrine taught throughout Scripture. According to the Old Testament, God chose Israel. Why? For those who say that election is always based on the fact that God knows in advance who will choose Him and who will reject Him-that idea really breaks down with Israel. Do you suppose that God looked down the corridors of time and saw how good and virtuous the Israelites would be-and therefore chose them on that basis? The rest of the OT argues against it. Time after time they were faithless and disobedient. Finally God divorced them-though one day they will finally look upon the One whom they have pierced and be saved. But why? Because they finally wised up? Because they were superior to the other nations? Because they were smart enough to choose Him *first*? Look at Deuteronomy 7:68:

*6 For you are a people holy to the LORD your God The LORD your God has **chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.** 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. 8 But it was because the LORD loved you and **kept the oath he swore to your forefathers** 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.*

The only reason for their election is to be found in God-not in the Jews themselves. God graciously chose Abraham. He made a promise to Him concerning himself *and his descendents*. And He always keeps his promises.

That is not just true with the people of God in the OT-it is just as true of the people of God today! Paul makes a direct tie-in with his Gentile readers in Ephesians 2:13:

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Why? Because he saw that one day we would choose Him first? No. *"For he **chose us in him before the creation of the world...**"*

For those of us who still struggle with the idea that somehow this robs us of our freedom of choice, I would remind you that the freedom of choice is secondary to an even more basic freedom. The freedom to *make* the right choice! And that is a freedom we gave up in Adam on that fateful day in the Garden when we, through Adam, tried to overthrow God's rule and set up a rival kingdom in which we became prisoners of our own sinful, tyrannical desires. So let's not argue over this point. Let's be *overwhelmed* by it!!!

Transition: Which leads to the next great truth about election in this text....

II. Election explains how God takes *ruined* sinners and produces *unfailing* holiness.

*4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world **to be holy and blameless in his sight In love***

If God's intention was that we should be *holy and blameless in his sight*, then we must have been unholy and blameworthy-and therefore deserving of His judgment. Brothers and sisters-I do not think our problem is with the doctrine of election. I think our problem is with the doctrine of sin! We absolutely do not understand how infinitely devastating sin was and is to us. Isaiah got it right when he said: "Woe to me. I am ruined!" If Paul's enthusiasm for election isn't clicking with you just yet, then wait a few verses until we get to chapter two. That is where it starts making sense. Let me give you a brief glimpse of what we will be looking at in a few weeks. Paul writes in 2:1-3:

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 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. 3 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.

Can you see how Paul captures this sense of sin's ruin and devastation in just *three* verses? We were made in God's image. Like statues in the ancient world reflected the likeness of the monarch in whose image they were cast, so man reflected the glorious attributes of God. God is holy-and we were created as holy beings. God loved and we were made to love God and our fellow man. But look at what has happened. Sin has ripped God's image right off our faces and now all we can do is be pathetic reflections of our sinful selves. By the way, that is so much of what our modern entertainment is all about. Worshipping the pathetic reflections of ourselves! When we rebelled against our Creator, we chose personal freedom, but we became immediate and permanent slaves to the world, the devil-and ultimately our own fleshly desires. We think we are free. And we certainly exercise our capacity to choose on a daily basis. But in Adam we lost the ability to do the right thing; to make the right choice. We serve a powerful taskmaster called sin. And its wages are death. So what happened?

Well one day you begin to see that sin paid lousy wages and you decided to make a break for freedom. Right? No, the worst thing about sin is not only does it devalue your life now and damn you for eternity-but its worst feature is that it tricks you into believing you were never better off than you are right now! There are people tonight in Jacksonville, FL whose lives are a mess; who are up to their eyeballs in debt, addictions, and ruined relationships. There are people who have no meaningful purpose in life. Who have nothing to live for beyond whatever pleasure they can scratch or claw out of a sporting event-and who are headed for an eternity without Christ: And they could very well be thinking tonight: "Man, it *doesn't get any better than this!*" They really think they are free. They are free to choose what they want-but they are not free to choose what they so desperately need!

For that, we need a Heavenly Father who *planned our* freedom before the world was even created. One who enables us to choose Him as our Savior and King because He first chose us to be holy and blameless in his presence. By the way, it is my opinion that the phrase: "in love" at the end of verse four goes with what precedes it in verse four rather than what follows it in verse 5. Both ideas make sense. If it goes with verse 5 (as NIV), it means that love is God's motive for predestining us as His children-something we will look at next week. But if it goes with what precedes it in verse four (as A.V.) (which seems to fit better with the other references to love in this book), it further describes the outcome of God's choosing us. We become loving people. Part of our holy and blameless lifestyle is that we become people who are characterized by love for God and each other. People who more and more resemble the image of God's dear Son. Only God's wondrous grace can produce that!

Once God's Spirit begins to reveal to you the devastating nature of sin, election still may not make perfect sense. It may even leave you scratching your head with some unanswered questions. But it will bless you and even begin to fire up your engine of praise-just like it did for Paul! There is an old hymn that wonderfully captures this idea. It was composed in the 19th century by a man named Josiah Conder: It goes like this:

You've Always Loved Me

1- It's not that I did choose You, for Lord, that could not be.
This heart would still refuse You, but You have chosen me:

And though my sin had stained it, my life You have made new,
And to this end ordained me, that I should live for You.
2- Your sovereign mercy called me, and taught my opening mind;
The world had else enthralled me, to heav'nly glories blind.
My heart owns none above You, for Your rich grace I thirst,
This knowing, if I love You, You must have loved me *first*.

Chorus:

**You've always loved me before I'd even heard
And called me while I despised Your every word.
Then You gave me a righteousness That covered all my shame;
And now I'll glory forever in Your name.**

Transition:

- I. A right understanding of Election reminds us that God is ultimately Sovereign.
- II. A right understanding of Election explains how God takes *ruined* sinners and produces *unfailing* holiness.

Finally...

- III. A right understanding of Election produces humility and awe which in turn fuels genuine praise to God.

There is no such thing as genuine praise apart from a heart of humility. What is humility? It is the understanding of what I truly deserve. The doctrine of election reminds that I have done nothing to deserve anything but God's just judgment. He has done everything from beginning to end to reconcile lost sinners to himself. Why? So that He alone receives all the credit, all the praise, and all the glory. Look at verse 6:

“...to the praise of his glorious grace....”

This passage so far does not tell us everything about our identity and mission. But already it supplies us with something very essential to understanding who we are and why we are here. It tells us that we are a choir-and our theme is His glory. For some reason, God has seen fit to share this doctrine with us-not to argue about. Not to get promote pride. But to so overwhelm us with a sense of His grace that we like Paul can't stop praising our great God.

Don't let go of this text, wrestle with it and cry out to God for insight until it brings you to your knees in awe of God's mercy and lifts you back up in praise to the Lord.

I close with this quote from a well-known Baptist pastor of the 19'h century who was known for his passionate preaching and soul-winning, Charles Spurgeon. Listen to him in his own words:

I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me, I would never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he would never have chosen me afterward.

--Charles H. Spurgeon

As citizens of America, we can say: Praise God for elections. But as citizens of heaven, we will be praising God forever and ever-***Praise God for election!***