

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW

Lesson 24

Salvation: Election

I. **Introduction:** “Back To The Future”

In the popular 80’s movie, “Back To The Future”, Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox), goes back to the 50’s in a scientifically “souped-up” DeLorean devised by his brilliantly inventive friend, Dr. Emmet Brown (Christopher Lloyd), where he encounters his parents as teenagers. Since H.G. Wells’ “The Time Machine”, we have always had a fascination with the “impossible possibility” of travelling backwards (and forwards!) in time. In the early days of television, Walter Cronkite hosted an intriguing historical series entitled “You Are There”. Each week viewers would be “taken back” to the very moment of some great event (from ancient Greece to the Civil War) to try and experience what it must have been like when the event happened.

Similarly, children who have been adopted, even after they become adults often have an intense desire “to go back in time”, as it were, and find out the reasons for their being offered for adoption and as much as they can learn about their birth parents. In many respects, these are analogies to our “second birth” and our “adoption” as sons by our Heavenly Father. Paul sets our minds and hearts at ease in the opening lines of his letter to the church at Ephesus when he says:

“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. He predestined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace.”

(Eph. 1:4-6)

The doctrine of election is not mentioned as such throughout scripture, but it certainly is a concept and a truth that the Prophets and writers of the Old Testament and the Apostles and writers of the New Testament seem to have as a presupposition upon which to approach all who are the “heirs of salvation”.

It is found in the writings of Paul, Peter, John, and Jude particularly and is certainly a part of what Jesus has to say throughout His ministry. The book of Acts, not primarily a book of doctrine, but a history of the early church, touches on the issue when Luke writes, “and when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed”.

(Acts 13:48)

Perhaps at this point it would be good to give a basic definition of election as a point of reference for the balance of our discussion. Wayne Grudem, in his “Systematic Theology, An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine” says: “Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account

of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of His sovereign good pleasure.” An even more succinct description is provided by prominent theologian R. C. Sproul who states “what predestination means, in its most elementary form, is that our final destination, Heaven or Hell, is decided by God not only before we get there, but before we are even born. God made a choice – He chose some individuals to be saved into everlasting blessedness in Heaven and others He chose to pass over, to allow them to follow the consequences of their sins into eternal torment in Hell. “

Sproul’s blunt statement raises a whole host of questions and, understandably, the doctrine of election, or predestination, has evoked enormous amounts of controversy and consternation. Since it is most assuredly a solidly Biblical teaching it must be dealt with using the utmost clarity in an attempt to understand the profundity of it’s meaning and it’s relativity to basic Christians faith. While there are a great variety of interpretation attendant upon this vital doctrine, the thinking devoted to it can principally be divided into two camps. The first point of view arose during the Reformation, differs from Roman Catholic teaching, and forms a part of Reformed Theology. The second was a reaction to that thought system and is known after its founder, Jacob Arminius, as Arminianism.

II. **Reformed Theology**: “Tiptoe Through The Tulips”

John Calvin (1509 –1564) studied for the priesthood at the University of Paris but was converted to Protestantism in the early 1530’s and wrote his great theological treatise “Institutes of The Christian Religion” in 1536 at the age of 26. Calvinism spread to Scotland in the form of Presbyterianism where it ultimately spread to America in the form of Puritanism. Out of his writings there arose what is known as “the five points of Calvinism”. He did not author them specifically, but they originated with the Synod of Dort in 1619 and have crystalized by being affirmed as the distinctives of Calvinism over the centuries since.

They contain five key elements and are known under the acronym of TULIP.

1. T stands for Total Depravity. As a result of Adam’s fall, the entire human race is affected; all humanity is dead in trespasses and sin. Man is unable to save himself.
2. U stands for Unconditional Election. Because man is dead in sin, he is unable to respond to God; therefore, in eternity past God elected certain people to Salvation. Election and Predestination are unconditional; they are not based on man’s response.
3. L is for Limited Atonement. Because God determined that certain ones should be saved as a result of God’s unconditional election, He determined that Christ should die for the elect. All whom God has elected and Christ died for will be saved.

4. I is for Irresistible Grace. Those whom God elected and Christ died for, God draws to himself through irresistible grace. God makes man willing to come to Him, when God calls, man responds.
5. P is for Perseverance of the Saints. The precise ones God has elected and drawn to Himself through the Holy Spirit will persevere in faith. None whom God has elected will be lost; they are eternally secure.

Rather than confusion or disappointment with God's process of election, Paul is instead filled with gratitude and praise to God for making, as an example, the Christians in Thessalonica the objects of His mercy. "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you...knowing brethren beloved by God, His choice of you..."(1 Thess. 1:4). Viewed in this way, the doctrine of election does increase praise in gratitude to God for our salvation and reduces any pride we might feel.

Rather than diminish our desire to spread the Gospel and see people accept Christ, the impulse to share our faith is actually increased. Paul endured great suffering and never gave up because the ultimate success of the endeavor rested with God. He boldly stated: "I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory."(2 Timothy 2:10) God Himself exhibits great personal concern for His creatures. He speaks eloquently to this point through the prophet Ezekiel. "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 35:11) God encouraged Paul to continue to spread the gospel in the book of Acts because, he says: "Do not be afraid but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you; for I have many people in this city". Paul was so concerned that he stayed for a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." (Acts 18:11). Paul was convinced if he didn't preach the Gospel, others would not be saved. "But how are men to call upon Him in whom they have not believed! And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" ... So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. Paul was so committed that he knew he must "endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain Salvation in Christ Jesus with it's eternal weight of glory." (2 Tim. 2:10)

The chief emphasis of the Reformed or Calvinistic position regarding election is on the sovereignty of God. It differs from Arminianism (about which more will be said later!) which tends to place the emphasis on God's foreknowledge, through his omniscience(all-knowing), of what we will do after we are born.

One of the key scriptural passages central to the matter concerns God's choice of Jacob (Israel) as the object of His blessing:

"Though they were not yet born and had done nothing good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but

because of his call, she was told, 'The elder will serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' " (Romans 9:11-13)
Nothing that Jacob or Esau would or would not do once they were alive had any bearing on God's choice; the chief issue was the furthermore of God's purpose of election.

The statement that God "hated" Esau (even before he was born!) has caused many people to question God's fairness. There are two views: (1) God did not exhibit the negative passion of hatred toward him, but withheld redemptive love, and (2) God did hate Esau because there was nothing in him to love.

The other pertinent passage concerns God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in his dealing with his Hebrew slaves in Egypt. The scripture says repeatedly "Pharaoh hardened his heart" and finally says, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart". God allowed Pharaoh to finally follow his heart's inclination so that God's power and glory may be made manifest. Martin Luther purports that God did not create fresh evil in Pharaoh's heart. There was already enough evil present in Pharaoh's heart to incline him to resist the will of God at every turn. Sproul concludes, "All God ever has to do to harden anybody is to remove His retraining grace from them and give them over to their own evil impulses. That is precisely what God does to the damned in hell. He abandons them to their own wickedness." A simple summation of this is that those who are not the elect receive God's justice, while the elect are the recipients of His mercy and grace. The country comedy star, Minnie Pearl, illustrates the difference clearly in her County Fair routine:

"I wuz at the Fair and a man took my picture with one of them new fangled Polaroid cameras and quick as a flash that there thing spit my picture out! I looked at it and said "Whoo-eee! That picture don't do me justice", and that feller said, "Lady, you don't need justice! What you need is mercy!"

God chose Jacob over Esau. It was a continuance of God's promise to Abraham in creating a mighty nation out of his seed. Esau's descendants, the Edomites, were the enemies of God's chosen people, Israel. We can only marvel at God's elect purposes. There is a little couplet that seems to sum it up:

"God chooses whom He uses.
How odd that God would choose the Jews!"

Some argue that God chooses (in His foreknowledge) us because He knows we will come to faith. That leaves the matter in our hands and we are seen as wise and moral enough to choose our own salvation. Faith becomes "a work" that we do. It is then not by grace through faith any longer and we would be inclined to "boast". It is based on God's sovereign good pleasure, that we cannot boast, but only be grateful for so wonderful a gift. Additionally, Eph. 1:5 says "he predestined us in

love to be his sons!" Not only is His gift of salvation gracious, it is done by the very quality which is the essence of God's nature – love!

There is a technicality that must be mentioned before moving forward because it forms part of a dispute within Reformed circles as to the logical order of God's thoughts regarding election. Did God first decide, (1) He would save some people and then allow sin into the world so he could save them from it or that (2) He would allow sin into the world and then save some people from it. It may seem like theological "hair splitting", but is a philosophical concern to some scholars. The former position is called superlapsarianism and the latter, infralapsarianism. The first means "before the fall" and the second, "after the fall".

Some argue against election because they contend unbelievers never had a chance to believe. But Jesus clearly states this is not so. To Jerusalem He says: "How often would I have gathered your children together And you would not!" (Matt. 23:37). He also said to the Jews who rejected him. "You refuse to come to me that you may have life." (John 5:40)

In Romans 9:18 Paul states that God "has mercy upon whomever He wills, and He hardens the heart of whomever He wills." He then gets to the heart of the "unfairness of God" objection by saying: "You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist His will?' (9:19) Paul then makes his supreme statement regarding God's unquestionable sovereignty:

"But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to it's molder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us who he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? (Rom. 9:20-24)

In stating this, Paul strikes at the heart of mankind's self-importance, which is very much apart of our fallen nature. It was Satan who hinted to Eve in the garden that we had the potential to "be as gods" and that thought is certainly in concert with challenging the thoughts and plans of the true Lord of creation and salvation.

One last idea which has been termed "double predestination" concerns the thought that God not only predestines the saved to Heaven, He also predestines the Lost to Hell. There are two views here also: (1) The positive – positive stance teaches that God positively ensures the elect receive grace in their hearts which brings them to faith and He positively works evil in the hearts of the reprobate and actively prevents them from coming to faith. This is called "hyper-Calvinism" which exceeds the teachings of Calvin, Luther, and the other theologians of the Reformation. View (2) is the Reformed view and it follows a positive – negative line

of reasoning. God acts to positively work grace in the hearts of the elect and save them, but in the case of the reprobate; He does not work evil to prevent their coming to faith. Instead He passively (negatively) passes over them and leaves them to their own sinful destruction. Pharaoh again is the prime example.

III. **Arminian Theology:** “I Did It My Way”

The Frank Sinatra classic, “My Way”, could more aptly be applied to those who totally reject Christ and exalt self, but in the sense of emphasizing the part man plays in salvation and the minimizing of God’s sovereign grace, it could also harmonize with the Arminian view of election. (N.B. it is Arminian and not Armenian!) Arminianism refers to the theological system espoused by Jacobus (James) Arminius (1560 – 1609) and those who followed his principles. The views are contained in the “Remonstrance” which was produced the year after his death as a reaction to strict Calvinism as practiced in the Netherlands.

The issues raised in the discussion of Calvinism and Reformed theology are the same elements under consideration here, so it will be expedient to mention just the basic differences.

Armenian theology holds that:

1. Election is conditional based on God’s foreknowledge.
2. God’s grace can be resisted
3. Christ’s atonement was universal, not just for the elect.
4. Man has a free will and through prevenient grace can co-operate with God in salvation.
5. The believer may lose his salvation

Generally, Arminian Theology is espoused by Methodism, Wesleyanism, members of the Holiness movement, many charismatics, and others such as Free Will Baptists.

The term “prevenient grace” is the “preparing” grace of God that is dispensed to all, enabling a person to respond to the invitation of the gospel. Prevenient grace is the grace that “goes before” or prepares the soul for entrance into the initial state of salvation. It is the work of the Holy Spirit exercised toward helpless sinners.

The “My Way” approach stresses the free will of man in choosing salvation and the doctrine states that the “free will” is intact after salvation and can make choices that will cause the believer to lose his salvation. It flies in the face of the idea of the eternal security of the believer or the perseverance of the saints.

IV. **Conclusion:** “Tell It To The Judge”

It has been stated that the doctrine of election finds it’s safest haven in the loving plans of a Sovereign God, not in the whims of mankind. He has infinite love,

concern, and interest in all of His creatures. It is worth repeating the words of Ezekiel at this point: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11)

Jesus invitation is universal: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28)

The Bible closes out with an appeal for those who will only hear and respond: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come': and let him who hears say, 'Come': and let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price." (Rev. 22:17). The other side of the coin regards those who refuse to come to him: "Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." (John 5:40)

Consideration of this difficult doctrine should remind us again that He is the potter and we are the clay. When Abraham was pleading with God for Lot and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah he said, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" Before we rush to accuse God of unfairness, we had best remember He is the Sovereign Lord of all creation and it is His right and privilege to save no one if He so chooses.

Some have thought this negates evangelism, but the Apostle Paul worked tirelessly in partnership with God to make sure the elect heard the Gospel and were saved and he suffered mightily because of it. The burden is still on us. Perhaps Dr. Young said it best: "I just keep on nominating them and let God do the electing!"

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