



THE CHOICE

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 1:4-6
Second Message
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In the opening verses of Ephesians 1, the apostle Paul documents the richness of the blessings that Christians possess in Christ Jesus. Summarizing these in a Hebrew blessing, Paul says, in verse 3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ...” In verses 4-14, the apostle goes on to give the specifics of these blessings. Here we learn that the blessings intimately join Christians in four relationships: the work of the Father (who chose us), the Son (who redeemed us), the apostles (who teach us), and the Holy Spirit (who seals us). And these blessings encompass all of history (even before the Big Bang!) They began in eternity past, they encompass all of world history, and they stretch into eternity future.

Today we will take the first of these blessings, which we find in Paul’s words, “the Father who chose us.” The grand doctrine of election, when it is properly taught and understood, has brought forth great awakenings in the church and elicited a quality of holiness rarely achieved in ordinary times. This was evident in the ministries of John Calvin during the Reformation in Geneva; in the work of Jonathan Edwards in the Great Awakening in New England; in the ministry of the English Puritans; in George Whitefield’s ministry both in England and the United States; in the preaching of Charles Spurgeon during the last century in England; in the ministry of Martyn Lloyd-Jones in our day; and, of course, in the work of our own Ray Stedman. In Edinburgh last month, I visited the home of John Knox, the 16th century Reformer. When the great man lay dying in 1572, his wife was reading to him the book that was most precious to him — John Calvin’s 48 sermons on Ephesians. These were the texts that brought assurance and peace to his soul.

Since the age of the Enlightenment at the turn of 19th century, however, the doctrine of election has fallen into disrepute. The fact that God reserves the right to make choices is anathema to modern man. Will Durant, in his book on the Reformation from his and his wife Ariel’s famous work on world history, called the doctrine of predestination “the most hellish of all doctrines.” That opinion is commonly held today. When a Christian friend of mine appeared on the Donohue TV talk show to discuss Christianity and politics, the host vented his rage over the fact that Christians believe that God made a selection of Christ as the one way to salvation, thus by implication, he charged, damning millions of innocent people to hell.

Don’t you find it intriguing that today, the very freedom that modern man denies God he vehemently claims for himself when it comes to his own personal choices? Take ethics, for example. Man vociferously upholds his right of sovereign choice in the matter of ethics. He will allow none to interfere — and most of the world will defend the freedom that he claims. The world comes on with irresistible force and, like the Philistine armies who intimidated the armies of Israel long ago in the valley of Elah, tries to intimidate all who dare to raise their voices against it.

So here we are, almost on the eve of a Presidential election, studying the doctrine of election. In my study last week I was surprised to learn that God is pro-choice! But then I was even more surprised to discover that man does not have a clue as to what “pro-choice” means.

Let’s start by reading our text, verses 4-6 of Ephesians 1. To give us the context, I will begin by reading at verse 3:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I. The limitations of God’s choice (1:4a)

Here we have the beginning of God’s choice. First, I will define what the word “choose” means, and take you through the history of God’s choice that leads to this text.

Verse 4 says that “He [God the Father] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world...”

(a) Choice implies individual selection

The Greek word for “choose” means “to select out for oneself.” In other words, God made a choice to select some people to have a relationship with him. This immediately raises an objection. People say, “How can God select some but not others? Isn’t he condemning innocent people to hell?” If this is your objection, all you are doing is revealing your ignorance of the whole of Scripture. When God chooses to select someone to enjoy a relationship with, he does not do so to punish others but rather to bless them. Why? It is because the selection of one is designed to lead to the blessing of many. And secondly, God’s choices function in order to bring life and salvation to man — after man has already chosen hell for himself by his own free choices. We can say with certainty therefore that God’s choices always lead to life, never to death.

The crowning point of man’s dignity is that, like God, he is given the right to choose. The tragedy is that, even under the best of conditions, man chooses death rather than life, and his choices lead to establishing a hell on earth. But God offers life through grace. He comes down to clean up the mess that man has made for himself.

Let’s look at some biblical examples of this. In the Tower of Babel, man made his assertion against God, and God responded by dispersing mankind throughout the earth to live in idolatry and sin. Yet by grace God selected Abram out of that number. He told the patriarch, “I will make you a great nation and in you

all nations will be blessed.” God made a selection, and the nation of Israel was born. But Israel soon became as corrupt as every other nation. God responded to her idolatry by making another choice, instituting the office of prophet to overcome the corruption in Israel. God selected one tribe, Ephraim; and from that tribe one family line, Elihu; then one couple, Elkanah and Hannah (a barren woman), who at last became pregnant and gave birth to a child, Samuel, the first prophet of Israel. God made a selection to bring life back to the nation. Then when he wanted to establish a monarchy in Israel, God selected one tribe, the line of Judah; one family, Jesse; one son, David, the youngest and most insignificant of all the sons of his family. But even the monarchy went on to choose idolatry and hell, so the nation went into captivity in Babylon. But then God made another choice of a tiny remnant whom he restored to the land, and from that remnant sprang the Messiah, God’s choice to bring restoration and life to many.

When we come to the New Testament, we find Judaism corrupted by the different sects — the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Scribes, etc. But God did not begin his work of redemption by making a political appeal to the religious lobbyists or to the zealous masses to revolt. On a very special day, the Day of Atonement, God made a selection of a family from the tribe of Levi, and from that one family chose one man, Zacharias, to meet with the one God on this, the one day of the year when the priest could enter the Holy of Holies. To this one priest would be born John the Baptist, the last prophet. And John was the one who anointed the last King of Israel, the Messiah, who would bring life to all the nations.

Then when the Messiah at last was born, he did not set about establishing his kingdom by traveling around from tribe to tribe, making speeches and taking opinion polls, courting the movers and shakers to gain popular support. Instead, he chose for himself twelve men who would be his apostles. And all of these were selected individually. (Paul, the last of the apostles, was added to this group at the end.) These men were not selected to bring life to themselves, but rather to pour out their lives in order to bring life to the nations.

There is something intensely personal about the way God establishes his kingdom through personal selection, isn’t there? His kingdom is built on intimacy of relationship, not on impersonal doctrines or organizations. God is not ashamed to say that he selected you with the same kind of intimacy that he had in mind when he chose Rebekah in the OT. He chose you for himself to have an intimate relationship with you in order to bring life to many.

A choice, by definition, is self-limiting. By his choice, God limits himself in order to be intimate with his choice. We have an excellent illustration of this here in our own church. When God wanted to unite our church with the church in Romania, he did not create a huge mission organization with scores of officials, delegates and massive budgets. God selected one man from our church and one woman from the church there to come together in the intimacy of marriage and set up their home in the obscure village of Simbatin in Romania.

So choice means limitation, but limitation brings intimacy. While man invariably chooses death, however, God’s choices are designed to bring life. People will always choose hell of their own free will, not because God chooses hell for them.

(b) Choice implies forethought

If you ask, “When did God choose me?” the startling answer

from our text is, “*before the foundation of the world.*” These words, “before the foundation of the world,” are used just three times in the NT.

- “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world”
(1 Pet. 1:20)
- “You loved me before the foundation of the world”
(Jn. 17:24)
- “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”
(Eph. 1:4)

We are not told much in scripture of what went on before creation, but in these verses we learn three things. First, we are told that Christ “was foreknown before the foundation of the world.” Secondly, we learn that God the Father loved Christ before the foundation of the world. Christ was, and Christ was loved. But there was a third thing: there was you and me — “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.”

So, first, choice implies limitation, which leads to intimacy; and second, choice implies forethought.

Perhaps I can illustrate. A year ago, my 10-year-old daughter decided that on this Halloween she wanted to dress up as the Energizer bunny. Last week she saw her dream realized as the costume took shape in our living room. Someone had forethought and prepared to make her a gift. Here is another example. In Romania this year I was let in on a secret. During Ceausescu’s reign of terror, a brother named John had a dream about the map of Romania. On that map an arrow went from the village of Simbatin to the city of Simaria (where many of our close brothers live), and then the arrow travelled clear across the ocean to California. John never understood the dream, he said, until we arrived in a bus and met him in Simaria in 1988. I was humbled to think that God foreknew that our church would be blessed by having a relationship established between his Romanian family and us. That is what God’s choice does for us. He thought about us and planned for us before eternity.

So choice implies forethought.

There is a third thing.

(c) Choice implies commitment

Once God makes a choice, unlike man, he never aborts his choice. An archaeological dig in Phoenicia has uncovered thousands of urns, each one bearing the name and age of a child, and the cause of death. “Bad harvest” was the reason given for most of the children’s deaths. Apparently thousands of children were put to death to appease the gods for bad harvests. Parents were making choices to have children, and then placing them in the fire so that they themselves might have a better life. In other instances children were tossed over the city wall during a siege, also to appease the gods. The Jews picked up these practices and began to sacrifice their children in the valley of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem. But God pronounced judgment on that valley, renaming it “the valley of burning.” In the NT, this valley became the eternal, burning garbage dump of Jerusalem. It was renamed Gehenna, a euphemism for hell.

Man uses his freedom to abort his choices, sacrificing the innocent, and creating a hell on earth.

As we have seen, God does not abort his choices, but you may be surprised to learn that he once contemplated abortion — not of innocent children, but of obstinate adults who were deserving of judgment. We read of this in Exodus 32 where God said to Moses: “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obsti-

nate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them; and I will make you a great nation” (Ex. 32:9-10). Then Moses said to God: “Turn from Thy burning anger...Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants to whom Thou didst swear by Thyself, and didst say to them, ‘I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your seed, and they shall inherit it forever’” (Ex. 32:12-13). This is a revelation of what goes on in the heart of God. He was horrified by what was happening, yet he remembered the oath he had made. God had already made a choice, and he could not deviate from what he had already chosen because he never aborts his choices.

We learn how true this is when we study the genealogy of Christ in the NT. In Matthew’s gospel there are listed four women of questionable background: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Look at the histories of these women. Tamar played the role of a harlot to manipulate her father-in-law, Judah, to have sex with her in order to carry on the line of her dead husband; Rahab was a former prostitute; Ruth was a foreigner; Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, committed adultery with David. But neither incest, prostitution, alien blood nor adultery could deter God from following through on his choice for the lineage of Jesus the Messiah.

God is pro-choice, and he submits to all the limitations inherent in his choices until he accomplishes what he set out to do in Christ, which is to bring blessing and life to many.

So freedom of choice means selection, limitation and commitment. Without these there is neither intimacy nor life.

Next we come to the second objection to God’s election in Christ. Some say, “If we are predestined, then everything in our lives is pre-determined and there is no freedom left, is there?” But this is not at all what the doctrine of predestination means.

II. The freedom of God’s choice (1:5a)

In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself...

(a) Expansive freedom within limits

Predestined means “to mark off, fix or set beforehand.” From the Greek word for predestined we get the English word “horizon.” Predestination means that God determines the horizons of your life.

It is helpful to note that in the OT, this word for horizon has two meanings. In Numbers 30:3,4,5,7,8,9,12, it is used of vows. One took an oath to do something, thus putting himself under binding obligation to carry out what he had promised. Secondly, the word was used of the fixed borders of the tribal lands of Israel (Joshua 13:27; 15:12; 18:20; 23:24). Thus the tribe was given tremendous freedom to live out their lives, but within the borders of their territory.

So our election leads us to a new land where we are to live in tremendous freedom.

And what are the horizons or borders to our lives? Paul goes on to write of these.

(b) Unlimited freedom in relationship

We were “{adopted} as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself.” We were predestined to adoption. Through adoption, God placed us into himself with the full status of sons. Now in the OT, we know that the term “son of God” meant Messiah or king,

so Christians are not just any sons — we have the same status as Jesus the Messiah who reigns as King. This is freedom indeed.

When my wife and I adopted our daughter, although she had neither blood lines nor legal status, she was immediately granted the full rights of a family member. This is how God regards each one of us who is in Christ.

Amazing things happen when this truth at last comes home to the heart. I observed this with Eddie Folsom, one of the men who went to Romania with us earlier this year. At a worship service one evening, Eddie was holding a contented, sleeping child in his lap, and he began to weep quietly as he looked at the child. Seeing this, I asked him to give his testimony. He shared that he had never found his father’s love although he sought it diligently. As he was holding the child in his arms on that evening, however, he knew that the heavenly Father was saying to him, “This child is like you, Eddie. I care for you just as you care for this little child. Give me your full weight. I love you.” He had found his Father’s love.

This is the horizon of the Christian’s life. We have been predestined for adoption as sons. We have expansive freedom, within limits, and unlimited freedom in relationship.

So God exercises his freedom of choice, and submits himself to the limitations of that choice so as to bring freedom to others.

What was the motive behind God’s action?

III. The motive of God’s choice (1:5b)

In love he predestined us...according to the good pleasure of His will...in the Beloved.

Some say that God was obligated to choose us because he foresaw that we would come to faith in Christ. The reality, however, is that Christ died for us, “according to the good pleasure of His will,” for if it were left up to us, not one of us in our free will would have responded. Even our faith was a gift. We would be doomed to hell if it were up to us to initiate our own salvation. God saved you because, before the foundation of the earth, he delighted in you.

“Good pleasure” is a powerful expression. It means that the inner longing and delight of God was to grant goodness to men. And that delight in his heart is so strong that it is the driving force of world history.

I will illustrate this from the book of Isaiah, from Luke’s gospel, and from the epistle to the Philippians. In Isaiah, God said to Israel,

“It will no longer be said to you, ‘Forsaken,’
Nor to your land will it any longer be said, ‘Desolate’;
But you will be called, ‘My *delight* is in her,’
And your land, ‘Married’:
For the LORD *delights* in you,
And to Him your land will be married.” (Is. 62:4)

This “delight” would change Israel’s history.

When Messiah was born, the angels sang, “on earth peace among men with whom He is *pleased*” (Luke 2:14). God’s delight was coming to pass. In Philippians, Paul wrote, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His *good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:13). God did this because he delighted in us. Our response should be to work for what delights him.

When you see how much God delights in you, your heart will be so affected that you will begin to make choices and act like God. Over the past several years in my travels to Romania, I

have taken great delight in selecting two little girls to love. I take them gifts when I go there, and I make sure they are with us during the conferences. The last time I was there I was holding one of them in my arms as we were singing outdoors. Her mother asked me why I love her daughter so much. I told her I didn't know why, that I just delighted in loving her! It is the same with God. He delights in us, capturing our hearts, then we begin to delight in his good pleasure and we select people to love and serve.

So we have the motive behind God's choice.

There is one last thing.

IV. The glory of God's choice (1:4b, 6)

(a) Purpose of his choice: Holiness

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.

The elect are "holy and blameless" before God. God elected you and he delights in you so that when you stand before him, in his eyes you will be morally perfect, without blemish. How can this be? It is because on that day you will be wholly his. He will own you fully. While we are on earth there will be areas in our lives where we struggle, where we are not fully his, but on that day we will be wholly God's, a trophy to his grace.

(b) The culmination of his choice: A trophy of God's grace

In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In the National Art Gallery in London recently, I found that my favorite room was the Rembrandt room. In his paintings, Rembrandt used the technique called chiaroscuro — arranging light and dark elements in his masterpieces and thereby transforming ordinary individuals or common scenes of everyday life into glorious portrayals. This is what God is going to do for Christians. There will be no cheap reproductions in his trophy room. The world will wonder at the lavishness of his grace upon grace as it is made visible in the saints.

So that is God's choice. Man might lay claim to be pro-choice, but how different is God's choice from man's! When God makes his choice, he limits himself so as to develop intimacy with the one. When man asserts his freedom of choice, on the

other hand, he deprives many of their intimacy so that the one might have pleasure. God's choice begins with selection of the one, but it leads to the blessing of life for the many. Man shuns the commitment to the one, leading to the destruction of the many. God's choice is conceived in love, birthed through pain, nurtured in devotion, crowned with glory. Man's choices are conceived in lust, birthed in pleasure, and abandoned on the streets.

V. What to do with our choice

What should Christians do when the world insists on flaunting its freedom of choice which, as we have seen, is really a perversion of the true dignity that God has bestowed upon us? What do we do when the world is in fact choosing hell and telling the church to go to hell when it dares to intervene? Let me suggest two things. First, before you do anything, be still and become lost in the love of God. You are worthless to this dying world unless you possess the love of God in the depth of your soul. Rejoice in God's selection of you from eternity past. God thought of you, cared for you, and sealed you. You are his delight. Become lost in that. May you experience the humbling, the joy and appreciation that my friend learned in Romania as he held that child in his arms.

And second, be God-like in your choices. Don't panic in the face of this battle over choice that is being fought throughout our nation today. Saul's army panicked when they saw the weapons of the Philistines. They had never seen armaments like that before and they became paralyzed with fear in the face of them. But then God selected one man, David, to fight the Philistine giant, Goliath, on behalf of the nation. Saul offered David his own armor, the weapons of the flesh, to assist him in his coming battle with the champion, but David refused. The Israelites had never seen weapons of iron, but the Philistine had never seen a slingshot. By redefining the battle and fighting as a civilian, not a warrior, David defeated Goliath.

So in the moral battles that we face today my advice is, don't shout at people from a distance or hide behind a group carrying slogans because you fear intimacy. Go down to the valley and choose someone to love. I am convinced that behind the enemy ranks there are hundreds and thousands of folk who are ready to admit that their choices have led them to a hell on earth. They are just waiting for someone to come down into the valley and talk to them and rescue them from their choices. God has made his choice; may we now make ours. Amen.

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