

Sermon – 13/01/2008 pm

Chosen by God

Study Text: Ephesians 1:4

After a brief introduction and greeting Paul breaks into a doxology as he writes this letter to the Ephesians. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1:3). Why does he bless God in this way? He does so as he remembers all the spiritual blessings that are his in Christ.

Paul was once a proud Pharisee, a strict keeper of the law and a man fully confident in his own righteousness. Paul not only kept the law himself, he was making sure others did also. Paul considered himself better than most other men. He even considered himself blameless with regard to righteousness which is in the law (Philippians 3:6). Such a man had no need to bless God for his righteousness was his own.

Paul's view of himself and his position before God totally changed when he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. He was not at that time searching for meaning in life. He did not at that time consider himself lost. He was busy hunting down Christians. He was persecuting Jesus. He was an enemy of Christ and the church.

What made Paul become a follower of Jesus? Paul could never say 'I thought about Jesus and decided to give my life to him'. He had to admit that it was Jesus who made the first move. It was Jesus who literally stopped him in his tracks. He had to further admit that nothing he had done made him deserving of such mercy.

It was Jesus alone, who by his resurrection power, irrevocably turned Paul around. From enemy of Jesus he became friend and servant. Paul understood from this experience, as well as from Scripture and from the teaching of Jesus, that this salvation and the salvation of all, is by the power of God from beginning to end.

Chosen

He (God) chose us in him (Christ) before the foundation of the world (1:4). What a majestic declaration! Do you believe that God chose you to be his child before you were born, and even before he created this world? In other places we read *before time began* (II Timothy 1:9). We struggle to comprehend such truth – indeed many do not believe this truth. They say that they chose God, but here we read that God chose us. They say they chose God after they had considered all the evidence, but here we read God chose us before we even gave him a thought, before the foundation of the world.

'God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being'. So we are instructed from the Shorter Catechism. God is sovereign in creation. He made this universe out of nothing, and without your help or mine. God is sovereign in redemption. He chose us before we were born into this world, to be holy and blameless before him. God is omnipotent and he has planned and purposed all things in your life for the praise of his glory.

This doctrine of sovereign election is not just Paul's idea. It was seen and understood by Abraham, by Moses and supremely by Jesus. Abraham was living with his father and worshipping other gods when the Lord God told him to 'get out of this land and go to a new land that I will show you'. God chose Abraham and promised to bless him and give him an inheritance.

The children of Israel were chosen by God to be his own special people, not because they were more numerous than any other people but because he set his love on them (Deuteronomy 7:7). In prayer Jesus said his disciples were given to him by the Father – out of this world (John 17:6). He said *no one can come to me unless the Father draws him* (John 6:44). The only way anyone can come to Jesus is if they are chosen by God – chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. This is the truth Paul explains here in this passage.

To Be Holy

Chosen to *be holy and without blame before him in love* (1:4). Why did God choose us to be his children? Why did he choose us to be in this special relationship with himself? He chose us in love. He set his love upon us just as he did the children of Israel. It was all of grace. *God who is rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us* (2:4).

It is not clear in the Greek whether the words 'in love' belong to this verse or the next – this doxology is one long sentence in Greek. Many translations begin the next verse with 'in love'. But we can understand 'in love' in the context of this verse – he chose us in love.

God is holy. He is wholly other. God is not part creation; he is not part of this fallen world. God made this world. He made man and gave him life. Man was made holy and fellowshiped with God in the Garden of Eden. That was until he sinned by disobeying God's one command. *Your sin has separated you from your God* said the prophet (Isaiah 59:2). God remains forever holy but man fell into sin and unholiness.

For man to be brought back into relationship with God he must first be made holy – because God is holy. Think of light and darkness. God is light and he cannot have any darkness in his presence (John 1:5). So bright is the light of his glory that it dispels all darkness. *God called you out of darkness into his wonderful light; who were not a people but are now the people of God* (I Peter 2:8-9). Peter refers to the people of God as a holy nation.

The children of Israel were chosen to be a holy people to the Lord their God. God brought them into an intimate and exclusive relationship with himself. They were to worship only God. They were to walk in obedience to the Lord, not as a burden but out of love. God set his love on them. All he asked was that they love him and obey him. The whole purpose of the law he gave them was to keep his people holy unto God.

Paul speaks of the church in much the same way. But holiness for the Christian is not a matter of keeping the law as it was for the Jew – it a matter of being in Christ. Jesus *loved the church and gave himself for her that he might sanctify and cleanse her...and present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish* (5:26-27). Note that the word 'sanctify', is from the same root as 'holy' in the Greek.

Christ loves us and in him we are made holy. Apart from Christ we have no holiness. It is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us that makes us holy and acceptable to God.

Without Blemish

Finally we have this word 'blame' – *holy and without blame* (1:4). It is the same word translated as blemish in 5:27. Holy and without blemish is what Jesus makes the church, which is his bride.

Whenever the Israelites sacrificed an animal it had to be whole and without blemish. The Lord would not accept blind or lame animals as a sacrifice (Malachi 1). God is holy and the sacrifice must be holy and without blemish. Jesus offered himself as a lamb without blemish or spot (I Peter 1:19). What does this mean? It means Jesus was without sin. Sin is a blemish on our souls. Because of this God rejects us. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us of this sin.

What does Jesus do for the church, the people of God? He sanctifies and *cleanses her with the washing of water by the word* (5:26). We will see the work of Christ a little later in this doxology. What we have seen in verse 4 is that God the Father chose us that we should be holy and without blame before him. How he did this is seen in the Cross of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Because the law is not mentioned in this passage do not think for a moment that Paul is advocating or even allowing the possibility of antinomianism, or lawless living. *The law is holy, and the commandment holy just and good* (Romans 7:12). But the law has no power to make us holy. Only the blood of Christ has such power.

Being made holy in Christ is no licence to sin. Such thinking denies the very essence of holiness in Christ. Those whom God has chosen and set apart in Christ he will keep forever to the praise of his glory – even if it means admonition and discipline from time to time (Hebrews 12).

'God who has chosen you to holiness will make you holy, and if the preaching of the gospel does not do so, God has other means and methods. He may strike you down with illness; he may ruin your business. God will make you holy because he has chosen you unto holiness' (Martin Lloyd-Jones).

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