

1 Thessalonians 1 (4) – Election and Predestination

Well, you heard our subject for today. And when someone mentions election, and predestination, these are words that produce a lot of different reactions. Some people will be excited. Others will be bored. And maybe a lot of people will be confused. What is this? Why are so many people so divided by these issues? And why are we talking about this today?

We are talking about this today because this is what our biblical text is talking about today. And election and predestination are talked about all over the Bible. You can't really avoid it. And really, no one does. Every Christian who knows their Bible knows that election and predestination are biblical truths. And denominations and groups must say what they believe about these truths. So, they have statements that reflect their beliefs about these truths. And here we are, in our text. Paul mentions God's sovereign choice. He says, *"For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you."*

Why did Paul choose to speak about God's choice right here, near the beginning of his letter? It's because Paul wanted to remind the Thessalonians, who were new converts, and who were under heavy burdens, that their security was in God.

You need to be reminded of this, too. Election and predestination are not mere academic propositions for the professional theologians to ponder and debate. They are not dry and dusty old doctrines that don't really matter. They are not inaccessible, and unnecessary things you can just ignore. Election and predestination are essential, encouraging, and exciting truths to be understood, savored, and counted on as bedrocks of our faith. They can build your character and comfort your soul. They are an invitation to know God and his love for you. And they can increase your love for him.

Paul wanted to encourage the Thessalonian church. And there was no greater encouragement he could give than for him, an Apostle, to say he knew they were saved. This encouragement was no mere hope. This

assurance was based on evidence. Paul was convinced that God had chosen the Thessalonians as objects of his saving love. And he was going to tell them why he was convinced, and what this evidence was. Paul was convinced that they were chosen to be part of God's beloved family.

Paul didn't say, "I thank God because I know you decided to choose him," but rather, "I thank God because I know he decided to choose you." Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that being "chosen" is God's doing. Ephesians 1:4-5 says – *even 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 for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.* Theologically we call this the doctrine of unconditional election. And we will look at Ephesians 1 some more later in our message today.

God's election of individuals is a frequent theme in Scripture. God chose Abram, who was an individual idolater, out of a city of idolaters. He didn't choose Abram's entire city or even his entire family. God chose Abram, but then he refused to choose Abram's first son, Ishmael, and instead chose his other son, Isaac. And God rejected Isaac's first son, Esau, and chose his second son, Jacob, whom he renamed Israel.

And election is pictured in God's choice of Israel. God chose the nation as a people for himself. And the New Testament teaches us that this picture was a sign of how God has chosen people from every nation, tribe, and tongue to be his New Covenant people. 1 Peter 2:9-10 says – *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

The New Testament often refers to believers as being elect, or chosen by God, or similar statements. In your notes I have included more than 50 examples (Matthew 22:14, 24:22, 24, 31 / Luke 10:21-22, 18:7 / John 6:37, 44, 65, 10:26, 15:16, 17:2, 6, 9 / Acts 5:31, 9:15, 11:18, 13:48 / Romans 8:29, 30, 33, 9:11, 15, 16,

18, 11:5, 7, 28 / 1 Corinthians 1:27, 28, 30 / Galatians 1:15 / Ephesians 1:4-5, 11 / Philippians 1:29 / Colossians 3:12 / 1 Thessalonians 1:4 / 2 Thessalonians 2:13 / 2 Timothy 2:10 / Titus 1:1 / 1 Peter 1:1-2, 2:8-9 / 2 Peter 1:10 / Revelation 5:9, 7:10-12). This doctrine is important as to how you view God and the basis of your salvation and the basis of your assurance.

Unconditional election means that God elects (chooses) individuals for salvation based on his own secret desire, and not based on any merit within that individual. This is further explained as an assertion, and a denial. Unconditional election asserts that God elects us for salvation. And unconditional election denies that this choice is based on our works or because God in the past foresaw our faith in the future.

The claim that God graciously chooses us for salvation is uncontroversial among Christians in general. The Bible is clear that God chooses kings for office, nations for service, and sinners for salvation. And the terms “elect,” “chosen,” “foreordained,” and “predestined” are firmly rooted in the biblical text. The blessings of salvation only come to sinners by God’s choice.

And here’s the thing; everyone believes in election and predestination. Historically, every group of churches and every denomination that has formulated a doctrinal statement has also formulated some doctrine of election and predestination. Election is the action, and predestination means that the outcome was decided before the process began. Baptists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and so on and so forth, all have a doctrine of election and predestination. Everyone agrees these are biblical doctrines. But what they mean, and what is decided, is the issue.

The controversy between those who believe in unconditional election and those who don’t is not about the assertion that God elects some for salvation. Both sides of this debate agree on this. Rather, the controversy is about why. The controversy is over the denial that divine election is based on something in us, our works, or our faith in the future. A moment ago, we read, in Ephesians 1:4, that God chose us before the foundation of the world.

Everyone agrees with that. The question we need to answer is, “On what basis did God choose to save you before the foundation of the world?”

Why is this so important? Why do we so forcefully deny that election is conditioned upon something foreseen in us? Because we believe the Bible is clear on this matter. And if there were conditions that people must meet for God’s election, then salvation rests upon the person, and not on God. And that means that God *doesn’t* get the full praise for his glory.

Now, let’s turn to Ephesians 1:3-14. This passage shows us that God’s election of people to salvation does not require our fulfillment of certain conditions. God choosing a people for himself was accomplished before we were born, and before there was even a world (vs.4). God, uninfluenced and before creation, predetermined certain people to be saved. And every spiritual blessing attendant to salvation (vs.3), that being justification (vs.4), adoption (vs.5), redemption and forgiveness (vs.7), unity with God (vs.10), an eternal inheritance (vs.11), the seal of the Holy Spirit (vs.13), and the blessings of union with Christ (vs.6, 9), these were a predestined plan of God (vs.5, 8, 9, 11). The only condition for these blessings is the election of God. And this means that God *does* get the full praise for his glory (vs.6, 12, 14).

This doesn’t mean that what you do doesn’t matter. And it doesn’t mean that election is unrelated to your will or your efforts. It just means that election is not *based on* your will and your efforts. Let me show you that. Once again, looking back at Ephesians 1:4, Paul said that election is *unto* holiness (1:4), and *that* certainly involves your will and your efforts. So, our desires and our actions are quite important to God.

Let me give you another example. In Philippians 2:12, Paul said – work out your salvation with fear and trembling. So, they had something to do. But Paul made sure to tell them that our will and our work is ultimately due to God’s working in our lives, as he says in the next verse. Philippians 2:13 – for it is God working in you, both to will and work for his good pleasure. Unconditional election traces your will and your work back to the

eternal and gracious purpose of God in your life. Paul saw evidence of God's saving work in the lives of the Thessalonians. This is why Paul says, "*we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you.*"

Now I want to talk about the two main objections people have, and see if we can bring some clarity to the issues.

1 Peter 1:1-2 are appealed to by some who suggest that election is based on God's foreknowledge of certain events. Peter is speaking to those he says are the elect, *according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*. This argument says that this phrase, *the foreknowledge of God*, means that God looks into the future to see those who would believe if given the Gospel. And then God chooses those whom he sees choosing him. Again, this view says God elects a person because of the choice he knew they would make. But that really evades the whole point of election, because it makes the deciding choice the choice of the sinner, rather than the choice of God. Why would God need to elect someone who *was already* going to make the right choice? Or does God elect someone to *make sure* they make the right choice?

Christians have made the right choice. And it is a free choice. But it is not a choice that comes independently. You have free will in that you do what you want. However, you do not choose what to want. You act according to your desires. But your desires are naturally bent in a particular way. You are aimed in a certain direction and you do not naturally love God. Until God gives you a new nature. This is the point: Regeneration precedes faith. You weren't born again after you believed. You believed after you were born again. You exercise the faith that God has given to you. God doesn't make you believe; he makes you spiritually alive, that's why you believe.

If you made some choice of faith independent of God, then that faith would be a work of merit on your part. God would have seen something worthy in you that caused him to elect you. But that isn't true. God doesn't have to "look into the future", he already knows it, he has already ordained it. Otherwise, he isn't God. And "looking into the future" is not the biblical

meaning of “foreknowledge.” God’s foreknowledge refers to his establishment of a love relationship with that person (cf. Hosea 13:4-5 / Amos 3:1-2 / Romans 11:2). To see this clearly, compare 1 Peter 1:2 with 1 Peter 1:20, which says that Christ *was foreknown before the foundation of the world*. This doesn’t mean that the Father looked into the future to behold Christ; it means he had an eternal, loving relationship with him. God “foreknew” the elect. He loved them, before the foundation of the world.

So, the idea that God elects based on some notion of our future faith doesn’t give all the glory to God, and it isn’t true. But there is another objection that some people have. And it says unconditional election is true. But while it says that God does indeed elect unconditionally unto salvation, it says this election is not an individual election, but rather, a corporate election. And it appeals to Ephesians 1:3-14, like we do, agreeing that election is unconditional. But there is a twist. The idea is that we are elect, “in him” that is in Christ (vs.3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). In other words, Jesus Christ is the unconditionally elect one, and individuals are elected to salvation upon belief in Christ as they become a part of the corporate body of Christ.

So, in this view, God chose that those who would believe in Christ would be saved, but he didn’t choose those who would believe in Christ. He simply chose the “way of salvation,” that being Jesus, and predestined the “package” of every spiritual blessing attendant to salvation. Sounds like a solution, doesn’t it? And, as we said earlier, you do have a corporate election with the election of Israel. And so, this view says that Jesus is the elect, and when we believe in him, we receive the blessings and benefits of salvation, as we see in Ephesians 1:3-14. This view has increased in popularity, as people realize that unconditional election must be true, but they don’t want to surrender to the truth that God chooses some people and not others, based on nothing but his own will and purpose.

But here’s the thing about the election of Israel. Yes, God chose the nation as a people for himself. However, while some individuals within physical Israel were saved, not every person in physical Israel was saved. God chose some

with his Old Covenant people for salvation, but not all of them. As Romans 9:6 says, not all who are descended from physical Israel belong to spiritual Israel. The New Testament teaches that God has chosen individuals from every nation, tribe, and tongue to be his New Covenant people. Ephesians 1:3-14 does not teach a corporate election. It teaches that of his own will and purpose, God chose certain individuals to make up the body of Christ

We agree that God predestined the package of blessings given to the saved. And yes, the blessings of salvation are indeed all centered in Christ. That is what you see in Ephesians 1:3-14. Praise God for that. However, in corporate election, the ultimate choice of being saved is up to the individual. And that means that God gets less than the full praise for his glory (vs.6, 12, 14).

In Ephesians 1:3-14, our will and what we do with it is never mentioned as the basis of God's choice. Rather, Paul repeatedly draws our attention to God's will as the foundation of our salvation (vs.5, 9, 11). The notion that election is conditioned upon something in the creature runs contrary to the emphasis of this entire passage.

All of these "conditional" ideas make God less than God. The future isn't conditional; it is from our standpoint, but not from God's. God already knows what is going to happen. And that isn't because he sees all of time ahead of time. It is because he planned all of time before there ever was such a thing as time. If God has exhaustive knowledge, in other words, he knows all things, at all times, in all times, for all times, then in some sense he has ordained everything that will be. If God doesn't have exhaustive knowledge, you have a diminished god, which can't be God. That little god would be dependent on other things. And that isn't the truth. The truth is that everything else is dependent on God, not that God is dependent on them. And what God sovereignly decrees in eternity, man freely chooses in time.

God chooses people groups (such as the nation of Israel) for special purposes. But he also chooses individuals. Jesus called his twelve disciples individually, selecting them by name out of a larger group of followers, to

do a specific work. When it comes to the matter of personal salvation, God has chosen us as individuals. Notice 2 Thessalonians 2:13 – *“But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved.”* Here Paul says to the Thessalonian believers that God not only chose them for salvation, but he also chose them to be among the first to respond to the gospel. You cannot take that statement and make it a general and depersonalized “corporate” election.

Paul wanted to remind the Thessalonians, who were new converts, and who were under heavy burdens, that their security was in God. He was trying to encourage them that he knew God had started a work in them, and that what God starts, God finishes. John Stott, in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians, said *“The topic of election is nearly always introduced for a practical purpose, in order to foster assurance (not presumption), holiness (not moral apathy), humility (not pride) and witness (not lazy selfishness).”*

Election and predestination are essential, encouraging, and exciting truths to be understood, savored, and counted on as bedrocks of our faith. They can build your character and comfort your soul. They are an invitation to know God and his love for you. And they can increase your love for him.

Election and predestination are not something to be repulsed by, but something to rejoice in. God knows what he is doing, and he will do all his holy will. To the praise of his glorious grace. Amen.