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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 16.3 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

The Scriptural Basis for the Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

We have already learned from God's Word that it is impossible for any person to save themselves or to contribute anything towards their salvation. We have learned from God's Word that we are saved by God's grace alone through the redemption of Christ. We have learned from God's Word that it is the Holy Spirit who brings us to faith in Christ through the means of grace. The blessed doctrine that God chose us to be His before time began underscores and establishes these truths. This doctrine of God's election of grace in eternity (or predestination) is specifically taught in many Scripture passages and alluded to in many others. Let us now consider this doctrine that is intended to strengthen a Christian's faith and comfort him, especially in times of tribulation and temptation.

Already in the Old Testament God told His people of Israel that they did not deserve to be His people. God's choosing them was entirely a matter of His grace (His undeserved and unmerited love). As the people were about to enter the promised land of Canaan Moses addressed them: **"You are a holy people to the LORD your God: the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt"** (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). Notice that the reason God gives for His choosing them is that He loves them, and that He is determined to keep His promises to their fathers. There is nothing in them or about them that led God to choose them as His people instead of choosing some other nation or people. God loves because He loves; there is no other reason.

Later in the same address Moses said to them: **"Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them out (the peoples of Canaan) before you, saying, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land': but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people"** (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). God's choice (or election) of Israel as His people was entirely a matter of God's grace.

What was true of God's Old Testament people is also true of God's New Testament people, His Church, which is made up of those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. The congregation in Corinth was in danger of considering themselves better than others because of the many spiritual gifts they had been given. The apostle Paul therefore reminds them: **"Who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?"** (1 Corinthians 4:7). Believers are no better than others by nature. Whatever gifts they have are just that: gifts received from a gracious God. They have nothing to boast of or to be proud of except God's grace.

God's choice to bring these Corinthians and others to faith in Christ was entirely a matter of grace. Paul tells them: "**God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and sanctification and redemption – that, as it is written, 'He who glories, let him glory in the LORD'"** (1 Corinthians 1:27-31).

Why is it that at times almost all those who are called Christians go astray and yet there are some who remain faithful? This happened in Israel's Old Testament history time and time again. Most of the people fell into idolatry and other gross sins and forgot their God. Yet there were some who remained faithful. Were they better than the rest? Paul answers: "**Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace**" (Romans 11:5-6). The election of grace is entirely by grace; there is nothing in us that causes God to choose us.

There are two longer sections of Scripture that tell us almost all we need to know about God's election of grace. We consider first the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. After his brief introduction Paul writes: "**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved**" (Ephesians 1:3-6).

First of all, Paul praises God for the spiritual blessings God has given to the Christians in Ephesus. The Gospel of Christ had been brought to them and they accepted it. They now knew that God loved them and gave them a Savior from sin, and that their sins were forgiven. But then he tells them something very wonderful indeed. He tells them that these spiritual blessings they now enjoy in time were actually theirs already from eternity. God had chosen them to be His before the world was made, He had chosen them in eternity, and in His grace, He determined to give them a Savior and to bring them to faith in that Savior through the Gospel. God predestined them to be His adopted sons and daughters by faith in Christ Jesus. They are not being praised for these blessings, but God is being praised, because all of these blessings (whether in time or eternity) come because of God's grace and God's grace alone.

Paul continues: "**In Him (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things, according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory**" (Ephesians 1:7-12). We should not be praised for the fact that we trust in Christ because our faith is not something we produce. God must get all the praise, because what He planned in eternity for us in Christ He carried out in time, according to His good will and pleasure. He is the Giver; we are nothing but receivers.

The other long section in Scripture that deals with the election of grace is the 8th chapter of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. This chapter has to do with the sufferings and troubles that Christians endure in this life. Things sometimes get so confusing and troubling that we do not even know what to pray for. We begin to think that we are not going to be able to persevere in our faith, and we long for relief from the problems of life. In such situations Paul first reminds us of the presence of the Holy

Spirit within us who intercedes for us when we do not know what to pray for, and we can be sure His intercessions for us will be accepted.

Then Paul shows us the comfort and assurance that is ours in the doctrine of the election of grace (predestination). First he says: **“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose”** (Romans 8:28). He is talking about believers in Christ. They are the ones who love God because they know God first loved them. After all, God called them. That is, God brought the Good News of Christ to them. They learned that God loved them and sent His Son as the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world. Through the Gospel the Holy Spirit not only invited them to put their trust in Christ, but also persuaded and convinced them to believe it.

We have an example of how the Holy Spirit does His calling in the report of the work done by the apostle Paul in the book of Acts. When Paul came to Thessalonica he **“went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.’ And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas”** (Acts 17:2-4).

We read in Romans 8 that these who were persuaded were **“the called according to His purpose”**. This introduces the topic of predestination. For God’s eternal purpose was to call them to faith in Christ, and what He purposed in eternity He carried out in time. For Paul explains God’s purpose like this: **“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these he also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”** (Romans 8:29-31).

Paul speaks of five steps or stages: two before the calling and two after the calling. The called are those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Christ through the Gospel. Those who have been called should know that their calling is a result of two things that preceded their being called. The first is that God foreknew them or chose them in love before time began. The second is that God predestined them to be His children. Each individual Christian should say to himself: “I believe Jesus died for my sins. This means that God knew me from eternity and chose to bring me to faith in Christ. Not only did He foreknow me in love; He predestined me to be a member of His family of believers, who have the image of God being restored in them. Thus, God chose me to be a brother or sister of Christ Himself, a member of the holy family of God.”

The called should then realize that since God foreknew and predestined them from eternity to be His, God will continue to concern Himself with them in love and fulfill what He began. After being called, the Christian immediately receives the justification (the forgiveness) that Christ has provided for all sinners. We are declared righteous in the sight of God. This is true of every person who believes in Jesus. Everyone who is called by the Gospel is also declared righteous and has the forgiveness of sins. Then we should realize that since the first four steps have already taken place, the fifth one is inevitable, and we can count on it: **“These He also glorified.”** As far as God is concerned, it is already done. The glory of being children of God is already ours by faith, and the glory that is promised for the hereafter is a sure thing, no matter how many difficulties, problems, tragedies, and persecutions we have endured and must still endure before the full glory of eternal life arrives.

Listen to Paul’s concluding words in this chapter: **“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us”** (Romans 8:31-34). Those who believe in Jesus should know they are God’s elect, God’s chosen ones – God’s chosen ones from eternity.

This does not mean our life on earth will be easy. Paul himself was subjected to extreme persecution, and he knew the Christians in Rome would certainly experience many difficulties as well. But their knowledge that God predestined them in Christ would help sustain them to the end. So he asks: **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: ‘For Your sake we are killed all day long: we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 8:35-39).

After warning the Thessalonians about the coming Antichrist, the apostle Paul wrote to them: **“We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our Gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Notice how God carried out His choice to save them. He called them by the Gospel. He sent the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts so that they would believe the truth about Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

God wants everyone who has been called by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel to believe that they are one of the elect and to call themselves elect, God's chosen ones. The apostle Peter writes to all the Christians in his care: **“You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9). He addresses his readers as **“elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ”** (1 Peter 1:2).

The apostle Paul addresses the Christians in Colosse in the same way, calling them **“the elect of God, holy and beloved”** (Colossians 3:12). He uses the expression **“God’s elect”** in his letter to Titus (Titus 1:1). In his second letter to Timothy he writes: **“I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory”** (2 Timothy 2:10).

Jesus Himself used the same expression in His explanation of the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. If even the unjust judge finally helps a persistent widow who continually keeps asking him for help, **“Shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily”** (Luke 18:7-8). In speaking of the many tribulations to be endured when Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed, Jesus said: **“Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened. ... For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect”** (Matthew 24:22-24). God's chosen ones, His elect, will be preserved through all tribulations, for **“His angels ... will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”** (Matthew 24:31).

Because Jesus' sheep are safe in the hands of the Savior and His Father and are being preserved for the ultimate glory of heaven, we can say with Paul: **“Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body”** (Philippians 3:20-21). Since we are citizens of heaven, Paul urges us: **“Seek those things which are above. ... Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth”** (Colossians 3:1-2).

The patriarchs of old (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) already considered themselves **“strangers and pilgrims on the earth”** and were looking forward to **“a heavenly country”** (Hebrews 11:13, 16). And so we Christians, as citizens of heaven, have already **“come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just**

men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant” (Hebrews 12:22-24). Since the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel and made us spiritually alive, we can say already now that God has **“raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,”** but in **“the ages to come”** He will **“show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus”** (Ephesians 2:5-7).

Because of God’s election of grace which He carried out in time we can have the confidence of Paul and say: **“The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!”** (2 Timothy 4:18).

Questions

1. What is meant by the election of grace?
2. When did this election take place?
3. Why is it called the election of grace?
4. Why is it called predestination?
5. On what basis were the children of Israel chosen to be God's people?
6. What is the only thing we really have that we can boast about as Christians?
7. Which statements teach the election of grace in Ephesians?
8. Which is the central statement in Paul's list of five in Romans 8?
9. What should we conclude about the past if we have been called by the Gospel?
10. What should we conclude about the future if we have been called by the Gospel?
11. How does the Holy Spirit carry out our election on this earth in time?
12. Why should we call ourselves strangers and pilgrims on earth?