Praise the Lord who elects to save

Text: Ephesians 1:3-4

Occasion: baptism of a child

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 7:16-13; Ephesians 1:1-6

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 111, 469, 385, 440, 206, 89 part 1

Series: Ephesians (Sermon #2)

Theme: The Apostle Paul praises God for His sovereign election of His adopted children through Jesus Christ

Proposition: Praise the Lord for choosing His children in Christ so that they would be holy and blameless!

**Introduction**

We are moved to speak well of people we admire and respect. For example, a bride might say to her groom whom she loves: “*The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag*”. (Song of Solomon 2:8-9a). I am not sure if these particular words of praise have been spoken by any of the ladies of this church about their fiancé or husband! The bride in Song of Solomon spoke well of her beloved. She likened him to a graceful, powerful and agile antelope or deer. This is an example of praise, that is speaking well of a person you deeply admire and respect. This kind of praising is the meaning of the word ‘blessed’.

Here the Apostle Paul is expressing admiration and respect for the God the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we heard a couple of weeks ago, the first two verses of Ephesians are a gospel greeting from the Apostle Paul, a man who was himself a new creation in Christ to a community of people who had been transformed by the power of God’s grace in Christ. Paul bursts into praise as he brings to mind the admirable work of God in Christ. He speaks very well of the Lord as he writes: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”.* The ‘heavenly places’ here refers to the supernatural realm where God manifests his presence and glory. This is the place where the Lord Jesus Christ in His resurrected, ascended body dwells. The spiritual blessings for which praise is given to God flow out from Christ who dwells in the ‘heavenly places’. It is because of this that praise flows out from the Apostle Paul as he writes this letter.

Imagine a wife today, not perhaps comparing her husband to a gazelle or stag, but saying things like: “You always know exactly what to say”; “You’re an incredible Father”; “Can you help me fix this? I know you can!”; “You’re a great listener”; “It’s amazing how hard you work”; “You have such a good heart”; “You handled that really well”; “I really appreciated the way you took the lead”; “I feel so safe with you”

God is far more praiseworthy than the best of husbands, most admirable of wives or any other descendants of Adam, and Paul speaks very well of Him in verses 3-14. These 11 verses form a single continuous stream of rich words which in the original language is just one very long sequence. It’s very difficult to match that in English whilst keeping the words readable together, so our translations break this surge of praise into multiple sentences. Today we’re going to focus on the first portion from verses 3-4 under two headings:

1. God’s blessed choice in Christ
2. God’s prior purpose in Christ
3. **God’s blessed choice in Christ**

Can you fly like a bird? Do you always speak and do the good things you want to? Can you say with certainty what is going to happen tomorrow? Would you agree that the choices which people like you and I make are necessarily limited? What are some of the restrictions which we have on the choices we make?

1. We are limited by our **abilities**. You and I could choose to fly without the aid of any technology (e.g. airplane, jetpack, paraglider). However, we lack the bodily capability to do so.
2. We are also limited by the faults in our **own character**. For those of us who desire to fully obey the revealed will of God – His law – we find that we constantly fail because our sinful nature continues to adversely affect our thoughts, words and actions. The Apostle Paul expresses this reality when he writes to the Romans **“***For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing*” (7:19).
3. We are limited by our **lack of control of events**. You and I could choose to become the Prime Minister of New Zealand, but there are so many factors over which we have no authority. You might study political science and seek to work your way up through a political party, but you cannot guarantee to become PM because there are so many circumstances and situations outside your control.

However, God is not subject to these limitations as we creatures are. He is completely able. There’s a song which expresses this truth very simply: “My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do”. God is perfect in His character: in holiness, truth, justice, wisdom, love, faithfulness, mercy, kindness, patience, righteousness, and grace. As the psalmist declares “*You are good and do good*” (Psalm 119:68). God’s plans, purposes and actions are not limited by events, because He controls absolutely everything which takes place. Paul will express this truth in verse 11 of Ephesians 1, writing of God: “*who works all things according to the counsel of his will*” (Eph 1:11b). Jesus said of small birds that not one of them falls to the ground apart from the will of God (Matt 10:29).

God is so infinitely powerful that he is able to determine absolutely everything which takes place. He is always in full control of His creation. However, He exercises His authority over everything and everybody in such a way that He does not in any way violate the choices we make in life. He is never responsible for the things which we do, say and think against Him and against one another. He is completely blameless; whilst we are all blameworthy.

God is worthy of all praise, because He has decided to bless – that is to speak well of, and acts graciously towards – those who He has chosen in Christ. Paul writes: **“***Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world”.* The word ‘choose’ here in the original language is the term from which we derive our English word ‘elect’.

It is helpful to remember that, above all, Christ Jesus is God’s ‘chosen One’. God the Father declared this at the transfiguration (Luke 9:35). Jesus was chosen by God, but not in any way which violated Christ’s own will. He said of the daily pattern of his life: "*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work*” (John 4:34). He said of His coming execution at the cross when His life would end “*No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord*” (John 10:18).

The revealed truth of Scripture is clearly that God has made a choice to save all those who are in Christ and that He made this decision before ‘the foundation of the world’; that is before He created space and time. The choice of God before the creation of the universe in electing to save some people has been understood in these **two different ways**:

1. That God looks forward in time and sees who will make a choice to be saved and then bases His election on their decision. Some Christians see support for this view in the word ‘foreknew’ which comes before ‘predestined’ in Romans 8:29: ‘*those whom he foreknew he also predestined*’.
2. That God decided to save particular people before time began, not based on anything about them or their own decisions

Which of these two views is correct? To answer this question, we need to use a Biblical method of interpretation which is to use other Scriptures to illuminate the meaning of our text.

In Romans chapter 9, the Apostle Paul deals with the complaint which can come about God’s choice – “isn’t it unfair that God chooses so save some people, but not others?” In response Paul quotes from the Old Testament (Exo 33:19), where God says to Moses "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion*." (Romans 9:15). God reveals that He alone choses whom He will be merciful and compassionate towards. Paul expresses this truth in summarizing God’s work of election when he writes: “*So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy*” (Romans 9:16).

There is no human decision or human action upon which God’s decision to choose an individual person to save is based. God does not choose those who are attractive to Him, lovely, saintly and talented and for those reasons decides to save them. He sets His perfect affections upon some of those who rebel against Him. He determines to rescue them and to make them glorious.

We see this in His selection of the Israelites as His chosen people: “*It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery*” (Deut 7:7-8).

The primary action of God in election is revealed in other places in the New Testament including 2 Thess 2:13-14; 1 Peter 1:1-2; John 17:6. These other illuminating Scriptures then help us to rightly understand the ‘foreknowledge’ which Paul writes to the Romans about. It is true that the word ‘foreknowledge’ is used in the Bible to describe the truth that God perfectly knows the future in complete detail. However, it also has the sense of ‘knowing’ particular people. In Scripture to ‘know’ someone is to know them intimately. In Romans 8:29 this is the meaning.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is most worthy of all praise, admiration and respect because He chose us from before the foundation of the world. This divine election is not based upon anything we decide or do. When you come to faith in Christ, you do make a real ‘free-will decision’, however the ability to do so comes as a result of God’s prior decision to make a blessed choice to save you. This deep truth is beautifully expressed in the words of the hymn which we sang earlier “I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew – he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me; it was not I that found O Saviour true; no, I was found, was found of thee”.

Divine election is a profound reality which stretches the minds and hearts of finite human beings like you and me. The WCF 3.8 speaks of God’s sovereign choice to choose some to be saved in this way: *The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care…. this doctrine shall provide reason for praise, reverence, and admira­tion of God.*

Praise God for His blessed choice of a people for Himself in Christ. Praise theLord who chooses to love the unlovely! Praise God for His good reason for electing some to salvation…which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **God’s prior purpose in Christ**

Author John Green wrote (in ‘The Fault is in our Stars’) of a city in the Netherlands: “*Some tourists think Amsterdam is a city of sin, but in truth it is a city of freedom. And in freedom, most people find sin*.” There are many evidences of the brokenness of this world including violence, injustice, hatred, greed, environmental damage, sickness, and death. Freedom apart from Christ is no freedom at all, but bondage to sin.

The root cause of every single problem, trouble and difficulty in this world and in this life is sin. Sin is one of those words which occur frequently in the Bible (in 393 verses), but is not well understood by many people.

Pastor, preacher and author John Piper has said:

*Sin is the glory of God not honoured.
The holiness of God not reverenced.
The greatness of God not admired.
The power of God not praised.
The truth of God not sought.
The wisdom of God not esteemed.
The beauty of God not treasured.
The goodness of God not savoured.
The faithfulness of God not trusted.
The commandments of God not obeyed.
The justice of God not respected.
The wrath of God not feared.
The grace of God not cherished.
The presence of God not prised.
The person of God not loved.*

The church father Augustine said, “*My sin was this: That I looked for beauty, pleasure and truth, not in Him, but in myself and in His other creatures*.” Sin is exchanging the truth about God for a lie and worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25). Sin originates in the centre of a person’s being and deeply damages unto death the whole person: the workings of their mind, the decisions they make (the will), together with the affections and desires of the heart (Prov 4:23; Luke 6:45; Heb 3:12). Here is the ‘bottom line’: sin is bad, very bad. It results in death.

God is to be praised because in His grace and goodness He deals decisively with the massive sin problem. The **complete removal of sin** from those he chooses is the reason why God elects to save them in Christ. We see this in verse 4: *“he chose us in him before the foundation of the world,* ***that*** *we should be holy and blameless before him*”. The word ‘holy’ here refers to an **inward** state of perfect purity, ‘Blameless’ to an **outward** state of a perfectly pure lifestyle.

Remember the words of Jesus to the Scribes and Pharisees: “*You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness*” (Matt 23:27b-28)

God’s purpose in choosing particular people in Christ is not merely to make them appear outwardly moral, but to radically change them from the inside so their true outer blamelessness matches their inner holiness. God’s purpose is to restore His image in His children so that they are new creations ‘*created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*’ (Ephesians 4:24). God’s purpose is to make those He has chosen in Christ to be like Jesus who is glorious being ‘*full of grace and truth*’ (John 1:14). God fulfils His praiseworthy purpose in Christ. He does this by calling people to repentance and faith.

The means which God has chosen to do this is His Word proclaimed, from pulpits like this, spoken from the mouths of His children, and also read from the pages of His Scripture. The response of sinners like you and me to the voice of God ultimately determines whether we have been chosen by Him. If, having seen your sin, you truly desire to have it removed then you will turn to the only person who can help you by removing that sin: Jesus Christ. You will turn to him in faith, believing that He died in your place on a cruel cross at Calvary and that His perfect holiness and blamelessness before God has been gifted to you as though you were actually holy and blameless. You will then become fruitful, giving outward evidence of the effect of God’s supernatural work in your inward being.

Peter writes about the increase in outward ‘blamelessness’ when he writes about making every effort to supplement faith with knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love. In this way we ‘*make our calling and election sure*’ (1 Peter 2:10). James declares that ‘*faith apart from works is dead*’ (James 2:26). If our outward good behaviour matches our inner purity of heart, then this is evidence that our faith is real which can lead to greater personal assurance that we are elect.

Remember that there is absolutely no reason to be proud about being elect, only every reason to praise the *“God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”.* It is because election is **entirely** a work of God’s sovereign will to be merciful and compassionate to some people and is not dependent upon ‘*human will or exertion’* that ‘no one may boast’ of their faith or election in Christ (Eph 2:9). The WCF expresses this truth in these words (3:8): “*The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination … shall provide reason for…. humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all who sincerely obey the gospel*”.

Here is a question which the truth of God’s election of some to eternal life in Christ raises today: Has Katie Annabelle Dirkze (who has been baptised today as an infant) been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, so that she would be holy and blameless before him? Some people might think our answer as a church is ‘yes, definitely’ because she has been baptised today. This is **not** correct.

Her baptism does not mean that she has been chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Her baptism does not mean that she believes in Jesus Christ. Her baptism does not mean that she has spiritual life in Him. Her baptism is not some magical event that changes her.

But her baptism is a sign that God makes promises to be God to both believers and their children, as he did to Abraham (Gen 17:7). Her baptism is a confirmation that God always delivers on His promises. Her baptism symbolizes the reality that the children of a believing parent or parents are part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not know what God will do in Katie’s life, but we do have a hope and expectation, based on God’s promises, that He may be pleased to bring her to saving faith. We prayed for Katie and the other children in this church that God would ‘enable them to respond in faith to the gospel’. That ‘the Lord would fill them with His Spirit and make their lives fruitful’ (baptism of children form 2).

**Praise the Lord** for His great purpose in completely removing sin from His children so that they will one day be perfectly holy and blameless in a world where there will be no mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things will have passed away (Rev 21:4).

**Praise the Lord** for His admirable merciful election of some people to eternal life in Christ, not as a result of human will or exertion, but solely according to the counsel of His perfect divine will. “*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen*” (Romans 11:33-36).

AMEN.