**1 Thessalonians 1:4**

**Election—That Most Despised of Doctrines**

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***2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;***

* Last week we examined the first of three specific things that Paul expresses his thanks for in the opening chapter of his first letter to the Thessalonian church.
	+ In v. 3 Paul expresses his thanks to God for the manifestation of the three greatest Christian virtues in the lives of the Thessalonian believers . . . those three virtues being their ***work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope***.
* This morning we come to **the second** thing that Paul is thankful for in the lives of the Thessalonian believers, stated in v. 4 . . . ***knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you***.
* Last week I explained that Paul’s greeting in v. 1 . . . ***grace to you and peace*** . . . is a uniquely Pauline phrase. And as I stated last week, in that greeting we see **the transaction** and **the result** of receiving saving faith.
	+ The process of **salvation first begins** with **the divine transaction** of God when He first extends ***grace*** to us.
	+ Then, having received salvation by grace, we see **the result** . . . we are transformed from being in a state of enmity with God . . . His enemy . . . to a state in which we are at ***peace*** with God.
* The English word ***grace*** is translated from the Greek word *charis*, meaning “an unmerited gift or benefit granted.”
	+ In other words, **a grace gift is given solely at the discretion of the giver . . . the gift is not earned, merited or deserved in any way.**
	+ And being an unmerited and undeserved gift, the grace gift of salvation is not only granted by God, but **it is granted solely based upon the sovereign choice of God.**
	+ **Being the sovereign Creator of the universe, God has the right to dispose of His creation as He sees fit. And being sovereign, God is therefore under no obligation to extend salvation to even one person. It is solely His sovereign prerogative that causes God, by His divine will and infinite grace, to extend salvation to anyone.**
* This morning I want to spend some time examining and teaching one of the foundational doctrines of grace. That doctrine is **the sovereignty of God in salvation**, referred to in Scripture in many places as God **“choosing” or “electing”** some people unto salvation.
* But before I continue, I want to begin with a warning by reading two quotes.

slide 2

* First, in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians, D. Edmund Hiebert writes . . . *“the truth of election must not be turned into a harsh and arbitrary doctrine. That it presents some unfathomed mysteries is unquestioned. ‘Why God should choose one continent, one nation, one town, one man rather than another is the unsolved mystery of the doctrine of election.’ The sovereign God has revealed Himself as infinitely righteous and holy and motivated by infinite love; this assures us that He is not an unprincipled tyrant in His selection.* ***The truth of divine election has been revealed for the benefit of believers. It is a family doctrine that only they can truly appreciate.****”*
* Second, in his book on the doctrine of election, J.C. Ryle states that *“a man must first go to the little grammar school of repentance and faith before he can attend the grand university of election and predestination.”*

slide 3

* My purpose in quoting Hiebert and Ryle is to emphasize the point that any discussion of the doctrine of election should be entered into cautiously. I’ve entitled my message this week, **election . . . that most despised of doctrines**.
	+ The reason I’ve chosen this title and to limit myself to this single verse, is because this very important doctrine is worth the time we take to study it.
	+ I know that I’m teaching a doctrine that most of you already know and agree with. But if there is even **1 person** whose knowledge of God or whose view on this doctrine is changed or clarified by this message, it will have been time well spent.
* The point that both Hiebert and Ryle make in the quotes I just read is that the doctrine of election is a doctrine for **mature** Christians.
	+ I say that the doctrine of election is for mature Christians because **with spiritual maturity there comes a true understanding of man’s natural condition and the greatness of God**.

**Modern Arminianism—a theology of human achievement**

slide 4

* One of the statements I like to make is that **“when Christians are spiritually born, we are all born as Arminians. It is only later, as we mature, that we become Calvinists.”**
	+ The reason I believe all Christians are born Arminians is because Arminianism . . . especially 21st century Arminianism . . . is a theology of human achievement.
	+ Modern Arminianism is epitomized by the catchy phrase, **“God has done all He can do. The rest is up to you.”**
	+ With that phrase there is **the explicit statement that God is not all-powerful** . . . that God has to cooperate with man in order to accomplish salvation . . . that man is the ultimate cause of salvation. God does His part, but man has to make the decision and take the action necessary to be saved. And if man chooses not to believe and be saved, there is nothing for God to do but sit back and watch . . . helplessly.
	+ When each of us finally believed the truth and was saved, our first thoughts were that “I’ve finally figured it out. I’ve finally arrived at the truth. I’ve saved myself.” **I . . . I . . . I . . . I did all this. Everything was about what I thought I had accomplished**.
	+ It is not until later, when we begin to study and learn about our great God that we come to the humbling realization that **I didn’t do anything. God did it all.**
	+ But for new believers, who know virtually nothing about God, it is natural to think that we each were the instruments of salvation. **God made the offer and we were smart enough to accept it.** **Simple enough. But simply wrong**.
* There are many people who resist and denounce the teaching that only God is sovereign in salvation. Many people angrily decry the teaching of God’s sovereign choice in salvation as a violation of man’s freedom and right to self-determination. And furthermore, those who reject God’s sovereignty in salvation claim that God’s sovereignty in salvation is unscriptural.
	+ To that claim . . . that God’s sovereignty in graciously giving salvation to some is unscriptural . . . I say, let us examine the evidence and see for ourselves.
* Two of the definitive statements in Scripture regarding the sovereign grace of God in salvation are found in John 6:44 and Ephesians 2:8-9. In John 6:44 the Lord states . . .

slide 5

***John 6:44— "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him***

* + That statement is emphatic and absolute. ***No one* *can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.*** There is no room for equivocation. **No one can be saved unless the Father saves him.**
	+ And furthermore, as I pointed out in the past when I taught this passage, the word ***draws*** in John 6:44 means “to drag one who is unwilling,” which is epitomized by the picture here.
		- Every single one of us was like this . . . literally “saved against our will.” So, for anyone to claim that we choose God is to make a claim contrary to the teaching of Jesus Christ.
* In the same way, the apostle Paul states in Ephesians 2:8-9 . . .

slide 6

***Ephesians 2:8-9— 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.***

* + The apostle Paul makes the same statement here in Ephesians 2:8 . . . our salvation is **not of ourselves, it is the gift of God**. And were God not to extend His grace gift to each of us, we would never be saved.
* We also find this infuriating and troublesome doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation in our passage this morning. It is found in the final phrase of v. 4 . . . ***knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you***.

slide 7

* The word that is translated ***choice*** is the Greek word *eklogē*, meaning “elect” or “chosen.”
	+ The word *eklogē*is formed by the preposition *ek*, meaning “out of,” and the verb *legō*, meaning “to call by name.”
	+ Literally, the Greek word *eklogē* means **“to call out of, by name”** . . . “to choose.”
* Last week I explained that the word ***church*** is translated from the Greek word *ekklēsia*, meaning “to call out from.”
	+ But while the terms *ekklēsia* and *eklogē* both refer to being **“called out**,” *ekklēsia* refers to **a group of people who are collectively identified as “the called out ones” . . . the church.** The word *eklogē* refers to **individuals who are called out by name.**
	+ **In effect, the *ekklēsia* is made up of the *eklogē*. The chosen people of the church are made up of the chosen individuals who comprise the church.**

slide 8

**This teaching is not unique to the New Testament**

* Theologically, the doctrine of election is the biblical teaching that as Sovereign Creator, God has reserved for Himself the sole authority to choose what He will do with His creation, including the right to choose who will be saved. **But this teaching . . . that God is sovereign over all His creation . . . is not unique to the New Testament.**
	+ We see the sovereignty of God taught throughout the Old Testament. For example, in Deuteronomy 7:7-8 we see God’s declaration of His sovereignty in choosing Israel to be His covenant people . . .

***Deuteronomy 7:7-8— 7 "The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers.”***

* + We learn in 1 Samuel 16:12 that God chooses the youngest son of Jesse to be the anointed King of Israel. Later in 2 Chronicles 6 we learn of other sovereign choices that God made…

***2 Chronicles 6:5-6— 5 'Since the day that I brought My people from the land of Egypt, I did not choose a city out of all the tribes of Israel in which to build a house that My name might be there, nor did I choose any man for a leader over My people Israel; 6 but I have chosen Jerusalem that My name might be there, and I have chosen David to be over My people Israel.'***

slide 9

* + We see God’s sovereignty also explicitly stated by the Lord Jesus in John 15:16, speaking to His disciples . . .

***John 15:16— "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit . . . .***

slide 10

* In the New Testament we see additional statements regarding God’s sovereign choice of whom He would save . . .

***2 Timothy 2:10— For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.***

slide 11

***2 Thessalonians 2:13— But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.***

***Ephesians 1:3-5— 3 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, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,***

slide 12

* These few verses are not the only verses declaring God’s sovereignty in choosing. There are many Old and New Testament passages that explicitly declare God’s sovereignty in choosing people for Himself and for His own purposes.

slide 13

**Why is God’s sovereignty in salvation rejected?**

* But, as most of you know, the doctrine of election is a despised doctrine by a large percentage of professing Christians who have bought into the lie that man has the free will and the ability to choose for him or herself whether he or she will be saved or not. I believe that the main reason for the rejection of God’s sovereignty in salvation is two-fold.
	+ **First**, **it is based upon an improper Anthropology**. The view that man has free will and the ability to choose to be saved is based upon the view that man is basically good . . . that mankind is not totally depraved and helpless.
		- Instead of being totally depraved, many professing Christians are of the opinion that **“man is basically good; we just do bad things.”** But this view is directly refuted by Romans 3:11-12 in which Paul declares, unequivocally, that ***there is none who seeks for God; there is none who does good, there is not even one***
		- The fact is, if God did not choose to save, not one human would ever be saved.
	+ The **second** reason for the rejection of God’s sovereignty in salvation is . . . put quite bluntly . . . based upon a low view of God. The view that God does not or can not exercise sovereign authority over mankind demonstrates a seriously diminished and flawed view of God. The notion that God is not sovereign over salvation makes God to be a flawed and weak God. Such a view of God is a libel to His glory and to His holy name.

slide 14

* + - Such a low view of God is directly contradicted by God’s own word. Listen to these words of God, spoken through the prophets Isaiah and Daniel . . .

***Isaiah 46:9-11— 9 Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, 10 declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; 11 calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.”***

***Daniel 4:35— "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'***

* + - Do those words sound like the words of a weak and impotent God? No. God is infinitely holy and powerful, accomplishing all that He has purposed to do from eternity past. And, as Nebuchadnezzar states in Daniel 4:35, no one has the right to demand that God explain Himself. Everything He does, He does according to His divine will.
* The idea that **“God has done all He can do; the rest is up to you”** is a blasphemy to the greatness of God. Compare that low view of God to what God reveals to the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 1:5 God speaks to Jeremiah, telling the young boy that he is to be a prophet . . .

slide 15

***Jeremiah 1:5— "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."***

* + In this passage we learn that **God chose Jeremiah to be one of His prophets even before Jeremiah was conceived.** But if you subscribe to the low view of God, Jeremiah had the ability to respond, **“with all due respect, God, I think I’ll pass on your offer.” No, Jeremiah served as God’s prophet because he had no choice.** We see this in Jeremiah’s protest that being only a boy, nobody would listen to him or take him seriously. To this, God responds in Jeremiah 1:6-10 . . .

slide 16

***Jeremiah 1:6-10— 6 Then I said, "Alas, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth." 7  But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak. 8  Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you," declares the LORD. 9 Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. 10  See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."***

* + Jeremiah’s objection is the same objection Moses gave to God . . . that he was not an eloquent speaker and that the people would not listen. And God’s response was the same to Moses as it was to Jeremiah . . . The words they were to speak to the people were not their own. **God would give them the words** to speak and the power to accomplish His purposes.
	+ In other words, **God did everything. There was nothing that these men brought that God needed.**
* To those who believe that the will of God can be resisted, we need only look at the attempts of Jonah to refuse God.
	+ In Jonah 1:2 we see God’s call to Jonah . . .

***Jonah 1:2— "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."***

slide 17

* + But Jonah did not wish to go to the evil Ninevites. Jonah knew that God would save them and his loathing of the Ninevites was so great that he could not bear the idea that God would be gracious to them. So he boarded a ship in order to flee from God. And you know the rest of the story. Jonah’s efforts to refuse God didn’t go well for Jonah and he ultimately submitted to God’s will.
* Those who have taken the time to study Scripture and to learn about God must inevitably come to the conclusion that God is sovereign over everything and everyone. And this sovereignty extends to God’s choosing of who will be saved.
* It is because God’s sovereignty in salvation is only believed and embraced by mature believers that D. Edmund Hiebert states that ***the truth of divine election has been revealed for the benefit of believers. It is a family doctrine that only they can truly appreciate.***

slide 18

* + Because only those who are of the family of God can accept and agree with the mystery of God’s sovereignty in salvation, it does not benefit those outside the family of God to discuss it.

slide 19

**Why does the doctrine of election evoke hostility?**

* If you try to teach or discuss the doctrine of election with an unbeliever or immature Christian, you will inevitably encounter hostility. Why? **2 reasons:** **envy and a misplaced sense of fairness.**
	+ Many of those who reject the doctrine of election do so because they see themselves on the outside, looking in.
	+ Imagine if you were to learn that there will be a lavish banquet at the church. Many of the church members were invited, but you were not. What would be your reaction? Envy. **Why am I not invited? That’s not fair.**
	+ For others, the idea that seemingly “good people” would not be saved **who wanted to be saved**, is unthinkable. That there are men and women who want to be saved, but are not chosen by God is seen as unfair. But, of course, as we read in Romans 3:11, ***there is none who seeks for God***. So this whole argument that there are people who want to be saved, but aren’t, is an invalid argument. But that doesn’t stop people from making it.
* I remember, about 15 or 20 years ago, John MacArthur was asked during the Q & A of a conference if he considered himself a Calvinist.
	+ Because the term Calvinist has a negative connotation among some, MacArthur was guarded with his answer. He answered, “I believe in Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints. Does that make me a Calvinist?”

slide 20

**Do you believe in election?**

* In that answer by MacArthur I see some wisdom. If someone asks you, “do you believe in election?” what should be your response? Generally, if someone asks you out of the blue if you believe in election, they are not seeking knowledge, they are looking to pick a theological fight.
	+ So, knowing that such a question is probably not a legitimate search for knowledge, your best answer might be a question of your own.
		- “Are you asking me if I believe that God is sovereign in salvation?”
		- To your question you might receive this response . . . “I want to know if you believe in election . . . that God chooses who will be saved . . . that we have no choice in whether we are saved or not.”
		- Rather than engage in a fruitless debate, the best response is to try to understand the theology of your interrogator. “Do you believe in the sovereignty of God?” This will take the conversation in a whole new direction. After all, I someone doesn’t believe in the sovereignty of God, they don’t understand who God is and any discussion of election is wasted.
* The problem for those who reject the doctrine of election is the delusion that many people are under that man has the right to self-determination and that God is under some obligation to be “fair,” as man defines fairness.
	+ Ultimately, those who reject the doctrine of election don’t really want what’s fair. They just want what benefits them and comports with their human sense of fairness.
	+ But those who reject the doctrine of election do so because their don’t understand or don’t agree with what the Bible teaches about man’s depravity and unworthiness before a holy God. That is why J.C. Ryle states that *“a man must first go to the little grammar school of repentance and faith before he can attend the grand university of election and predestination.”*

slide 21

* + It is of no benefit to discuss the mystery of the doctrine of election unless a person first has a high and proper view of both God and an understanding of his own loathsome depravity. Until that proper foundation is laid, no sound theological structure can be built.
* Here in the opening verses of Paul’s letter to the Thessalonian church, he is writing to a church of mature believers who did understand the deep things of God. And to that church, Paul expresses his thanks to God for His blessing upon them. ***2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;***