

How Can You Know If You're Elect?

Isaiah 65:17–25, 1 Thessalonians 1:2–7

I have three points this morning: first,

1. A love story

The Gospel is the story of God's love. All men and women had sinned in our forefather Adam, when he disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. The whole human race sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." Our forefather Adam, so recently created by God, and having enjoyed fellowship in the Garden of Eden with God his heavenly Father, represented us all as a public person. God had put him in a perfect environment where all his needs had been met. There was no want or starvation, no harm or danger. God had given him every tree that was pleasant to the eye and good for food. He had been told that of every tree of the Garden he could freely eat, but there was one tree at the center of the Garden that was off limits: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was not to eat of that one tree, for in the day that he ate of it, he would surely die.

Not only had God placed Adam in a perfect environment and supplied him with food, he also gave him useful work to do. Just as God is the Lord of all, man, made in his image, was put in charge of the earth to rule over it on behalf of God himself. He was told to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." The earth was his to use in a God-glorifying manner as he saw fit. "Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field." There was no sin, or want, or war—only perfect harmony and beauty. Adam enjoyed regular fellowship with God and was free to roam about, enjoying the creation, studying the interesting creatures that God had made, and naming each one. Essentially, Adam was doing the work of a biologist, studying the animals and designing ways that they could be used to for his advantage as he built a civilization for God's glory. None of the birds or animals was a danger to him at this time; all were tame and cooperative. It was very satisfying and fulfilling work. God gave him a wife, Eve, which Adam recognized as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. She could join with him in his work of exercising dominion over the beautiful world that was their inheritance.

Then trouble began! Adam, in full possession of his senses and knowing full well what he was doing, rebelled against God by eating the forbidden fruit. In so doing he died spiritually, and brought death and condemnation upon the whole human race. He was told, "Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat

of it all the days of your life.” He was banished from the Garden of Eden, never to return. From that time on there would be a struggle for survival. The animals would be afraid of man, and man afraid of the animals. His firstborn son would grow up to be a murderer. Man’s inhumanity to man had begun. From that time on man would live in a world of wars, fighting, theft and oppression—man seeking to have an advantage over other men, subjugating his fellow humans for his own benefit.

Because of Adam’s sin, death had entered the world. Without a Savior, Adam would go to eternal perdition. But God is a merciful God. His eternal Son, his pride and joy and delight, would come to this world and take upon him our human nature. He would be like us in every way except for sin. As the perfect man he would go to the cross and die for men—not for every man without distinction, but for his elect people, given to him by the Father before the world began.

But Adam had heard the Gospel. God had told the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” God would send a Savior, specifically called “*her Seed*,” whose conception would be different from that of every other human person. Rather than born to man by ordinary human generation, the unique individual identified as “*her Seed*” would be the seed of the *woman*, the virgin Mary. He would be the God-man, the Son of the Highest, God in human flesh, who would win ultimate victory over the serpent’s seed. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

So the Gospel is a love story, the story of God’s love. Even though the whole human race sinned in Adam and deserved to go to everlasting condemnation, God had pity upon our race and sent the Savior. Jesus the Messiah, the eternal Son, equal with the Father in power and glory, came into this world for the purpose of dying for man the creature’s sin. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—for miserable, helpless, hopeless creatures who, born again by the Spirit who, sent by the Son, would give spiritual life to unworthy rebels who would recognize their need of him and call upon his name. And so the promise remains: “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:13). If you recognize your sin and hopelessness and look to Christ in true faith, he will save you! Not because you deserve it—*no* fallen son or daughter of Adam deserves it—but because *Christ*, the perfect one, deserves it. As the apostle Paul would later explain, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Tit. 3:5). All praise and glory to Christ, the Savior of sinners, the Savior of the world! Such a great salvation is ours through faith in the Son! There is no other way to be saved than through Christ. None of the world’s religions can save any sinner. Human effort cannot save. Only Christ can save.

Because of sin, wrath is come upon us to the uttermost.¹ But Christ is Almighty God in human flesh, and he is up the the task. The Bible says: “wherefore he is able also to save them *to the uttermost* that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

Here in broad outline is the Gospel story. It is a beautiful story, and it deserves to be told—everywhere, always, and to everyone. Our Lord gave the commission: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the *gospel* to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”² Here is the truth that every son and daughter of Adam is charged to believe. All of us are called to believe on Jesus with perfect faith, to profess that faith with his people, and to maintain a good profession to our dying day. We are to be loyal to him and live for him and depend upon him with our every breath. This is the “work of faith” of which we spoke last week. In the words of Christ, “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.”³ Christian, this is the faith to which you are called to be faithful unto death. As our Lord told the church in Smyrna, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” That promise still stands! Amen.

2. Our text

Our text for exposition and application this morning is 1 Thessalonians 1:4, “knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.” Here is the doctrine of election; that is, of God’s *choosing*.

Our God is absolutely sovereign. If he were not absolutely sovereign, he would not be God. Sovereignty is the ability to make choices. God is sovereign. As the Psalmist said, “God hath spoken once; twice have I heard this; that *power* belongeth unto God” (Ps. 62:11). Yes, “power”—“all power in heaven and on earth”—belongs to God. He can do all his holy will. He answers to no one. He has the absolute power to make choices, and no one in all the universe can disannul his choices. If anyone did, his would be a power greater than God, and such cannot be.

In the case of the Thessalonian Christians Paul could say, “knowing, beloved brethren, your *election* by God.” What he is speaking about is a choice—an eternal choice—made by Almighty God.

Scripture speaks of God’s election or choosing of individuals to special office or privilege: for example, Abraham, Jacob, Saul, David and Solomon in the Old Testament, and the apostles in the New. It speaks of God’s choice of Israel as his chosen nation. In addition, Scripture speaks of an election to eternal life. This is where it gets controversial. In his second letter to the Thessalonians Paul will go into more detail on this teaching and say, “we are bound to give thanks to God

¹ 1 Thess. 2:16

² Mark 16:15–16

³ John 6:29

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.”⁴ In that text Paul specifically teaches that the Thessalonian Christians were chosen “to *salvation*.”

This idea of the God of heaven choosing individuals for salvation makes many people uncomfortable. They do not like the idea of a sovereign God who chooses one and passes by another. Even when they are reminded that all of us by nature are children of wrath and equally undeserving of God’s gift of salvation, they are still nervous about this teaching.

Yesterday I spoke with a man who is a very active member of one of our sister churches. He told me that his father is a retired minister in one of the Calvary Chapel churches. He knows the Bible’s teaching on election; he just doesn’t preach on it. It makes him uncomfortable; it makes his hearers uncomfortable. So he just doesn’t preach on it. He ignores it and pretends it doesn’t exist. Yet the minister of Christ is charged to preach “the *whole* counsel of God.”⁵ Preaching the whole counsel of God means leaving nothing out. Brothers and sisters, God has not called us to edit his Word to make it more palatable to sinful human minds. He wants his church to be satisfied with his word as he has written it, to understand the doctrines of Holy Scripture as he has crafted it, and to deliver it faithfully and purely to our hearers. “The law of the LORD is perfect.”⁶

Sometimes we hear of a statement made by a president that is subsequently “walked back” by his staff. The statement was outlandish or not well received by our allies, so his staff will call a press conference and explain to the world what the president really meant. Such a “walking back” is actually a retraction of the original statement. But the God of heaven has not called us to retract any of his statements! As a minister of Christ I assure you that our wise heavenly Father meant every word of the Bible! He is not a man that he should lie. His word stands exactly as written. God is not finite and fallible and unable to express himself adequately. He doesn’t want us “walking back” his word. He doesn’t *need* us walking back his word!

A lot of Christians have been erroneously taught that “elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Pet. 1:2) means that in eternity past God looked down the corridors of time and saw which individuals would respond in faith, and on that basis chose them. He saw that you and I would believe, and on that basis he chose us. In other words, God doesn’t choose man; rather, man chooses God! This is a message that is palatable to the human mind; it seems so democratic: God chooses men and women who choose him. Who could be

⁴ 2 Thess. 2:13

⁵ Acts 20:27 NKJV

⁶ Ps. 19:7

offended by that? But that's not the teaching of the Bible. There are actually two problems with that understanding: first, men and women who are spiritually dead are, in the words of our Confession, "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil."⁷ This is the unhappy result of the Fall. Just as a corpse cannot choose, so the natural man, dead in trespasses and sins, cannot choose; he is spiritually dead, wholly inclined to all evil, and will never choose the way of righteousness over the way of death. Second, Scripture explicitly tells us that God "chose" us to salvation. Now when God's inspired and inerrant word tells us that he from the beginning chose us to salvation, it means exactly what it says. Jesus confirmed this when he said, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,"⁸

On what basis does God choose men and women to salvation? Easton's comment is helpful: "the ground of this election to salvation is the good pleasure of God . . . It is not conditioned on faith or repentance, but is of sovereign grace."⁹

This, then, is the teaching of our text: "knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God." This is the truth that God wants his people to receive and rejoice in, and live by. Brothers and sisters, if you are trusting in Christ alone you can rest assured that your salvation is grounded in his sovereign, eternal election. In eternity past, before God created anything or anyone, the Father chose a people unto salvation and gave them to his Son. The Son undertook the assignment of coming to this earth, taking on human flesh, so he could die in the place of his people and send his Spirit to regenerate those dead in trespasses and sins and bring them to Christ. The church is, as the hymnwriter put it, composed of the "elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth."

The gospel is a love story, and our text assures us that we who believe do so because of God's prior election, but there is

3. The problem

As we saw, the apostle writes, "knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God." The problem is this: how can I *know* that I'm elect?

Back in the old days, before the internet, there were telephone books. They used to be thick. When our family moved to Lansing 34 years ago, the Lansing phone book was quite thick—about an inch and a half thick. It contained a list of residential phone numbers—everyone except for those who paid a monthly fee to have an unlisted number. Every year, a new book was printed and left on everybody's doorstep. If you wanted to get in touch with anybody, you looked up their number in the phone book and dialed it by hand.

⁷ WCF 6.4, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_06

⁸ John 15:16

⁹ Easton's Bible Dictionary, "Election of Grace" (Logos Bible Software)

But the Bible is not a phone book. It doesn't contain a list of all the elect. The list exists only in the mind of our omniscient and all-knowing God. The apostle John, speaking of the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem that he had seen, wrote that the only people that get to enter heaven are "those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life" (Rev. 21:27). If it were an actual book, it would be an exceedingly thick one, registering the names of a "great multitude which no man can number." But the exact form or appearance of the Lamb's Book of Life is not our present focus. What every Christian wants to know is: is my name written there? The names of all the elect, chosen by God before the foundation of the world, are there. Paul writes, "knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God." How did he ascertain that they were elect? For that matter, how can you or I or any person ascertain that we are elect? Some Christians really worry about these things. They agonize: am I really elect? Will I really go to heaven? They spend their days and nights worrying, will I really make it to heaven?

Now if I am describing you, I want to reassure you: your worrying about this matter is evidence in itself that you belong to Christ. The unregenerate are not "awake to righteousness" (1 Cor. 15:34); they do not know or care about their great peril. They rationalize: I'm pretty good; I'm a decent, moral person; I'll be OK at the last day. When they read Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," where Edwards famously told his hearers, "Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock."¹⁰ When the unregenerate hear this, they smile smugly and think to themselves: we're much more enlightened now; we would never believe such old-fashioned notions. The unregenerate are not really concerned about how they will fare at the final judgment; they are more concerned about having a good time now.

But those who are born again—those whose hearts have been awakened to righteousness by God's Holy Spirit, *do* care! They want to know: am I saved? Am I truly trusting in Christ alone for my salvation? Did Jesus really die for me? Is my faith real? Is his finished work sufficient to save such a great sinner as I?

Did the Holy Spirit of God supernaturally inform Paul of the election status of every man, woman and child in the Thessalonian congregation? I do not believe so, nor do I believe that it was necessary. As the context makes clear, the apostle Paul was convinced of the Thessalonians' election because of three things: because of

¹⁰ <https://www.jonathan-edwards.org/Sinners.pdf> accessed 11-5-23

their good works that flowed from a sincere faith (v. 3), because they had become followers of Christ, having believed the Gospel (v. 6), and because of their evident joy in the midst of affliction (again, v. 6). Paul could declare that the Thessalonian Christians were elect because they had received the Gospel and were living out their faith in community.

The annotator in the *Reformation Heritage Study Bible* helpfully said: “the only evidence of a person’s being one of God’s elect is when they (*sic*) live a godly life and so bring forth the fruits of righteousness. Election makes men saints, not mere religious talkers, learned hypocrites, or adherents to some religious group.”

How can you know if you’re elect? Because you confess Christ, do the good works that flow from a sincere faith, and exhibit joy in Christ, even in the midst of affliction. You can know that you’re elect if you are trusting in Christ to save you and walking in obedience to him.

Brothers and sisters, our salvation doesn’t depend on our merit, but on Christ’s mercy. Keep looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Amen.