

Safety for God's Elect

Isaiah 42:1–9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14

In the paragraphs immediately preceding our text this morning the apostle Paul had taught that, prior to Christ's second coming, a personage called the "man of sin" and "son of perdition" will come onto the world stage. This man will be a sworn enemy of the faith. Exceedingly pumped up with pride, he will "exalt himself" above the God of heaven! But his destiny is the Lake of Fire: the Lord will "consume" him with the "breath of His mouth" and "destroy" him with "the brightness of His coming." At that time, all those who do not believe the truth but take pleasure in unrighteousness will be "condemned." This is the ultimate fate of all Christ-rejectors.

But as we learn in our text today, a far different future awaits those who are "beloved of the Lord." At the final day theirs will be "the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ"—that is, heaven itself. They will spend eternity in the presence of Christ, offering grateful praise that will resound throughout the courts of heaven. Here are two different destinies: *condemnation* for the wicked, and *safety* for God's elect. I have three points this morning: (1) chosen from the beginning; (2) called by the Gospel; (3) destined for glory. First,

1. Chosen from the beginning

Paul writes: "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."

Note particularly the words "from the beginning": "God *from the beginning* chose you for salvation." The alternate reading, followed in some translations, is "God chose you as the *firstfruits*." This reading differs by just a single letter in the original Greek. The Byzantine text, in common use in the worship of the Greek-speaking churches, representing thousands of handwritten manuscripts, has ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ("from the beginning"). This is the reading found in the 1904 Orthodox Patriarchal text. On the other hand, the "Vaticanus," an ancient *codex* (that is, a book composed of a stack of pages bound at one edge in the manner of modern books) has ἀπαρχὴν ("firstfruits"). This was the reading followed by the Latin text known as the Vulgate; it is also the reading of the ESV: "God chose you as the *firstfruits* to be saved."

This instance is somewhat different from a lot of textual variations, where the Byzantine texts have one reading and the Alexandrian or critical texts have another. In this case, the two main Alexandrian texts—Sinaiticus and Vaticanus—have conflicting readings. The Sinaiticus, a fourth-century text that wasn't discovered till 1844, has the Byzantine or majority reading ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ("from the beginning"), while the Vaticanus has ἀπαρχὴν ("firstfruits"). I am firmly convinced, on the basis of the textual evidence, that the reading "from the beginning" is the authentic Pauline wording. This is the reading of the New King James Version and the New

American Standard Version. The doctrine being taught here is that, in contrast to the wicked, who at the last day will be “condemned” to the Lake of Fire, the righteous are “beloved by the Lord” and were chosen for salvation “from the *beginning*.” This phrase, “from the beginning,” as we shall see, does not denote “from the beginning of the *gospel*,” but “from *eternity*”—eternity past! “God *from the beginning* chose you for salvation.” Because the elect are beloved by the Lord, because we were chosen for salvation, we will not be condemned along with the enemies of God who did not believe the truth. Praise be to God!

Sadly, the biblical teaching of divine election is unpalatable to a lot of Christians. The idea that a sovereign God, in eternity past, out of the mass of humanity that he determined to create, would pass over *some* undeserving sinners and have mercy on *other*, equally undeserving sinners, provokes a lot of spirited debate and even hostility. Most members of independent churches do not like the idea of a God who chooses. Many Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of God “from the beginning” choosing people for salvation. The notion of a God who leaves it up to man to determine his own destiny is much more palatable to the human mind, and therefore much more popular.

But for the Bible-believing Christian, the main issue is *what does the Bible teach?* The Bible is very clear on this. In Ephesians 1:4 Paul asserts that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ “chose us in Him *before the foundation of the world* (πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου)” —that is, in eternity past. In 2 Timothy 1:9 he writes that God “has saved us and called us with a holy calling . . . according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus *before time began* (πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων).”

Many more things might be said about this, but consider just two. First, the God of Scripture does not change. He is immutable. He explicitly says, “For I am the LORD, *I change not*; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6). It is a great comfort to the Christian that God does not change, for if he did, then his favorable attitude toward us in Christ might change; he might rethink his promises; he might go back on his word. But he does *not* change! Therefore, his promises to us are sure and steadfast. He says, “My covenant will I not break, nor *alter* the thing that is gone out of my lips” (Ps. 89:34). If he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world—from the beginning, before time began—then his sovereign choice stands. He will not alter it. Our election in Christ was no afterthought, no response to external stimuli. It was the right decision when it was made, and it is the right decision now; it doesn’t need to be updated. God knows the end from the beginning. In his omniscience God knew every eventuality—everything that would or could happen. Nothing that happens in time could ever force him to change his mind.

Second, remember that fallen men and women by nature are “dead in trespasses and sins”—*spiritually* dead (Eph. 2:1). God cannot choose us on the basis of our having first chosen him, because we were spiritually dead and lacked all ability to choose him on our own. Spiritual corpses—dry bones—cannot will anything good. Apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit we are *averse* to the good. We hate God, love our sin and don’t see any need to change. In the words of the Westminster Confession, “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, [has] wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.” He is “a natural man . . . altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin.” He is “not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself” for conversion.¹

In the seventeenth century Jacob Arminius taught that the doctrine of unconditional election made God the author of evil. (It does not.) Arminius insisted that God’s election was an election of *believers* and therefore conditioned on faith. It was as if God looked down the corridors of history and chose for salvation those whom he foresaw would choose him first. But dead men do not choose! However, that did not stop Arminius’s followers. They came up with a teaching called *prevenient grace*—that is, a measure of grace, given to *all* men, that enables those who *will* to choose Christ.² The only problem with that is that the Bible nowhere teaches such a notion. It is humanly-devised, made out of desperation in the minds of men and women who stubbornly cling to their theological notions despite an utter lack of scriptural evidence—and one that is contrary to Scripture’s explicit teaching.

The Bible-believing Christian accepts the Scripture’s statements as they stand, and doesn’t want to explain them away. We are not offended by them. We *delight* in the truth that God *from the beginning* chose his people for salvation. This is the teaching of the Bible. It gives glory to God and takes glory away from man. So be it! *He* must increase and *we* must decrease! All glory be to Jesus!

What is the meaning of the alternate reading, “God chose you as the *firstfruits* to be saved”?

Firstfruits was a Jewish feast held in early spring at the beginning of the grain harvest. Its origin goes back to Exodus 23: 14ff., which stipulates: “Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread . . . and the Feast of Harvest, the *firstfruits* of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year.”

Firstfruits was a time of thanksgiving for God’s provision. It foreshadowed Christ’s resurrection and his role as the firstfruits of those who believe. In

¹ WCF 9.2, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_09

² “. . . through Jesus Christ the *prevenient grace* of God makes possible what humans in self effort cannot do. It is bestowed freely upon all, enabling all who will to turn and be saved.” <https://www.wesleyan.org/about/articles-of-religion>, accessed 10-1-24.

1 Corinthians 15:20 Paul declares, “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the *firstfruits* of them that slept.” Believers, too, are counted as firstfruits. For example, in Romans 16:5 Paul instructs, “Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the *firstfruits* of Achaia to Christ.” Epaenetus was one of the first converts to Christ in Achaia.

So if the alternate reading is original, Paul’s meaning is that the Thessalonian Christians were some of the first converts to Christ in Macedonia. The problem with this interpretation, as Calvin observes, is that “this is foreign to Paul’s meaning, and does not accord with the connection of the passage. For he does not merely exempt from fear a few individuals, who had been led to Christ immediately on the commencement of the gospel, . . . this consolation belongs to all the elect of God, without exception.”

If we are elected to salvation, we are safe from destruction, no matter when we came to Christ. God’s elect are safe in Christ—no qualifiers! God’s elect were chosen in Christ “from the beginning”—from eternity past.

Secondly, God’s elect are

2. Called by the Gospel

Note again the language of our text: “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.” How can we know if we are elect, chosen for salvation? Only if we believe in the truth of the gospel! If you believe in the truth of the gospel, then you are elect. If you do not believe in Christ, then you cannot know if you are elect. The way to find out if you are elect is to believe the gospel.

The word “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον), which comes into English as *evangel*, *evangelism*, *evangelist*, *evangelical*, means *good news*. It is an important word occurring some 77 times in the New Testament. The word is composed of two parts: εὖ, which means *well*, or *good*; and ἄγγελος, *angel* or *messenger*. The *good news*, in its biblical context, is the good news of salvation brought by a messenger of the Lord.

Paul goes into more detail on this in Romans 10: “How . . . shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our report?’ So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” The Old Testament texts that he cites from the Septuagint, the translation of the Old

Testament into Greek, made about 200 years before Christ, use the word εὐαγγελίζω, which means *to announce good news*.

We live in a world where there is a lot of *bad* news—wars, disease, plagues, starvation, oppression, crime, hatred, ill-will, broken promises. How we need to hear good news! And when you get right down to it, the only good news comes from God himself; it is the good news of a Savior, Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, sent by the Father to come into the world to save his people from their sins. The bad news is that we are all sinners with no hope of eternal life in ourself. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The “all” in that verse includes every son and daughter of Adam, our first father. All of us, fallen in Adam, have failed to attain to the perfection that God requires. No matter how good a life we try to live, we do not measure up to God’s standard of absolute perfection. The only one who measures up is “Jesus Christ the righteous.”³ The gospel, or good news, is that if we look to him in faith, believing his promise, we will be saved. We will receive forgiveness of sins, and the perfect righteousness of Christ will be credited to our account. In the language of Scripture we will be “*in* Christ.” The filthy rags of our own self-righteousness will be removed, and we will be clothed with “garments of salvation.” When God looks at us he will see not our sins and failings but the perfect righteousness of Christ. This is the gospel.

The gospel is *not* “do your best; turn over a new leaf; try harder.” The gospel is: “for whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” There is a place for good works as the *fruit* of a true faith, but the fact is that our good works cannot earn our salvation. Salvation is a free gift—the gift of Christ.

Every person on the face of the earth needs to hear the good news of Christ—every Lord’s day. Christ commissioned his apostles to “go into all the world and preach the gospel.” If a church preaches anything other than the gospel, it is being disobedient to Christ. If you are attending a church that fails to preach the gospel of Christ, that church is a synagogue of Satan. You need to leave that church and attend a church that has the gospel. You might have to travel a distance to find such a church, but no matter. To obey Christ is all-important.

The Belgic Confession, summarizing Scripture, helpfully points out that “the true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church—and no one ought to be separated from it.”⁴

³ 1 John 2:1

⁴ <https://threeforms.org/the-belgic-confession/>

Does a church preach the gospel? Does the preaching point sinners to Jesus Christ, the only Savior? Does it tell them to put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ? Does it administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper as signs and seals of salvation in Christ—not as magical rites that confer salvation in and of themselves? Does it practice church discipline, or does it let everyone determine his or her own fitness to come to the Lord's table? To let every person determine his or her own fitness to come to the Lord's table is an *abdication* of church discipline; it is a failure on the part of the elders to “rule well” (1 Tim. 5:17).

Our text teaches that God calls men and women to himself by “*our* gospel”—that is, the gospel preached by Paul and the other apostles. There is no other gospel than that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” If a church teaches that Christ was a good example only, and not the only Savior of sinners, then it is not a true church, and God's people must leave it.

We have seen that God's elect were chosen in Christ “from the beginning”—from eternity past—and that they are called by the Gospel. Thirdly, they are

3. Destined for glory

Our text teaches that God “called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the *glory* of our Lord Jesus Christ.” What is the glory which God's people obtain through Christ? Ultimately, it is the glory of *heaven*!

We see this most clearly in Luke 24, where the risen Christ, on resurrection Sunday, falls into step with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, who were dejected and downcast at having witnessed their Lord's crucifixion on the cross at Calvary, but had not yet heard the good news that he had risen from the dead. He says: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His *glory*?” The word “glory” in this context means *the state of being in the next life described as participation in God's radiance or glory*.⁵ The good news of the gospel is that this sinful world is not the final destination of the righteous. “This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through; my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.” Christ died for our sins, he was buried, but he rose again the third day, never to die again. He ascended up into *glory*, where he sits at the right hand of God, reigning in splendor until all his enemies are made a footstool for his feet. And all that he did, he did on behalf of his elect. As he prayed in John 17, “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; *that they may behold my glory*.” As the gospel promises, “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face.”⁶ “The sufferings of this present time are

⁵ Adapted from Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, lexicon: δόξα (Logos Bible Software)

⁶ 1 Cor. 13:12

not worthy to be compared with the *glory* which shall be revealed in us.”⁷ As Christians, “we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the *glory* of God.”⁸

There is indeed safety for God’s elect, but not just a deliverance from condemnation on the day of judgment that the wicked will experience. The wicked will be turned into hell, but the righteous “shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).

Church of Jesus Christ, this is your destiny! Amen.

⁷ Rom. 8:18

⁸ Rom. 5:2