

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE ELECTION THAT MATTERS MOST

Ephesians 1:1-14

The countdown continues. Only 23 days remain until Election Day, which is Tuesday, November 6. Thank God it is almost here ... finally! I won't speak for you, but I am so *ready* for Election Day to come and go. As you probably know, all 435 seats for the U. S. House of Representatives are on the line, as well as 35 of the 100 seats in the U. S. Senate. Governor-ships in 36 of the 50 states along with 3 U. S. territories will also be decided.

Control of both the House and the Senate is up for grabs. Depending on who you listen to, if Democrats win the majority in the House and Senate, it will have disastrous consequences for America. Or if Republicans maintain control of both houses of Congress, that will spell doom for America. The 2018 election may turn out to be one of the most consequential mid-term elections in our nation's history. Or it may not. While the stakes are high, we won't know how historically significant it is until we see how the winners govern and how the losing party deals with being in the minority. One of my seminary professors was a master of one-liners. One of his favorites was: "The most important shot in golf is always the next one." You may have to be a golfer to appreciate it. Maybe the same thing applies to elections: The most important election is always the next one. At least that is how many people view it.

The need for civility in our society is as great as ever. On all sides. Regardless of which party has majorities in the House and Senate. I don't know if you need this word of caution or not, but I offer it for the benefit of any who may need it: Don't pin your hopes for the health or well-being or peace or prosperity of America on the outcome of this or any election. Elections may (and do) have consequences for the good or ill of a nation, a society, interest groups, and individuals, but election results must not be the source of our ultimate hope. We must guard against the idolatry of believing that a particular political party or viewpoint is the ultimate source of or key to our salvation as a country.

The Bible warns us in Psalm 146 not to put our trust in princes (or presidents or political parties or even politics for that matter), not to trust in mortal men (or women) who cannot save, but instead to put our hope in God, who alone has the power to save and to lead us into the kind of life for which we were created. Our hope, as I said last Sunday, is not in donkeys (Democrats) or elephants (Republicans), but in the Lamb of God – Jesus – who came to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and to give us life, "real and eternal life, more and better life than (we) ever dreamed of" (John 10:10, *MSG*).

As election day approaches, I urge you to pray. Pray for our nation. Pray for the wisdom and understanding to vote for the candidate(s) who will best represent God's values and serve His purposes for good in our civil government. Pray for the election of candidates, whatever their party affiliation, who will best represent God's values and serve His purposes for good. Pray that in their governing, they will seek to do what is best for our country, not merely what the leaders of their party want them to do, or what will help them get re-elected. Pray for leaders

at all levels of government to be men and women of godly character who know they need God and who look to Him for wisdom, guidance, courage, and strength.

Pray. Then vote. Then leave the results in God's hands and remember that this election, whatever its outcome, is just another opportunity to trust God.

The 2018 mid-term election, however politically significant it turns out to be, is *not* the election that matters most. The election that matters most – from a *spiritual* standpoint and from a *theological* standpoint – took place a long time ago. Actually, to be more precise, it took place *before* the beginning of time. It took place, as Paul says in Ephesians 1:4, “before the foundation of the world” (ESV). Before the universe and everything in it was created. The election I’m talking about is God’s free, sovereign, and loving election of those to whom He would give the gift of salvation, which, as a gift of grace, comes free of charge to people like you and me who don’t deserve it and never will.

Listen again to what Paul writes in Ephesians 1, starting in verse 3:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He (God) chose (elected) us in Him (Christ) before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He (God) predestined us to be adopted as His [children] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace, which He (God) has freely given us in the One (Jesus) He loves. In Him (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding” (1:3-8).

I could keep going. This is one of the richest and most uplifting theological passages in the Bible. You can’t tell from English translations, but in the original Greek – the language in which Paul wrote this letter – verses 3-14 are one very long, elaborate, elegant, complex sentence. I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t want to have to try to diagram it! As John Stott puts it, the entire paragraph – consisting of this one long sentence – is “a (song) of praise, a doxology, or ... a ‘eulogy’”, which is actually the word Paul uses in verse 3. A eulogy is a tribute, often given at a funeral or memorial service, though sometimes while a person is still living, at a retirement ceremony, for example, for a person whose life, character, or contribution has made a positive difference. Paul uses one form or another of the word *eulogia* or the verb *eulogeo* three times in verse 3, which begins: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He blesses *God* (or praises Him, as it says in the NIV) for blessing *us* with every spiritual blessing in Christ. That is how Paul starts this beautiful and elaborate explanation of what God has done for us in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He “eulogizes” God for blessing us with every conceivable spiritual blessing. That is a good place for each of us to begin each day. Why not begin every day by blessing God for blessing you with every spiritual blessing in Christ?

The first of these spiritual blessings for which Paul blesses or praises God is His election of His people to salvation. Verse 4 says: “For He (God) chose us in Him (Christ) before the foundation of the world.” The verb “chose” is the same word used in the Greek translation of

the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, where it is used for God's choice of Israel to be His covenant people.

I know the doctrine of election can provide a variety of responses. It has been a point of contention among Protestants pretty much since the time of the Protestant Reformation. Even within the Reformed tradition to which we belong as evangelical Presbyterians, there is disagreement as to the exact meaning of the doctrine of election and the "P" word associated with it: predestination.

Do you have to believe the doctrine of election in order to be saved? Must you affirm it in order to be a true follower of Jesus? No. It is not an "essential of the faith." However, if you want to be a biblical Christian, if you want to have a faith that is consistent with the teachings of the Bible, you can't ignore or deny what the Bible teaches about election and predestination, just as you can't ignore or deny what it teaches about the exercise of our free will.

R. C. Sproul, the founder of Ligonier Ministries who died last December, has long been one of the main theological mentors in my life. Listen to the way he explains predestination in his book *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology* (also published under the title *What is Reformed Theology*): "Paul speaks of believers being predestined according to the counsel of God's will." It is clearly stated here in Ephesians 1, as well as Romans 8 and other places in the New Testament. "The question then," he says, "is not: Does the Bible teach predestination? The question is: What exactly does the biblical concept of predestination mean? In its most basic sense predestination has to do with the question of destiny. A destiny or destination is a point toward which we are moving but have not yet reached. When we book airline tickets, we do not book them to nowhere. We have a destination in mind, a place we are trying to reach.

"When we add the prefix *pre* to *destination*, we speak of something that takes place prior to or before the destination. The *pre* of *predestination* relates to the question of time. In biblical categories predestination clearly takes place, not only before we believe in Christ, and not only before we were even born, but from all eternity, before the universe was ever created."

Continuing, Sproul says: "The agent of predestination is God. In His sovereignty He predestinates" (or predestines). "Human beings are the object of His predestination. In short, predestination refers to God's sovereign plan for human beings, decreed by Him in eternity.... The term *election* refers specifically to one aspect of divine predestination: God's choosing of certain individuals to be saved. The term *election* has a positive connotation, referring to a benevolent predestination that results in the salvation of those who are elect.

"In summary," he says, "we may define *predestination* broadly as follows: From all eternity God decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish. God made a choice. He" – freely, sovereignly, and graciously – "chose some individuals to be saved," to be adopted, as Paul says in verse 5, as His sons and daughters through our Savior Jesus Christ; "and others He chose to pass over, allowing them to suffer

the consequences of their sins,” which involves eternal separation from God in hell. (Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 140-141; See also Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 161-162.)

I feel like I’m tiptoeing through a mine field laden with theological landmines that could explode at any moment. As one who literally has a hard time swallowing pills sometimes, I know this can be a terribly difficult doctrinal pill to swallow and digest. Some people, including many sincere Christians, find this doctrine offensive. Others find it confusing. Still others complain that it is just plain unfair for God to choose to save some and not others. When we combine the doctrine of election or predestination with commonly-held views about the freedom of our will and our ability to choose, either the pendulum of our belief will swing in one direction or the other, or we will admit that there is something going on in the counsels of God that is just beyond our ability to comprehend it.

I can guarantee you that I will not answer or even address every question you may have about election or predestination today. If you don’t believe in the doctrine of election or predestination, I don’t know that I can change your mind by anything I say. I do hope, though, that you will seriously consider what Paul says about it here and what Jesus Himself says about it in the Gospels, in such places as:

- John 15:16, where Jesus says to His disciples on the night before His death: “You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that won’t spoil.”
- John 6:44, where Jesus is speaking to a group of people who were skeptical and critical of His message: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him (or her).” Think about that. Jesus is saying that no one comes to Him on our own. You can only come to Jesus and believe in Him if the Heavenly Father draws you to Jesus in His grace.

Returning to Ephesians 1, it is striking that, as Paul lays out for us the spiritual blessings that are ours and the fullness of what God has done for us in and through Christ, his explanation of God’s loving and gracious choice of the elect before the creation of the world – God’s decision beforehand (His predestination of us) to adopt us as His children through Jesus Christ (1:4-5) – does not give Paul spiritual heartburn. It does not prompt him to protest. It does not move him to object on the grounds that it is unfair. It does not cause him to be offended. It is not grounds for him to be angry with God. On the contrary, Paul understands the doctrine of election or predestination to be a doctrine of grace. It is an expression of God’s sovereign grace, apart from which no one – *no one* – could ever be saved. It is, as he says in verse 6, “to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves” – in other words, in and through Jesus His Son, who for us and for our salvation willingly gave up His life as a ransom for our sins.

Far from being angry with God over the doctrine of election, Paul affirms it – celebrates it, even – as one of the greatest of all the spiritual blessings we have received in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you see that? God’s electing grace is at the top of the list of all the reasons Paul gives in this passage to bless, to praise, to give thanks to God.

In addition, Paul affirms – and celebrates – God’s electing grace in predestination because he knows that, if God had not elected some to receive the gift of salvation, no one would or could ever be saved. I understand the objection, from our limited human understanding, that it seems unfair for God to choose to save some people and not others. It is hard for us to understand. I find it helpful to remember that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, and our ways are not His ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God’s ways higher than our ways, and His thoughts than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). Or, as I saw on a T-shirt years ago:

There are two unchangeable truths in life:

1. There is a God.
2. You’re not Him.

Or, *I’m* not Him. God, who is sovereign in and over all things, including salvation, does not submit to my thoughts or my ways. I must submit my thoughts and my ways to Him.

The truly amazing thing about God’s electing grace is not that He chooses to give the gift of salvation to some and not to others, but that He chooses to save any of us at all. Because, if it were left up to us, if it were up to us to choose to believe in Jesus on our own, no one would ever be saved.

No one, not you, not me, not the most spiritual person you know or the most saintly person who ever lived – would ever come to Jesus on our own. Why? Because, as Paul explains in Ephesians 2, apart from God’s saving grace, we were all dead in our transgressions and sins (2:1). All of us. Not just spiritually sick or handicapped. We were dead as a doornail. Spiritually speaking, there was no breath, no heartbeat, no brain waves in us. When you’re dead, spiritually or physically, there is nothing you can do to make yourself alive. It is hopeless. You are helpless. Then the Bible utters these earth-shaking, life-giving words in Ephesians 2:4-5: “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace” – and wholly by grace – “you have been saved.” This changes everything. *God* changes everything.

If God did not first choose to make you spiritually alive in the Lord Jesus Christ, you would still be spiritually dead. You would never have embraced the gospel. You would never have put your faith in Jesus for salvation.

For some of you, this may be a new or different way of looking at salvation. It may be uncomfortable. It was terribly uncomfortable for me when I first encountered the doctrines of grace from a Reformed perspective as a college student. In the church in which I grew up, the doctrine of election or predestination was anathema. It was heresy. The church even fired one pastor after only a year because it turned out that he was a Calvinist. I was thoroughly steeped in Wesleyan Arminianism that emphasized our natural human ability to choose to believe in Christ and follow Him.

Then I went off to college, where I studied under professors who were Reformed in their theology. From them I was exposed to the teachings of John Calvin and other scholars and theologians who affirmed biblical doctrines at odds with some of what I had been taught at

church. I've shared this many times in our Officer Training classes for elders and deacons. I went through a lengthy period of soul-searching before finally concluding that what my professors were teaching about the sovereignty of God and its implications for salvation, including the doctrine of election or predestination, was in fact biblical and therefore true.

I don't understand election today nearly as well as I thought I understood it all 40 years ago (when I thought I knew and understood pretty much everything). It is much more of a mystery to me. But I believe it, because the Bible teaches it.

There is so much more in this passage, and so much more to the doctrine of election. But it is time for me to wrap this up. So let me just say two more things very quickly.

First, God's decision to save you or me or anyone is not about anything of merit He sees in us. It is not because we are any more deserving of salvation than someone else. It is simply a matter of His gracious and loving choice. Why He should choose to save me and not someone else is a mystery.

He does not choose us, as some people think, because He looks into the future and sees that we will choose to believe and follow Him. According to this view, in His foreknowledge, God knows who will come to Him in faith, and so these are the ones He "elects" for salvation. In other words, we really choose ourselves to be saved. This is not what the Bible teaches.

Second, many people think the doctrine of election makes evangelism unnecessary. If God is going to save certain people, they think, He will save them, whether or not we ever tell anyone about Jesus. That is not the way it works. In the words of James Boice: "The fact that God elects [some] to salvation does not eliminate the means by which He calls (the elect) to faith" (Boice, *Ephesians*, 19). The doctrine of election was not a disincentive to Paul, the first great missionary in the history of the church.

God uses His church, and ordinary people like us, to bring to faith those He has chosen for salvation. It is another mystery. But it does not diminish the privilege and responsibility the Lord Jesus has given us to be the human instruments and messengers through whom He brings sinners to saving faith in Him.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.