

The Ephesians Series
SOVEREIGN SELECTION (Part 4)
Selected Verses
August 19, 2007
Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church

For those of you who are visiting with us, or perhaps those of our own congregation who have been away, I should tell you that you find us in the middle of a study from Ephesians chapter 1. We have begun Paul's great letter to the church there in Ephesus and to the surrounding area, and we have looked, over the last several weeks, at the doctrine of election. In Ephesians chapter 1, over the last couple of weeks, we have discovered several features of divine election. In verse 4 we discovered that election is sovereign. "God chose," verse 4 says. We discovered that election is individual. "God chose us." That election is "in Christ." Because of our connection to Him, we're told that God chose us "in Him." Fourthly, we discovered from this passage that election is unconditional. Verse 4 says, "God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." God chose, in eternity past, so that it had nothing to do with us, but solely with His grace.

Last week, we stopped our study of Ephesians for a moment to consider some questions that always come up whenever you talk about the issue of election. How do you reconcile God's election with God's universal love for all men? How do you reconcile it with free will? And what about evangelism? What about the non-elect? We discussed all of those issues together. If you've not been here, and you've missed one of those weeks over the recent few weeks, I encourage you to listen, because that really laid the foundation for what we'll discuss today.

There is one more feature of election to unpack from Ephesians chapter 1 and, Lord willing, we'll look at it together next Sunday; but today, to prepare our hearts for communion, I want us to think together for a few minutes about the ramifications of election. What are the practical implications of the doctrine of election? Many people have the mistaken impression that doctrine is unimportant and, in fact, that it's only divisive. I've actually heard people say that. I just want the practical teaching. Don't give me doctrine. Well, Paul certainly wouldn't agree with you, because as he writes to the Ephesians, he begins the first half of his letter--the first three chapters--and there is nothing "practical." It's all teaching about the great truth of God and His acts in history. It's not until you get to Ephesians 4:1 that he gets practical, if you will--if you believe that doctrine isn't practical. To the apostle Paul, it's very practical.

There are also others who have the mistaken impression that the doctrine of election, especially, is divisive and unhelpful, so we should just ignore it. It doesn't really benefit anyone. Well, Paul didn't think so. He ministered to the churches there in the area of Ephesus for three years. And about six years later, he writes them this letter, and he begins his letter to the church at Ephesus and the churches in the surrounding region, with the doctrine of election. The New Testament

Available online at: www.countrysidebible.org
Copyright © 2013 Tom Pennington. All rights reserved.
Unedited transcript for personal use only.

points out, in fact, that there are a number of practical uses, practical implications, of this doctrine. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if you can truly come to understand the doctrine of election, it will revolutionize your Christian life in several ways. How? Well, there are a number of practical benefits or blessings that come with a Biblical understanding of election. In the limited amount of time we have this morning, I want us to briefly examine three great benefits or blessings of election.

The first benefit of election is that election provides comfort in trials and troubles. We see this most clearly in Romans chapter 8. Turn there with me together this morning. Romans chapter 8. We've looked intensively at verses 29 and 30 of this chapter. Paul writes in Romans 8:29, "For those whom [God] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified [or declared righteous] and these whom He justified, He also glorified." That is, in the future, He will glorify them. That is a certain reality. It's as certain as if it had already happened in the past. Now, we love this passage. I love this passage, because it teaches us about what the reformers and the puritans called the golden chain of redemption. Each link linking together to form an unbreakable chain of God's sovereign love for us. But that's not why this is here. Notice how verse 29 begins. It begins with the word "for," that is, because. You see, verses 29 and 30 are not there just merely to teach us doctrine. Instead, they are the proof of what Paul says in verse 28. In context, verses 29 and 30 are here to assure us that all of the difficulties and troubles of life have a purpose, and that they fit into God's great eternal plan for us. Look at verse 28. It's one of the most familiar in all of scripture. "And we know [Paul says] that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, [there's the human faith side] and to those who are called according to His purpose." For--because. Paul says let me tell you what God has done. His love for you started in eternity past when He predestined you ultimately to be conformed to the image of His Son. It sweeps through time and your salvation, and it sweeps into eternity future when He will make you like Jesus Christ in glorification. Because of that, you can rest assured that whatever happens to you in this life, He will weave together for your good. You see Paul's basic point is that God has already acted for the good of those He chose and called, and He will never fail to act that way toward you, regardless of what your circumstances may look like. No matter how dark the clouds, how fierce the storm, God's eternal love is still on you. "For those whom He foreknew, He predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son." All that's happening to you is a part of that great eternal plan of God.

Turn back to Deuteronomy chapter 8. I love the way Moses puts it to the children of Israel as they are gathered there on the plains outside of Jericho. Deuteronomy 8:15. Moses says to them, "He led you [that is God led you] through the great and terrible wilderness." Notice, folks, that the wilderness is not always outside of God's purpose. The wilderness is in God's purpose. "He led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know." Even in the hard places, God cares for us. But why did God do this to His people? Notice the end of verse 16. "That He might humble you and that He might test you." You see God has a purpose in the troubles and trials that He brings into our lives, just as He did for the children of Israel in the wilderness those 40 years. But notice the end of verse 16. Ultimately God's purpose is "to do good for you in the

end." You know what Moses is saying? The same thing Paul says in Romans 8:28. God will cause all these things to work together for good.

When trials and troubles come into our lives, what's our very first temptation? The first temptation that comes is to doubt God's goodness and, then, to doubt His love. Maybe God doesn't really love me. How could God love me and let this come into my life? Perhaps right now you are going through a dark and difficult time. If you're honest with yourself, it's hard to remember, in the middle of that difficulty, in the middle of that trial, that God really does love you. But the fact that God chose you in eternity past guarantees you that He will cause everything in your life to work together for your good. There's nothing that He will bring into your life that will end the inexorable march of His good will toward you. It started in eternity past and it will march forward into eternity future and however dark the clouds may be now, God is still committed to you. You see Paul uses the doctrine of election in Romans chapter 8 to provide comfort for those in the midst of trouble and difficulty.

A second practical benefit of election that I want us to look at this morning is: it produces humility before God. Now, that may not seem like a great benefit to you, but it's a very important one to God. One of the great concerns God had in providing salvation was that those who were saved would have no grounds on which to boast before Him. That it would be all of grace. Paul makes this point in a number of passages. In Romans chapter 3 Paul explains the doctrine of justification--that God declares the believing sinner to be righteous with the righteousness of Christ, based solely on the life and death of Jesus Christ, and received by faith. After he explains that in Romans 3:27, he says, "Where then is boasting? It is excluded." God has so provided salvation He's done it in such a way as to get rid of all human boasting. Romans 4:2, "If Abraham was justified by works [that is, it was something he did] then he has something to boast about." If you had any part in your salvation, then you can boast before God. But notice Paul's response to that. "But not before God." It's like he's saying that's unthinkable, that a human being would have something to boast of before God. In Ephesians chapter 2, those familiar verses that we quote often, Paul makes this same point. Ephesians 2:8 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works [Why? Why has God done it this way?] so that no one may boast." Now, as direct as those passages are, I think the greatest statement of this design of God in election, comes in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. Turn there with me for a moment. In 1 Corinthians 1:18 he says to those Corinthians, "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Understand God did this on purpose. God purposely came up with a plan that appears to be foolish to the world. Look at the next verse, verse 19. "For it is written, I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." God did what He did. He provided salvation the way He did it in order to set up His own wisdom and to destroy all earthly wisdom. Verse 22, here's why: "For indeed Jews ask for signs." That is, the Jewish people always wanted some miracle to attest to the reality of something, and the cross surely didn't give them that, so they thought. And the Greeks look for human wisdom. They want something that's in line with their idea of wisdom. Verse 23, "But we preach Christ crucified." Paul says the essence of our message is a crucified Messiah--God on a cross. So how was that message received? Look at verse 23. To the Jews that message is a stumbling block. You'll recognize the Greek word that's translated stumbling block. The Greek word is skandalon. It's a scandal to

the Jews. It's an absolute scandalous message. It's an offense. They can't conceive of the Messiah being crucified, dying as a common criminal, cursed of God. I think I've told you before that in the second century there were a series of debates between Christian apologist Justin Martyr and a Jewish teacher of the law named Trypho. In one of those debates, the Jewish teacher of the law responds to Justin Martyr like this. He says, "It is quite clear that the scriptures announce that Messiah had to suffer. But prove to us whether He must be crucified and die so disgracefully and so dishonorably the death accursed in the law, for we cannot bring ourselves even to consider this." To the Jews, it was a scandal.

That's how the Jews responded. What about the Gentiles? Look at verse 23. To the Gentiles, this message of a crucified Messiah, God on a cross, was foolishness. To the Greeks and the Romans it was foolish. By the way, the Greek word that's translated foolishness here, is the word from which we get our English word moronic. Absolute folly. It's crazy. Today, the response is no different. The cross and the message of a crucified God is still either a scandal or it's moronic. So think about this for a moment. God in His wisdom has provided a way of spiritual rescue that is a scandal to the Jews and is moronic to the Gentiles. Now, you tell me, who's left? What hope is there that anyone will be saved? There's nobody left. If the Jews think it's an insult, a scandal, if the Gentiles think it's moronic, then what hope is there that anyone will ever respond to this scandalous, moronic message? There's only one hope. God's sovereign election, Paul says. Look at verse 24. "But to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks." Stop there a moment. What does he mean, the called? Well, in scripture, there are two kinds of calls. We studied this back a number of months ago on Sunday night. If you want to listen, you can go online and listen to the message on Effectual Calling.

There are two kinds of calls. Let me give you a brief overview. There's first the general call. This is the proclamation of the gospel message. Every time an unregenerate person encounters the gospel, God is issuing a general call to believe the good news. That's the general call. Then there is the effectual call, as theologians call it. This is the Father, speaking through the human presentation of the gospel, and calling His chosen ones to Himself, with the result that they always respond in faith. Many of us heard the gospel countless times before we came to faith in Christ. Growing up in America, many of us were exposed to Him in that way. All of those times you heard the gospel before you actually responded--those were general calls. God was calling you in the gospel. But that day when you really understood, when the Spirit brought conviction to your heart, when you responded in faith and repentance; that was God's effectual call. He was in that presentation of the gospel drawing you to Himself.

Now, with that understanding, look back at 1 Corinthians 1:24. To those who are the effectually called, the ones God has called to Himself; to them, Christ has become the power of God and the wisdom of God in spite of the scandal, and in spite of the foolishness of the message. Now, you tell me. Why do the called get it? Why do they respond to the message? Well, glance ahead to verses 27 and 28. Three times in those verses, Paul says it's because God has chosen. You see God effectually calls those whom He has chosen. Now verse 26 says, "Consider your calling, brethren." Think about this. Consider or think, first of all, about those whom God has not chosen. He says, there were not many wise, according to the flesh. This refers to those who were considered wise by the people of the world. You know what Paul is saying? He's saying very few of those who were considered the intellectuals of society, who were the naturally

brilliant, very few of those have been chosen by God. Verse 26 says “not many mighty.” Literally, not many of those who have power. This refers to those who have power and authority in this world, who wield a great deal of influence, who assert their authority in the context of the leadership of the world. Not many mighty. He adds, not many noble. That is, those who are from the nobility. Those who are highborn, or well born. Those born into the aristocracy, into the leading families of society. There are not many Christians from the higher ranks of society's families. Instead, instead of the wise, the intelligentsia, instead of the influential and the powerful, instead of those of the aristocracy and noble birth; look at those whom God has chosen. Verse 27. "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world." I hate to tell you, folks, but that's us. Instead of the wise of the world, instead of the intelligentsia, God has chosen those who are considered foolish by the intellectual elite. Listen to the news. Hear them talking about us poor misled pagans. That's how they think of us. We don't understand. God has chosen the foolish things of the world.

Verse 27 adds, He's “chosen the weak things of the world.” Instead of those with power and authority and influence, for the most part, God has chosen those without it, without power, without authority, without influence. Verse 28 adds, He's “chosen the base things of the world.” Instead of those of noble birth, God has chosen the base, the ignoble, those who aren't part of the world's leading families. You see there are very few Rockefellers, and very few Gates whom God has chosen. To further explain this group of the base, notice Paul adds, “the despised God has chosen,” that is, those on whom the rich and the powerful and the elite look with contempt. He adds one more category in verse 28, “The things that are not.” Let me give you a contemporary translation of that expression. Paul says God has chosen the nobodies. Those whom the intellectuals, whom the powerful, the influential families entirely overlook as though they didn't even exist--the nobodies. Charles Hodge, in his excellent commentary on 1 Corinthians says this, "There is a climax here. God has chosen not only plebeians, but of the plebeians, those who were objects of contempt, and even those below contempt, too insignificant to even be noticed at all." We don't even show up on the radar screen.

Now you'll notice that on the one hand God did not choose the wise and the great on account of their wisdom or greatness and, on the other hand, God doesn't choose the foolish and the weak on account of their lack of wisdom or their lack of greatness. The point here is God chose whomever He pleased without regard to them at all. Now, why has God chosen like this? Look at verse 27, “To shame the wise. To shame the things which are strong.” Verse 28, “So that He may nullify the things that are.” But in verse 29 he brings it all together in a package. It's "so that no man may boast before God." There is the reason God chose primarily the foolish, the weak, the base, the despised, the nobodies, is to remove every ground for human boasting. You see, not one of us sitting here this morning that are in Christ, not one of us can attribute our salvation to our own wisdom or to our noble birth or to our position and authority, or to anything else about ourselves. It's all of God.

But why did God elect at all? I mean, why did God decide to effect salvation by choosing certain ones to be saved? Well, the answer comes in verses 30 and 31. Notice that Paul begins verse 30 by asserting what theologians call monergism. Don't be scared of that word. Monergism comes from two words--mono meaning one, ergism comes from erg or unit of work--means work or effort. So in other words, salvation is not by synergism, my working in synergy

with God; but by monergism, by one working--by God working. Notice verse 30, "By His doing you are in Christ Jesus." How much more plain could Paul make it than that? By His doing you are in Christ Jesus. You're being in Christ Jesus has nothing to do with you. God is the efficient cause of your salvation. It's by His act that Christ has become your wisdom--he goes on to say--your righteousness, your sanctification, and your redemption. Charles Hodge, again, writes,

This is the turning point in theology, and therefore in religion, and it is here most explicitly asserted. And not only asserted, but it is declared to be the purpose of God to make it apparent and to force all men to acknowledge it. He so dispenses His grace, as to make men see, with regard to others, and to acknowledge with regard to themselves, that the fact they are in Christ, or true Christians, is due to Him and not to themselves.

It is solely by God's grace--by His undeserved, unmerited favor that you are in Jesus Christ.

Why did God choose certain ones? Why is there election? Look at verse 31. Here it is. "So that, [for this purpose] just as it is written [back in Jeremiah chapter 9] LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD." God's choice of certain ones to salvation in sovereign election is intended to destroy every shred of human pride and produce in every one of us a profound sense of humility and gratitude. As you sit here this morning, realize that God chose you in eternity past, and He chose you because of absolutely nothing in you. In fact, He purposely chose the foolish and the base, the ignoble, those who aren't the elite of society and culture. He did that so that no one could boast that they had a part. As you sit here this morning, God wants you to know that by His doing, you are in Christ Jesus. You know what that does to all of us. It throws us on our knees, because I didn't have the smallest part in my redemption. God was merciful to me, and so He was to you. He wants us to boast in Him.

That brings us to our third and final benefit or blessing of election. Election provides us assurance of God's love. This is really amazing to me because God Himself uses election to make this point. He does it in the last book of the Old Testament. Turn over to Malachi's prophecy. You've probably not spent a lot of time in Malachi, but it's a great book. The Puritans used to call it the catechism for doubt. Malachi was written about 433 years before Christ--433 BC. Israel's Babylonian captivity--you remember that 70 years they were carried off captive--that had ended about 100 years before. Malachi's ancestors had returned to the land of Israel. But when they got back, they found, after the Babylonian captivity, things were just not the same as they had been before. And over the hundred years or so leading up to Malachi's time, the people had become depressed and discouraged and disillusioned. They doubted God. They doubted His promises. And as always happens, when God doesn't meet our expectations, when we face difficult times; we find it easy to question His character. And that's exactly what Israel did in Malachi's time. Malachi organized his prophecy around a series of questions of the people. In each case, you'll find this sequence occurring. At some point we'll look at the entire book of Malachi. It's a fascinating study. But in each case, the book is structured around God making a statement. The people question God's statement, and then God presents evidence to prove what He said. Each of these exchanges between God and the people shows how wrongly the people are thinking about God, how scandalously they are thinking about God; and God, with

the evidence He presents, corrects their thinking, and corrects ours as well. I just want to look at the first one this morning.

Malachi 1:2. Here's the Lord's statement to Israel of Malachi's time. "I have loved you, says the LORD." I've loved you. But notice the people immediately question that. "But you say [Malachi writes--you, the people of Israel say] 'How?'" Look at our circumstances. Look at how bad everything is. How, exactly has the Lord loved us? Malachi, haven't you looked? Look at the circumstances we're in. How has God loved us? Now look at God's evidence to them, beginning in the middle of verse 2. Here it is. "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD, "Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau." You know what God's answer to their question "How in the world have you demonstrated love to us?" It was: remember that I chose you and not Esau and his offspring. This is the passage, by the way, that Paul uses to form his great defense of election in Romans chapter 9. We saw it together. Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated. R.C. Sproul, commenting on verse 2 says this,

These two men, that is Jacob and Esau, were twin brothers. They were carried in the same womb at the same time. One received the blessing of God and one did not. One received a special portion of the love of God and the other did not. Esau was hated by God.

Sproul goes on to say, "The divine hatred here is not the expression of an insidious attitude of malice. It's what David called holy hatred. Divine hatred is not malicious. It involves a withholding of favor." We saw that last week.

God is for those whom He loves. He turns His face against those wicked people who are not the objects of His special redemptive favor. Those whom He loves receive His mercy. Those whom He hates receive His justice. No one is treated unfairly.

God says you want to know how I loved you? I chose you. I set My love on you. Look at how differently God treated Esau and his descendants. Verse 3,

'I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness. Though Edom [Edom would be the offspring--the nation that was the offspring of Esau] says we have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins;' thus says the Lord of hosts, 'They may build, but I will tear down, and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the LORD is indignant forever.'

Do you ever doubt God's love? Be honest with yourself. Do you ever doubt that God loves you? Maybe your circumstances are such that you are forced to question--not forced, but you think you're forced by your circumstances--to question the love of God for you. Don't look at your circumstances like the people of Israel did. Instead, remember what God tells them. Remember that God has chosen you. That's how He's demonstrated His love to you. In eternity past He chose you. So understanding election deepens our understanding of God's love for us. It in fact proves God's love to us. God Himself said so. You know, this is so important. James

Montgomery Boice, before his death, said these, I think, wonderful words about the issue. He said, "Sadly, today's church frequently takes the love of God for granted. Of course God loves me, we say. I love myself. Why shouldn't God love me too?" He says, "Consider the little girl who loved the Barney theme song on television." I know some of you parents--this will be painful for you, you've heard it too many times. The song, "I love you, you love me, we're a happy family." But this little girl, Boice says, sang it this way, "I love me, you love me, we're a happy family." That is how we tend to think of God's love. We think we deserve it. Understanding that we are elected by grace alone undermines our self-centered, self-satisfied way of thinking. When God wanted to prove His love to His people Israel, at a time when they doubted it, He takes them back in eternity past to election, back to His unconditional choice of Jacob instead of Esau. You don't need to doubt My love, He says, because didn't I choose to set it upon you? Believer, get your mind--try to get your mind around this profound reality. God, the Almighty Infinite Being who inhabits eternity has set His love upon you, individually, by name. And if you want proof, just look at what He did when He chose you to be His own.

We can be secure in God's love because we were never the cause of it. The only cause was in God Himself. It's so important to grasp God's love for us. Why? Because it's only as you and I understand that we were helpless, ungodly, rebellious sinners; and that entirely in spite of us, God chose us, and Christ died for us--it's only as we understand this that we can be assured of God's love. Think of it like this: In eternity past, when God chose you, He knew every wicked thought you would ever allow into your mind. He knew every rotten word that would ever flow out of your lips. He knew every foul attitude that you would ever display. He understood every sinful act you would ever commit, every sinful pattern that would ever be a part of your life. Nothing you have done or will ever do can take God by surprise, and even though He knew all the rotten stuff there is to know about you; in spite of that, He chose to set His love upon you. That brings assurance of God's love. When we truly come to understand and grasp God's love for us, it will ignite our own love for God. What does John say in 1 John 4:19? "We love, because He first loved us." It is so important that we understand this. This is why Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with election. He wanted the Ephesians and us to better understand God's love for us.

Turn to Ephesians chapter 3, as we close our time of study and prepare for the Lord's Table in just a moment. Ephesians chapter 3. I've alluded to this prayer several times, and we will get here, in less time than you think we will. Ephesians 3:14. At the end of this doctrinal section, Paul prays. He says, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father." And he has this wonderful prayer. Notice where he goes with this prayer. Verse 18. My prayer is, that you will "be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love" that Christ has for us. And it's a love that surpasses knowledge. Paul says here's my prayer. You have got to grasp God's love for you in Christ. And it requires an act of divine power to give you a grasp of it. And even when we grasp it, no matter how high we go, it goes higher. No matter how deep we go, it does deeper. No matter how far we go, it goes longer. But what happens when we do grasp it? Notice the end of verse 19. In order "that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." Spiritual perfection. Christ-likeness. Personal holiness. You see understanding the love that God has for us in Christ is the foundation, as I've told you before, from which we grow into full spiritual maturity. That's exactly what Paul says in Ephesians 3:19. And that results from an experiential grasp of the love that God has for us. And that love

is most evidently demonstrated on two great parallel planes -- one in eternity past when God chose us, and in time, when Christ died for us. Oh, election has plenty of practical benefits. It comforts us in our trials and troubles, it humbles us before God and causes us to boast only in Him, and it assures us of God's love for us.

Our Father, we thank you for the blood of Christ. We thank you that He willingly poured out His life in a violent death--in the death of a criminal; because we were criminals, and deserve not only physical death, but we deserve your wrath that He endured for those six hours that Friday. Father, we thank you that He was our substitute. We can never imagine the love that motivated You to give up the most precious thing to You, Your only Son, for us. Lord, you have proven Your love. Help us to learn it. Help us to grow deep in it. Father, help us to be changed by it. May we grow up into the fullness of Christ through our knowledge and our grasp of Your great love for us in Him. We thank you Father for Your eternal, electing love and your redeeming love. We pray all of this in Jesus name. Amen