**Elect of God** 25/6/23

Read: Romans 9:1-24, 1Thessalonians 1

Text: 1Thessalonians 1:4-5

Psalms: 100old, 145:1-9, 147:15-20, 72old

When the apostle Paul came to Thessalonica he went into the synagogue to worship. He was given the opportunity to preach, it seems, so beginning with the Scriptures he explained that Christ had to suffer and die as the sacrifice for our sins, that he rose from the dead on the third day because death could not hold the Son of God. Paul had himself seen the risen Christ. Hearing this message some believed in Jesus as their Saviour and Lord, just like Paul. They put their faith in God. They turned from idols to serve the living and true God (1:9). Paul learned about their faith and love and hope when Timothy returned to Corinth after visiting Thessalonica. In this letter Paul gives thanks to God for the faith, love, and hope evidenced in the lives of these new believers.

Paul continues giving thanks to God for them, calling them ‘beloved brethren’ or ‘brethren loved by God’ (1:4). God loved them because he gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die in their place, to suffer the penalty for their sin. ‘But why me?’ they might have asked. And how was my heart changed or converted? They heard the gospel and their heart was changed. Paul explains that the gospel is not just words but words with power; the Bible is a book but not like any other book. The gospel comes with power, the power of the Holy Spirit; remember Pentecost. He also tells them that they are the ‘elect of God’ (Col 3:12). What did Paul mean? It is doubtful that any thought they were worthy to be called the children of God because of good works or parentage, but they may have thought they had decided to follow Jesus. On the other hand, they may not have understood exactly how they came to believe or have faith, part of the ‘mystery’ of the gospel.

The apostle Paul was a teacher of the law, a proud Pharisee, but on the Damascus road his heart was totally changed. He stopped believing in his own righteousness and persecuting Christ and started believing in Christ and following him. He saw himself as the greatest of sinner, as a man dead in sin who by the grace of God was made alive in Christ. It was not actually his decision but the call of Christ that changed his heart. It was all of grace and nothing of works.

As he explains what has happened to the believers at Thessalonica he goes to truth of election, of God in his sovereignty electing individuals to be saved. Elsewhere he writes of the truth of predestination, which is essentially the same (Rom 8:30). Election has been defined as, ‘An act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure’. Let us unpick this definition under the subheadings: ‘What and when of election’, ‘Why is election important’.

**1. What and when of election**

Let us begin with a brief history of this truth or doctrine. The Reformation led by Martin Luther returned to the church to the essential truth of salvation by grace along through faith alone. The Church of Rome had become so corrupt that not only your good works but the good works of other people could be credited to your account for salvation, and that by paying money to the church! Calvin led the Reformed church further into the teaching of the sovereignty of God in all things, sovereign in redemption as well as creation. Calvin’s teaching is found in the so-called five points of Calvinism, which have been summarised in the acronym TULIP; these points actually came out of the Synod of Dort (1618-19) that was called to answer the ‘Remonstrance articles’ of the Dutch theologian Arminius. The U in the acronym refers to ‘unconditional election’; unconditional because it is not dependent on anything seen or foreseen in us.

In a democracy like ours we hear the word ‘election’ all the time, and we get to elect a person to sit in our parliament. Our Prime Minister gets elected, but he has to work hard to get our vote, and he only remains for a term. Maybe marriage is a better analogy; we choose a marriage partner, who presumably has not had to work hard to gain our love, and remains with us for life. Marriage is a reflection of God’s choosing and God’s love (Eph 5:25), although God chose while we were still in our sin, still rebelling against him (Rom 5:8). He actually chose us before we were born!

The truth of God’s electing grace is seen in the OT when the children of Israel were slaves in Egypt. God in his grace and power delivered them out of slavery and brought them into him Promised Land. Why did God do this? The Bible says that he set his love on them and chose them, not because they were more in number or because of anything else about them - he simply chose them (Deut 7:7). God chose Aaron to be high priest; he chose David to be king, a most unlikely choice in man’s eyes, but God looks on the heart. God not only looks on the heart but changes hearts.

God’s choice of Jacob over his twin brother Esau is particularly interesting in terms of election. Paul refers to this when teaching the doctrine of election in Romans 9. While Esau, the firstborn, despised his birthright, selling it for a bowl of red stew (Heb 12:16), this was not the real reason for his downfall; it was but the outcome of God’s sovereign choice. It was God’s purpose, according to election, that the older would serve the younger; it was ‘not of works but of Him who calls’ (Rom 9:11). God chose the older to serve the younger even before they were born.

Paul explains further in his letter to the Ephesians that God, ‘chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love’ (Eph 1:4). In the following verse he writes of God ‘having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself’ and for his good pleasure. Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians ‘because God from the beginning chose you for salvation, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth’ (2Thess 2:13).

God did not choose us after we chose him anymore than the disciples chose Jesus: ‘You did not chose me, but I chose you’ (John 15:16). Paul makes it clear that God chose us, chose us to be saved and adopted as his children before we were born, and even before Adam was born, or rather, created. He did not choose us because he foresaw that we would believe or that we would do good works to merit him saving us. God knew all about us before we were born of course, but he chose us because of his electing love.

He chose us ‘according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace’ (Eph 1:5, 6). God is sovereign in all things and he is most gracious. He wants to be worshipped and glorified as the God of grace. It is not easy to comprehend the grace of God and his electing love, but knowing this truth we are bound to give him all the praise and take no glory to ourselves. God chose us to be glorified in him. ‘Whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified these He also glorified’ (Rom 8:30).

Paul called the believers in Thessalonica the elect of God because he saw or heard about their faith and their changed lives. We do not know who the elect of God are before we see their faith, although God does of course- he elected them. When we believe we know we are the elect of God and receive wonderful comfort from this truth, as we will mention shortly. We do not know who the elect are so we preach the gospel to all, as Jesus tells us to do: ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature’ (Mark 16:15). We call people to come to Jesus and be saved, and we tell them that they were elect from the foundation of the world.

Have you heard of the doctrine of election before? Some have not, and some simply ignore it. Others do not accept it because they think it is unfair that God chooses some but rejects others. This is because they do not understand the sovereignty of God. God does not have to choose anyone. We are all born in sin: ‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Rom 3:23). We were all destined to destruction, to hell. If God in his electing love chose to save us we should be grateful, and be giving thanks to God, like the apostle Paul. We urge everyone to listen to the gospel and believe, but some will not; not everyone will be saved.

Charles Spurgeon gave the following explanation: “Some say, ‘It is hard for God to choose some and leave others’. Now I will ask you one question. Is there any one of you who wishes to be holy, who wishes to be regenerate, to leave off sin and walk in holiness? ‘Yes, there is’ says someone. ‘I do’. Then God has elected you. But another says, ‘No, I don’t want to be holy: I don’t want to give up my lusts and my vices’. Why should you grumble then that God has not elected you to it? For if you were elected you would not like it, according to your own confession’.

**2. Why is the truth of election important?**

Why do we teach this doctrine of election? Is it just because we are a Reformed church? As Reformed believers we teach what is in the Bible, and we have this teaching here in 1Thessalonians 1:4, and in 2Thessalonians 2:13. So why does Paul teach election, especially to new believers? He taught election because he wanted them to understand the sovereignty of God in all things. The word that Paul preached was not his word, not the words of men but the word of God. This word has the power to touch and change hearts when the Holy Spirit accompanies the preaching (1:6). God’s electing love is effected in our hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit. Yes, we have to repent and believe, but our dead hearts must first be quickened by the Holy Spirit. We use the word ‘regeneration’. Election is followed by God’s call and by regeneration or new birth by the Holy Spirit.

When you repented and believed it was because the Holy Spirit was working in your heart, giving you the faith to believe the gospel. And when you believed you were justified by God in his grace, and now you are being sanctified or made holy by God in his grace. We learned from 2Corinthians that the Holy Spirit is given by God to dwell in our hearts as a guarantee of our salvation (2Cor 1:22). We find assurance in this doctrine of election also- as Paul says here in verse 5.

Do you have assurance that you are saved and have a place in heaven? Millions of Christians don’t know if they will end up in heaven or hell! Why? Because they think their good works are part of their salvation, and who knows if their works are good enough? This was the situation before the Reformation, and remains so today. Moreover, there are those who say that they chose Christ, that they made the decision to follow Christ. They may show you their baptismal certificate or church membership certificate. Baptism is biblical, as is church membership and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but our assurance does not come from our worship or our good works. Some people think it presumptuous if you tell them you are certain you are going to heaven. They have no assurance and they think this is the lot of the Christian; what if they miss out on the last rites? The doctrine of personal assurance is closely associated with the doctrine of election that the apostle writes about here in this letter.

If God chose us, as this doctrine declares, then nothing can separate us from him, as Paul says in Romans 8:39. Jesus himself said, ‘All whom the Father give to me will come to me’; is this not divine election? And then, ‘No one will snatch them out of my hand’; is this not divine assurance? God’s electing love is powerful and effective. God’s electing love is unconditional. It relies on nothing we are or do, since it was bestowed upon us before the creation of the world. And therefore we cannot lose it through anything we say or do (Rom 8:37-39). God’s election of his people is both the outworking of, and the guarantee of his love for us! May you be comforted by this wonderful truth of God’s election, just as Paul wanted to comfort the elect of God in Thessalonica.