

## The Doctrine of Election

### [John Calvin](#)

This sermon is from a Wm. B. Eerdmans' volume which was a reprint of the only sizable collection of John Calvin's sermons translated into the English language since the Sixteenth Century and the only volume ever published in America up to that time (1949). The collection was originally published in a limited edition in 1830 by John Forbes of New York.

**Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began;**

**But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. — 2 TIMOTHY 1:9, 10.**

WE HAVE SHOWN THIS MORNING, according to the text of St. Paul, that if we will know the free mercy of our God in saving us, we must come to His everlasting counsel: whereby He chose us before the world began. For there we see, He had no regard to our persons, neither to our worthiness, nor to any deserts that we could possibly bring. Before we were born, we were enrolled in His register; He had already adopted us for His children. Therefore let us yield the whole to His mercy, knowing that we cannot boast of ourselves, unless we rob Him of the honor which belongs to Him.

Men have endeavored to invent cavils, to darken the grace of God. For they have said, although God chose men before the world began, yet it was according as He foresaw that one would be diverse from another. The Scripture showeth plainly that God did not wait to see whether men were worthy or not when He chose them: but the sophisters thought they might darken the grace of God by saying, though He regarded not the deserts that were passed, He had an eye to those that were to come. For, say they, though Jacob and his brother Esau had done neither good nor evil, and God chose one and refused the other, yet notwithstanding He foresaw, (as all things are present with Him) that Esau would be a vicious man, and that Jacob would be as he afterwards showed himself.

But these are foolish speculations: for they plainly make St. Paul a liar who saith, God rendered no reward to our works when He chose us, because He did it before the world began. But though the authority of St. Paul were abolished, yet the matter is very plain and open, not only in the Holy Scripture, but in reason; insomuch that those who would make an escape after this sort, show themselves to be men void of all skill. For if we search ourselves to the bottom, what good can we find? Are not all mankind cursed? What do we bring from our mother's womb, except sin?

Therefore we differ not one whit, one from another; but it pleaseth God to take those to Himself whom He would. And for this cause, St. Paul useth these words in another place, when he saith, men have not whereof to rejoice, for no man finds himself better than his fellows, unless it be because God discerneth him. So then, if we confess that God chose us before the world began, it necessarily follows, that God prepared us to receive His grace; that He bestowed upon us that goodness, which was not in us before; that He not only chose us to be heirs of the kingdom of heaven, but He likewise justifies us, and governs us by His Holy Spirit. The Christian ought to be so well resolved in this doctrine, that he is beyond doubt.

There are some men at this day, that would be glad if the truth of God were destroyed. Such men fight against the Holy Ghost, like mad beasts, and endeavor to abolish the Holy Scripture. There is more honesty in the papists, than in these men: for the doctrine of the papists is a great deal better, more holy, and more agreeable to the sacred Scripture, than the doctrine of those vile and wicked men, who cast down God's holy election; these dogs that bark at it, and swine that root it up.

However, let us hold fast that which is here taught us: God having chosen us before the world had its course, we must attribute the cause of our salvation to His free goodness; we must confess that He did not take us to be His children, for any deserts of our own; for we had nothing to recommend ourselves into His favor. Therefore, we must put the cause and fountain of our salvation in Him only. and ground ourselves upon it: otherwise, whatsoever and howsoever we build, it will come to nought.

We must here notice what St. Paul joineth together; to wit, the grace of Jesus Christ, with the everlasting counsel of God the Father: and then he bringeth us to our calling, that we may be assured of God's goodness. and of His will, that would have remained hid from us, unless we had a witness of it. St. Paul saith in the first place, that the grace which hangeth upon the purpose of God, and is comprehended in it, is given in our Lord Jesus Christ. As if he said, seeing we deserve to be cast away, and hated as God's mortal enemies, it was needful for us to be grafted, as it were, into Jesus Christ; that God might acknowledge, and allow us for His children. Otherwise, God could not look upon us, only to hate us; because there is nothing but wretchedness in us; we are full of sin, and stuffed up as it were with all kinds of iniquity.

God, who is justice itself, can have no agreement with us, while He considereth our sinful nature. Therefore, when He would adopt us before the world began, it was requisite that Jesus Christ should stand between us and Him; that we should be chosen

in His person, for He is the well beloved Son: when God joineth us to Him, He maketh us such as pleaseth Him. Let us learn to come directly to Jesus Christ. if we will not doubt God's election: for He is the true looking glass, wherein we must behold our adoption.

If Jesus Christ be taken from us, then is God a judge of sinners; so that we cannot hope for any goodness or favor at His hands, but look rather for vengeance: for without Jesus Christ. His majesty will always be terrible and fearful to us. If we hear mention made of His ever-lasting purpose, we cannot but be afraid, as though He were already armed to plunge us into misery. But when we know that all grace resteth in Jesus Christ, then we may be assured that God loved us, although we were unworthy.

In the second place, we must notice that St. Paul speaketh not simply of God's election, for that would not put us beyond doubt; but we should rather remain in perplexity and anguish: but he adds, *the calling*; whereby God hath opened His counsel, which before was unknown to us, and which we could not reach. How shall we know then that God hath chosen us, that we may rejoice in Him, and boast of the goodness that He hath bestowed upon us? They that speak against God's election, leave the gospel alone; they leave all that God layeth before us, to bring us to Him; all the means that He hath appointed for us, and knoweth to be fit and proper for our use. We must not go on so; but according to St. Paul's rule, we must join the calling with God's everlasting election.

It is said, we are called; and thus we have this second word, calling. Therefore God calleth us: and how? Surely, when it pleaseth Him to certify us of our election; which we could by no other means attain unto. For who can enter into God's counsel? as saith the prophet Isaiah; and also the apostle Paul. But when it pleaseth God to communicate Himself to us familiarly, then we receive that which surmounteth the knowledge of all men: for we have a good and faithful witness, which is the Holy Ghost; that raiseth us above the world, and bringeth us even into the wonderful secrets of God.

We must not speak rashly of God's election, and say, we are predestinate; but if we will be thoroughly assured of our salvation, we must not speak lightly of it; whether God hath taken us to be His children or not. What then? Let us look at what is set forth in the gospel. There God showeth us that He is our Father; and that He will bring us to the inheritance of life, having marked us with the seal of the Holy Ghost in our hearts, which is an undoubted witness of our salvation, if we receive it by faith.

The gospel is preached to a great number, which notwithstanding, are reprobate; yea, and God discovereth and showeth that He hath cursed them: that they have no part nor portion in His kingdom, because they resist the gospel, and cast away the grace that is offered them. But when we receive the doctrine of God with obedience and faith, and rest ourselves upon His promises, and accept this offer that He maketh us, to take us for His children, this, I say, is a certainty of our election. But we must here remark, that when we have knowledge of our salvation, when God hath called us and enlightened us in the faith of His gospel, it is not to bring to nought the everlasting predestination that went before.

There are a great many in these days that will say, who are they whom God hath chosen, but only the faithful? I grant it; but they make an evil consequence of it; and say faith is the cause, yea, and the first cause of our salvation. If they called it a middle cause, it would indeed be true; for the Scripture saith, "By grace are ye saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8). But we must go up higher; for if they attribute faith to men's free will, they blaspheme wickedly against God, and commit sacrilege. We must come to that which the Scripture showeth; to wit, when God giveth us faith, we must know that we are not capable of receiving the gospel, only as He hath framed us by the Holy Ghost.

It is not enough for us to hear the voice of man, unless God work within, and speak to us in a secret manner by the Holy Ghost; and from hence cometh faith. But what is the cause of it? Why is faith given to one and not to another? St. Luke showeth us: saying, "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (Acts 13 :48). There were a great number of hearers, and yet but few of them received the promise of salvation. And what few were they? Those that were appointed to salvation. Again, St. Paul speaketh so largely upon this subject, in his epistle to the Ephesians, that it cannot be but the enemies of God's predestination are stupid and ignorant, and that the devil hath plucked out their eyes; and that they have become void of all reason, if they cannot see a thing so plain and evident.

St. Paul saith, God hath called us, and made us partakers of His treasures and infinite riches, which were given us through our Lord Jesus Christ: according as He had chosen us before the world began. When we say that we are called to salvation because God hath given us faith, it is not because there is no higher cause; and whosoever cannot come to the everlasting election of God, taketh somewhat from Him, and lesseneth His honor. This is found in almost every part of the Holy Scripture.

That we may make a short conclusion of this matter, let us see in what manner we ought to keep ourselves. When we inquire about our salvation, we must not begin to say, Are we chosen? No, we can never climb so high; we shall be confounded a thousand times, and have our eyes dazzled, before we can come to God's counsel. What then shall we do? Let us hear what is said in the gospel: when God hath been so gracious, as to make us receive the promise offered, know we not that it is as much as if He had opened His whole heart to us, and had registered our election in our consciences!

We must be certified that God hath taken us for His children, and that the kingdom of heaven is ours; because we are called in Jesus Christ. How may we know this? How shall we stay ourselves upon the doctrine that God hath set before us? We must magnify the grace of God, and know that we can bring nothing to recommend ourselves to His favor; we must become nothing in our own eyes, that we may not claim any praise; but know that God hath called us to the gospel, having chosen us before the world began. This election of God is, as it were, a sealed letter; because it consisteth in itself, and in its own nature: but we may read it, for God giveth a witness of it, when He called us to Himself by the gospel and by faith.

For even as the original or first copy taketh nothing from the letter or writing that is read, even so must we be out of doubt of our salvation. When God certifieth us by the gospel that He taketh us for His children, this testimony carries peace with it; being signed by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and sealed by the Holy Ghost. When we have this witness, have we not enough to content our minds? Therefore, God's election is so far from being against this, that it confirmeth the witness which we have in the gospel. We must not doubt but what God hath registered our names before the world was made, among His chosen children: but the knowledge thereof He reserved to Himself.

We must always come to our Lord Jesus Christ, when we talk of our election; for without Him (as we have already shown), we cannot come nigh to God. When we talk of His decree, well may we be astonished, as men worthy of death. But if Jesus Christ be our guide, we may with cheerfulness depend upon Him; knowing that He hath worthiness enough in Him to make all His members beloved of God the Father; it being sufficient for us that we are grafted into His body, and made one with Him. Thus we must muse upon this doctrine, if we will profit by it aright: as it is set forth by St. Paul; when he saith, this grace of salvation was given us *before the world began*. We must go beyond the order of nature, if we will know how we are saved, and by what cause, and from whence our salvation cometh.

God would not leave us in doubt, neither would He hide His counsel, that we might not know how our salvation was secured; but hath called us to Him by His gospel, and hath sealed the witness of His goodness and fatherly love in our hearts. So then, having such a certainty, let us glorify God, that He hath called us of His free mercy. Let us rest ourselves upon our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that He hath not deceived us, when He caused it to be preached that He gave Himself for us, and witnessed it by the Holy Ghost. For faith is an undoubted token that God taketh us for His children; and thereby we are led to the everlasting election, according as He had chosen us before.

He saith not that God hath chosen us because we have heard the gospel, but on the other hand, he attributes the faith that is given us to the highest cause; to wit, because God hath fore-ordained that He would save us; seeing we were lost and cast away in Adam. There are certain dolts, who, to blind the eyes of the simple and such as are like themselves, say, the grace of salvation was given us because God ordained that His Son should redeem mankind, and therefore this is common to all.

But St. Paul spake after another sort; and men cannot by such childish arguments mar the doctrine of the gospel: for it is said plainly, that God hath saved us. Does this refer to all without exception? No; he speaketh only of the faithful. Again, does St. Paul include all the world? Some were called by preaching, and yet they made themselves unworthy of the salvation which was offered them: therefore they were reprobate. God left others in their unbelief, who never heard the gospel preached.

Therefore St. Paul directed himself plainly and precisely to those whom God had chosen and reserved to Himself. God's goodness will never be viewed in its true light, nor honored as it deserveth, unless we know that He would not have us remain in the

general destruction of mankind; wherein He hath left those that were like unto us: from whom we do not differ; for we are no better than they: but so it pleased God. Therefore all mouths must be stopped; men must presume to take nothing upon themselves, except to praise God, confessing themselves debtors to Him for all their salvation.

We shall now make some remarks upon the other words used by St. Paul in this place. It is true that God's election could never be profitable to us, neither could it come to us, unless we knew it by means of the gospel; for this cause it pleased God to reveal that which He had kept secret before all ages. But to declare His meaning more plainly, he adds, that this grace is revealed to us now. And how? "By the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ." When he saith that this grace is revealed to us by the appearing of Jesus Christ, he showeth that we should be too unthankful, if we could not content and rest ourselves upon the grace of the Son of God. What can we look for more? If we could climb up beyond the clouds, and search out the secrets of God, what would be the result of it? Would it not be to ascertain that we are His children and heirs?

Now we know these things, for they are clearly set forth in Jesus Christ. For it is said, that all who believe in Him shall enjoy the privilege of being God's children. Therefore we must not swerve from these things one jot, if we will be certified of our election. St. Paul hath already shown us, that God never loved us, nor chose us, only in the person of His beloved Son. When Jesus Christ appeared He revealed life to us, otherwise we should never have been the partakers of it. He hath made us acquainted with the everlasting counsel of God. But it is presumption for men to attempt to know more than God would have them know.

If we walk soberly and reverently in obedience to God, hearing and receiving what He saith in the Holy Scripture, the way will be made plain before us. St. Paul saith, when the Son of God appeared in the world, He opened our eyes, that we might know that He was gracious to us before the world was made. We were received as His children, and accounted just; so that we need not doubt but that the kingdom of heaven is prepared for us. Not that we have it by our deserts, but because it belongs to Jesus Christ, who makes us partakers with Himself.

When St. Paul speaketh of the appearing of Jesus Christ, he saith, "He hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." It is not only said that Jesus Christ is our Savior, but that He is sent to be a mediator, to reconcile us by the sacrifice of His death; He is sent to us as a lamb without blemish; to purge us and make satisfaction for all our trespasses; He is our pledge, to deliver us from the condemnation of death; He is our righteousness; He is our advocate, who maketh intercession with God that He would hear our prayers.

We must allow, all these qualities to belong to Jesus Christ, if we will know aright how He appeared. We must look at the substance contained in the gospel. We must know that Jesus Christ appeared as our Savior, and that He suffered for our salvation; and that we were reconciled to God the Father through His means; that we have been cleansed from all our blemishes, and freed from everlasting death. If we know not that

He is our advocate, that He heareth us when we pray to God, to the end that our prayers may be answered, what will become of us; what confidence can we have to call upon God's name, who is the fountain of our salvation? But St. Paul saith, Jesus Christ hath fulfilled all things that were requisite for the redemption of mankind.

If the gospel were taken away, of what advantage would it be to us that the Son of God had suffered death, and risen again the third day for our justification? All this would be unprofitable to us. So then, the gospel putteth us in possession of the benefits that Jesus Christ hath purchased for us. And therefore, though He be absent from us in body, and is not conversant with us here on earth, it is not that He hath withdrawn Himself, as though we could not find Him; for the sun that shineth doth no more enlighten the world, than Jesus Christ showeth Himself openly to those that have the eyes of faith to look upon Him, when the gospel is preached. Therefore St. Paul saith, Jesus Christ hath brought *life to light*, yea, everlasting life.

He saith, the Son of God hath abolished death. And how did He abolish it? If He had not offered an everlasting sacrifice to appease the wrath of God, if He had not entered even to the bottomless pit to draw us from thence; if He had not taken our curse upon Himself, if He had not taken away the burden wherewith we were crushed down, where should we have been? Would death have been destroyed? Nay, sin would reign in us, and death likewise. And indeed, let every one examine himself, and we shall find that we are slaves to Satan, who is the prince of death. So that we are shut up in this miserable slavery, unless God destroy the devil, sin, and death. And this is done: but how? He hath taken away our sins by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, though we be poor sinners, and in danger of God's judgment, yet sin cannot hurt us; the sting, which is venomous, is so blunted that it cannot wound us, because Jesus Christ has gained the victory over it. He suffered not the shedding of His blood in vain; but it was a washing wherewith we were washed through the Holy Ghost, as is shown by St. Peter. And thus we see plainly that when St. Paul speaketh of the gospel, wherein Jesus Christ appeared, and appeareth daily to us, he forgetteth not His death and passion, nor the things that pertain to the salvation of mankind.

We may be certified that in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ we have all that we can desire; we have full and perfect trust in the goodness of God, and the love He beareth us. But we see that our sins separate us from God, and cause a warfare in our members; yet we have an atonement through our Lord Jesus Christ. And why so? Because He hath shed His blood to wash away our sins; He hath offered a sacrifice whereby God hath become reconciled to us; to be short, He hath taken away the curse, that we may be blessed of God. Moreover, He hath conquered death, and triumphed over it; that He might deliver us from the tyranny thereof; which otherwise would entirely overwhelm us.

Thus we see that all things that belong to our salvation are accomplished in our Lord Jesus Christ. And that we may enter into full possession of all these benefits we most know that He appeareth to us daily by His gospel. Although He dwelleth in His heavenly

glory, if we open the eyes of our faith we shall behold Him. We must learn not to separate that which the Holy Ghost hath joined together. Let us observe what St. Paul meant by a comparison to amplify the grace that God showed to the world after the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; as if He said, the old fathers had not this advantage, to have Jesus Christ appear to them, as He appeared to us.

It is true, they had the self-same faith; and the inheritance of heaven is theirs, as well as ours; God having revealed His grace to them as well as us, but not in like measure, for they saw Jesus Christ afar off, under the figures of the law, as St. Paul saith to the Corinthians. The veil of the temple was as yet stretched out, that the Jews could not come near the sanctuary, that is, the material sanctuary. But now, the veil of the temple being removed, we draw nigh to the majesty of our God: we come most familiarly to Him, in whom dwelleth all perfection and glory. In short, we have the body, whereas they had but the shadow (Col. 2:17).

The ancient fathers submitted themselves wholly to bear the affliction of Jesus Christ; as it is said in the 11th chapter of the Hebrews; for it is not said, Moses bore the shame of Abraham, but of Jesus Christ. Thus the ancient fathers, though they lived under the law, offered themselves to God in sacrifices, to bear most patiently the afflictions of Christ. And now, Jesus Christ having risen from the dead, hath brought *life to light*. If we are so delicate that we cannot bear the afflictions of the gospel, are we not worthy to be blotted from the book of God, and cast off? Therefore, we must be constant in the faith, and ready to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ, whatsoever God will; because life is set before us, and we have a more familiar knowledge of it than the ancient fathers had.

We know how the ancient fathers were tormented by tyrants, and enemies of the truth, and how they suffered constantly. The condition of the church is not more grievous in these days, than it was then. For now hath Jesus Christ brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. As often as the grace of God is preached to us, it is as much as if the kingdom of heaven were opened to us; as if God reached out His hand, and certified us that life was nigh; and that He will make us partakers of His heavenly inheritance. But when we look to this life, which was purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ, we should not hesitate to forsake all that we have in this world, to come to the treasure above, which is in heaven.

Therefore, let us not be willingly blind; seeing Jesus Christ layeth daily before us the life and immortality here spoken of. When St. Paul speaketh of life, and addeth immortality, it is as much as if he said, we already enter into the kingdom of heaven by faith. Though we be as strangers here below, the life and grace of which we are made partakers through our Lord Jesus Christ shall bring its fruit in convenient time; to wit, when He shall be sent of God the Father to show us the effect of things that are daily preached, which were fulfilled in His person when He was clad in humanity.

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