

Election: The Ground and Source of the Christian Life

A SERMON ON EPHESIANS 1:3-4

We have already seen how St. Paul exhorts us to praise and bless God because he has blessed us, and that not after an earthly manner but after a spiritual manner, so that we should content ourselves with God's showing of his fatherly goodness and love toward us in opening the gate of the kingdom of heaven to us by hope. Although we are subject to much misery in this world, yet there is good reason for us to content ourselves with God's choosing of us after that fashion and with his calling of us to himself, for it is witnessed to us by the gospel that he is our Father [Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2] inasmuch as he has joined us to our Lord Jesus Christ as members to their Head.

And now St. Paul brings us to the origin and source, or rather to the principal cause that moved God to take us into his favor. For it is not enough that God has revealed the treasures of his goodness and mercy to us

to draw us to the hope of the heavenly life by the gospel—and yet that is very much. For had not St. Paul added that which we see now, it might have been surmised that God's grace is common to all men and that he offers it and presents it to all without exception, and, consequently, that it is in every man's power to receive it according to his own free will, by which means there would be some merit in us. For if there were no distinction between men except that some receive God's grace and others refuse it, what could be said but that God has shown himself liberal to all mankind? But they that are partakers of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ attain to it by faith. And so you see what might be judged of it. But St. Paul, to exclude all merit on man's part and to show that all comes from God's pure goodness and grace, says that he has blessed us according to his election of us beforehand. As if he should say that to exalt God's grace as becomes us, we must look upon the diversity that is found among men. For the gospel is preached to some, and others do not know what it is but are utterly shut out from it, as if God should make it rain in one quarter and allow another quarter to remain very dry.

Now if it is demanded why God pities the one part and forsakes and leaves and abandons the other, there is no other answer but that it so pleases him. Upon the preaching of the gospel in a place, some will be affected with lively faith in their hearts and others will go away as they came without benefiting at all, or else they harden themselves against God and betray the stub-

bornness that was hidden in them before. What is the reason for this difference? Even this, that God directs the one sort by his Holy Spirit and leaves the other sort in their natural corruption.

You see then that the thing in which God's goodness shines forth most to us, is that by the preaching of the gospel to us we have, as it were, a token that he has pitied us, loves us, calls us and allures us to him. But when the doctrine preached to us is received by us with heart and affection, that is yet a further and more special token by which we perceive that God intends to be our Father and has adopted us to be his children. Not without reason, then, St. Paul says in this passage that we are blessed by God even according to his election of us beforehand. For it is not that we have come to him; it is not that we have sought him. But the saying of the prophet Isaiah [65:1] must be fulfilled in every respect, namely, that God shows himself to such as did not seek him, and that such as were far off see him near at hand, and he says to them, "Here I am, here I am. Although you have despised me, yet I vouchsafe to come to you because I have a care of your salvation." Thus we see what St. Paul was aiming at in this passage.

In short, we have to note here that we shall never know where our salvation comes from till we have lifted up our minds to God's eternal counsel by which he has chosen whom he pleased and left the remainder in their confusion and ruin. Now then it is no marvel that some men think this doctrine to be strange and

hard, for it does not fit in at all with man's natural understanding. If a man asks of the philosophers, they will always tell him that God loves such as are worthy of it, and that, since virtue pleases him, he also marks out such as are given that way to claim them for his people. You see then that, after our own imagination, we shall judge that God puts no other difference between men, in loving some and in hating others, than each man's own worthiness and deserving. But, at the same time, let us also remember that in our own understanding there is nothing but vanity and that we must not measure God by our own yardstick, and that it is too excessive a presumption to impose law upon God so that it would not be lawful for him to do anything but that which we could conceive and which might seem just in our eyes. The matter here, therefore, concerns the reverencing of God's secrets which are incomprehensible to us, and unless we do so, we shall never taste the principles of faith. For we know that our wisdom ought always to begin with humility, and this humility imports that we must not come weighing God's judgments in our own balances or take it upon ourselves to be judges and arbiters of them. We must be sober because of the smallness of our minds, and since we are gross and dull, we must magnify God and say, as we are taught by the holy Scripture [Ps. 36:6], Lord, thy counsels are as a great deep, and no man is able to give an account of them.

You see then that the reason why some men find this doctrine hard and irksome is because they are too much

wedded to their own opinion and cannot submit themselves to God's wisdom, to receive his sayings soberly and modestly. And truly we ought to take warning from what St. Paul says, namely, that the natural man does not understand God's secrets but regards them as stark foolishness [1 Cor. 2:14]. And why? Because we are not his counselors but must have things revealed to us by his Holy Spirit, or else we shall never know them, and we must have them in such measure as he gives them to us.

St. Paul speaks here of the things we know by experience, namely, that we are God's children, that he governs us by his Holy Spirit, that he comforts us in our miseries and that he strengthens us through patience. We should not conceive any of all these things unless we were enlightened by his Holy Spirit. How then shall we understand that which is much higher, namely, that God elected us before the creation of the world? Since the matter stands thus, let us learn to put away all that we conceive in our own brain and put it under foot, and let us be ready to receive whatever God says to us, casting away our own judgment and assuring ourselves that we cannot bring anything from our side but utter stupidity. Thus you see what we have to bear in mind.

And, in fact, we see how St. Paul exhorts us to come to the same point. "Who art thou, O man (he says), who contends against thy God?" [Rom. 9:20]. After he had set down many replies we are accustomed to make, he says, "O man." By the word "man" he meant to

make us perceive our own frailty, for we are but worms of earth and rottenness [Ps. 103:14]. Now then, what audacity it is to open our mouths to reply against God. Is it not a perverting of the whole order of nature? Is it in our power to pluck the sun out of the sky, or to take the moon between our teeth, as they say? Much less is it lawful for us to contend with God and to advance reasons for controlling his judgments which we cannot comprehend.

There are those who will grant this doctrine of predestination, which St. Paul treats here, to be true, for they dare not contradict the Holy Spirit, yet they would it were buried so that it might never be spoken of. But they merely show themselves to be nothing but fools in controlling the Holy Spirit who spoke it by the prophets and apostles, and even by the mouth of God's only Son. For when our Lord intends to assure us of our salvation, he brings us back to this eternal election; and similarly when he intends to magnify the gift of faith, the one in the tenth chapter of John and the other in the sixth. And therefore that kind of people come too late to put God to silence and to efface from the holy Scripture the things which are shown there. For the whole Scripture is profitable [2 Tim. 3:16]. St. Paul said that of the Law and the Prophets. Therefore we may also conclude that there is nothing superfluous in the gospel, nor anything which serves no good purpose and by which we may not be edified both in faith and in the fear of God. . . .

But there are yet two more reasons which show that

this doctrine must of necessity be preached, and that we reap such great profit from it that it had been much better if we had never been born than be ignorant of what St. Paul shows here. For there are two things at which we must chiefly aim and to which it is fitting for us to apply all our studies and endeavours, and they are the very sum of all the things God teaches us by the holy Scripture. The one is the magnifying of God as he deserves, and the other is the assurance of our salvation, so that we may call on him as our Father with full liberty [Rom. 8:15]. If we do not have these two things, woe to us, for there is neither faith nor religion in us. We may talk well of God, but it will be but falsehood.

With regard to the first point, I have told you already that God's grace is not sufficiently known but by setting God's election, as it were, before our eyes. For suppose God draws all men alike, and that such as wish to obtain salvation must come of their own free will and self-moving. If it be so, then it is certain that we deserve to be received at God's hand, and that he should handle every man according to his deserts. But how shall God's goodness be magnified? Simply in this way, that he goes before us by his pure bounty and loves us despite all, without finding either in our persons or in our works any reason why he should love us. If this is true, then there must needs be election: God takes the one sort because he thinks it good to do so, and leaves the other. Thus you see it is a most certain point that God's glory does not appear and shine forth as is fitting, unless it be known that he sheds

forth his goodness and love where it pleases him.

I said just now that the preaching of his Word is a singular benefit to us. And that is the reason why it is said so often in the Law and the Prophets that God has not dealt with any other nation as he dealt with the line of Abraham, in that he vouchsafed to choose and adopt them, to which the law gave sure testimony. So then the children of Israel were exhorted to praise God because he had vouchsafed to give them his law [Deut. 4:7], and, in the meanwhile, had let the poor Gentiles alone as people that did not belong to him after the same fashion. But it is yet a far greater and more special privilege when he makes us profit by that Word. For it is certain that our ears might be assailed daily with the things that should be told us and that we would never be the better for it, until God speaks to us by his Holy Spirit within us.

In this matter, then, God shows a double grace. The one is when he raises up men to preach the gospel to us, for no man is meet and sufficient to do it of himself. It is therefore necessary that God should send those who call us to him and offer us the hope of salvation. But yet, for all that, let us note well that we cannot believe unless God reveals himself to us by his Holy Spirit and speaks to our hearts by the Holy Spirit, in addition to speaking to our ears by the mouth of man. And that is the reason why the prophet Isaiah says, "Who hath believed our doctrine, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" [Isa. 53:1]. He shows that there is no faith in the world till God has worked in

men's minds and hearts by the power of his Holy Spirit. And for the very same reason also our Lord Jesus Christ says that no man comes to him except he be drawn by the Father; but whoever has learned of my Father (he says), the same submits himself to me [John 6:44]. In a word, we see clearly that God shows himself merciful to us when he vouchsafes to enlighten us by his Holy Spirit in order that we might be drawn to the faith of his gospel.

If this was done commonly and to all men without distinction, we should still have reason to magnify God. But now, when we see that some are hardened and others fickle, and that some go their ways without receiving any profit from what they have heard, and that others are altogether stupid, it is certain that it makes God's grace more apparent to us, even as it is said by St. Luke that, at St. Paul's preaching, as many believed as were ordained to salvation [Acts 13:48]. Truly a multitude of people heard St. Paul's sermon, and, beyond all doubt, he on his side had such grace that it ought to have moved even the very stones. Nevertheless, despite this, a great many continued in their unbelief and stubbornness; others believed.

Now St. Luke says plainly that it was not that some were more clever than others, or that there was more inclination to virtue in them than in others, but that God had specially ordained them to salvation. In a word, therefore, we see that all man's merits must cease and be laid underfoot, or else God will not have the praise he deserves. Furthermore, we must understand

that faith comes not of ourselves, for if it did, there would be some merit in our works. It is true that by faith we confess that there is nothing but wretchedness in us, that we are damned and accursed, and that we do not bring anything with us but only an acknowledgment of our sins. But, even so, our faith would qualify as a thing of merit if we had it through our own initiative. We must therefore conclude that it is impossible for men to believe, unless it is given them from above.

And surely St. Paul here declares something well worth observing when he says "Blessed be God." And for what reason? Even for so enriching us in Jesus Christ that our life is happy and blessed. And afterwards he adds, "according to his election of us." Is not faith comprehended among the spiritual riches of which St. Paul makes mention? Indeed, and (what is more) it is the chief of them. For it is by faith that we receive the Holy Spirit; it is by faith that we become patient in our adversities; it is by faith that we become obedient to God; it is by faith that we are sanctified to his service. In short, faith continues always chief of all the spiritual benefits that God bestows upon us.

Now let us well remember St. Paul's order. He says that God has given us faith as well as any of the rest, according to his election of us. We see then that faith depends upon God's election, or else we must make St. Paul a liar. And so, with regard to the first point, you see that all who cannot suffer having predestination plainly and openly spoken of, are deadly enemies of

God's grace and would make it obscure to the utmost of their power. For (as I said before) to hide it is to overthrow all religion.

The second point is the assurance of our salvation. [Some] say that we must doubt it and that we can come to God only with a hope that he will receive us; but to assure ourselves of it—that we ought not to do, for that would be too great a presumption. But when we pray to God, we must call him Father, at least if we are the scholars of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he has taught us to do so. Now, is it at a venture that we call him Father, or are we sure of it in ourselves that he is our Father? If not, then there would be nothing but hypocrisy in our prayers, and the first word that we utter would be a lie. . . . The Scripture shows that to pray to God rightly, we must have belief in Jesus Christ, which gives us confidence, and upon that confidence we by and by conceive boldness. Be that as it may, we must not be hesitant nor yet doubt, but we must be thoroughly resolved and persuaded in ourselves that God counts us as his children. And how may that be but by embracing his mercy through faith, as he offers it to us in his gospel, and by assuring ourselves also that we are grounded in his eternal election? For if our faith should depend upon ourselves, surely it would soon slip from us; and it might be shaken off, if it were not maintained from above. And although we are kept or preserved by faith, as St. Peter says [1 Pet. 1:5], yet it is God who keeps us. If, then, our faith were not grounded in God's eternal election, it is certain that

Satan might pluck it from us every minute. Though today we were the most steadfast in the world, yet we might fail tomorrow. But our Lord Jesus shows us the remedy to strengthen us against all temptations in that he says: You do not come to me of yourselves, but the heavenly Father brings you to me; and since I have taken you into my keeping, be no more afraid, for I acknowledge you as the inheritance of God my Father, and he that has given me charge of you and put you into my hand is stronger than all [John 10:28-29]. We see, then, that besides setting forth God's glory, our salvation also is assured by God's eternal predestination, which ought to be sufficient reason to move us to consider what St. Paul says of it in this place.

It is true (as I have mentioned already) that many men cavil when they hear that God has elected those as it seemed good to him and rejected all the rest. For we see that it is the smaller portion that come to God; and why then has he rejected the rest? Really, it is rather like saying that the will of God should not suffice for our rule. We ought to note, first, that God is not bound at all to any person. For if we once held that principle, that he owes us the least thing in the world, then we call in question his law. But since he on his side has no obligation towards us, but that we owe everything to him while he owes nothing to us, let us see now what we shall gain by all our contending. For if we aim at compelling God to deal alike with all men, he would have less liberty than mortal creatures. If a man is rich, he may do what he likes with his own

goods. If he makes a gift to someone, is it reason that he should be sued at the law for it, and that every man should demand the same sum from him? Again, a man wishes to promote someone whom he loves. Now if all poor people should come and require him to do as much for them as a matter of obligation, would it not be ridiculous? Why, a man may adopt the most distant stranger in the world to be his child and heir, and he is free to do so. And mark, God is liberal to all men, for he makes his sun to shine upon both good and bad [Matt. 5:45]. He reserves only a certain number of men on whom to bestow the privilege of adopting them as his children. What shall we now gain by murmuring against him? If any man says that then he would seem to be a respecter of persons, it is not so [Col. 3:25]. For he does not elect the rich and pass over the poor; he does not choose noble men and gentlemen rather than men of no account and low degree [1 Cor. 1:26]. And therefore it cannot be said that there is any respecting of persons before God, for in choosing those that are unworthy he has respect to his own pure goodness alone. Nor does he consider whether one is more worthy than another, but he takes whom he pleases.

What more could we wish? It is good reason, then, that we should hold ourselves contented with God's will and check ourselves and leave him to choose whom he pleases, because his will is the sovereign standard of all equity and right. And so you see the mouths of all the world stopped [Rom. 3:19]. And although the wicked and profane murmur and find fault, or even

blaspheme, yet God is mighty enough to maintain his own righteousness and infinite wisdom, and when they have jabbered their fill, they are sure to be confounded in the end. For our part we see what St. Paul says here. For it is no obscure doctrine when he says that God has blessed us. Truly, inasmuch as he has enlightened us with the faith of the gospel by his Holy Spirit and made us partakers of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, even thereby (he says) he has shown that he had elected us before the creation of the world. And therefore let us understand that to magnify God's grace aright, we must (as I said before) come to this fountain and original cause, that is to say, to election.

Now we have to proceed further, for in order the better to exclude all respect and worthiness which men might pretend, since we are inclined always to attribute something to ourselves and cannot bear to be brought to nothing, he says, "before the creation of the world." So then, since through such thinking we imagine ourselves to have that which we do not have, it was essential that St. Paul should here beat down all such ridiculous folly. . . .

How then do we come to God? How do we obey him? How do we have a quiet mind that yields itself in accordance with faith? All these things come from him, and so it follows that he must do all himself. Wherefore let us observe that in saying that God elected us before the creation of the world, St. Paul presupposes that which is true, namely, that God could not see anything in us save the evil that was there, for

there was not one drop of goodness for him to find. So then, seeing he has elected us, regard it as a very clear token of his free grace. And for the same reason, in the ninth chapter to the Romans, where he speaks of the twins Jacob and Esau at such time as they were still in their mother's womb before they had done either good or evil, it is said that the elder should serve the younger so that all should come from the side of him who called them, and not from the side of their works [Rom. 9:11-12].

We see then how St. Paul shows there at greater length that which he here touches on briefly, that is to say, that since God chose us before the creation of the world, he thereby shows sufficiently that one man is not more worthy or excellent than another; that he did not have respect to worthiness. Therefore, seeing that the distinguishing between Jacob and Esau was before they had done either good or evil, it did not come of the works but of the caller. All praise, then, must be yielded to God and nothing at all be reserved to man. And so you see yet once again what we have to note here when St. Paul says that we were elected before the creation of the world.

He confirms the thing in better fashion still by saying that the same was done in Jesus Christ. If we had been elected in ourselves it might be said that God had found in us some secret virtue unknown to men. But seeing that he has elected us outside of ourselves, that is to say, loved us outside of ourselves, what shall we reply to that? If I do a man good, it is because I love

him. And if the cause of my love is sought, it will be because we are alike in character, or else for some other good reason. But we must not imagine anything similar to this in God. And also it is expressly told us here, for St. Paul says that we have been elected in Jesus Christ. Did God, then, have an eye to us when he vouchsafed to love us? No! No! For then he would have utterly abhorred us. It is true that in regarding our miseries he had pity and compassion on us to relieve us, but that was because he had already loved us in our Lord Jesus Christ. God, then, must have had before him his pattern and mirror in which to see us, that is to say, he must have first looked on our Lord Jesus Christ before he could choose us and call us.

And so, to be brief, after St. Paul had showed that we could not bring anything to God, but that he acted beforehand of his own free grace in electing us before the creation of the world, he adds an even more certain proof, namely, that he did it in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is, as it were, the true register. For God's vouchsafing to elect us, that is to say, his vouchsafing to do it from all eternity, was, as it were, a registering of us in writing. And the holy Scripture calls God's election the book of life. As I said before, Jesus Christ serves as a register. It is in him that we are written down and acknowledged by God as his children. Seeing, then, that God had an eye to us in the person of Jesus Christ, it follows that he did not find anything in us which we might lay before him to cause him to elect us. This, in sum, is what we must always remember.

It follows next that it is "in order that we should be

pure and unblameable before God in love." This word "love" may be referred to God, as if it were said that we shall find no other reason why God vouchsafed to take us for his children, but only his own free love. Or else (as seems very likely) St. Paul shows us here what the true soundness and perfection of the faithful is, namely, to walk in all righteousness before God. We cannot expound the whole now, but it will suffice to tell briefly what St. Paul had in view. For he shows here that although God's election is free and beats down and annihilates all the worthiness, works and virtues of men, nevertheless it does not provide us with license to do evil and to lead a disordered life, or to run amok, but rather it serves to withdraw us from the evil in which we were plunged. For, by nature, we can do nothing else but provoke God's wrath; wickedness will always reign in us; and we are held down under the bonds and tyranny of Satan. God, therefore, must work and change us, for all goodness comes from his election, says St. Paul.

You see, then, that that to which he meant to bring the faithful was to make them know that just as God elected them of his own free grace, so he does not give them leave to yield themselves to all wickedness, but intends to keep and preserve them undefiled to himself. For God's electing of us and, with that, his calling of us to holiness are things joined inseparably together, even as St. Paul says in another passage, that we are not called to uncleanness and filthiness, but to be dedicated to God in all piety and holiness [I Thess. 4:7].

Now, since we cannot expound the whole at this

time, let us seek to profit from this doctrine. And seeing we are now about to prepare ourselves to receive the supper of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is a pledge to us of our election, as well as the hope of our salvation and of all the spiritual benefits that come forth from this source and fountain of God's free love, let us know that there he displays his riches to us not so that we should abuse them, but rather with the purpose of being glorified for them at our hands, not only with our mouths but also with our whole life. And since we hold all things of him, let us also learn to be his and to give ourselves up to his obedience, that he may enjoy us peaceably. And let us always aim at this mark, namely, to get a sure approbation that he takes and owns us for his children, by bearing his marks and by showing in every deed that we are truly governed by his Holy Spirit in calling upon him as our Father. Thus you see, in effect, what we have to observe in this passage till the rest follows.

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God with acknowledgment of our faults, praying him to make us feel them in such a way that we may continually profit in his fear, and be strengthened more and more in the same; and, in the meanwhile, so to bear with our weaknesses that we may always enjoy his grace even till he has set us in possession of all things at such time as he shall have put away our sins and blotted them out completely for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake.