

The God who Chooses

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Date: 23 October 2005

Preacher: George Philip

[0 : 00] Now will you turn with me in your Bibles to this passage we read earlier in the service, Ephesians chapter 1 and the first 14 verses of it. This was written by Paul to a comparatively young or comparatively new company of Christian believers living in a very unpleasant place.

And one of the things we learn from these epistles of Paul is simply this, that right through our Christian lives from beginning to end, no matter how long we have been on the Christian way, right through, we need instruction in the things of God, we need exhortation, we need challenge, and at times from God through his word, we need rebuke.

And all these are necessary. But I think it is vital at times to stand back from our own situation and our own immediate experience in order that by considering the scriptures we might encourage our hearts in God.

And that is our purpose this morning, to encourage our hearts in God. And the best way to do this, I think, is to take a fresh look at the glorious salvation and salvation life which God has worked for us in Jesus Christ.

A salvation that is perfect and complete in every way. A salvation given to us to be worked out in our lives and through our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit who has been given to every Christian believer.

[2 : 01] When I speak of these things, being a good Presbyterian, my mind goes back to one of the metrical psalms, Psalm number 43. Why art thou then cast down my soul?

What should discourage thee? And why with vexing thoughts art thou disquieted in me? Still trust in God, for him to praise good cause I yet shall have.

He of my countenance is the health, my God that doth me save. And this is why we have to consider the God of our salvation for our encouragement.

Many, many years ago, I was sitting at the bedside of an aged relative. She was well into her 80s. She had been born illegitimate. She had been very poorly educated.

She wasn't very bright as far as intelligent went, but she loved the Lord. I've no doubt about that at all. And she knew she was near the end of her life, and I knew, and we sat and talked.

[3 : 09] And at one point she said to me, turn up my verse. Well, I picked up her well-thumbed Bible that was by her bedside, and I knew where to turn.

Isaiah chapter 12 and verse 2. God is my salvation. I will trust and not be afraid.

She didn't say anything, but I can still remember the smile on her face. And so we're considering the God of our salvation and the salvation that he has worked for us.

And this letter to the Ephesians all the way through gives us good cause to consider what God has done, what God has given, and what God plans for us.

There's a devotional commentary, I think it's out of print now, on Ephesians that has the title, for the whole of Ephesians, The Wealth, The Walk, and the Warfare of the Christian Believer.

[4 : 16] It's a great title. And when you go through Ephesians in chapter 1, you have the God we have. In chapter 2, the salvation we have. In chapter 3, the power we have.

In chapters 4 and 5, the walk or the life we have to live. In chapter 6, the warfare that is an inevitable part of Christian life and service in a fallen, disordered world.

The first three chapters of Ephesians are all to do with the wealth of the Christian. And this was the word from Paul, from God through Paul, to these Christian believers, living in Ephesus, working and witnessing in the city of Ephesus, which was dominated by the temple and the shrine of Diana.

And part of the worship at that shrine of Diana was sex. There was a whole host of temple prostitutes.

So you see, the Ephesians were living in a generation and in a city, every bit as obsessed with sex as our own generation is. An idolatry of sex.

[5 : 34] As if sex was the beginning, the middle and the end of everything. And in that kind of situation, there were these Christian believers, and Paul writes to encourage them.

And in the first two verses of chapter 1, his letter begins in a great way. It lifts the whole issue onto a glorious level. Paul, Paul, an apostle.

And the word apostle means a sent one. Sent by God. Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God.

In the will of God, in the hand of God, under the hand of God, the God of sure purposes. And he addresses these Christian believers in Ephesus as the saints.

Not suggesting for a moment that they were perfect. But recognizing the real meaning of the word, the term saint. In the Bible, the term saint means someone set apart for God.

[6 : 51] In Jesus Christ. Marked out for God. In Jesus Christ. Or as Peter puts it in his first epistle, chapter 2, verse 9, a people for God's own possession.

A people regarding whom God says, they are mine. To the saints. In Christ Jesus.

In the city of Ephesus. And this description of a Christian believer as a saint is a concept that should counter all our feelings of inferiority.

Not just individual inferiority, but often congregational inferiority. And some congregations have a terrible struggle, you know. I remember asking a Glasgow minister in the garbled, an evangelical man, about his prayer meeting.

Did he still have the prayer meeting? And he said, yes. But this week, only I and my wife attended. I wondered if I could cope with a situation like that.

[8 : 03] I wonder how many of us here this morning could cope and could keep on going on if Sunday by Sunday we gathered for worship in a congregation that might number anything between 10 and 20.

Oh, in a sense, it's easy when you've got a whole gang of folk to stand with you and help you. It wasn't like that in Ephesus. It's not like that in a great many places in Scotland and elsewhere. But there is no need. There is no need for us to be preoccupied as the Church of Scotland did just now about how many difficulties there are, how membership is going down, how finance is going down, how there's this and that, and churches are disappearing.

It's so easy to get trapped in an abysmal inferiority. And this is why we need to remember that God has chosen us to be His and to be His witnesses wherever we are placed in the will of God.

And it is this identification of Christian believers as being saints set apart from God that emphasizes the difference between the Church and the world.

[9 : 26] I hear Christians nowadays talking about the most godless people. Well, really, they're just the same as us. No, they're not. If you're a Christian, you are in Christ.

If they are not Christians, they are not in Christ. And the division between the two is absolute and eternal. The world, and all that we mean by the world, is the natural outworking of sinful man's self-determination, and it leads to judgment.

There are so many references in Scripture that one would like to quote, but time forbids. In the first epistle of John, chapter 2, and verse 15, Do not love the world or the things in the world.

If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

And the world passes away, and the lust of it. But he who does the will of God abides forever. I almost hesitate to quote 1 John, chapter 5, verse 19, that staggering verse that takes some believing.

[10 : 49] But easy to believe when you read your daily papers. The whole world order lies in the wicked one. And you only need to look around you and read your papers and listen to news bulletins to become aware of the fact that the evil we see all around us is very often beyond simply human evil.

There is a demonic and devilish element in it. My heart cringed when I saw the picture this week in television of that girl.

Was she 10 years old? Who had been slashed in the face by another girl in her class who had taken the little sharp cutting bit out of her pencil sharpener and was it 30 stitches she had in her face?

Can you understand that kind of evil? Is that just human evil? I don't think so. And this term that Paul here says speaking of saints set apart from God emphasizes the difference between the world and the church.

Because the church is a gathered, the church is a work of God's grace. A gathered, redeemed, united company of sinners saved by grace, supplied by grace, grace that cannot and will not fail as we have it in John chapter 1.

[12:16] Out of his fullness have we all received and those who know about Greek tell me the verb means that we have received grace upon grace upon grace upon grace.

the world and the church and they are different and in that saving grace of God recently Joy and I have been able to go out to an evening service and we are listening to some of the tapes of that series that Sinclair Ferguson did on the hymn Oh How the Grace of God Amazes Me an astonishing thought the grace of God lavished upon us as we shall see later and in that grace we have identity as the people of God we have purpose as the people of God we have direction as the people of God and we have destiny as the people of God and these are the things that this world simply does not have so many have no hope so many struggle what's the point so many are living with this attitude nothing now and nothing to come

I remember years ago my brother preaching and speaking about a he was a great reader a novel by a Russian novelist and in that novelist there was described a country in which there were no signposts because there was nowhere to go what a description of our own day and generation hopeless nothing now nothing to come in a sense I'm not surprised that people turn to drugs and the occult and a whole variety of other things to try to escape but in Christ it's so different in Christ verse 3 in Christ we have salvation blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly I know some of the translations have it that he has blessed us in the heavenly places with spiritual but I'm not in the heavenly places yet

I'm down here I want these blessings now not when I get to heaven he has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places you see this is this is not future blessing this is present blessing actual possession here and now and every spiritual blessing and that means every possible need is provided for in Christ every possible contingency is provided for in Christ all the riches of God's grace have been given to us in Christ Jesus and that without qualification people sometimes laugh at some of the illustrations I use but to try to understand this in my own congregation try to think of God's heaven as the most magnificent spiritual supermarket and God going around the shelves emptying the shelves into your trolley and then as you wheel out the trolley and you come to the checkout the voice says it's all been paid for every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places has been given to us the very moment we trusted Christ as our saviour I used to get a bit hot under my clerical collar when I used to wear it when people made it oh I'm just a poor Christian there's not such a thing God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus you read Colossians chapter 1 Colossians chapter 2 and you're told there that all the fullness of God is in Christ and we have been filled we who have believed have been filled with all the fullness it simply means that if we've got Christ we've got everything that God has to give and we have that from the very moment we put our trust in Christ and take him as our saviour and this is emphasised all through the Bible 2 Peter chapter 1 verses 3 and 4 God's divine power has given us all things necessary for life and salvation and he has backed that up by exceeding great and precious promises of course we don't always recognise

[17:29] God's blessings when I was at university a friend of mine gave me a leaflet he felt I needed it and the title of the leaflet was answered prayer the first at the top it said a great deal of what happens to us is the answer to our own prayers and the first illustration was from Romans chapter 5 verse 4 we pray for patience and God sends tribulation because tribulation works patience I remember in a paperback commentary an American paperback commentary on Romans I came across this statement in Romans chapter 5 tribulations are God's gracious gifts to help us on to glory it's so easy you know Christians though we be to settle down and get stuck in this world's empty glory and as I used to say in my own congregation the good

Lord looks down from heaven oh dear George Phillips making heavy weather of his Christian life just now we'll send him a load of trouble tribulations are God's gracious gift to help us and you know as I know that when things take a sudden bad turn my that changes your prayer life doesn't it I remember years ago as a student coming across the J.B.

Phillips translation of the epistle of James at the beginning count it all joy my brethren when you meet various trials but I wrote J.B.

Phillips translation into the margin of my Bible when all kinds of trials and temptations come crowding into your life don't resent them as intruders but welcome them as friends realize they come to test your faith and produce in you the quality of endurance blessed and that's only verse 3 we've got to hurry verse 4 even as he chose us in Christ before the found oh I love that verse you'll have gathered that when I was speaking to the children he chose us before the foundation oh you say I don't understand I'm not sure that I understand it but I believe it he chose us before not as an afterthought and this this is a great comfort and encouragement when you're really up against it the great

God of eternity has chosen us for himself he has set his heart on us I love the old hymn I don't know if it's in the new hymn book or not it's got the line in it and while I passed my savior by his love laid hold on me that would be my testimony he chose us from the beginning he has set his heart on us we are his and he has no regrets how often do you think of that verse in Hebrews chapter 11 the 16th verse he is not ashamed to be called their God oh it works wonders for me to think of God oh I'm George Phillips God chosen chosen in a specific way not just to make up the numbers not because we've been left to the last as I was saying to the children not really wanted he chose us from before the foundation of the world now we mustn't we've got to hurry on but we mustn't get confused in the question of free will and predestination after all

[21 : 42] God is free to give his grace gift to whomsoever he will but in speaking and thinking of all that we mean by this word destined or predestined or chosen before the foundation of the world it is vitally important to keep to the limits of what scripture actually says and not allow the logical process of deduction to lead us to statements beyond what is clearly stated in scripture we are chosen in Christ and it is in the proclamation of the gospel that we hear the call of Jesus Christ come to me believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and all the eternal purposes of God are worked out in the context of the preaching of the gospel and the great question you see is not am I elect or not the great question is have

I believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and that's an important I don't know who you are but have you believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation for the forgiveness of your sins and for your ultimate entrance into heaven Paul says to the Thessalonian believers we know you are chosen because you believe the gospel and we are chosen to be holy and blameless before him he destined us verse 5 in love nothing mechanical about it he destined or he marked us out in love and love of course plans for the loved one and what a comfort it is to know that the way is marked out for us the root and the boundaries that's why the letter to the

Hebrews says let us run the race that is set before us it's it's not hope for the best or come what may not even we hope it will work out we are we are destined and you see all these all these verses speak about the God who plans for you and for me and for his church the God who holds the future and all its developments in his own hand and in his own power and the great emphasis here is on the sureness of God it's not all that long now till Christmas it's a dreadful thought isn't it and no doubt in the traditional Christmas services there will be read the passage from Isaiah chapter 9 that marvelous wonderful counselor mighty all that but the verse says and the government shall be upon his shoulder and to me that is inexpressible comfort because it tells me that God is in charge of George

Philip and George Philip's life if you're a Christian he's in charge of you and your life and his plans for you are absolutely clear destined kind in love and the picture here is of the activity of God's grace setting about the business of our salvation with eager dedication and deliberation by the Holy Spirit bringing us not just inviting us but actually bringing us I wasn't sure if I could quote the shorter catechism accurately so I took it with me effectual calling is the work of God's spirit whereby convincing us of our sin and misery enlightening our minds and the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills he persuades us and enables us to embrace Jesus

Christ freely offered to us in the gospel destined marked out in love of course there's a whole variety of God's methods time forbids too many illustrations took Nicodemus a long long time religious man that he was to come to the real knowledge of salvation the Philippian jailer well it needed a different method there it took an earthquake a good friend of mine who became a minister now in glory having exorcised many people will be in heaven because of his ministry he had known the gospel since childhood but he refused to be converted he knew many one of his best friends

was my brother in garden town no no he wouldn't no no he wasn't going to be converted he came down with a group of friends in a car to the

[27 : 10] Billy Graham crusade in the Kelvin hall no no he didn't go forward but on the way driving back at night up to Aberdeen the person driving the car dozed off and the car went into a ditch and I remember that friend of mine said he said at that point God said to me now that's your last warning oh yes he was converted in the ditch it's amazing what God has to do with some people to bring them to accept Christ and to confess Christ the love of God can be very very earnest and determined I think we need to learn more than ever to thrill at the thought of God at work in our lives bringing us and leading us and enabling us by his Holy Spirit in our heart creating within us new desires so that more and more we are looking to the eternal future with no thought of turning back and thinking of eternity not only in terms of service but in terms of being changed into his likeness any idea how hard at work

God is in your life join I read this morning after breakfast time in Isaiah 52 and 53 he shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied in his love he's working at you changing you into the very likeness of Christ so that in the end you'll be ready to take your place verses 7 to 10 I've only got to mention them in him Jesus Christ God's beloved son we have redemption he paid the price of our sin and bought us back from the slavery of sin in him we have we have redemption we have the forgiveness of all our trespasses according to or on the scale of the riches of his grace which he lavished upon oh how the grace of God amazes me when somebody has really hurt you and cut you to the quick and you know you're a

Christian and you know you should forgive them well yes yes I suppose I can forgive God's not like that the riches of his grace lavished upon us for the forgiveness of all our sins I love the opening verse of Psalm 32 I've tried over the years in the ministry to know how best to quote it it needs a great sigh oh the blessedness of the man whose sins are forgiven what a Lord it lifts from mind and heart and spirit oh I hope you know it redemption forgiveness of all our trespasses even more verses 9 and 10 he has made known to us and brought us in to share in God's plan for the fullness of the time here again is the thought of

God working to plan and to purpose and that's a comfort over the seeming chaos of the world wish I had time to deal with verses 11 to 14 can we be sure of all oh yes we can be sure verse 13 we were sealed by God he put the hallmark on us as the real thing sealed and verse 14 guaranteed in him in Christ beloved son we are marked out as heirs of God to be adopted as his sons and because God has written his name our names in his will we cannot be denied our inheritance and that means that all the future is guaranteed by the God who according to verse 11 works all things according to the purpose of his own will he knows what he's doing and he knows how he's doing it and how he does it is always right when eventually we get to heaven one of the hymns says we'll look back and we'll bless the hand that guided and we'll bless the heart that planned when throned where glory dwelleth in

Emmanuel's land this is the glorious gospel of our blessed God and all the issues are sealed and God's spirit is given within us the great enabler who urges us on and keeps us right so that in spite of everything we never look back set apart for God in Christ blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing chosen in him destined for eternity redeemed forgiven brought in not just to the family of God but to be a working part of the purposes the perfect purposes of

[33 : 31] God I don't know about you that moves my heart and I'll go back again and again to Ephesians chapter 1 Amen and may God bless to us the preaching of his word