

Reconciliation Within Our Beliefs

Ephesians 1:3-6

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved.
(Ephesians 1:3-6 (ESV))

May we begin today by first retracing some of the truths that we have been given thus far in these words! And although the understanding and the acceptance of these truths varies widely as the brethren in our different churches read and preach them, God really does have only “one truth” within His word.

But again, why should there be any variations at all? Why are we seemingly unable to read these words and take them at their simplest “face value”, just as they are written? Our struggle seems most often to come because we already have a preconception of just how God ought to think and how He ought to do things. And then, we take these words and try to “fit” them into that narrow preconception.

By that I mean, if we have grown up in a Presbyterian Church, our thoughts immediately go to that way of understanding. But if we have grown up in an Arminian church, Methodist, Baptist and the like, we read these words with that way of thinking. But folks, none of that should ever be. Our minds should always be given over to the Holy Spirit to receive His intended meaning. Was He not the writer of each word? Should He not be the One to explain it all to us? That truth again from 2 Timothy 3:16.

16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, (2 Timothy 3:16)

Here, to make sure we understand from whence these words come, He makes it clear. They are from the whole Trinity of God, from Himself, the Holy Spirit, from God the Father and from God the Son. Then, He immediately begins to speak of mysterious and wonderful blessings that God the Father and God the Son have done for us in heavenly places. Listen again, verse 2 . . .

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, (Ephesians 1:2-3)

As we have learned over the past few weeks, these “Spiritual Blessings” are many and they are wonderful beyond our imagination, beginning with “choices” that God made on our behalf. Verse 4,

4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ((Ephesians 1:4)

Yes, these are strange words indeed, too strange for the ordinary mind to comprehend. And so, for centuries, men’s minds have contended over exactly what they might mean. As we have said in an earlier message, our Arminian brethren especially struggle to believe that “God would choose us” rather than it being “us who chooses Him”.

But these words really do appear to be clear and plain. And they are supported by other scriptures, such as those in Romans 9. (Please turn there and follow along with me, beginning in verse 9.) In these words of Romans 9 God goes to great lengths to explain to us about the choices He alone makes. And He even asks us to consider if we think He is doing something wrong or evil as He makes His choices. In these words, God harkens back to promises He made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob . . . listen, verse 9 of Romans 9

9 For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son." 10 And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac 11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), 12 it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."
(Romans 9:9-13 (NKJV)

Here, long before either Jacob or Esau were born, or either of them had an opportunity to do anything good or evil, God is making a clear choice between them. And this is no small choice. Jacob and his lineage would become the heart and soul of all who would believe in God, the children of Israel then, and continuing on down to all of us who believe in Christ today.

And folks, as uncomfortable as it might be to some who read these words, Jacob’s brother Esau was not chosen. And it was not because of anything that Esau did wrong. And it is also not said here that “God looked ahead and saw that Esau would eventually sin.” It was purely and simply because God is God, and He has a plan, and Esau was not part of that plan.

You will recall that God had made a similar choice with Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac was the chosen one, and Ishmael was not.

Here, as God lays out before us the details of His choice of Jacob over Esau, He asks us to consider what He has done. Listen!

14 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?
(Romans 9:14 (NKJV))

And it is here, within these few words that the minds of men and women throughout our church denominations bring forth their wide and contentious differences.

Our Arminian brethren find it ever so hard to believe that God could make such choices, some even verbalizing their disagreement by saying such things as, "well, I can't believe in a God who will not give a person at least one chance at salvation."

But God does not waver in His words. Here, instead of giving some "soothing explanation", He simply answers His own question by saying, Certainly not!

14 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!
(Romans 9:14 (NKJV))

May I again remind us that while yes, the Apostle Paul is penning these words, this is the voice of the Holy Spirit who declares to us that no matter what we might think about God's seemingly arbitrary choice of Jacob over Esau, He ever and always remains righteous in His behavior.

And then the Holy Spirit goes on further and emphasizes His "choice making" by giving another example, this time with the Pharaoh in Egypt. Verse 15,

15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." 16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." 18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.
(Romans 9:15-18 (NKJV))

And God, knowing our thoughts and our rejection of His making such seemingly arbitrary choices, voices our argument for us in verse 19,

19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" (Romans 9:19 (NKJV))

In other words, how can God hold a person accountable for their sin if they never had a chance to turn to God and know they were sinning?

Human rationale does not like or accept these words of God. And churches filled with people today reject these words saying “well God just must have meant something else.” Or, “maybe the translators translated these words wrongly”, and so whole denominations of theologians reword God’s word to fit their preferred manner of thinking.

But folks, these words are what they are. And they stand as they are. And these words do not make God unrighteous. And such “standing up in the face of God and demanding that He answer to us for things we don’t understand will not cause God to change.

I am reminded of another saint who did not understand what God was doing and for most of the Book that bears his name, Job also stood up and cried out to God for God to explain Himself for all the suffering that he, Job, had endured. Finally, after 37 chapters of Job crying out and bewailing his plight, God seems to have heard enough from Him and said to Job . . .

2 "Who is this who darkens counsel By words without knowledge?
(Job 38:2 (NKJV))

And in Job 40,

7 "Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me:
8 "Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified? (Job 40:7-8 (NKJV))

This is God’s response to any and all of us who would dare make such foolish statements as, “Well, I can’t believe in a God who would do this or that thing that I don’t agree with”.

Our bible scholars tell us that when God wants to make His point emphatic and final, He says it three times. Well, here in Romans 9, God says it again for the “third” time. Listen . . . verse 20 . . .

20 indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? (Romans 9:20-21)

Again, I do fear that man very often stands in judgment of God, condemning Him for these choices that we are reading about here in these words.

But may I declare to you that anyone who takes the position of being judgmental of God will surely be judged using the same measure of judgment that they use on God. If a person rejects God and His ways, then God will likewise reject that person, and eternally so.

Some would try to soften their opposition to God and say, “But God really is not saying what He is saying here. He must mean something else.” And then, they go about making up explanations about God, explanations that better fit their way of thinking, explanations that they can agree with. But folks, there are penalties for adding to and taking away from these scriptures. And we must never be found doing that.

. . . But again, with all of this things being said, how can we answer the question that we have been pondering over these past few weeks, the question of how we might reconcile the “goodness” and the “mercy” of God with all of these seemingly arbitrary choices that He so obviously makes? Perhaps we might begin to find our understanding within these next few words from Romans 9.

22 What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, (Romans 9:22-23)

These words have as their foundational understanding the simple truth that each and every person that is born on this earth is born with a sinful nature within them, wicked and depraved and deserving of no mercy at all, that if given what each of us truly deserve, we would all spend an eternity in hell.

And why God would choose to have mercy on any of us at all is a great mystery. But He does! And because He does, He chooses to show mercy to some. Not all, but to at least some.

And unfortunately, instead of our thanking and praising Him for the mercy that He does show, we choose to condemn Him for not saving everyone.

Folks, I confess that I do not understand the mind of God either. But just because I am not able to comprehend the mind of God does not automatically make Him wrong for the choices He makes. And I must not stand in judgment of Him for those choices. The greatest of all truths is that “God is good”. He is always good. That truth is reassured to us all throughout these scriptures, over and over again. And we must, by faith, believe it to be true, even when we can’t understand His manner of goodness.

Now then . . . before we close for today, may I bring us back to the question that lies at the center of this study and at the heart of the contention and disagreement that keeps us and our churches from being 'one' in our worship of the Lord.

In its simplest form, the question asks, "Is everyone chosen or does everyone have the free will ability to make their own choices?" "Does God choose those who will receive Him, leaving the others to spend an eternity in hell?" Or "is God merciful and gracious to all, with everyone having an opportunity to be saved?"

Unfortunately, these two widely-separated beliefs do seem to be the only ones that most of our churches accept. And it seems that most within our churches are "well-entrenched", refusing to budge. But in reality, are these two doctrines so widely separated that there can be no relief found within their differences? Is there no possibility that these opposing views, though seemingly vastly different, might have within them a "middle ground", a ground on which "both" are somehow effectual?

Again, I know that each side of this argument would immediately reject the words that I have just said. But the simple fact that both doctrines, that of "God's foreordination and that of freewill" are both solidly given within these scriptures, and that ought to make us pause to reconsider our stand.

Perhaps reconciliation might lie within the simple fact that God really does make other covenants with us. And in His "Covenant of Grace" He might not only have an "either/or", He might also have an "and".

Without adding to or taking away from these truths, may I ask, could it be possible within God's Covenant of Grace that He both chooses some souls to come to Him for salvation, but then also allows some others to make freewill choice?

Again, I know that the words I am saying are not well received by either of the "well-entrenched" belief systems. But for myself, because both "freewill choices" and "God's foreordination" are clearly given doctrines, I do choose to believe that God really does both, He chooses us and He also allows us to make our own free will choices. All of God's word is infallibly true and I will accept it all, even and especially the parts I don't understand.

And I choose to rejoice in this mystery because I know that regardless of how the choice was made to save my own soul, I am now saved. And thanks be to God that I am!

But what about those “ignoble vessels” spoken about in Romans 9, those vessels that God has chosen for “wrath”? I confess simply that I do not know. But I do know that God is completely and utterly righteous and trustworthy. So I will not condemn Him for the choices He makes. He is God, and He is good in all that He does!

May we pray . . .