

From Lost To Found

Ephesians 1:3-14

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. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, 9 having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, 10 that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth--in Him. 11 In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, 12 that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. 13 In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:3-14 (ESV))

Last week, as we studied about the church doctrines that were developed by our most trusted of biblical scholars, we noted that much of their works were based around scriptures like these here in the Book of Ephesians. And we found also that as each of these men, especially John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius, formed their various theological conclusions, each concept that they put forth, had been carefully researched within these scriptures, both by them and by their advocates, with each sides having firm scriptural proofs to support their beliefs.

And further, that they built their conclusions in a manner that can be described as "Precept upon Precept", each point being proven by itself and by other attending scriptures, and then also building to the next point of doctrine.

We see that clearly in the method and manner in which the Five Points of Calvinism were constructed, beginning with the first of the five points, the simple conclusion that each and every one of us is "Totally Depraved", that condition of soul in which sin and our sin nature has complete and total control over every part of who we are, our heart, our soul, our mind and our body.

And again no, that does not mean that we are “absolutely depraved”, as bad or as evil as we could be, but we are still so much depraved that we are not only not capable of turning ourselves to God for His redemption and His salvation, we are also too depraved to even recognize that we have need of a Savior.

And it is not as if we begin our lives perfectly innocent and then go downhill from there. No, unfortunately, from our birth sin is imbedded within the smallest strands of our most basic DNA. In Psalm 51, we read,

5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.
(Psalm 51:5)

And no, I do not understand those words very well, but I do know that they are truth and, by faith, I accept them.

And then, as we read further in these scriptures, we find that within our own strength and purposes, our progress towards goodness and righteousness never improves. Depravity seems to continue to beget more and more depravity within us. Listen to these words from Romans 3 . . .

10 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; 11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. 12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one." 13 "Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips"; 14 "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." 15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 Destruction and misery are in their ways; 17 And the way of peace they have not known." 18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18 (NKJV))

The truth within these and other words like them is that each of us is born with a nature to sin. And we do, by that nature, follow on with a life that is bent towards sin with no conscious understanding of our need for a “Savior”.

And our intellect, though it be a revered instrument within each of us, is not of much help. Men and women of excellent intellectual understanding have sought continually to find their answers and pathways within their intellect, their logic and their common sense, only to fail in their efforts. The pathways of intellect and common sense are simply part of that “broader path” that Jesus spoke about, the one that leads to destruction. And in Proverbs 16:25, we read

25 There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. (Proverbs 16:25)

The question that comes to us from knowing all of this about ourselves is a simple one, “How do we get from where we are in this depravity into the eternal salvation that we so desperately need, from being lost to being found?” God’s answer to that question is “grace”, a free and unmerited gift of eternal life, given to us directly from the hand of God. Verses 6 and 7 of Ephesians 1 tell us,

6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. (Ephesians 1:6-7)

And both our Calvinist friends and our Arminian friends fully agree that this is the only means through which we can gain the salvation and the eternal life that we are seeking. It can only come through the marvelous “grace” of God.

Our Arminian brethren speak of that grace using the words “Prevenient Grace”. In “Wesley's Order of Salvation”, John Wesley, that great Methodist Theologian defined Prevenient Grace in this way. He said,

"Human beings are totally incapable of responding to God without God first empowering them to have faith. This empowerment is known as "Prevenient Grace." Prevenient Grace doesn't save us but, rather, comes before anything that we do, drawing us to God, making us WANT to come to God, and enabling us to have faith in God.

Prevenient Grace is Universal, in as much as all humans receive it, regardless of their having heard of Jesus. It is manifested in the deep-seated desire of most humans to know God."

I must agree with most of what Wesley has said here in these words. Our “right response” to God, our receiving of His grace of eternal life can only come through His first having enabled us to turn and to WANT to receive it from His hand.

But this is also where our Calvinist friends expressly differ. Does God, at this point within the choices, leave us to our own “free will”? And are we able, at this point, to actually turn our hearts and make what would be called in this generation, “an informed choice”, a choice to receive Christ or to reject Him?

And this is where “Point 2” in the five points of Calvinism comes to the forefront, that of “Unconditional Election”. Our Calvinist friends would argue that these words here in Ephesian 1, expressly tell us that God actually makes those choices for us, and not just at that one moment in time, but rather long before time ever began. 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, 5 having predestined us to

adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. (Ephesians 1:4-5)

These words do seem very plain and simple to understand. Verse 4 tells us that “He (God) chose us”. And further that “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”. And then, verse 5 goes on to say that His choices were “according to the good pleasure of His will”.

The mention of our “free will” being involved in these first choices that bring us to salvation and eternal life is nowhere to be found in these words. But with that being said, I also do agree that these “precepts” must be verified and agreed upon by other “precepts” that are found within other scriptures. And there are numerous instances given where man’s “free will” is intricately intertwined into most all of the choices that we make.

Our Calvinist friends would agree with man’s “free will” being intertwined with God’s will in most all the choices of life, but would however hold back on agreeing that such is true in this one matter, the choice for or against salvation. They would insist that this part is only within the decision making of God.

Our Arminian friends would argue fervently that God does not desire that any should perish, and therefore man must have some “say” in his final outcome. And our Arminian friends would explain these words that we have just read by saying that yes, God does make these choices spoken about here in Ephesians 1, to “chose” us, but only because in His vast “foreknowledge”, God has first looked ahead and seen that we would, of our own “free will”, eventually make the choice to receive Him, that based on our choice, He chooses us.

These Calvinist doctrines and Arminian doctrines are both very deeply sought after truths, doctrines that differ very widely, doctrines that theologians on both sides of the argument fervently desire to know. But unfortunately, very little reconciliation between the two has ever been reached. And because no reconciliation has been found, we look around us today and we find a vast number of Baptist and Methodist and Presbyterian and other such churches sprinkled across the landscape, each with devoutly believing members, praising God for the salvation that they have received, but each still firmly entrenched in their own beliefs, disagreeing on exactly how they each got to where they are in their salvation, Presbyterian believing that God chose us, and Baptists and Methodist believing that they made their own decisions.

It is truly a great “mystery”, one that brings back to mind a question that I posed in an earlier message, and that is . . . “Is it possible for opposing views such as these, though vastly different, to have within them a “middle ground”, one on which “both” are actually true and accurate.

I know that as each side would listen to me say such words as I have just said, they would each quickly respond with a firm answer of “no, these are too different to have any way of reconciliation between them”. But may I say that God has answers that you and I, and even our greatest of theologians, have not yet considered.

Recall for a moment the very first thing that God said to man there in the Garden, when He told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they would surely die. But they did not die and why not? It was because God then established another covenant with them, the “Covenant of Grace”. Now they and we can have life eternally. All of this truly is a mystery, a mystery that may remain until we stand face to face with our Lord Jesus, when all things will then become known to us. But again, the best part is we are not arguing about whether the other person is saved, but only about how each of us got to where we are in our salvation.

So then, may I bring us back to a point that we spoke about last week. The question about why those great theologians of the past disagreed so fervently? And why we, even now, also join with their disagreement as to how we gained our salvation? For myself, it all goes back to exactly what I said last week about the probable motivation within those men’s hearts. It is “feelings”, their “feelings”, my “feelings”. My heart tells me that a loving and gracious God could not leave my dearly beloved family members and friends to perish without hope.

Even before the first moments of conception of our dear children, my wife and I prayed for their unborn souls. And we have continued to pray fervently for their salvation all of the days since, wanting, hoping, crying out with great tears for God to save and to sanctify our dear ones. And also now, as husbands and wives and grandchildren and great-grandchildren have been added, our prayers have increased all the more. And therein lies the great battle for these doctrinal beliefs.

On the one hand, if we believe some of the strict interpretations of the Calvinist doctrines, we can only hope that our beloved children and grandchildren were chosen by God for salvation before the foundations of the world were laid.

However, if we hold to the Arminian Doctrines, there is always hope that as we see our loved ones turning to and fro, vacillating between behaviors of right and wrong, good and evil, they will eventually turn and believe and make the right choice and choose life. Listen to these words of Deuteronomy 30:15-20. These are words spoken by God to His beloved children as He was sending them forth out into their daily lives. He said . . .

15 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. 16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you . . .

17 But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear . . .

18 I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish . . .

19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, 20 loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days." (Deuteronomy 30:15, 17-20)

Folks, these are choices that God is speaking about here, "free will" choices, choices that seem, in every way, to rest within the decision-making power of God's beloved children. And the "life" that God is speaking about here is not just our mortal life that we live in the flesh, but rather it is "eternal life" with Him as our Lord and Savior.

So then . . . What is each of us to believe? Are our prayers simply carrying forward that which God has already decided, or will our prayers actually have an impact within the Trinity of God. As we bow daily before God, we do want to believe that our prayers for our beloved children who are not yet saved will be effectual prayers for the saving of their souls. Otherwise, why should we pray?

I must confess that I am personally also caught up daily in the simple act of "hope", hope that that which is not yet seen, the salvation of the souls of my beloved ones, can and will yet eventually come about. And so, I stay on my knees before God, humbly beseeching Him for His grace and His mercy, saying "Father, please, please save my dear children".

Let's pray!