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## *Fearless Q: Does God Choose Us or Do We Choose Him?* Ephesians 1:3-6

We begin today our summer series entitled "Fearless Q." You were invited to submit your toughest questions about the faith. We received 390 sheets, tallied them up and produced a list of the top ten. Fearlessly you asked; fearlessly we shall preach.

And let me start here: we approach these issues with humility. These questions have vexed humans for thousands of years. We won't have all the answers, and even as we turn to the Bible for the answers, it will be challenging. Sometimes the Bible seems contradictory. Sometimes it is maddeningly silent. And sometimes the Bible is very clear, and we just don't like what it says (like with today's topic!) Still, these are real questions worthy of an honest response. So, we will try—with a spirit of deep humility and a prayer that you will bring that same attitude. Fair enough? We might be wrong, you might be wrong, so let's turn to God's Word and seek His truth together.

I thought I'd kick off the series with a softball topic: Predestination (also known as Election). How do predestination and free will go together? Here's the pile of those questions. We can sum it up with this one: "Does God choose us or do we choose Him?" So let's start with a definition: Predestination is the Biblical teaching that before time, God chose specific people for salvation.

Last week our daughter Rachel was driving to her seminary near Boston, and she came upon something in the middle of the street that looked like a tire. She slowed down and realized it was moving. So she stopped the car in the middle of the street, got out, and this is what she found (picture of turtle).

Do you know what it is? A Snapping Turtle, the size of a large hubcap, right in the middle of Massachusetts! Rachel, being Rachel, decided to move it out of the road and discovered why they are called Snapping Turtles. It was doing everything it could to lock his jaws on her. So very carefully, she put him in the back of her car and drove him to a nearby pond where she has undoubtedly screwed up the ecosystem forever!

When we come to the doctrine of Predestination, we must approach it like a Snapping Turtle. If we pick it up carelessly—if we treat it with less respect than it deserves—it can do a lot of damage. So very carefully, very respectfully, let's pick it up.

On this Fathers' Day I want to start with an image that will grip the heart of every dad in this place. Imagine you have a swimming pool and you walk out to discover that your young son is in the water, thrashing about, unable to even cry for help because he is drowning, his eyes filled with terror. What do you do? You run to the edge of the pool, reach down, grab your boy and pull him out. But he is so terrorized he begins to flail, lashing out blindly. He rakes your skin with his fingernails and your arm begins to bleed, but you pay no attention. You tighten your grip on your child and pull him to safety.

As he coughs and cries in your arms, you think back over what just happened. Did your son ask for help? No. His throat was filled with water. Did he reach out for help? No, in fact, he struck back at the very hand that would save him. What part did that child play in his own rescue? Absolutely none. Then why was he saved? Because his Father noticed his peril, realized his utter inability to save himself and, out of his love, reached out to rescue his son.

That is a picture of predestination as we understand it in our Presbyterian Reformed tradition. God saw us in our helpless state. He realized we couldn't even cry out for help, that we were drowning in our sin, so out of his love, by his own initiative, he chose to save us. It was all God's doing, God's love, God's initiative, God's salvation. We did nothing to deserve it, nothing to enable it—all we could do was receive it.

This is a Reformed view of election. It places all the initiative, all the authority, all of the choice about salvation in the hands of our sovereign God. You might ask, "Well, what is the alternative?" A big word: Arminianism, named after a theologian named Arminius. Arminius emphasized, not the sovereignty of God but the free will of man. To return to our illustration, Arminians might say that God is there, standing by the pool, waiting to save. All he needs to hear are the words, "Save me" and he will be quick to respond, but the initiative rests with the drowning swimmer. Until he cries out for help, God's hands are tied.

But the Reformed theologian, like me, would say he couldn't cry out for help, he was drowning! He couldn't reach out for help, he was flailing! In fact, when the hand of salvation came, his instinct was to slap it away; to strike back. The only way that child could be saved would be if the father took the initiative, reached out, ignored the flailing and hauled him to safety.

Many should find this image helpful. We are grateful to imagine God reaching out to save us when we cannot save ourselves, but here's where the doctrine of predestination becomes problematic for some. The idea that God chooses only some to save, "the elect", while choosing not to elect others to salvation doesn't seem fair, does it?

So why do we believe that God chooses some—because, the Bible teaches it. I don't have time to cover all the texts, but here are examples: God chose Abraham when

he was a pagan. God chose Moses when he was a murderer. God chose the Jewish people—in fact, we call the Jews the “chosen” people. The Old Testament teaches God’s election, so does the New Testament.

Did you realize that Jesus taught and prayed about the doctrine of election repeatedly? Two examples out of John 6: <sup>37</sup>All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.... <sup>65</sup> “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”

And of course, God chose the Apostle Paul when he was killing Christians, and Paul never stopped writing about the precious gift of God’s election. Romans 9-11 is his most thorough treatment; go home and wrestle with that if you doubt the doctrine of election. But the text I want to land on today comes from Ephesians 1:

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love <sup>5</sup>he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace...

God “chose us before the foundation of the world”; he “predestined us” for adoption through Jesus Christ. This idea, that God chose to save us out of his own initiative and for his own glory, is woven throughout the Bible like another scarlet thread. It may be one of those doctrines that makes us uncomfortable, but we do not avoid uncomfortable truth. We unpack it and try to understand it.

Now if we agree that Election is a true teaching of scripture, then what should our response be? First, gratitude! When it suddenly strikes you, “Oh my! Before the foundations of the earth were laid God chose me,” how can you respond with anything but gratitude? What other response is appropriate except, “Thank you Jesus for seeking me in my desperation and saving me!” Gratitude.

A second response is humility. When you realize God chose to save you for no reason other than that he wanted to—that it had nothing to do with you or your goodness or deservedness—that is a very humbling thing. The problem is, the primary tenets of American Religion are these: we are all good people and everybody goes to heaven. I have never been to a funeral where someone got up and said of the deceased, “You know, he was a pretty awful guy. He’s probably in hell, and he deserves it.” No, in American Religion, everybody is good and everybody goes to heaven.

But that’s not what the Bible teaches. When we read the Bible, from beginning to end, we see how hopelessly wicked we are. We are not good, our inclinations are not holy, and our instincts are not pure. The image of the swimming pool is apt. We

are drowning in our own sin and selfishness. What we deserve is judgment. Yet despite this, God in his grace chooses to save us.

Now some object that election is not fair. It's not fair that God should choose some and allow others to suffer the judgment they deserve. Here's one response to that: real fairness would be leaving all of us to suffer the consequences of our sin—that would be fair—to leave all of us to experience God's wrath which we deserve. The doctrine of election should evoke a response of deep humility! I deserve God's judgment, that would be fair, but what I got was God's amazing grace!

The third response to election is assurance. If my salvation is my responsibility, if it depends upon my confession of faith and my obedience, then how do I know it is secure? If I gained salvation by my actions, can't I just as surely lose my salvation by my actions? But the doctrine of election says that since God is doing the saving and not me my salvation is secure. Put a different way, if the all-powerful God has decided to save me, what's going to stop him?

Jesus speaks to this when he describes himself as the Good Shepherd. Listen to his words in John 10 where he is speaking to antagonistic Jews:

“...you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. <sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Did you hear the words of assurance? Jesus' sheep—the elect whom the Father has given to him—will never perish. “No one will snatch them out of my hand.” What comfort! If you are one of Jesus' lambs, no one will snatch you out of his hand. And by the way, “no one” includes you. Even when you fight against the Lord; even in times of doubt or rebellion, there is nothing you can do to un-child yourself. You belong to the Lord forever.

Let's go back to the swimming pool. Imagine that son, in his terror, flailing and scratching the very arm that reaches out to save him. What does that father do if his child begins to draw blood? Does he say, “Ow, this rescue is too painful for me. I'm going to let go now?” No!!! That kid could pull dad's arm right out of the socket, and that father is never, never, never going to let go. Such is the assurance we have that our salvation is secure in the hands of Christ.

So these are three helpful responses to this doctrine. But there are other less helpful ones. Some find election distasteful, frankly, because they don't like the idea of God being God. We know what is fair and right. We want to be the captains of our souls. We value equality and freedom above all, so we resent a sovereign God who would presume to exercise his divine authority. I think that is the greatest obstacle this doctrine faces in our American culture because, for us, equality, choice and fairness are our gods!

This is the core issue regarding the doctrine of election: Is God sovereign or not? Do we trust him to do what is right and just or not?

One last unhelpful response to election is fatalism. It goes like this: if God has predestined me, then I am just a puppet. I don't have to do anything. In fact, it doesn't matter what I do, and I certainly don't need to be sharing the gospel with others. Either they are saved or not, right? Wrong! Here where we come back to the title of the sermon: Does God chose us or do we choose Him? The answer is "yes", both are true. The call of God always comes first, but the means of God's salvation for his elect requires a response of faith.

Some people will ask, "How do I know that God has saved me? That I'm among the elect?" First of all, you won't care if you aren't. It doesn't matter to you. And the easy test is this: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!" Do you know where that passage comes from? Romans 10. Right in the middle of Paul's treatise on predestination, all who choose to call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

One last time to the poolside: When that dad pulls the terrified, thrashing child out of the water, when the son comes to his senses and realizes he is in the arms of his loving, saving father, what does he do? He weeps and throws his arms around his father's neck and says, "Daddy, you saved me. You saved me. Thank you for saving me!" He chooses a response of loving gratitude.

Did God choose me? Yes. Do I choose God? Yes. This is the divine mystery of election. It is like a great tower held in place by guy wires. One wire represents the sovereignty of God. The other wire represents our free will. They are in divine tension, securing for us the gift of our salvation. Take away one wire or the other wire, and the whole thing collapses. It is a mysterious and precious gift.

But in another sense, it is the "So-What Doctrine." Why do I say that, because we have no idea whom God has elected. So what if God has predestined whom he will save; we have no idea who they are. So, what do we do? We do what Jesus told us to do. We sow the seed, we go into all the world, we preach the gospel. Because, as a matter of fact, those are the very means by which God ordinarily accomplishes his work of salvation. John Calvin...the father of Calvinism, planted 2000 churches! Obviously, he didn't think that predestination meant you sat back on your heels! Neither should we.

Someone once said, "There is a sign at the gates of heaven. On the outside it reads, "Whosoever will, may come." But when you walk inside and turn around, on the back it reads, "Chosen before the foundation of the earth." This is a mystery. And if you still find it confusing, rest easy. So did Paul. After spending three chapters trying to explain predestination, he concludes with these words in Romans 11:

<sup>33</sup>Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! <sup>34</sup>“Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”<sup>35</sup>“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” <sup>36</sup>For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.