

SOVEREIGN ELECTION

Preached February 15, 1959, by Pastor Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church,
Topeka, Kansas

My subject for today is Sovereign Election, and my first text is *Matthew 22:14: "Many are called, but few are chosen"* and *Acts 13:48: "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."* You know what a prominent place in scripture the Doctrine of Election holds; it meets us everywhere, both in the Old and New Testaments. Whatever may be the meaning of the word, one cannot help feeling that the truth which it expresses must, in God's sight, be a vitally important one.

But, how can this be the case if it mean no more than God's choosing those that choose Him? If it mean no more than God choosing those whom He foresaw would believe of their own accord and by their own power, then it is not worthy of the prominent place it holds in scripture. Nay, it is not worthy of a separate name, even; least of all, such a name as election. If there be any election at all in such a case as this, it is plainly not God's election of man, but man's election of God, so that the question comes to be simply this: does election mean God's choosing man or man's choosing God? It cannot mean both. It must be either the one or the other. Which of the two can any reasonable being suppose it to mean?

As the right understanding of this word is of great importance, I think it well to note just here a few passages which will help us to shed light on the meaning of the word itself. "*The man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom.*" (*Numbers 17:5*) and "*Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose.*" (*Deuteronomy 17:15*) and "*The place which the Lord thy God hath chosen to put his name there.*" (*Deuteronomy 12:21*) and "*Them the Lord thy God hath chosen to minister unto him.*" (*Deuteronomy 21:5*) and "*And in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen me to put my name there.*" (*1 Kings 11:36*) and "*The Lord chose me before all the house of my father to be king over Israel.*" (*1 Chronicles 28:4*) and "*For the elect's sake, whom he hath chosen.*" (*Mark 13:20*) and "*He is a chosen vessel unto me.*" (*Acts 9:15*) and "*I know whom I have chosen.*" (*John 13:18*) and "*Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.*" (*John 15:16*) and "*According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world.*" (*Ephesians 1:4*) and "*God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation.*" (*2 Thessalonians 2:13*)

These are but a few out of the many passages that might have been selected, but they are quite enough to show the meaning of the word. No one who wishes to take words plainly as he finds them can find any difficulty in understanding what ‘choosing’ and ‘election’ means, after reading such passages as these. I would just ask: what does the word in common speech mean? That is, the word ‘election.’

When we speak of the election of a member of Congress, do we mean that he first chose himself, do we mean that he first chose himself, and then the people chose him because, and only because, he had chosen himself? Or, when we speak of the election of a minister to a church, do we mean that he first chose himself, and then the people chose him because, and only because he had chosen himself? No such theory of election would be listened to for a moment in such matters. Election has but one meaning there: it means the people choosing their representative in the one case, by a distinctive act of their own will; or the congregation choosing their minister in the other case, by a distinct act of their own will. And shall man have his will, and shall not God have His? Shall man have his choice, and shall not God have His?

But let us take an instance from the bible. What does God’s choosing Abraham mean? He is a specimen, you know, of a sinner saved by grace; a sinner called out of the world by God. Well, how did this choosing take place? Did not God think of him long before he ever thought of God? Did not God choose him long before he ever thought of choosing God? Were there not thousands more in Chaldea that God might have chosen and called and saved, had He pleased? Yet, He chose Abraham alone. And what does the bible call this procedure on the part of God? It calls it election. ***“Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees.” (Nehemiah 9:7)*** Does anyone say: “Oh, but God chose Abraham because He foresaw that Abraham would choose Him?” Then I answer: the case is precisely the reverse of this. He chose Abraham just because He saw that otherwise, Abraham would never choose Him. It was God’s foreseeing that Abraham would not choose Him that made election necessary; and so it is with us. God chooses us, not because He foresees that we would choose Him, or that we would believe, but for the very opposite reason. He chooses us just because He foresees that we would neither choose Him nor believe, of ourselves at all. Election then proceeds not upon foreseen faith in us, but upon foreseen unbelief.

The truth is that election has no meaning if it be not the expression of God's will, in reference to particular persons and things, saying to each: "Thus and thus shalt thou be, not because thou chooseth to be so, but because I, the infinite Jehovah, see fit that thou shouldest be so. To one creature, He says: "Thou shalt be an angel;" to another: "Thou shalt be a man." To one order of beings: "Thou shalt dwell in heaven;" to another: "Thou shalt dwell upon earth." To one man: "Thou shalt be born in Judaea where my name is named, and where my temple stands;" to another: "Thou shalt be born in Egypt or Babylon, where utter darkness rains." To one, He says: "Thou shalt be born in the United States, and hear the glad tidings;" to another: "Thou shalt be born in inland Africa, where no gospel has ever come." Thus, He expresses His will, and who can resist it? Who can find fault, or say to Him, what doest thou?

Men may object at their being placed, thus entirely, at the disposal of God, but the apostle's answer to such is: "***Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?***" (***Romans 9:20***) Election, then, is the distinct forth putting of God's sovereign will, for the purpose of bringing a thing to pass, which, but for explicit forth going of that will, would not have come to pass. Even our opponents admit that there are some events decreed beforehand, such as the birth and death of Christ, the Judgement day, and so forth. If then, they admit that He has decreed a single event, they are in precisely the same difficulty in which they seek to fix us. If one event is decreed, why not all? Who is to draw the line and say: "These are decreed, but those are not?" God's will has already fixed one or two, and is man's will or chance to settle the rest?

I know, friends, that the sinner must have a will in the matter too. It is absurdity to think of a sinner loving, believing, and so forth, against his will, or by compulsion. The sinner must, doubtless, will. He must will to take the broad way, or he must will to take the narrow way. His will is essential to all these movement of his soul. But, in what state do we find his will, at the present? We find it wholly set against the truth. Every will of man since the fall of Adam is wholly opposed to God and his word. Man needs no foreign influence or external power to make him reject the truth. That, he does by nature. He hates it with his whole heart.

When a sinner then comes to receive the truth, how is this accomplished? Does he renew himself? Does he change the enmity of his will, by the unaided act of his will?

Does he, of himself, bend back his own will into the opposite direction? Does he, by a word of his own power, cause the current that had been flowing downhill to change its course and flow upward? Does his own will originate the change in itself, and carry the change into effect? Impossible. The current would have flowed forever downward, had it not been arrested in its course by something stronger than itself. The sinner's will would have remained forever in depravity and bondage, had not another will, mightier far than itself, come into contact with it, and altered both its nature and its course, working the sinner both to will and to do. Was the sinner willing before this other will met his? Manifestly, no. Was he willing after? Yes. Then is it not plain that it was God's will, meeting and changing his, that made the difference? God's will was first. It was God's will that began the work, and made the sinner willing; he never would have willed, had not God made him willing. As we read: ***"Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power" (Psalm 110:3)***

It is the power of Jehovah applied to us that makes us willing. Until that is applied, we are unwilling. It is His hand operating directly upon the soul that changes its nature and its bent. Were it not for that, our unwillingness would never be removed; no outward means or motives would be sufficient to effect the change, for all these means and motives are rejected by the sinner. Nor does he become willing, even to allow the approach or application of these means or motives till God makes him willing. To speak of his being changed by that which he rejects, is as absurd as to speak of a man's being healed by a medicine which he persists in refusing. And again, we read: ***"Can an Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" (Jeremiah 13:23)***

Are all then willing? Does not the depraved will remain in most men, while the new will appears in very few? What makes the difference? My friends, God's choice makes the difference. Even so father, for so it seemed good in thy sight, ***"Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:21)*** And except the Lord of Hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.

But, why does God save some, and not all? Because such is the good pleasure of His own will, and that is the only bible answer. He has infinitely wise reasons for this, though we understand them not.

Let me give you some remarks from John Calvin to show that in his day, none but Papist theologians or Roman Catholics held the doctrine that God elects men because He foresaw they will believe. Calvin said:

“The Papist theologians have a distinction current among themselves that God does not elect men according to the works which are in them, but that He chooses those who He foresees will be believers. Therein do they contradict what we’ve already alleged from Paul, for Paul says that we are chosen and elected in Him that we might be holy and without blame. Paul must needs had spoken otherwise if God elected us, having foreseen that we should be holy. But he has not used such language; he says He hath elected us, that we might be holy. He infers, therefore, that the latter faith depends upon the former election, and those who think otherwise know not what man and human nature is.”

Such is the testimony of Calvin against the Papist theologians of the day.

My friends, God elects those who he foresaw would believe, indeed, and who were they? None, absolutely none. He foresaw that none would believe, not one. And because He foresaw this, He elected some to believe. Otherwise, not one would have ever believed. This speaker has written a poem setting forth the threefold work of Christ on behalf of the elect. I should like to read it to you this morning.

“Oh Jesus, but for thee alone, how lost would be my case?

With naught to plead but guilt as one with Adam’s ruined race.

But Lo, thy life of righteousness doth mine become instead,

For sovereign grace imputes its soul and quickens from the dead.

And Lo, thy death doth satisfy the debts that once I owed,

Complete, complete the ransom’s paid, redemption by thy blood.

Now one there is for all the rest, entreating now above;

My name He bears upon His breast, and pleads His dying love.

Oh living word, oh dying lamb, exalted priest and King,

Thy righteousness, thy blood, thy prayers, my soul to heaven shall bring.”

This is Fred Phelps, Pastor of Westboro Baptist Church. Next week, the LORD willing, at this same time, more of the same. And now, peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the father and the LORD Jesus Christ, and grace be with all them that love our LORD Jesus Christ in sincerity.

Amen.