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Chapter 1

In Ancient Days: Election

He chose us in him ... (Eph. 1:4)

It was one of those *I-should-probably-read-this-before-I-sign-it* moments. A friend and I had just landed in Atlanta after a transatlantic flight and we were collecting a car from a rental depot. I scanned the contract quickly. One somewhat intriguing sentence caught my eye. The contract stated I was accepting the company's terms that if I drove the vehicle to Alaska, I would no

longer be insured. *Alaska?* I thought, *what's wrong with Alaska? It's still the United States.*

Later, after pushing the bulky, white Chrysler into cruise, I thought about Alaska. Then it hit me! Alaska is no smooth, flat Florida beach. There are mountains, valleys, glaciers, forests, ice fields, plains, fjords, bears, eagles and whales. It's wild. It's rugged. There might be rocks on the roads, ice on the roads, moose on the roads. The rental company didn't want me to take their car to Alaska because Alaska is a dangerous country. Magnificent ... but dangerous.

Doctrine is like Alaska. Although many of us would have it otherwise, truths about the Most High God and His glorious salvation are wild and rugged. They are not easy country. Instead, they stretch our minds and worldviews, driving us out of our comfort zones. Our Triune God is awesome, infinite, eternal, unchanging, all-powerful, all-knowing, and omnipresent. Therefore, each doctrine is a mighty mountain range of unfathomable depth and incomprehensible height. The Bible reveals something of these wonders to us but conceals a great deal of mystery. Biblical doctrine is not safe. It is not comfortable. You can't conquer it all. Doctrine is dangerous because it is mysterious, mighty truth about a God far bigger than we can comprehend ... But it is magnificent!

In the exploration of these mysterious mountains of truth we make spectacular discoveries that stir us to worship and transform our lives. Sure, digging deep into God's Word can be strenuous work. But it's more rewarding than we can ever imagine. When we dig hard enough in the Alaska of doctrine, we discover vast rivers of gold! Whereas if you stick to a Florida beach, you'll be lucky to find a lost Rolex.

The Greatest Election

In ancient days before the foundation of the world, the second person of the Triune God was *chosen* to be the Saviour of lost humanity. This was ordained by Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a pact for peace or 'the covenant of redemption'. In His divine foreknowledge God knew we were going to rebel and get stuck into a mess of deadly sin. Peter speaks of this in the council in Jerusalem, 'for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place' (Acts 4:27-28). The eternal Godhead ordained that God the Son step out of heaven and clothe His divinity with humanity and die at the hands of rebellious hearts. He would be Jesus Christ the Messiah, King of kings and Lord of lords. He would appear amongst a people that God would make His own, and from this people God's salvation would spread abroad to all whom God would choose. Matthew witnesses to Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy for this Messiah, 'Behold, my servant whom I have *chosen*, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles' (Matt. 12:18, Isa. 42:1).

It is not surprising that God ordained salvation in Christ long before the mountains and ancient oaks birthed from the ground. Our eternal God was there. 'Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God' (Ps. 90:2). Salvation started with the Godhead choosing the Son to be Saviour. This is *His* election and the greatest election that has ever taken place. Our election in eternity is based on Christ's *greater* election in eternity. He was chosen first and we were then chosen to be in Him. This was God's 'purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a

plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him' (Eph. 1:9-10). Therefore, 'when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons [and daughters]' (Gal. 4:4-5).

So ... as a result ... one warm day on the river banks of the Jordan, a somewhat unusual man dressed in camel's hair, laid eyes on a fellow Jew and cried out, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). As John the Baptist pulled the Incarnate Son of God out of the water, a voice spoke from heaven, 'This is my Son, *my Chosen One*; listen to him!' (Luke 9:35). His obedience, death and resurrection would rescue humanity from perishing in a godless mire of idolatry and rebellion.

Covenants and helicopters

As the helicopter roared over the city of Brighton, I stared at the soft line of silver-blue sea meeting a speckled beach of pebbles. From the beach stretched neat rows of white and cream Georgian townhouses and grey tower blocks. The view was fantastic.

I had a big hunch as to why we were floating up above the city. Tom had asked my father for my hand in marriage a couple of months before, and I was impatiently waiting for him to pop the question. We smiled at each other in excitement and I turned to the window to allow him to rummage in his pocket. Seconds later, in what sounded more like an ecstatic yelp than an elegant marriage acceptance fitting for a Jane Austen drama, I promised to marry him. It was a commitment to the institution of marriage. But more than that, it was a commitment to marry a specific man – Thomas Brand.

When the Holy Trinity ordained salvation, it was a specific plan to save by means of a specific man – Jesus Christ the

incarnate Son of God. Just as it is absurd to think of the marriage promise I made in that helicopter apart from the person I was marrying, it is absurd to consider the Godhead's salvation in election apart from the person of Jesus Christ and union with Him. Theologian John Murray says, 'Those who will be saved were not even contemplated by the Father in the ultimate counsel of his predestining love apart from union with Christ – they were *chosen* in Christ.'¹ 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Salvation does not exist apart from Jesus.

WHAT IS ELECTION?

Theologians tend to place election within the *application* of salvation (see part two). However, we start with the doctrine of election in salvation *accomplished* because, as Wayne Grudem states, 'it is chronologically the *beginning* of God's dealing with us in a gracious way. Therefore, it is rightly thought of as the first step in the process of God's bringing salvation to us individually.'² Election is not the application of salvation but the intention of salvation.

So, what is election exactly? We are all familiar with political elections; candidates are presented and we elect our favourite by voting for them. *Election* is the choosing. *To elect* is to make a choice. The doctrine of election, or the broader word 'predestination', is Scripture's teaching that God chose a people for Himself in eternity past. It is a teaching that many Christians wrestle to understand or accept. Yet right at the start of Paul's letter to the Ephesians he reminds them that they were chosen

1 John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth, 1961), 162 [emphasis mine].

2 Grudem, *Systematic*, 669.