

## Ephesians 1:4-6, Work of the Father

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### Overview

How does one cope with a sentence of this length and complexity? Need to pay attention first to a few details of methodology.

Then we will see that the paragraph deals with two main verbs, which give different perspectives on the divine foundation of our salvation: our *election*, and our *predestination*.

### Methodology

From a linguistic perspective, Bible study is a cyclical process of

- identifying the units of the text (an aspect of *observation*)
- determining how they are related to one another (an aspect of *interpretation*), and
- determining how they relate to our daily lives (*application*).

One can start at different levels in identifying these units.

- In historical books, it is natural to look for episodes, like scenes in a play, marked off by change in characters, location, or time, and the relations are largely chronological and causal.
- In poetic books, the sections are marked mainly by rhythmic or symmetrical considerations, and the relations are of similarity and contrast.
- In expository literature (like Paul), we have to deal mainly with grammatical units and syntactical relations.

A good place to start is breaking down the text into phrases (groups of words that belong together, e.g., prepositional phrase) and clauses (a clause is a phrase containing a verb), and indent them to show what relates to what, as on the chart. As we build up these units, we can consider them as modules or subsystems at yet higher levels. Application to vv.4-6:

1	4	According as he hath chosen us	
2		in him	
3		before the foundation of the world,	
4		that we should be holy and without blame	
5		before him	
6		in love:	<i>Nearest antecedent</i>
7	5	Having predestinated us	<i>Same subject as 1</i>
8		unto the adoption of children	
9		by Jesus Christ	
10		to himself,	
11		according to the good pleasure of his will,	<i>Nearest antecedent</i>
12	6	To the praise of the glory of his grace,	<i>Nearest antecedent</i>
13		wherein he hath made us accepted	
14		in the beloved.	

## Relation between Choosing and Predestination

We read, “he hath chosen us ... having predestinated us.” This might suggest that the predestination precedes the choosing. Two reasons to think otherwise:

**Grammar.**—This particular combination of Greek verb tenses does not require this sequence (Dana and Mantey article 202; BDF article 339(1)). Cf. Matt 22:1 (and many other places), “Jesus answered and spake,” which is literally, “having answered, Jesus spake.”

- Matthew does not mean to say that first Jesus answered, and then subsequently spoke.
- Rather, “having answered” defines more particularly the nature of what he did in the action of “speaking.”
- Suggests that “he chose us ... having predestinated us” means that “having predestinated us” gives further detail on the nature of what happened when “he chose us.”

**Parallels.**—Compare Rom 8:29-30 (foreknowledge → predestination → salvation) and 1 Pet 1:2 (foreknowledge → election → salvation); predestination and election appear to occupy the same slot in the sequence.

So we should consider each of these two main verbs, and their dependent phrases and clauses. We will see that election focuses on *breaking* our relation with a sinful, rebellious world, while predestination focuses on *creating* a relation with God.

## v.4, Election

The main clause, “he hath chosen us” (better, “he chose us”), has three dependent clauses, answering the questions “how,” “when,” and “wherefore.”

### ***What did God do? “he chose us”***

The Greek word means “to select, to pick out for oneself.” As offensive as it is to the natural man, Scripture clearly teaches that God has chosen for himself those who will be saved, out of the broader mass of humanity, leaving the rest to suffer the judgment that we all deserve. Some other choosings in the Bible:

- 1 Sam 17:40, David chose five smooth stones from the brook, leaving behind hundreds of others;
- Luke 6:13, Our Lord chose the Twelve to be with him, thereby excluding many others who might have longed for that privilege.
- Acts 6:5, the early church chose seven deacons, not every man in the group

Thus the focus in this clause is on our selection from a greater mass of people.

### ***How did God choose us? “in him”***

The relation between “chosen us” and “in him” is the subject of extensive theological debate. See Thomas Goodwin’s 17<sup>th</sup> century commentary on these verses for a survey of interpretations. Avoid all the side-trails and cut to what I perceive to be the simplest, most direct reading:

1. God chose his Son to be the redeemer:

## Ephesians 1:4-5, Work of the Father

- Matt 12:18, “Behold my servant, whom I have chosen” (from Isa 42:1)
  - Luke 23:35, the rulers recognize that “Christ” is “the chosen of God”
2. The Messiah is the representative and head of his people (Rom 5:12-21)
  3. Thus in choosing him, God has chosen us as well. We are not chosen in isolation from him. Our election to be his sheep is tied up with his election to be our shepherd. In election as in redemption, he is our representative and head.
  4. An important consequence: in this sense, God gives us a blessing “in Christ” even before we believe. God’s sovereign choice has placed us in an intimate relation with his Son, a relation that unfolds and blossoms over time into the full realization of salvation.

The same sentiment is expressed in 2 Tim 1:9, God “hath saved us, and called [us] with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.”

Caution: some would say that since the Father chose the Son, and since believers are “in Christ,” the verse means only that God chooses whoever (later) comes to be “in Christ.” E.g., “God chose Christ, so whoever ends up being in Christ ends up being chosen.” But this avoids the simple meaning of the text, that God “chose us,” and did so long ago. Paul in Rom 9:12,13 makes this precisely analogous with Jacob and Esau in Gen 25:22,23 and Mal 1:2,3, where the selection is directly of individuals, not of corporate relationship with a representative head.

**Application.**—The truth of God’s election ought to move us (as it did Paul) to worship and evangelism:

- to worship as we realize how completely our joy is a gift from our sovereign God;
- to evangelism as we realize that there are “fish in the barrel.” Cf. 2 Tim 2:10, “Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.”

### ***When did God choose us? “before the foundation of the world”***

God is like an engineer, preparing a detailed plan in eternity past and then executing it through time. This is one of several passages that trace God’s works of salvation to his purposes before the world ever existed.

- John 17:24, the Father loved the Son
- 1 Pet 1:20, the Father foreknew the Son as Redeemer
- Rev 13:8, Christ was slain
- Rev 17:8, the book of election was written
- 1 Cor 2:7, the gospel was ordained

Redemption is not an afterthought in the mind of God. The sequence was definitely NOT

- make Adam and Eve to have fellowship with him
- they unexpectedly sin

- “I hate it when that happens; now what will I do? I know—I’ll send a savior.”

On the contrary, God purposed from the first to have a redeemed people, and even the sin of Adam and Eve works precisely into his sovereign plan. He causes the wrath of man to praise him, Ps 76:10.

**Application.**—This truth is a great encouragement when all around us things seem to be going wrong. Nothing is beyond the scope of our Lord’s control. We, indeed, may feel that we are constantly patching and fixing things that are broken, but from his perspective, he is working all things together for good to those who love him, whom he has called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

### ***To what end did God choose us? “holy and without blame”***

Regularly, when Paul celebrates the free and unmerited nature of our salvation, he continues with an emphasis on our responsibility to live godly lives.

- Eph 2:10 follows 8,9
- Tit 3:8 follows 3-7.

This godly character can be described in two ways: with reference to those around us, and with reference to ourselves.

**Holy.**—“Separate,” that is, from the mass of those who are *not* chosen. This is the adjective; those who are holy are “saints.” We are to be distinctive, in word, thought, appearance, conduct. This is not an optional accessory to the Christian life, but central and obligatory: Cf. Heb 12:14, “Follow peace with all [men], and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”

**Blameless.**—“without spot,” “faultless.” We are to be separate from those around us, distinct from them and morally superior, but that is not enough. We are to be pure, flawless, spotless.

The two prepositional phrases that come next qualify the entire clause (“that we should be holy and without blame”) in two important ways.

**Before him.**—Reminds us that the standard we have to satisfy is his, not our own, and not the world’s.

**In love.**—This phrase precludes any attitude of “moral competition” or “holier than thou” among the believers. Our Lord’s new commandment is that we love one another as he loved us, and a spirit of love toward our brethren must characterize all of our efforts to holiness and blamelessness.

### ***Summary***

We thus see that election focuses on what we are *not*. It distinguishes us from those who are not chosen, and sets up the expectation of our future conduct in contrast to them. The next verb, “predestinated,” focuses on what we *are*: the children of God.

### **v.5-6, Predestination**

Again, a main verb with three qualifying phrases

### ***What did God do? “predestinated us”***

Προορίζω is rare, almost entirely restricted to six occurrences in the NT.

- Underlying verb ορίζω is used in LXX in describing the boundaries of Israel: “the sea bounded them on the west ... the Jordan bounded them on the east.” Cf. our “horizon.”
- Ορίζω occurs 6x in Luke-Acts + 2, all metaphorical in the sense of “appoint,” “determine.” Always with God as subject and the person or work of Christ as object, except Acts 11:29, where the disciples in Antioch determine to send relief to Jerusalem. E.g., Acts 10:42, Jesus ordained to be judge of quick and dead.
- So προορίζω naturally means, “to determine, appoint, bound ahead of time.” Note that this is doubly future. Ορίζω itself implies a future plan, and adding προ- emphasizes that aspect. 6 uses in the NT: 2 in Rom 8 and 2 in Eph 1 of our salvation, 1x each in Acts 4:28 and 1 Cor 2:7 of the crucifixion of Christ as the means to that end.

**Application.**—How the natural heart rebels against this simple, direct teaching of the Scriptures. Yet it pervades both the Old and New Testament, and is an unavoidable consequence of God’s sovereign position as creator of the entire universe. For us, it should be a token of great comfort that the God who loves us so much has fixed a destiny for us that guarantees our blessing. Many wealthy parents have tried in vain to guarantee the prosperity and happiness of their children; God alone can succeed in this.

### ***What is this destiny? “unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself”***

There are two issues here, the meaning of the metaphor, and the relation of adoption to a complementary metaphor of parent-child relationship, the new birth.

**Meaning.**—The metaphor is drawn from Roman law, by which one man could take another as his legal son and heir. Three questions deserve attention.

- What status does it convey on us? “Children” is misleading. The Greek word is υιοθεσία = “appointment as a υιος son,” and Paul makes much of this distinction. E.g., Gal 3:23-4:7 contrasts our sonship as a result of the “adoption” with Israel’s minor status as children under the law. Acts 17:29 makes all men the “offspring” of God, and modern liberal theology has made much of the “universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man,” neglecting this distinction.
- In what does it consist? The noun occurs in three books of the NT (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5) and in both of the other two it is associated with the gift of the Spirit and our ability to call God αββα. Thus it seems to be associated in Paul’s mind with the new covenant. (How then does he say that it pertains to Israel in Rom 9:4? Two answers. First, that is aggregate, “Israel is my son,” not the individual portion of each believer. Second, the new covenant DOES pertain to them. It is promised to them, and one day they shall receive it; indeed, those who have received it are “the Israel of God,” Gal 6:16.
- How does it occur? It is said to be “by [through] Jesus Christ.” He is the one who has ratified the new covenant by his sacrifice (Heb 9:13-23), and who has proclaimed the good news to us. “Through Jesus Christ” is a complement to “in Jesus Christ.” “In” emphasizes his role as our representative and substitute, while “through” emphasizes the actions that he has done for us.

**Relation to rebirth.**—(John 3). The best commentary appears to be John 1:12-13

- v.12, “authority to become the sons of God,” adoption
- v.13, “which were born,” rebirth.

Haldane on Romans 8:15, p.358, sees adoption as the legal transaction; regeneration that which makes it so in fact. “Adoption confers the *name* of sons, and a *title* to the inheritance; regeneration confers the *nature* of sons, and a *meetness* for the inheritance.” But this seems backward to the order in John 1:12,13, which grants the authority to those believe (present tense), and then observes that they had already (aorist compared with present tense “believe”) been begotten of God totally apart from any human will (cf. James 1:18, “of his own will begat he us”). Thus we have the order

- new birth, conveying life
- faith as the evidence of that life
- sonship (on the order faith → sonship, Gal 3:26)
- gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal 4:6).

This ordering is the source of much theological argument. There need not be any temporal separation. Adoption, gift of the Spirit, faith, and rebirth all come as a package.

**Application.**—We need to recognize our status as sons and daughters of God, (2 Cor 6:18), and act in keeping with it. We are not just his little children, whose immature behavior may be excused by our age. We are adult sons and daughters, full heirs to the household and representatives of our divine Parent, and we should conduct ourselves in the sense of this status.

### ***What led God to predestinate us? “the good pleasure of his will”***

Both expressions are important.

**Of his will.**—Cf. v.11, which cites this as the basis of all that God does. Cf. Dan 4:35, which notes that no one can oppose this will. No basis for the common evangelical distinction between the “perfect” and “permissive” will of God. His will embraces all that happens, but this does not mean he takes pleasure in it all alike.

- Ezek 33:11, God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, although that death is certainly according to his will; in fact, he decrees it.
- Isa 28:21 (cf. vv.14ff), God describes judgment as his “strange work” and “strange act.”
- Micah 7:18, “Who [is] a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth [in] mercy.”

**The good pleasure.**—This is the flip side of Ezek 33:11. If judgment brings God displeasure, what brings him pleasure? Answer: the salvation of sinners, beginning with their predestination. God delights to select a few of his creatures and set them apart for salvation. He does so without regard to their merit, and in Paul’s case even chose “the chief of sinners,” and then brings them to himself.

Cf. Luke 15:7,10,32. It is God himself who leads the rejoicing in heaven over salvation.

Cf. Isa 46:8-13, where God promises to do both his “counsel” and his “pleasure.”

- The counsel is the judgment brought by the “ravenous bird from the east,” Cyrus, v.10.
- The good pleasure is the salvation in v.13, embodied in the restoration of the temple.

**Application.**—The bottom line is that God has saved us because he wanted to, and for no other reason. Sometimes people think that they are too great a sinner for God to save, but remember that his attitude toward salvation and damnation is not symmetrical. Salvation, but not judgment, brings him pleasure, and on that basis the prophets and apostles plead with guilty sinners, “Why will ye die? Whosoever will, let him come.”

### ***What object did God have in predestinating us? “the praise of the glory of his grace”***

This phrase is like an onion, made up of successive layers. Easiest to start with the one in the middle and work out.

**His grace.**—Grace is “God’s favor given where his wrath is deserved.” Peter offers us two illuminating instances of it in close compass in 1 Pet 2:19,20. It is a fundamental character of God (cf. the revelation to Moses in Exod 34:6, “merciful and gracious”). Yet it poses an ethical dilemma, for it would seem to overlook the punishment that his justice demands. Thus Paul explains this grace with the phrase, “with which he has graced us in the beloved.” Not just “made us accepted”; the verb is a verbal form of the noun “grace,” and means “to bestow grace upon.” Because we are in Christ, and because Christ has borne our penalty for us, God can be gracious to us without compromising his justice. Cf. Rom. 3:26: “just and the justifier.”

**The glory of his grace.**—God’s glory in general is the manifestation of his attributes. They aren’t hidden in a box, but shine forth around him. God has put himself on display to a watching universe. This theme recurs throughout the book:

- 2:7, “That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in [his] kindness toward us through Christ Jesus”
- 3:10, “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly [places] might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God”

Paul here focuses on one of these attributes, his grace.

**Praise.**—God’s object in choosing us is not just to be gracious, or to show forth that grace as an aspect of his glory, but that the creation would respond in praise of that glory. His actions are calculated to inspire our worship and adoration. In a human, such behavior would be considered vain, but it is absolutely appropriate to the sovereign creator and sustainer of the universe. This phrase, “to the praise of his glory,” is the recurring refrain that marks off the three sections of this opening prayer (vv. 12,14). The work of each member of the trinity is calculated to stimulate the creation to praise the glory of our great God.

**Application.**—Shows us how important worship is. Bible study and exposition are important, since they help us perceive God’s attributes, but they are not an end in themselves. The end is that we would praise God for who he is and what he has done. This is the objective for which he has created and saved us.