



**BELIEVERS CHAPEL**

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

“The Doctrine of Election – IV: Its Problem”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] We thank Thee for the opportunity to study Thy word. And we ask now Thy blessing upon us as we consider again the great doctrine of election to direct in such a way that our understanding of the truth may increase. And that we may appreciate the great truths which are in Thy word which have to do with our eternal destiny. And so we commit ourselves to Thee for this hour of study.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Now, we are studying the doctrine of election, its problems. And last meeting of the class last year, we considered three objections that have been raised to the doctrine of election. One election is inconsistent with human freedom and responsibility. And secondly, election is just fatalism. And third, election prevents the sincere offer of salvation to the non-elect.

Now, I think in fairness to what I said I did overlook stressing the fact that election is not inconsistent with human responsibility. I spent most of my time under that heading discussing election and human freedom. And I think, as I begin tonight, I should say something about the fact that election is not inconsistent with human responsibility. And the key to this is that we should remember that when God elects, the fact of election,

does not mean that men who are in their state of sin because of their own actions are thereby relieved of their responsibility. They are in their state and, therefore, under divine condemnation because of their sin. The doctrine of election does not prevent anyone from getting to heaven. The fact that I am elect and that you are elect does not mean that the act of election prevents anyone from coming to the Lord through Jesus Christ. It is his sin that prevents him from coming. It is his sin that hinders him from coming. And so, if we conceive all men as being lost and all men under divine judgment and I presume that we do believe that simple biblical truth which is found in Romans chapter 5, verse 12, for example, “Death is passed upon all men because all sin and had sinned and come short of the glory of God and all are under divine condemnation,” the fact that God should choose some does not relieve others of responsibility. Further, it does not prevent them from coming, the act of election. It is their sin that prevents them from coming and we should remember that.

And perhaps we could illustrate it by an illustration from the military since we are living in the day in which the military is so important in our life. Let’s suppose, for example, that there is a man who is subject to the draft but who does not want to be drafted. Now, of course, all he has to do in 1969 and 70 is burn his draft card and let his hair grow long and let his beard grow out and shout obscenities and demonstrate and other things and get some advice from a church and its leaders on how to escape over the border into Mexico or Canada and, of course, he won’t have to go to war.

But let’s presume that we’re living in normal conditions and we are subject to the draft and that a person does not wish to be drafted. And let us presume, just for the sake of an illustration, that if he were without one of his fingers he would not be subject to the draft. And let’s suppose then that he mutilates himself to the extent that he removes one of his fingers in order that he might not be subject to the draft. I’m sure that our government would still regard him as responsible because his mutilation of himself is a self-mutilation. And consequently, he is still responsible and the same is true of our

relationship before the Lord. We are responsible because our sin is our sin. And because it is our sin and brings condemnation to us because of our place before God then we are responsible. So election is not inconsistent with human responsibility.

Let’s go on and consider some other objections, a fourth objection. Election involves the injustice of electing only some. Let me begin by saying election is not a matter of justice at all. Election prevents no one from reaching heaven. Election is a matter of sovereign grace and mercy. Because God is favorable to some, we do not thereby say that he must be to all. As a matter of fact, if God saved no one, he would be absolutely just. If no man ever was converted by the saving grace of God, we should say as we all went into hell God is just. That’s what we deserve. That’s what we all deserve. Every single one of us, the best of us to the worst of us we deserve hell. We deserve to be lost. We deserve nothing from God. If ten men owe debts and three are pardoned by the creditor, do the seven have claims? No they are still responsible for their debt. If a governor should pardon one convict from the penitentiary, must he, therefore, pardon all? When he pardons one no injury is done to those who are left.

In God’s government, still less is their reason for objection for God offers pardon to all. There is a universal offer of salvation. Nothing prevents men from being pardoned except their own sin. It is not that they are not elect, it’s that they are sinners and that they like their sin and they will not come to God. Nowhere in the Bible, which teaches so plainly the doctrine election as it says, he did not come, or let me put it this way, he could not come because he was not elect. You might have statements like he could not come because he was not of God. But that is a recognition of the fact that he is in sin. Election is simply God’s determination to rule certain individuals and bring them to the place of willingness so that they accept the offer of his free grace and salvation. Because justice save all, shall it, therefore, save none? So I do not see myself how we can say election involves the injustice of electing only some.

We might try a fifth objection, which is really the other side of that, if election is true, then all should have been elected. Now, this is the other side of that preceding objection. Why is it that God has not chosen everyone? Now, let’s ask a further and more fundamental question, why has God chosen anyone? Why has he devised a plan of salvation? I think if we finally push the matter of election back to its ultimate and if we push the problem of suffering and sin back to its ultimate, we come to the realization that the reason that God has given us a revelation of himself is that he has desired to make known to us his mercy and his grace. And therefore, it was necessary for him to permit sin and, consequently, in permitting sin it was possible for him to reveal himself as a gracious, loving, merciful God. If he had never permitted sin, no one would ever know that God was a God of grace. The angels do not know it in experience now for they are not redeemed. Only men who have been redeemed know that God is a merciful and gracious God. He has revealed himself in this way and it is only by the permission of sin that he would know that.

On the other hand, we must also have a revelation of the justice of God too. And consequently, in addition to the fact of his permission of sin and his redemption of some so that his mercy and grace are manifested because of the fact that those who do not respond are ultimately separated from God, cast into the Lake of Fire, we now know that he is not only a merciful God and a just God and a gracious God but also a just God. Further, if all men were saved, we wouldn’t have seen the just desserts of sin nor would we have appreciated salvation as much. If everybody was going to be saved, who would appreciate the great saving work of God? The Apostle Paul states in 1 Timothy 1:15 and 16, this is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, “That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners whom I am chief. Albeit for this cause obtain mercy that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long suffering for a pattern to them which from that hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.” I think when the facts are finally known we shall discover that God has saved more souls than we had ever dreamed would be and that he

has saved all of the souls that he could have saved consistent with his own wise and holy purposes for a redeemed humanity. And we shall not be disappointed; we shall not think that God is a very niggardly kind of God in that he is cheap in his saving work.

Another objection, a sixth, if this objection is election discourages the efforts of the lost and for the lost. Election discourages the efforts of the lost and for the lost expressed in our language if there is such a thing as election. Why should I worry about whether I come to know God or not? And if there is such a thing as election then God is going save whom he is going save and why should I worry about it. As far as efforts of the loss are concerned, the very opposite is true. If we were convinced that we were free to believe when we liked, then we would become careless and indifferent. And as far as efforts for the lost are concerned, this is certainly not true of the man who wrote Romans chapter 9, the great chapter on election. The Apostle Paul has given us the strongest words, except our Lord Jesus Christ concerning the doctrine and he gives us those words in Romans chapter 9, verses 6 through 29. But did you notice how that chapter began, “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” And then after he has unfolded in this great chapter his doctrine of election, he says in chapter 10, “Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved.” And so whatever we say about the doctrine of election in the case of Paul who has taught us the doctrine of election, it did not discourage his efforts for the loss.

Will you turn with me to 2 Timothy chapter 2 in verse 10? 2 Timothy chapter 2 in verse 10, Paul states just the opposite of this. He says in 2 Timothy chapter 2 in verse 10, “Therefore,” well let’s read in verse 8. “Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel: Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds...” in other words, I am so involved in work for the lost that it even means that I had gone to prison but he says the word of God is not bound.

“Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” So the Apostle Paul, the great believer in election, felt that this was such a tremendous truth that he had an opportunity to cooperate with God in a work that was eternal in its significance. He was willing to give himself wholeheartedly to it that whatever it meant all things he was willing to endure them for the elects sake that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ.

Further, as I've often said to you, the election of God is a secret election. It is not an open election. Frankly, I do not know who in this room is elect nor do you. You do not really know if I am elect. I do not really know if you are elect. We're going to ultimately talk a little bit about the evidences of election how we can have some idea about who are the elect. But in the ultimate analysis, only God knows who are the elect. There is no stripe down the back of an elect person which if you could just get him and pull up his shirt tail you could find out if he was elect or not. No one knows who the elect are and consequently we preach the gospel to everyone giving a universal offer of salvation and the doctrine of election does not prevent them from coming. Remember it is their sin that prevents from coming.

So, election does not discourage efforts of the lost. It should not. It should not discourage efforts for the lost. Listen to the Apostle Paul in Acts chapter 18, verses 9 and 10, “Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.” Actually, the doctrine of election was an encouragement to Paul. It was the assurance to him that his labors would not be in vain in Corinth. I think as a preacher of the gospel, and I have been engaged in this work for twenty-five years, and one of the most comforting things to me is the doctrine of election because here and there God has his own and it is my duty to be an instrument in his hands to recover the elect for him. Jesus said, “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold. Them also I must bring and they shall hear my voice and they shall be onefold and one

Sheppard.” So election does not discourage the efforts of the lost, ideally it does not discourage efforts for the lost.

Now, seventh. Election makes Christians proud and careless. Now, remember in God’s saving work of election, he foreordains not only the end that someone will come to the Lord, but he also foreordains the means to that end. He does not just say Lewis Johnson will somehow or other come to the Lord. Within in his great program, it is Lewis Johnson is one of my children. He shall come to faith in Jesus Christ. And I desire that he come to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of Donald Grey Barnhouse. And so he foreordains the means as well as the end.

Now, it is possible for us, of course, to be unfaithful. That is not unknown to God. He is not shocked when someone is unfaithful. And he’d say well I guess that won’t work. We’ll have to do it another way. He knows the end from the beginning. And so he foreordains the means as well as the end but it is possible for us within the program of God to lose our reward because we have not been faithful. And while he may in his permissive will have allowed us to fail and lose our rewards, he’s not going to lose his elect because we fail someone else but then the preceptive will of God has been determined from ages past as the means in that salvation.

But coming to this question of election making Christians proud and careless, as a matter of fact, there’s nothing provides a stronger basis for morality than gratitude. It’s often thought that the strongest basis for morality is keeping the law. In other words, if you can give people law, they will respond and be lawful. That is not true. We have had the finest laws in the history of humanity, but we have not been a law-abiding people, universally. We have largely been a lawless people. You see the strongest motive for morality is love and gratitude. And so the Christian who has come to realize that he is the object of the saving grace of God, that man is appreciative for what has happened to him and he is ruled by the greatest of all moralities, love for God. And when a man recognizes the truth of election and what it really means, it is not a discouragement to

morality. It does not make Christians proud and careless. And if you will look at the history to those who have been the greatest believers in the doctrine of election, you will discover that generally speaking they have stood out in the history of humanity as men of the deepest moral fiber.

One of the men, who has written a history of the reformation, who was not an outstanding Christian man, is Preserved Smith. And he has written a book called the Age of the Reformation which for many years was the standard text in most of our universities on the history of the reformation. And in it he has some words to say about the Calvinists and the Huguenots and others, the Puritans who were Calvinistic in their doctrine. And after a paragraph, which I read again this afternoon, in which he quotes some of the accusations that were laid to John Calvin and others among them even Martin Luther, he went on to say this. And mind you this man is not an outstanding Christian man and so far as I know from the reading of Preserved Smith’s book, he does not believe in the doctrine of election as John Calvin did. But this is what he says, “But there was another side to the doctrine of election. There was a certain moral grandeur in the complete abandon to God and in the earnestness that was ready to sacrifice all to his will. And if we judged the tree by its fruits at its best it brought forth a stronger good grace. The noblest examples are not the theologians Calvin and Knox not only drunk with God but drugged with him much less, politicians like Henry of Navarre and William of Orange, but the rank and file of the Huguenots of France, the Puritans of England, the choice and sifted seed wherewith God sowed the wilderness of America. These men bore themselves with I know not what of lofty seriousness and with a matchless disdain of all mortal peril and earthly grandeur believing themselves chosen vessels and elect instruments of grace. They could neither be seduced by carnal pleasure nor awed by human might. Taught that they were kings by the election of God and priests by the imposition of his hands, they despised the puny and vicious monarchs of this earth. They remained, in fact, what they always felt themselves to be an elite, the chosen few.” And I think that history bears

that out, the men who have done the greatest for America and for Britain have been men whose moral fiber was strengthened by feeding upon the great doctrines of sovereign mercy and free grace and election and foreordination. The knowledge that we are the elect of God humbles the true Christian. A proud and haunting spirit is a sure mark that a person doesn’t belong to the elect.

One of the great Calvinistic hymn writers was Isaac Watts. You look at almost any hymnbook, you will notice Watts’ hymns are very common and he was a great writer. He had some weaknesses Calvinistically but he belonged to that general theological strand. In 1702, Isaac Watts became minister of the most fashionable and notable independent church in England, the Church of Christ in London. And he’s written some of the greatest of our hymns. Here is one of his hymns and you’ll notice it has a very somber beginning. It begins “Plunged in the gulf of dark despair. We wretched sinners lay without one cheerful beam of hope or spark of glimmering day.” But then it concludes with this triumphant exordium, “Oh for this love let rocks and hills their lasting silence break. And all harmonious human tongues savior’s praises speak.” And there he speaks of the gratitude of the election which has come to him.

Now, another objection, election implies reprobation. Election implies a preterition, the passing by of others. Now, I think that we must in honesty say this is true. But we should distinguish between the decree to elect and the decree for reprobate. One is positive the other is negative and permissive. One is the doctrine of election. The other is the doctrine of preterition. Preterition means to pass over, to pass beyond from the Latin word *praeter*. You may remember it. *Praeterito* means passing by or an omission.

Now, there are several things to remember here. The first place we have to view to the word. The Bible never speaks of predestination to hell. It speaks of predestination so to the end that we are conformed to the image of God’s Son. It does not speak of predestination to hell. There are many who think that careful distinctions are made. I

would not like to go that far. But one of our great Baptist theologians has said “Election and sovereignty are only sources of good. Election is not a decree to destroy. It is a decree only to save.” When we elect the President, we do not need to hold a second election to determine the remaining millions shall be non-presidents. It’s needless to imply contrivance or force. Sinners, like water, if simply let alone, will simply run down hill to ruin. The decree of reprobation is simply a decree to do nothing. A decree to lead the sinner to himself. The natural result to this judicial forsaking on the part of God is the hardening and destruction of the sinner. And he refers to Romans chapter 1, verses 24, 26, and 28 in which God says, “Now God gave them over when they persisted in sin. Now, God gave them over. God gave them over.” When a man persists in rejecting the grace of God, a law operates so that ultimately he comes under judicial hardening but that is the just desserts of his refusal and rejection of the grace of God. The led never presents God as taking delight in the death of the wicked. So I think if we consider all of the objections to election, they really do not hold water. Men are responsible because of their sin. God’s goodness to some does not mean that he must show the same goodness to all. God is just if he should save no one.

You know in connection with this, some people think because God has chosen some he ought to choose all. I remember something that happened in my family a number of years ago. Our little girl, Grace, was about three or four years of age at the time and our son was who is about five years older or four and a half, was, therefore, seven, eight, or nine. And we were living by some people who were friends of ours and they were, because Grace was the younger child, they went out of their way to be nice to her and frequently the wife of the family would give Grace little gifts. And once I remember we sat down at the table and Gracie had just been given something by the young lady who lived next door. And Sam spoke up and said why doesn’t she give me something? And we, of course, tried to explain to Sam that because she gave Grace gifts did not mean that she had to give Sam gifts. That was her privilege. And I think the

same thing holds true with regards to election. When all are lost if you should exercise mercy to some we should be thankful and grateful to God and we should realize that we do not, thereby, make God liable to do good to all.

Now, if you are sitting in the audience tonight and you are puzzled about this, and you do not really know if you belong to the elect, you know there is one thing that you can do to settle the question. And by this you would prove that your objections are something more than just merely theoretical objections which are meaningless. If you really are concerned the only thing that you have to do in order to receive the everlasting life which would demonstrate that you have belonged to the elect from eternity past would be to simply say thank you Lord for dying for me and I take you as my personal savior. And that settles the question.

But, if you are not willing to do that if you are sitting in the audience tonight and you are not a Christian and you’re not willing to do that then what shall we say about your protestation about the doctrine of election? If you are not willing to come then why should you have objection to God if he should desire to bless some. And if you will not become because of your sin, if you will not come because of your sin then you have no real reason to complain to God. So if you’re here tonight and you are not one of the elect, you can settle the question by putting your faith and trust in Jesus Christ. And when you do and when you begin to study the Bible you will discover it’s because God has brought you to the place where you desire, the salvation which none of us desire naturally. And you have acted out of the wonderful mercy and grace of God which has brought you to him.

I’d like to say just a few words before we close about the problems of preaching election. No one who has studied the Bible would doubt that election is a problem with a natural man. It is difficult for him to adjust to the fact. Number one, that all are lost and under condemnation, that all deserve hell. And then it is difficult for him to adjust to the fact that God is not unrighteous to save some. Difficult for us to do it, but remember

our minds are under sin. Our minds have been touched by the fall. We’re not able to reason under God. Our reasoning processes are touched by the fall that’s why we have difficulty. And then, of course, if we do see in the Bible the doctrine of election and if we see the logic of all that I’m telling you, we still wonder now should we say anything about this to those who are not elect. Isn’t it an embarrassing thing because the natural man reacts so violently to the idea that God should elect some?

I had a systematic theology teacher whom I revered very much and still do one of the greatest of teachers. And I owe a great deal of what I think I know about the Bible to his teaching. And he used to like to say to us in class the entire theme of election concerns those only who are regenerated and should never be presented to or even discussed in the presence of the unsaved. And I remember that when he told me that, twenty years ago, I thought that was a very wise statement because in those days I really didn’t understand as much I think I understand about the doctrine of election now. Now, I could see there would be great difficulties if we were to preach the doctrine of election to those who did not know Jesus Christ as Savior. Then I began to study the Bible and I discovered that those who teach the doctrine of election and the word of God primarily our Lord, of course, not only taught the doctrine of election to those who belong to him but he taught the doctrine of election to those who didn’t belong to him. As a matter of fact, the strongest statements in the Bible about election about the sovereignty of God and his free grace in choosing the strongest statements in all of the Bible if they are not Paul’s they are our Lord’s statements. He said, for example, to unbelievers, “No man can come to me except the Father that sent me draw him.” “No man can come to me except the Father which hat sent me draw him.” Many other places he spoke about the doctrine of election but he spoke about that doctrine in the presence of the lost.

Last Sunday in Philadelphia I preached twice in the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant in Bala Cynwyd which is one of the residential areas of the city of Philadelphia

on the main line. I spoke on the subject of Pilate. And in the course of our Lord’s words to Pilate, we have one of the most solemn statements that Jesus ever uttered. For example, he said to Pilate, after he had begun his conversation with him in that 18th chapter in the 37th, Pilate had said to Jesus “Art thou our King then? Jesus answers thou sayst that I’m a King to this end was I born and for this cause came I to the world that I should bear witness unto the truth.” And then he said these solemn words, “Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice.” “Everyone that is of the truth.” What does it mean to be of the truth? Well, it means to belong to God. The man who is of the truth is the man whose disposition is in harmony with the truth of God’s. “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.”

Now, we’re taught and you’ve heard me say this a number of times, we are taught by those who teach us how to witness, we are taught that we should tell them how God has a plan for their lives. We are taught to tell them how that God by reason of the saving work of Jesus Christ has bridge the gap that exists between sinful man and between the requirements of God for man’s salvation. And we’re taught that we should tell them that if they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ they shall be saved. And we are hardly ever taught that we should appeal to the basic character of their being.

You know soul winning is likened to fishing by our Lord. He said “From henceforth thou shall become fishers of men.” And there are all kinds of bait that men use to catch fish. And there are all kinds of bait that soul winners use to catch souls. And the good soul winner is the man who knows how to use bait. He knows how to take the precise bait that will work with certain types of fish. But you hardly ever hear anyone told to use this kind of bait. Jesus’ words are extremely solemn. “Everyone that is of the truth hearth my voice, Pilate.” In the 8th chapter in the 47th verse he utters words that are very similar. He said “He that is of God heareth God’s words. Ye therefore hear them not because ye are not of God.”

Now, he didn’t say you couldn’t hear him because you are not of God. As if the fact that they were not of God was designed by God to prevent them from coming though they wished to. But he said, “He that is of God heareth God’s words. Ye therefore hear them not because ye are not of God.” So the basic question is are we of the truth? Are we of God? Well do you remember the little parable that Jesus told about four kinds of soil? He said the seed was taken by the sower and he went out to sow and he sowed some seed by the wayside. Birds of the air came down, took the seed away. It didn’t bring forth fruit. Some were sowed on the rock and it managed to enter into the soil, sprang up temporarily and then withered away because it didn’t have any root. Some fell along the thorns and thistles and the thorns choked it so that no fruit resulted. And some fell upon good ground and it brought forth fruit, thirty-fold, sixty-fold, one hundred-fold. You see the question is are we good ground? Our Lord’s responsible for this. He told us that parable. He said there are some ground that is good and there is ground that is not good. There are people who are of God and they hear God’s words. Those who do not hear God’s words are not of God. There are those who are of the truth and they hear the truth and respond to the truth. And there are others, the great mass it seems, who are not of the truth.

Shall we preach election? I think our Lord preached it. I think he preached it as one of the most solemn ways of bringing home to the hearts of men that they have responsibility before God to respond to the message of the truth. And you know if I were in this room tonight and I had not believed in Jesus Christ I wouldn’t waste one breath before I turned immediately and said Lord I come the best way I know how, “Thank you Lord for giving Jesus Christ to die for me. I do respond and oh God in my unbelief help me to come.” I would come. I wouldn’t waste a breath. This is the most solemn thing in all of the word of God in all our life.

I do think a man should use discretion and discernment when preaching election. He should relate it to the context. We can make it a very cold and forbidding doctrine.

In most of the cases in which it occurs in Scripture it’s related to other and often practical truth. God speaks about our being chosen to suffer for him. He speaks about our being chosen for other purposes, as we shall see. And it should always be preached with a universal offer of salvation. Whenever we talk about election, we ought to say whosoever will come may come. We know there are the elect but we do not know who they are. And God offers as a universal appeal the gospel message of Jesus Christ. If you do not come, it’s not because you’re not elect. It’s because you don’t want to come because of your wicked sin that you do not respond for which you are responsible before God.

Time is up. Next time we’re going to talk about the practical values of the doctrine of election. Then we’re going to try to launch into the question of for whom did Christ die? Did he die for all? Did he die for the elect? That’s a very moot question and we shall look at that from both angles.

Next Monday night we will not have a class. It’s going to snow [laughter] and so I’m serious we’re not going to have a class, but I don’t know what the weather is going to be. I have to be in Nashville next Monday night. Nashville happens to be the city where my grandchildren are too. But I’m going to be in Nashville next Monday and then when I come back I won’t be absent for a good while, so let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee for this great doctrine of election. We know Lord we shall never as long as we’re in the flesh completely understand it but we thank Thee that thou hast chosen us in him before the foundation of the world. And enable us to come to a deep appreciation and to a deep gratitude for all that Jesus Christ has done. And Lord we acknowledge as a group of believers that it was pure grace that reached out to us for each one of us deserves to be lost. We deserve eternal condemnation. We have nothing with which to commend ourselves to Thee. All we have is Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for him. We thank Thee for the enlightening ministry of the Holy Spirit that

brought us to understand ourselves and to understand him. And to woo and win us so that we responded out of our grace to him. May Thy hand rest upon each one of us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.