

## ***Cedars: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith***

### ***“What is Election?”***

Ephesians 1:3-14

Cedars Sermon Series

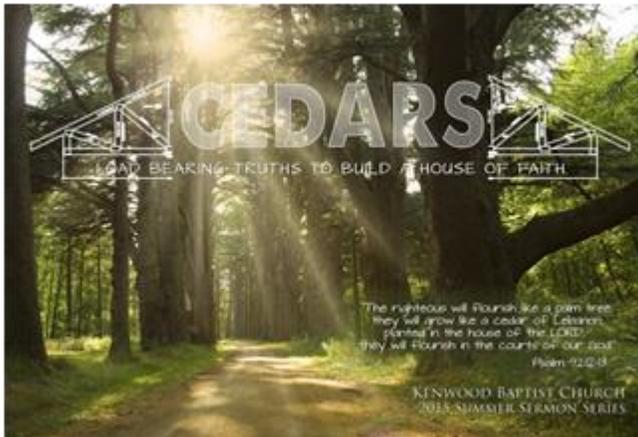
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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**TEXT:** Ephesians 1:3-14

We continue this morning with our summer series on *Cedars of Lebanon: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith*, truths that support the structure of Christian faith. We have looked



together so far this summer at a set of important questions. We looked at: “Where do we go to find the truth?” We saw that we find the truth in God's Word. We looked at the question: “What is God like? Who does He reveal Himself to be in His Word?” We looked at: “What is humanity? Who are we in His image?” We look at: “What's wrong with us that we are in sin through Adam's and Eve's fall?” We looked at: “Who can help us? Jesus

Christ.” Last week, we looked at: “How Christ helps us by His atoning death on the cross in which He satisfies the wrath of Almighty God.” This morning, we turn to the next question. It is a deep question. It is the question of how this great salvation of Christ comes to us. The Scripture teaches that salvation comes to us first through God's election, His choosing, His taking the initiative to save.

What is election? What does it mean to be chosen by God? I want to start with this as a working definition: Election is God's free, sovereign choice of some from every people to be saved in Christ. The doctrine of election can easily be misunderstood in the limits of our own understanding. It is a doctrine that has been controversial at times throughout church history. Christian groups have separated from one another precisely over this doctrine, and yet, in Ephesians 1, the doctrine of election inspires praise. Ephesians 1:3 says:

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”*

What is the first spiritual blessing that drives this praise? It is in the next phrase, in Ephesians 1:4:

*“For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world.”*

Election drives and fuels our praise of God. Election also opens us up to the experience of God's love. Ephesians 1:5 says:

*“In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will--to the praise of His glorious grace.”*

The doctrine of election also provides assurance of God's commitment to us. In Ephesians 1:11, we read:

*“In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.”*

Sometimes people asked me: “Do you believe in the doctrine of predestination?” I say: “That language is in the Bible.” Sometimes predestination frightens us; sometimes it makes us apathetic; and sometimes it makes us proud or inactive. Yet, these are all misunderstandings. This is a precious truth of God's Word, and we have the great privilege of exploring it together. I hope that by the end of the sermon you embrace election, not because of my opinion, but that you embrace it because it fills the pages of Scripture. God speaks of it for climactic purposes: to keep us close to Him; to let us know that salvation is His initiative; and to comfort us in His commitment to us. We will end up there.

I want to start by looking at being chosen. What does it mean that God chooses? Does the Bible actually teach this, or did we just pick one passage in Ephesians and try to squeeze this in? Actually, the doctrine of election, or God's choosing for salvation, is a topic that runs through the entire course of Scripture. To help us understand that election is not an abstract philosophical or theological question, but a very concrete reality, let's look at the first person said to be chosen in Scripture. In Genesis 12, we see the first person chosen in Scripture is Abraham. God breaks into the life of this idolatrous man out of His sheer sovereign will and good pleasure, and calls an idolater from Ur to leave his ancestral home. He then gives him staggering promises: “...that through him all nations would be blessed.” Joshua 24:2 recalls this great action of God:

*“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.’”*

In other words, they were idolaters. Then God says in Joshua 24:3:

*“Then I took [chose] your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many.”*

In Genesis 18:19, the Lord says to the angel right before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that He will explain His purposes to Abraham:

*"For I have chosen him . . ."*

God's free, sovereign choosing of Abraham, was not by virtue of Abraham's merits, for he was an idolater when he was chosen, called. In Nehemiah 9:7, Nehemiah says:

*"You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham."*

God's sovereign purposes in history continue in His choosing of Isaac and not Ishmael. God says in Genesis 17:19:

*"Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him."*

"I will establish My covenant with Isaac," the Lord promises, confounding human wisdom. In Genesis 25:23, Lord says to Rebecca concerning Jacob and Esau, twins still in her womb:

*"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."*

God's sovereign pre-choosing of Jacob, was not because he deserved it, for that would nullify Romans 9. Paul says in Romans 9:11-12:

*". . . though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad--in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of Him who calls--she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'"*

God's sovereign, free election is an important idea in Scripture. It keeps God at the center of all things. It is a concept that we in the 21st century as Americans are predisposed not to embrace, because we conceive of elections as human decisions based on popular votes. In other elections, we choose by what we like or we don't like. Yet, God's sovereign, free election is of a totally different order than these. The language of being chosen is used not only of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. It is used of Israel as a nation, as a people. In Deuteronomy 4:37, the Lord says:

*"And because He loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with His own presence, by His great power."*

Deuteronomy 7:6 says:

*"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."*

God chose them out of all peoples in remembrance of His promise. The doctrine of election causes the authors of Scriptures to burst into praise, like in Psalm 105:42-43:

*“For He remembered His holy promise, and Abraham, His servant. So He brought His people out with joy, His chosen ones with singing.”*

Psalm 135:3-4 says:

*“Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing to His name, for it is pleasant! For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel as His own possession.”*

The language of election and being chosen fills the Scriptures, and it is therefore very important, as we will see.

Some of you are trying to scuttle for safety right now, thinking, “Well, that’s Old Testament. Let me run to the Gospels for safety.” I’ll tell you, you will hit a theological brick wall in John 15:16 when Jesus says in the plainest of terms:

*“You did not choose Me, but I chose you. . .”*

That's not a difficult statement to understand, but it is a vital, life-giving truth as I hope we will see. Listen to the words of Jesus as He describes His people as those whom the Father has given to Him in John 10:29:

*“I give them [My sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.”*

In John 6:37 Jesus says:

*“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out.”*

Jesus continues in John 6:38-39:

*“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will but the will of Him who sent me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me.”*

In John 17:6, Jesus says in His prayer to the Father:

*“I have manifested Your name to the people whom You gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and You gave them to Me.”*

Do you see that language? *“The people whom You have given to Me.”*

The apostle Paul uses the language of being chosen, of the elect, throughout his letters, In 1 Thessalonians 1:4, he says of new converts, Greek Christians from a pagan background:

*“For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came*

*to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”*

In Colossians 3:12, he says:

*“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”*

In the great text, Romans 8:28, we read:

*“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”*

Romans 8:29 says:

*“For those whom He foreknew He also predestined . . .”*

This is another variation on the language of being chosen, or elected: those whom He knew, as He says to Israel in Amos 3:2:

*“You only have I known among the nations.”*

Those God knew, He predestined, He planned, to be conformed to the image of His Son in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.

I know what lies within your hearts; I can see it on your faces. I call these the four Fs, the four failures of understanding that lie within the heart, yours and mine, so let's just call them what they are.

The first F that rises in the human heart: **Is this fair?**

What is fair about this? Let me vaccinate you against this question immediately, because you should never ask God for what you deserve. The only thing that's not fair in this universe is salvation in Christ. The only thing that we do not have coming to us is the free grace of God that we receive in Jesus Christ, and election guards us and causes us to praise. In Ephesians 1:6, we see it is:

*“. . . to the praise of His glorious grace.”*

It is precisely because it's unfair that the Gospel is celebrated and announced with glory. Hallelujah! that God is not fair and He has not treated me as my sins deserve. If He counted a reckoning for your sins and mine, none could stand. So, when you feel rising within your heart that desperate cry of egalitarianism, of all things equal, equal opportunity, equal lending, whatever your category is, just say, “Hallelujah! God is not fair; He has not treated me as my sins deserve,” because in Christ, in Ephesians 1:7:

*“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us.*

Who deserves redemption? Who deserves the death of Christ as an atoning sacrifice? No one! But we have redemption in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished upon us. Hallelujah!

The second F is: **What about my free will?**

John Owen said:

“Free will is ‘corrupted nature's deformed darling, the Pallas of beloved self-conception of darkened minds.’”

That is a real insult. Let's look at it from a different angle. Frances Turretin, the Swiss Italian theologian of the Reformation noted with accuracy:

“The word ‘freewill’ as also ‘self-determining power’ [*autexousiou*] used by the Greek Fathers does not occur in Scripture.”

Our free will, though we pretend to have it, is not how the Bible views our will. Scripture does not view our will as free. I am not saying that you can't choose Cheerios instead of Cornflakes, or something absurd like that. Our experience of making choices is real, but the concept of a free, autonomous self-determination is not how the Bible views us after the Garden of Eden. Paul says in Ephesians 2:1-2:

*“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.”*

Dead people don't make meaningful choices. This is how our will is viewed in Scripture. Our will is viewed as following the course of this world; our will is viewed as following the prince of the power of the air; our will is viewed as carrying out the passions of our own desires; our will is viewed as being by nature a child of wrath; our will is viewed as futile in our thinking, claiming to be wise so we become fools (Ephesians 2:2-3; Romans 1:21-31). Our will is easily manipulated; our will consistently makes choices that are hostile to God; our will is anything but free in Scripture. Martin Luther said:

"Free will is an empty term. Free-will cannot will good and of necessity serves sin."

He goes on to say that if he could get rid of it, he would. He says:

"I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want ‘free-will’ to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground ...; but because even were there no dangers ... I should still be forced to labor with no guarantee of success ... But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie

to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him.”

Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favor promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God”

This is what it means to understand God's free, sovereign, electing grace: that He acts; He takes initiative; none can rescue from His hand. Rightly understanding election fuels our praise. It comforts us with the assurance of the experience of His love.

Let me vaccinate you against the third F, that sometimes we misconstrue election as **foreknowledge**. We read in Romans 8:29:

*“For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers.”*

We often read this as though God just happened to know, happened to look ahead and say, “Election means that I know who will choose to respond to the Gospel.” This reduces God’s election to God's omniscience, that He knows the self-determining choice that I will make, and yet there is no verse in Scripture that clearly teaches this. *Those whom He foreknew* is the language of Amos: *you I have known*. Not only has God known us, but He has a plan for us. It is a plan to work us into the transformation and conformity to the image of His beloved Son. God has a plan. Isn’t it comforting to know that the God who is running the universe has a plan? When you wake up in the morning and gather around the breakfast table in your home and there is no plan for the day, some people around the table get nervous. Others feel excitement, for anything can fit into that plan. But a life with no plan tends to go towards chaos. A universe with no plan disintegrates. But God, who is the Creator and Redeemer, has a plan. Ephesians says He chose us before the creation of the world. Revelation 7 shows us the end result of that plan where some from every nation are gathered around the throne in praise, and what God begins, He completes.

The fourth F that sometimes rises within us is a cynics F: **fatalism**. It says that if God has elected, if God has predestined, then it's a fatalistic universe, an impersonal universe, and it makes my soul apathetic: a cynic’s resignation that all is determined, so why bother? This is a profound misunderstanding of election. Paul anticipates this objection in Romans 9:19:

*“You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?’”*

But, the doctrine of election, God's free, sovereign choice of some from everywhere means that the universe is not impersonal, but that it is absolutely personal. It means that God, who has all

power, uses that power to act on our behalf. Markus Barth says:

“The election of people is not one among several features of an impersonal omnipotent rule. To the contrary, it is described in strictly personal terms. It pertains to the relationship of the Father to his children. ... Mechanical predetermination calls for the reaction of marionettes to the wire-pulling artist. But election for adoption finds its response in hearing, believing, hoping, loving, and praising. The saints are not subject to the whims of fate or to an anonymous, predetermining force. Their election is praised in language fitting the glorification of the heavenly Father’s love. ... Ephesians 1 bears testimony to the living God, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Everything said is personal, intimate, functional. An invitation to fatalism cannot be found here.”

Instead of an impersonal universe where humanity is alone, or humanity strives for salvation or seeks our will as the driving force of the universe, the Word of God invites us to see that God, the personal God, has chosen to act, chosen us, that He knows our names, and that in Christ we are chosen to receive a grace that we do not deserve. What does God do from His electing love? His electing love makes us alive in Christ. He makes us alive so that we have the experience of being able to be to respond. Ephesians 2, after describing that we are dead in our sins and that our will runs rampant in the world, hostile to God, we read in Ephesians 2:4-5:

*“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”*

When we were dead people, God reached out and breathed on us as He said ~~to~~ in Ezekiel: “Breathe, Spirit, on these bones and live,” and we become alive, our heart starts to beat anew, and we can respond to God in praise. Salvation begins and ends in Him out of His great mercy. Election means that we were chosen, like Israel. Election, being chosen, was a bedrock of Israel's faith. They stood in unique relationship to God by His electing love, not by their own merits, and in Jesus Christ, this gift is extended to all peoples and is to be received by faith. Election is not something that should be hidden. It is not a theological skeleton in the closet. Election in Ephesians 1 is the mystery of God's will that He revealed in Christ to put into effect in the fullness of time, to bring all together under Christ. We hail the power of Jesus name!

I was going over my notes early this morning, and I just reached that point where I couldn’t hold it in. I knew we were going to sing this, and I just sang it by myself in my office. If you had walked by, you would have heard me. Listen to the words:

“All hail the power of Jesus' name!  
Let angels prostrate fall;  
bring forth the royal diadem,  
and crown him Lord of all.”

The next verse continues:

“Ye chosen seed of Israel's race,  
ye ransomed from the fall,  
hail him who saves you by his grace,  
and crown him Lord of all.”

Election gives us a place to stand in God's saving love, and we are chosen in Christ. Ephesians 1 is saturated with what we receive in Christ. Ephesians 1:3-5:

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ...in accordance with His pleasure and will...which He has freely given us in the One He loves.”*

In Christ, we have redemption; in Christ, we were called; in Christ, we have heard the word of truth, the Gospel; and in Christ, we have believed. Salvation is from Him and through Him and to Him, and all glory and praise go to Him.

Why should we believe in the doctrine of election? I want to conclude with four reasons, or applications.

**Number one: God speaks often in Scripture of election, and election it is a deeply biblical truth.**

The language of being chosen, elect, occurs in hundreds of passages. The language of predestination means that God has a plan and He is working that plan, not by fate or whim, but according to His purpose in Christ, and that purpose results in our salvation.

**Number two: God takes initiative to secure our salvation, and election comforts by keeping God exalted and our pride low.**

Charles Spurgeon recalls a transformation that happened to him precisely on this question. He said:

“One night when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher’s sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, *How did you come to be a Christian?* I sought the Lord. *But how did you come to seek the Lord?* The truth flashed across my mind in a moment – I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, *How came I to pray?* I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. *How came I to read the Scriptures?* I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed, and I desire to make this my constant confession, ‘I ascribe my change

wholly to God.”

I remember the first time I was exposed to the doctrine of election. It was in a class called *Old Testament Hermeneutics*, which you might not think could be life-changing. But, it was. An elderly professor stood in the front of a massive lecture hall. I think he was the last person in the United States to teach using a chalkboard. He worked through the genealogies of Genesis, and then he drew a line across the chalkboard. As he drew this line of God's active work in the world, that chalk line changed my life. I remember sitting there thinking: “Is God really running the universe? Is He really in charge? Is He actively seeking the lost?” That line showed me that He was. He wasn't waiting for me. He wasn't waiting for you. He was in pursuit, and He would accomplish salvation for people who do not deserve it.

**Number three: God's free sovereign election of some from everywhere stirs confidence in ministry outreach and global missions.**

It's a deep misunderstanding to take election and reduce it to fatalism or to think of yourself as “frozen chosen,” people not moved by God's grace and power, when election in Scripture means that ministry must be done. We hear in Acts 13 that when they preached the gospel to those gathered in Antioch, the nations heard. They were glad and honored the Word of the Lord. And then we read this phrase in Acts 13:48:

*“...and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”*

Paul was told to stay in Corinth. Why? Jesus appeared to him and said in Acts 13:9-10:

*“Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”*

There is a great people that belong to Me in the city. So ministry goes forward with power; ministry goes forward with boldness, because the results of ministry are not up to you or me. We go because God has people to save. David Livingstone, pioneer missionary in Africa, made a geographical survey of Africa, and he did this as a prelude to pioneering missions in this unexplored region. He did this for 30 years. Why did he do that? He did that compelled by Jesus' statement in John 10:16:

*“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one flock, one Shepherd.”*

This verse is engraved on the side of Livingstone's tombstone. He had to go because there are people that God has chosen to redeem, and they are there to be disciplined and taught.

**Number four and final application: **The doctrine of election, His electing love to us in Christ, opens us to the experience and assurance of God's love.****

If you don't believe in election, being chosen, then your state in this world hangs, rises and falls,

in the wind of your own deliberation. It rises and falls in the winds of culture or change. But, when we embrace election as it is presented to us in Scripture, it provides us with the deep assurance of God's saving, sovereign love. George Mueller, whom God used to feed 10,000 children a day in England, was a man of prayer. He cared for orphans and those on the margins. When he first was taught election, Mueller revolted against the idea. He doesn't say if it was the question of fairness, or if it was free will, or foreknowledge, or fatalism, or some variation, but he resolved to read through the New Testament. This is what he wrote:

“I had been much opposed to the doctrines of election, but now I was brought to examine these precious truths by the Word of God. Being made willing to have no glory of my own in the conversion of sinners, but to consider myself merely an instrument; and being made willing to receive what the Scriptures said, I went to the Word, reading the NT from the beginning, with a particular reference to these truths.

“To my great astonishment I found that the passages which speak decidedly for election were about four times as many as those which speak apparently against these truths; and even those few, shortly after, when I had examined and understood them, served to confirm me in the above doctrines.

“As to the effect which my belief in these doctrines had on me, I am constrained to state for the God's glory, that though I am still exceedingly weak, and by no means so dead to the lusts of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, as I might be, and as I ought to be, yet by the grace of God, I have walked more closely with Him since that period. My life has not been so variable, and I may say that I have lived much more for God than before.”

Election is there to comfort us and give us the radical, humbling, awe-inspiring experience of God's grace, the everlasting love of God. Some of us have not had a personal experience of knowing that we are loved by God eternally, and I want that experience for all of us: eternally loved before the foundation of the world. That means that God loved us before He even said “Let there be light,” and He is committed to us, and He will bring us safely through to that great multitude in Revelation 7. God has loved us eternally, and He will care for us with omnipotent, all-supplying love. Many of us think of God's love only in terms of a love that offers and waits, but does not take us for Himself and work with infinite enthusiasm to hold us and glorify us forever.

The ultimate comfort of election is the assurance that we belong to God, that we belong to His covenant community, that we are loved with an everlasting, electing, free, sovereign love that not only offers good things, but accomplishes all things necessary for our salvation. Do not be afraid of election. Do not fear the embracing of this precious truth. Do not press it into the closet as a mystery too deep for understanding, for God speaks of this often to place Himself at

the center of our affections, to root us deeply in His love. Jeremiah 31:2-3 says:

*“Thus says the LORD: ‘The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued My faithfulness to you.’”*

Embrace election and receive the experience of this everlasting love and the blessed assurance that Jesus is mine!

Amen.