

Introduction: Faith & Doubt

We all will struggle with our faith.

That may come as a surprise to some of you. There are things that no one tells you when you they are sharing the beauty of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this is often one of the things not mentioned. There definitely are days where faith is easy, where God seems very near, and hope seems very real and large. But there will also be the days where you have less hope, where God seems distant, where you are unsure of what you once were sure of. Your faith will not be a straight line of continual growth. In fact, it will, at times, even seem to go backwards, or down below the previous level. As though you trust in God less now than you did previously. You may have very real doubts.

For some of us, that doubt can be quite severe. It can lead to deep depression. Right now one of the words of the day in Christian circles is deconstruction. The process where people begin to pull apart their faith—often ending without a faith at all.

We started this series in Ephesians last week talking about our need to understand our identity, and how our most basic identity is that we are all “in Christ.” Our hope, our salvation, our future, and our today are all wrapped up in who we are and have been made “in Christ Jesus.” Ours in not a religion of mere intellect, but it is one of identity! It is one of being

found known in the right relationship with the God-Man, Jesus.

It is interesting that doubt, or our struggle to have faith, is not an identity itself but rather the result of the challenge to know our identity—to believe our identity is true when it doesn't seem to be true. To say you are doubting, or lack faith, is simply to say that you are not sure you can see that the truth of your identity at any given moment is true. God is very fair to present this a real problem and experiences for us throughout Scripture.

We see this particular in the Psalms where we have Psalms like Psalm 73:

“my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” (Psalm 73:2–3, ESV)

Here we have the Asaph, a Levite, one of the priests of Israel, being honest that when he looked around at those who didn't follow God, he almost decided to give up his faith in God. He was envious of what he saw going well with them.

We see it in the New Testament. Poor Thomas—one of the disciples—has been forever immortalized as doubting Thomas.

“Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”” (John 20:24–25, ESV)

To be fair to Thomas, wouldn't you be unsure if you should trust your friends if they told you another friend who had just died came back from the dead. I'm guessing most of you would want some proof. Part of our faith that is distinct from Thomas's is that we have to trust their eyewitness reports. We have to put faith in the fact that Jesus raised from the dead.

God doesn't shy away from the reality that we will have doubt in our identity. And we see it all around us daily. All children have to work through the difficulty of believing that they are still loved by their parents when they are disciplined. It is similar at any job: we have to believe we are valued employees even when we are given critical feedback. Trusting your identity is secure is particularly difficult when things in life are not going the way you wanted them to go. When the new job still seems elusive. When you keep getting in the same arguments with your spouse or friend again and again. When you get a difficult disease diagnosis. When a loved one dies. As a believer it can be hard to trust that God is for you and with you in difficult moments.

Look at how David said it in Psalm 13:

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”
(Psalm 13:1–2)

David acutely felt like God was not with him. He struggled to see his identity in this moment very clearly as God’s chosen king and son, someone God promised he would be close to.

The Solution: Subjective vs Objective

Like Asaph, Thomas, and David, we will all struggle with doubt and our faith. God knows this, and we see that he gives us two distinct ways to deal with this challenge and difficulty in our life throughout Scripture.

The first solution is a subjective path. It’s a call to look at our life and see what good things God is doing through us because of the truth of our identity. To see the work of the Holy Spirit at work in us and how our identity in Christ has really changed us. How we are different now than we were when we first came to faith. We have passages like this in 2 Corinthians:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5, ESV)

Now, I imagine there are some of us who are easily able to look at our life and truly see the differences of who we would have been without God and are able to hold onto that as a beautiful reminder of God’s work in our life and our new identity. I think we all have glimpses and moments of this that are very encouraging to us. It is very kind of God to let us see that growth and change.

Yet, if you are like me, or as I imagine many people are, when we examine ourselves we tend to see the bad things most clearly. We see the ways we are failing. Subjectively, it looks like our identity IS a lie. We read 2 Corinthians 13 and say, “Yep, I’m failing the test. Clearly I am not in Jesus Christ.” It furthers our struggle with our faith and our identity rather than bolster it.

Praise God he gives us another solution when we are struggling with our faith, and a completely different standard to look at:

“Therefore, holy brothers [and sisters], you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,” (Hebrews 3:1, ESV)

“let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,” (Hebrews 12:1–2, ESV)

God’s other standard is much more objective. Look to Jesus...this is the other standard. The author of Hebrews is giving us an objective standard outside of our own subjective understanding of how we are growing in Christ. Something that is not dependent on us but dependent on God.

Ephesians 1:4–6: Chosen

This turn to look at the objective reality of what God has done is exactly what Paul is doing here in the beginning of Ephesians. Paul is not trying to help us better understand our salvation through our subjective reality, our own examination of ourself (though, as we saw, that is a valid way to examine our faith). Rather, Paul is wanting to point us to the objective realities that are true for us in Jesus Christ. Realities that come from what God alone did, and that have nothing to do with us. Both sides matter, both sides are true, but this is Paul’s project here in Ephesians chapters 1–3. An objective examination of the truth of our life in Jesus Christ because of who God is and what he has done.

When you think about it, this is an extremely gracious act for God to give us this perspective. That he would choose to share with us his choices and actions that we might have something else to place our waiver faith on when we are

shaken. A bedrock of truth to be a sure foundation when our emotions roll to-and-fro like ocean waves.

As we said last week, Paul's second full sentence starts at Ephesians 1:3 and goes through verse fourteen so we will start there for context:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.” (Ephesians 1:3–6, ESV)

Paul is telling the Ephesians, and he is telling me and you, that God is to receive blessings, praise, honor, and glory because of what he has done for us in Christ Jesus. (This is what we talked about last week.) God has given us every spiritual blessing (in the heavenlies, not necessarily now), and that all occurred as we see in our section this week:

“even as he chose us in him [Jesus Christ] before the foundation of the world.”

The simplest reading of this phrase is that God chose us—God chose Paul, the Ephesians, and you and me, believers in

Jesus Christ—before we did anything to choose him. That is the assurance and objective good news that Paul wants us to see. We were chosen “in him,” that is, in Jesus. God pondered at the creation he was about to make in his mind, he looked at Jesus and what he would do—this beautiful arrangement within the trinity of how to create people with free will and still save them—and God chose those who would believe that “we should be holy and blameless before him.” That we, believers in Jesus, would receive the blessing of being made one of the saints that Paul says we are from earlier in this chapter, those who can now come back into right relationship with God and walk with him because of what Jesus Christ did for us.

Now, I know that for some this is a debated section of Scripture. And nothing I am going to say here today should be taken to mean that I think those who think differently than what I am going to preach are not saved. Nor that they don’t love the Lord. But my main concern this morning is that some well-meaning preachers and scholars have removed one of the most amazing objective statements of God’s love for me and you from our toolbox of assuredness, and therefore left many people more susceptible to doubt and have diminished their view of God and their identity.

I want to, humbly, try to hand you back this verse this morning so that it can be the blessing it was meant to be in your life as a Moon sized marker of God’s love for you and HIS work in securing your identity in ways you could never

have accomplished yourself. If staring at the sun is looking straight into the realities of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, this statement should be like the Moon—rightly reflecting the light of God for us in the darkness of our doubt. That is what I pray you walk away with this morning. And if it is a reality that is already dear and near to your heart, I want to remind you of the glory of a God who has chosen YOU!

Did God Really Choose Us?

The most common argument that this verse doesn't really mean God chose believers before time began and creation has to do with the word "us." People look at that term and say that, yes, God chose "us," but that simply means that he chose that there would be believers, a church, people who loved him, but he didn't prescribe nor ordain who those people would be.

That may seem like an odd argument in general, so let me give an analogy for what they are saying. It is like saying that there will be a Super Bowl winner in February, but the NFL doesn't determine who will be the winner. What happens with the players, and the teams, and how we get to a winner each year was not predetermined (regardless of what social media says about the Super Bowl being one big conspiracy). The NFL simply sets the rules, the parameters, and lets the game play out. The same is true, this argument says, with God. He gives us a paradigm and rules and ways for us to put our faith in Jesus, he did the work to save people on the cross, but at the end of the day he doesn't make any of that

happen for each of us individually and he didn't choose anyone.

The simplest pushback to that view is that the phrase “us” would rarely if ever mean that. And it doesn't seem to be how Paul is using that word throughout all of Ephesians chapters one through three. He seems to be talking to the Ephesians in particular, and to me and you as believers by extension. But fighting what the word “us” means is a tough battle. Who can really say outside of a simple reading how to define that word.

So, let's look at two other passages in Scripture that deal with this question.

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,” (1 Corinthians 1:26–30, ESV)

Here Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to think about their own calling—their personal process of coming to faith in Jesus Christ. This takes away the argument that the word “us” is only a general idea, at least here. Here it is very specific. It is each individual that Paul is addressing as believers. And look what Paul says. Paul says “God chose.” Paul’s point here was to show the Corinthians and me and you that we were nothing special yet God chose us.

Paul’s entire point hinges on the reality that God chose them, that God chose us. Paul doesn’t look at me and you, see foolish, weak, low and despised people and say, “Well, a broken clock is right at least twice a day. I guess some of you can slip in if God makes his rules open to it.” No! He is saying the amazing thing is God CHOSE people like US! Broken, foolish, weak, low, and despised people. The exact opposite of the kinds of people you and I would choose. Completely unlike any game of red-rover you have ever seen. The amazing thing isn’t that losers in the world’s view like me and you managed to stumble into faith, to get lucky and find the right path, but that God would choose people like us.

Even more, we have this last verse that says in the ESV “and because of him [God] you are in Christ Jesus.” As we talked about last week, the more direct translation is “From God you are in Christ Jesus.” That is the point Paul is making in Ephesians 1 and the same point he is making here in 1 Corinthians 1.

Often, when faced with this comparison of Paul from his letter to the Ephesians and then to the Corinthians, some will finally concede that Paul really is saying that God chose believers, but that is just a weird Paul idea and not something we should all believe. They would say the rest of the New Testament isn't really trying to say that.

Well, let's look at James:

“Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?” (James 2:5–6, ESV)

Here we have James, not talking about how we should view ourselves, but how we should view others. Where Paul's discussion both to the Ephesians and the Corinthians is a personal perspective, here we have an interpersonal perspective in James. And James wants to remind us to not look down on others. Not to think less about the poor in particular. Why? Because God **CHOSE** the poor. Not that he allowed the poor to stumble in through his rules, as if they were worthy if they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and made the right profession of faith. Rather, James argues that, just like me and you, they are valuable because God chose them! They find their value and purpose in God's choice, not their choice.

Chosen to Adoption: A Long Story

Paul is really saying something deep, profound, and beautiful here in Ephesians 1. He is saying that God chose us, and not just as a possession or trophy to show his greatness. Paul says God chose us and that he chose us to be holy and blameless, and then he restates what this means for us in case we missed it (or in case we were inclined to not believe what he was saying):

In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

In case we were missing it, Paul restates again this idea of God's choosing and tells us exactly what it means to be holy and blameless. Choosing us means predestining us, declaring that something will happen from before time. And our being holy and blameless means we are now God's beloved sons and daughters.

To pull apart the beauty of what Paul is saying here is to pull at a thread that begins to unravel everything that God has done for us. Our **God has always been a choosing God.**

God chose Abraham from all the peoples of the world, and Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness BEFORE he did anything of merit (like circumcision), but after God's call

on his life. Abraham responded to God, he didn't go seeking God out. One of the main points of the account of Abraham's life is that he is not the kind of guy who is making good choices. Immediately after God calls him he offers his wife as his sister to kings that things might go well with them. Him and Sarah doubt God and his promises and take things into their own hands to try to make the promise come to pass through Hagar and Ishmael. By subjective measures Abraham is failing. But by objective measures, he is God's and God has secured his relationship and covenant with Abraham by his own doing and his CHOOSING Abraham.

Because of God's faithfulness with Isaac and Jacob (and his choosing of them), we get to the people of God, Israel. This nation, as the multitude they were promised to become through Abraham, comes into the story when they are at their weakest. They are so weak and unable to do anything for themselves that their sons are being slaughtered by Pharaoh. And it is in this moment that God brings them out as a people for himself. He chooses them when they could do nothing for themselves. Again, we see that this is not a people who by any subjective examination are succeeding. They grumble at every turn, they build idols when left alone for even a couple of days and descend into debauchery, and they disobey about every single rule they have ever been given. But God is faithful and by his own objective standard he has CHOSEN them and will love them.

When prophesying about God's people later on, Ezekiel says

they are “a valley of dry bones” (Ezek 37:1–14). This is not the imagery of a people who just need to have a little faith. So often the imagery of salvation has been likened to grabbing a life preserver. You are drowning in the sea, God has thrown you the preserver of Jesus, and all you need to do is reach out in faith and grab on. Yes, our first experience of faith may be gasping for air in the ocean and joyfully reaching out to the good news of Jesus as our only path to salvation. But the reality is that before that we were dry and dead bones. We were on the bottom of the ocean, not even people, bones in need of animating and the breath of life breathed into us before we could even contemplate grasping for the good news he made us to receive.

The entire story of God is of God CHOOSING his people. Of God doing what only he could do—softening hearts, opening blind eyes, unstopping deaf ears, that his people might know him (Ezek 11:19; 36:26; Isaiah 35:5, 1 Cor 2:9). To diminish God’s choosing here in Ephesians is to diminish the beauty of the entire storyline of God throughout Scripture where he sovereignly chooses his people, where he makes covenants with them that only he can keep, and where he joyfully does this for us in Jesus Christ that we might come ALIVE!

[Same slide...if there] That is the last phrase here in this piece of Ephesians 1:4–6. God did this “in love,” and “in the beloved.” He was happy to choose me and you in Christ before time. In Jesus, all the promises that were for Israel are now true and he is the supreme object of God’s love, the very

son of his love (Col 1:13), and we now are seen in that same love because of his choosing us. And God did this that he might receive praise. But this is not praise that is vanity on God's behalf, it is praise that comes as we see his GRACE! Grace given to me and you, those he has chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world.

Be Encouraged!

Your identity is 'in Christ'—you and I, we are wrapped up in God's love because of what the God-Man Jesus did for us. And that identity is secure because it rests most firmly and primarily on what GOD alone has done. On his choosing of me and you!

I want you, Rev, to be encouraged this morning. To be encouraged in your struggles. Objectively God has done so much for you in Jesus Christ. In fact, he has done it all. When you may doubt your faith and your walk, and when the process of examining your subjective walk may seem to leave you coming up short (whether that is just how you feel or even reality), remember that you are found in Christ because God chose you. He chose you, and will not leave you nor forsake you (Heb 13:5).

Again, if this is a hard doctrine for you, you are not saved by this understanding. But the elders and I would all want you to know that you are missing a sweet encouragement of God's love for you in not seeing how he has always been a choosing God, and how he has chosen you. Your faith is not

reliant first and foremost on your ability to keep your own faith. It rests on the bedrock of God's perfect, good, and immovable choice to choose you.

For me, I feel like Ephesians 1:4–6 is really the marrying of the subjective and the objective for me. I know myself—in ways none of you do. I know my thoughts, my tendencies, my sins, and I am a horrible sinner and I need saving. And I know that I needed God to change me that I might even contemplate faith. Something had to happen before I would even begin to CONSIDER faith.

When I think about myself and my choice to “choose” God and put my faith in Jesus, I wonder, if I was always good enough to make that choice, why would I need saving anyways? Why wouldn't I just buck up and always choose the good things and therefore be good and righteous by my own works. But that is where my subjective reality needs an objective truth. I know I couldn't and can't have chosen God without him first doing something to me. For him to choose me, change me, and draw me to himself. For him to open my eyes to the beauty of the gospel. For him to soften my prideful heart that I might choose him. For me to finally know faith because he has known me.

Conclusion

This morning, I pray you receive this as Good News for you. Yes, this passage may leave you with questions about what this means for those God didn't chose, how is that fair, how

does that play out in their lives. Why me and not others. But those are frankly not what this verse is trying to tell you. Don't import the other questions you may have into this passage and miss how this is the consistent picture we have of our God who has saved us by his choice alone in choosing us. Find this morning, in your challenges in your faith, in your doubt, that you come back to where the Psalmists always bring us back to. Even in the most difficult Psalms, they beckon us back to the God who alone provides for us:

"You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Psalm 73:24–26)

"But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works."
(Psalm 73:28)

"But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me." (Psalm 13:5–6)

Find that your praise is in a God who MADE your identity in Christ. And our identity in Christ is not by our own doing, but by Gods.

Call

Communion

Heb. 13:20-21 - Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.