Chapter 4

Awaiting the Election Results

Evangelicals certainly have opinions about the concept of election. Some break out in a rash when you even mention the concept, and others think it necessarily means that God has predetermined everything in advance. Some think God is still awaiting the election results (about which it is assumed we have a vote since the issue is personal salvation), and others think that if God did not determine things in advance no one would be saved. But in fact, election and absolute predestination are not necessarily inherently linked concepts, and in early Judaism they were not necessarily linked ideas. To understand how Paul (and other NT writers) understood these complex ideas we must first consider how they were discussed in early Judaism.

The Chosen People’s View of Election: Predestination, Election, Salvation, and Apostasy in Early Judaism

Paul’s concepts of election, salvation, predestination, and the like are not examples of creatio ex nihilo. Paul is writing out of and into a rather specific social and historical context. Some of the vocabulary he uses, such as the verb pro-oridzo, is not found in previous Greek literature, including the Septuagint. The related term proginosko (“to foreknow”) is found with a little more frequency—for example in Philo, Somn. 1.2—and the concept and term is also present in Wisdom of Solomon 8:8. It is probable that lying in the background here are the OT references to God knowing his people, which at times connote his inclination toward or love for them, and at other times connote something like the concept of election (cf. Amos 3:2; Deut 9:24; Exod 33:12, 17; Gen 18:19; Deut 34:10). It is, however, a mistake to simply draw conclusions about Paul’s views on these matters on the basis of word
studies of certain key terms in earlier literature, not least because Paul has reenvisioned whatever he believed as a non-Christian Jew about such matters in the light of Christ and in the light of his new found eschatological beliefs, since he thinks the Christ event has inaugurated the end times. Furthermore, the language about God knowing and determining in the OT does not stand in isolation but needs to be correlated with the discussions about Israel’s apostasy, rebellion, and falling away. Such discussions can be found especially in the prophetic literature (see e.g., Hosea), but also in the later Jewish literature such as in Jubilees 23.14–23, where, as in Paul, they are connected with certain eschatological and apocalyptic ideas. It is interesting then that in the very texts where God’s sovereignty is stressed, there is also a stress on viable human choice when it comes to moral matters.

On this last point consider for example Sirach 15:11–17: “Say not it was the Lord’s fault that I fell away... say not, He led me astray... He made man from the beginning, and left him to his own counsel.” Or again in Psalms of Solomon 9:4: “Our deeds are in the choice and power of our soul, to do righteousness and iniquity in the works of our hands.” In 4 Esdras 8:55–56 we find: “Ask no more about the multitude of those who perish... for they themselves having freedom given them, spurned the Most High, and despised his law and abandoned his ways.”

If we wish to pursue the discussion with specific rabbis, there is the famous saying of Rabbi Akiba: “Everything is foreseen (by God), and freedom of choice is given (to man), and the world is judged with goodness, and all depends on the preponderance of (good or ill) doing” (P. Abot 3:15). Simeon ben Azarai, a younger contemporary of Akiba says the same thing (Mek. on Exod 15:26). It is interesting that the usual proof texts for the idea that freedom of moral choice has been given to human beings are Proverbs 3:34 along with Exodus 15:26. R. Hanina says: “Everything is in the power of Heaven, except the reverence of Heaven (i.e. God)” (B. T. Ber. 33b). Especially telling is B. T. Niddah 16b which says that God in his providence determines beforehand what a person will be and what will befall him but not whether he will be godless or godly, wicked or righteous. G. F. Moore, in his summary of the evidence from early Judaism, says: “Religion is the one thing that God requires of man; He does not constrain him to it. It is unnecessary to multiply examples further; there are no dissentient voices.” This is perhaps a bit of an overstatement, as an examination of Josephus’s account of the various sects of Judaism shows.

Josephus indicates that determinism, or fate, or predestination, was an issue very much in dispute in early Judaism, and the dispute was chiefly between Paul’s former sect, the Pharisees, and other dominant sects. In regard to the matter of destiny or foreordination, Josephus says the Essenes exempted nothing from its control, while the Sadducees took the opposite end of the spectrum, denying there was any such thing as foreordination, while the Pharisees held the middle ground, namely some things, but not all things, are the work of divine destining. Some things, such as whether one responds to divine grace, or whether one continues in one’s faith, are within the control of human beings.

Yet Josephus recognizes there is some tension within Pharisaic thought on this matter. For example, in Jewish War 2.8 and 14, he says that the Pharisees ascribe everything to destiny and to God, except that to do right or wrong lies mainly in the hands of human beings, though God’s hand can be seen as an auxiliary force involved in these choices as well. There is a fuller statement of the matter at Jewish Antiquities 18.1–3 where we hear: “While the Pharisees hold that all things are brought about by destiny, they do not deprive the human will of its own impulse to do them, it having pleased God that there should be a co-operation, and that to the deliberation (of God) about destiny, humans in the case of the one who wills should assent, with virtue or wickedness.”

The relevance of this discussion of Pharisaism for what Paul says should be clear. Paul was a Pharisee before his Damascus Road experience; he affirms God’s foreknowledge, his destining of some things, and also he affirms human responsibility for sin, and the awful possibility of radical rebellion against God by a believer, namely apostasy.

It is not an either/or matter for Paul when it comes to viable human moral choices and God’s sovereignty, but rather a both/and situation. Among other things, this means that while he certainly affirms that all human beings are sinful, and have sinned and fallen short of God’s highest and best for them, he also affirms the possibility by grace and through faith to avoid sin. He stands directly in the line of the early Jewish discussion by affirming that in the most important matter of all—one’s salvation and the possibility of virtuous behavior—humans must respond to the initiative of grace freely, and continue to do so freely after initially becoming new creatures in Christ. The divine and human wills are both involved in such matters.

In sum, it is important to set Paul in the context of early Jewish discussions of such matters, especially early Pharisaic ones, to the extent we can discern them. When we do so, we find that Paul sounds rather like various of his contemporaries who certainly affirm divine providence, election, and destining, and also human sin and viable human choice, especially about the crucial matters of salvation and moral rectitude.
Early Returns and Late Losses

The concept of election is of course intertwined with the concepts of predestination and perseverance. Put another way, how one views election will affect, if not determine, how one views perseverance of the saints. If one thinks that God before the foundation of the world chose some individuals to be saved, come what may, then of course one has to believe that apostasy is impossible for a real Christian person, someone who is truly elect. But does God's destining, choosing, calling, saving really work that way? Is it really true that God's grace makes one an offer that one cannot ever refuse? Or is it the case that one is not eternally secure until one is securely in eternity? These are good questions that great minds have debated for centuries, and I am not naive enough to think that anything I say here will stop that ongoing debate.

What I would hope, however, is that the discussion could be put on more sound exegetical footing, especially from the Reformed side of the equation, because frankly there are just too many warnings in the NT that Christians can and do fall prey to temptation, can make shipwreck of their faith, can grieve or quench the Holy Spirit in their lives, and can even commit apostasy or the unforgivable sin. If this can happen to genuine Christians, those whom God has called and given the Holy Spirit to, and destined or intended in advance for them to be conformed to the image of the Son, then frankly something is wrong with the Reformed concept of election.

Note that I did not say that there is no concept of election or of God's choosing people in the NT. Of course there is. However much this may make some of my voluntarist Arminian friends uncomfortable, it has to be frankly admitted that there is a concept of election in the NT that must not be ignored. The question is: what sort of concept of election? We need to work through various relevant texts about election and perseverance, and once again, Paul's letters are the real source of the material that is most often debated, especially by Evangelicals. Let us turn now to these texts. We begin with the earliest place, chronologically, in which Paul speaks of these matters: 1 Thessalonians.

The language of election and being beloved by God does not appear, of course, for the first time in the Bible in 1 Thessalonians, but it is quite common in the Pauline corpus. For example, the connection between God's love and election that we see in 1 Thessalonians 1:4 we also find in Romans 9:11–13, and Colossians 3:12. Paul is simply applying to the Christian assembly election-language that had previously been used of Israel on numerous occasions (see, e.g., Deut 32:15; 33:12; Isa 44:2). Note, for example, how election statements originally made only of Jews (Hos 2:25) are now applied by Paul to Jews and Gentiles united in Christ (Rom 9:28).3

Electing for Paul is a corporate thing. It was in ethnic Israel; it is now "in Christ." From Paul's viewpoint, which is simply an adaptation of views found in early Judaism, "election" does not guarantee the final salvation of individual Christian converts any more than it guaranteed the final salvation of individual Israelites in the past. We must caution that Paul's hermeneutical use of texts like Hosea 2:25 does not mean he operates with a replacement theology, as if God has reneged on his promises to Jews, but it does mean that those promises are now and in the future to be fulfilled through and by the Lord Jesus, the Jews' and Gentiles' Messiah. The church has not replaced Israel. Rather, Jews like Paul who believe in Jesus are viewed as the true Israel, the true descendants of Abraham, and those Gentiles who join them have become part of the people of God, grafted into the true olive tree.4 Paul's is a fulfillment rather than replacement theology. But it is not just that Paul carries over concepts of corporate election from early Judaism into his theologizing about the Christian assembly. Just as apostasy was and could be committed by individual Israelites, whom God then broke off from the people of God, at least temporarily (see Rom 11:11–24), so there was also the same danger for individual Christians, hence all the warnings about falling away in 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

In his detailed discussion of the use of the term *eilektos* found in the Septuagint as well as in Paul's letters (cf. 2 Thess 2:13, 16; Rom 8:33; Col 3:12), I. H. Marshall rightly asks the question: Does the term simply refer to an action of God, perhaps a premundane action of God ("the people upon whom God has set his choice"), or does the phrase in fact refer to "the people upon whom God has set his choice and who have responded to the call"?5 The answer he gives is that an examination of the usage in the OT and in Judaism shows that the phrase 'the elect' is used of those who have become members of God's people and never of individuals before they have become members of God's people.6

This is correct, and we may add that apart from its occasional application to the king (cf. later the application to Jesus), the language of election in the OT is applied corporately to a people, not to an individual. The word "elect" (*b'ḥārîṯ*) is normally used in the plural, and so collectively of Israel. And lest we think that being elect guarantees salvation, we even have texts like 2 Kings 23:27 where we hear of God rejecting Jerusalem after having chosen it. There are also, of course, texts that speak of God choosing and anointing persons for specific historical purposes (e.g., Cyrus in Isa 45:1), but these are not soteriological texts. In fact it must be stressed that texts which refer to Pharaoh or Cyrus or someone else being chosen for some particular historical task, positive or negative, are really of no relevance to this discussion, because they are not about God picking those persons to be saved or to
have eternal life. This is the general context in which one must view the references to election in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, to which we now turn.

In this discussion we interact with two dialogue partners, I. H. Marshall and J. M. Gundry Volf, who come to opposite conclusions in regard to the meaning of Paul’s election, perseverance, and apostasy language.7 Let us start with 1 Thessalonians 3:5 where Paul speaks of fearing that he may have been laboring in vain due to the dangers of loss of faith facing the Thessalonian church because of their many tribulations.

Gundry Volf on the one hand argues that while this sounds like Paul’s genuine worry that his converts might fall away or commit apostasy, in fact what he was worried about was himself, his legacy, his own potential unfaithfulness to his calling, and whether in the end his own ministry was rooted in God’s saving power.8 She puts it this way: “Paul thus feared being robbed of his hope and joy or crown of boasting... before our Lord Jesus at his coming if his converts fell in persecution... Paul is thus uncertain whether or not some of his converts will be numbered among the saved at the day of Christ.”9 In her view, Paul also worried that perhaps some of his converts had actually falsely professed faith in the first place.

It would be hard to describe how many things are wrong with this sort of argument. In the first place Paul has no uncertainty at all about whether God’s power was active amongst the Thessalonians and converted them when Paul preached there. He is in fact emphatic about this at 1 Thessalonians 1:5; the word came to them with power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. He does not say it came to just some of them in this way. There is no shred of evidence in these letters that Paul worried that some had falsely made a profession of faith. Psychologically and socially it is hard to imagine someone doing that anyway in a social environment where there was considerable pressure and persecution not to convert to this new “Jewish superstition.”

In the second place, as Marshall says, this explanation:

fails to do justice to the fact that Paul’s remarks are undoubtedly motivated by genuine concern for the welfare of his readers and not by personal concern for his own reputation at the parousia. Moreover, the language used shows that the purpose of sending Timothy to them was not to see whether they were truly converted, but rather to encourage converts to stand firm in the midst of persecution and to see what was the state of their faith. Paul’s language deals with standing firm despite tribulation (3:3, 8) and repairing any weaknesses in their faith (3:10), not with the question of whether the readers actually possess faith.10

The worry and anxiety and pastoral concern of Paul in 1 Thessalonians about the spiritual danger his converts are truly in is hard to discredit or pass off as mere rhetorical flourish, much less to suggest it was really worry about himself.

Returning to 1 Thessalonians 1:4, what must be stressed is that “Paul’s claim to knowledge of their election is related to his knowledge of their conversion.”11 He wants to say both that the choice of God to save them was expressed in the fact that the Gospel came to them in power and that their response of faith shows that they now belong to the elect.”12 Notice too that Paul says that not only he but also the Thessalonians can “know” that the Thessalonians are God’s chosen. There is nothing here about the invisible elect amongst the mass of churchgoers. This “knowing” comes from the recognizing of the positive response to the gospel received with joy and the changed lives turning from idols to the living God. Indeed the chosen are all too visible and are enduring persecution because of it. What Paul certainly does not say, or want to say, is that the Thessalonians have believed because God chose them and caused them to do so.

Our next text of interest is 1 Thessalonians 5:9—“For God did not purpose/appoint/arrange things for us to suffer wrath but rather to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus.” The “us” here is those who are already Christians, and this text is thus closely parallel to what is said in Romans 8:28—30.13 It has to do with the final destiny of human beings who are either lost or saved. The same antithesis may be found in Romans 5:9—10. Now there can be no doubt that the verb tauben here in the middle with the preposition eis means to “purposely for/unto” or to “appoint for/unto.” We may compare for example the same language in Acts 13:47 quoting the Septuagint of Isaiah 49:6 where we hear of a people who were appointed for or to be a light to the Gentiles. Of course in individual cases, some Israelites failed to fulfill the destiny or purpose that God intended for them. This was not because they were not chosen or appointed by God for such a task or end. In fact, if we compare John 15:16, we will see that the words for purposeizing and electing or choosing are used as virtual synonyms. What can be said about purpose can also be said about electing or choosing.

Gundry Volf argues on the basis of 1 Thessalonians 5:9 that Paul means that God has purposed for individual persons to receive final salvation and that this divine purpose will infallibly be brought to conclusion and completion. She stresses that the use of the verb “receive” here indicates the actual reception of something, which she takes to mean pure passivity, not allowing for any positive effort toward the goal or purpose behind by the recipient.14 She says, “Paul’s statement that God has not destined Christians to wrath relativizes human action,”15 but then she adds, “God’s appointment to salvation does not make human obedience superfluous.”16 But if it is not superfluous or incidental to the outcome, then surely it is essential to the outcome!
The fact that final salvation is a gift that must be received when Christ returns does not in any way relativize the importance of believers here and now persevering in the faith so that they might “be in that number when the saints go marching in.” Nothing in 1 or 2 Thessalonians suggests otherwise, and indeed much suggests that persevering is something that Christians must actively purpose and engage in, for it is possible for them to fall or commit apostasy. This is why in the very same context in 1 Thessalonians 5:11 Paul warns the Thessalonians to be alert and watchful, lest they be caught napping or even stumble in the dark.

This text in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 may also be compared to 2 Peter 3:9, which says that God does not desire that any perish but that all should come to repentance. God’s desires are one thing, the outcome is another. Similarly God’s purpose, design, or intent for Israel to be a light to the nations was one thing. Whether they fulfilled that purpose or not in individual cases was not merely up to God; it also required willing human participation. Especially the text in Acts 13:47 should be seen as parallel to our text in 1 Thessalonians 5 when it comes to the force of the language about God’s purposes or appointments.17

It is worth adding as well that since the very same instance of the very same Greek verb ἐθέτο (“appoint”) in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 applies to those who are heading for wrath as well as to those being saved, it may be asked whether Gundry Volf really wants to argue that God infallibly and inevitably appointed some for wrath from before the foundation of the world, come what may and do what they will? The answer is apparently no, she does not want to argue that case. But then accordingly, whatever “appoint” means for the lost is also what “appoint” means for the saved in this text, and in neither case is unilateral predetermination apart from human response or willing participation in view.

There is, in addition to the language of election, the language of calling. The question is, what does it mean when Paul talks about being called or God calling a person? The issue for this discussion is whether calling means “effectual calling” (i.e., an action of God which includes and indeed prompts and necessarily assures the response of the one called). 1 Thessalonians 2:12 is a good example of how Paul can use this language. He speaks of living a life “worthy of the one who calls you into his dominion and glory.” Here the term calling does not refer to something retrospective but rather something prospective. It refers to the fact that believers are being invited or called to enter the eschatological dominion in the future. Clearly this text is not about “effectual calling” as a past event in the believer’s life.

What about 1 Thessalonians 4:7? Here the reference is to the call that comes at conversion to change one’s pattern of life or behavior. God is the one doing the calling, and he calls us not to uncleanness but to holiness. This way of putting it, in the midst of paraenesis and exhortations of various sorts, makes clear that Paul thinks that unclean and immoral behavior is certainly possible, and that to do such a thing is to go against one’s calling, against the lifestyle one has been called to live. As Marshall says, this text makes clear that the ethical response to the call is an ongoing matter, and the potential of going against one’s calling is an ongoing possibility.18

1 Thessalonians 5:24 is of interest in this discussion as well. Here, calling is something God does in the present (“the one who calls you”), and this usage is exceedingly common in Paul’s letters (Rom 4:17; 9:11; Gal 1:6, 15; 5:8; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Tim 1:9). Paul promises that God, for his part, will be faithful and that he is capable of entirely sanctifying a person and keeping a person blameless “as in the coming of the Lord Jesus” (this is what Paul prays for in 1 Thess 5:23). This seems to refer to something God will do at the eschaton, for notice here the reference to the body as well as the human spirit.

In other words, Paul seems to be referring to what happens at the resurrection, when the believer is glorified and transformed into the likeness of Christ (see 1 Cor 15). This is Paul’s prayer that his converts will be in the right condition when Christ comes to judge the world, and so will be found both pure and blameless at that juncture. This then would be similar to the eschatological statement at 1 Thessalonians 2:12. It would not, in short, be about the “perseverance of the saints” before and leading up to the return of Christ but about the condition of the believer on that day or at the time of the parousia of Christ. Had Paul wanted to talk about perseverance, he could have used the preposition εἰς and spoken of being kept blameless “unto/fors,” or the preposition ἐκβολὴ and spoken of “until” the coming. He uses neither of these prepositions here.

Gundry Volf takes this text to mean that since God will be faithful to the end, “he will complete the salvation begun in their calling.”19

The problem with this conclusion is that besides missing the point that Paul is talking about God’s direct action on behalf of the believer at the eschaton, in which God raises the believer and presents him or her pure and blameless and with a glorified body before Jesus when he sits on the bema seat to judge even believers (see 2 Cor 5:10), there is the further problem that when Paul does talk about holiness and progressive sanctification during this lifetime he includes remarks like we find in 1 Thessalonians 4:3–5 where human actions are involved, and not solely divine ones, and we have exhortations such as we find at 1 Thessalonians 5:22 to hold on to the good and avoid evil.

Confirmation that we are right in our eschatological interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 5:23 can be found in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, which refers to the ongoing process of God strengthening hearts so that
believers will be blameless, not now, but when Jesus returns with the holy ones. Obviously there is a relationship between progressive sanctification and final glorification, but the former involves both the strengthening and purifying work of God and also the correct responsive behavior of believers, whereas what happens at the eschaton is purely a matter of divine action. It will be too late to change one’s behavior at that juncture.

One of the interesting points that Marshall makes most strongly when considering some of the similar texts in 2 Thessalonians (e.g., 2 Thess 1:11–12; 2:13–14) is that there is a paraenetic character or implication to Paul’s prayers in two ways: (1) on the one hand, praying that disciples will behave in a certain way is a good indirect way of urging or persuading them that they need to behave that way, and Marshall goes on to rightly point out the paraenetic context of these prayers; (2) he also points out that if one reads these Pauline intercessory prayers carefully, there is in them an element of doubt, which is to say the reason Paul feels he needs to pray for these things is because it is not absolutely certain that his converts will persevere in the faith. Prayer is a vehicle which aids them in the process of doing so, then, in two ways—galvanizing both them and the Almighty to that good end. 20

Lastly we may consider 2 Thessalonians 3:3. Here we have a pastoral assurance that God will protect these converts under pressure from the Evil One. As Marshall says, this probably means that the Evil One’s attacks, though real, will be in vain. As such this is close to the assurance Paul offers in 1 Corinthians 10:13. 21 Gundry Volf takes this to mean that God will not allow the believer to fail the final test of perseverance, even though he allows small stumbling points and cases of disobedience along the way. 22

The problem with this exegesis is that Paul is talking about protection from an external source of trial, tribulation, and temptation. He is not talking about a believer wrestling internally with the possibility of committing apostasy. The text is about protection, not a guarantee of human perseverance come what may. In Romans 8:38–39 we have a similar promise for believers about no external force or factor separating them from the love of God. However, the one thing not listed in that list is, of course, the individual himself. That text does not suggest it is impossible for a called and chosen believing person to commit apostasy, and neither does our text, 2 Thessalonians 3:3. 23

What this discussion has shown is that Paul’s reasoning on these matters is eschatological to the core. He speaks pastorally about what God has already accomplished through Paul’s proclamation of the gospel in Thessalonike, what God is doing now with his calling still echoing in the ears of the believer, and what God will do when God raises the dead believers at the eschaton. Protology, or God’s decisions before the foundation of the world, is not really a subject of these discussions. In other words, the discussion of calling and election and perseverance comports with the narration which begins with the story of the Thessalonians’ conversion and then moves forward, pressing on relentlessly to the return of Christ. The narration then prepares admirably in 1 Thessalonians for the exhortations in 1 Thessalonians 4–5 about the parousia and the state of the dead in Christ.
their responses to God are a necessary part of the process before it is all over. This leads us quite naturally to a discussion of that most controverted of all texts when it comes to these matters—Romans 8.

KNOWING YOUR PRE-DESTINATION

Rather than diving right into the exegesis, Romans 8:28ff. is such a crucial text for Evangelicals that we will start with a fresh translation of the relevant section.

But we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those called according to choice/purpose, for those whom he knew beforehand, he also destined beforehand to share the likeness of the form of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn of many brothers. Those he destined beforehand, he also called, and those he called he also set right, and those he set right he also glorified.

What then shall we say to all this? If God is for us, is anyone against us? For he who did not spare his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how will he not with him, give us all things? Who will make an accusation against God’s chosen? God is the one who sets it right. Who will condemn? Christ is the one who died, rather was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. For what will separate us from the love of Christ? Will suffering or anguish or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or the sword? Just as it is written “For the sake of you, we die the whole day, we are regarded as lambs for slaughter.” But in all these situations we triumph gloriously through the one who loves us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor any other part of creation is able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In v. 28 Paul makes a statement that he assumes is common knowledge (“we know,” though this could be rhetorical, really meaning “we all ought to know”). This verse is interesting for a variety of reasons, not least of which is we have the rarity of Paul speaking about the believer’s love for God. It is crucial, if one is to understand his argument here, to bear in mind that Paul is talking about those who are already Christians. For Christians who are called, all things work together. Paul is not talking about some evolutionary or inevitable process that happens like magic for believers. He is referring to the sovereignty and providence of God over all things and processes. God is the one who works things out, as the alternate textual reading, which inserts the words ὁ Θεός, makes even clearer. That God is the subject
is made clear by the reference just afterwards to "those whom he called." 39

Whatever this verse means, it certainly does not mean exemption from the hardships of life, as Paul will go on to suggest when he lists such things later in this chapter. Probably panta (all things) here has especially in mind the sufferings of the present age. Paul believes that God can use such events, weaving them into his plan for a person's life, using all things to a good end (cf. 13:4)—namely, to the eventual end of the redemption of believers' bodies. The point is that all things can be made to serve the end of our redemption, not necessarily our earthly comfort or convenience. What this text does not mean is that God destinies bad or evil things to happen to God's people to strengthen their character. There is more than one will in operation in the universe. There is God's will and human wills, not to mention the willing of angels and demons and the devil. What this text indicates is that God's will is the most powerful and dominant one, and he is thus capable of working even bad things and events together for good for those who love him. What Satan intends for harm, God can use for good.

The next phrase reads literally "those called according to purpose/choice." The word his often found in translations before the word choice is not in the Greek text. Some commentators have urged that prothesis could refer to human beings here, in which case the text would mean "those called according to (our) choice," or as we would say "by choice," the free act of choice by which those called respond to God's call. This is grammatically perfectly possible and is in fact the interpretation of this verse by Origen, Chrysostom, Theodoret, and other ancient Greek commentators who knew Paul's Greek far better than we do.

Chrysostom for example says in commenting on v. 28: "For if the calling alone were sufficient, how is it that all were not saved? Hence he says it is not the calling alone, but the purpose of those called too, that works the salvation. For the calling was not forced upon them, nor compulsory. All then were called, but all did not obey the call" (Hom. Rom 8). Thus the choice or purposing is seen by Chrysostom to be that of the respondent here. That human purpose or choice is in view seems to have been the view of almost all the Greek commentators. In support of the view that God's choice is meant here is probably Romans 9:11 (cf. Eph 1:11; 3:11; 2 Tim 1:9; Philo Mos. 3:61), 50 and one may point to the general tenor and drift of the passage, particularly the emphasis on divine action for the believer in 8:29. Since, however, this same verse refers to our love for God, the exegetical decision is not so clear cut and obvious, contrary to the impression left by most translations. Above all, the word "his" should not be inserted here, but rather the matter should be left open. It seems likely that Chrysostom was right.

Romans 8:29 must be read in light of v. 28; the one at the beginning of v. 29 must refer back to "those who love God"—Christians. The discussion that follows is about the future of believers. Paul is not discussing some mass of unredeemed humanity out of which God chose some to be among the elect. 41 But what are we to do with the but in v. 29? It seems likely that it means "for" or "because" here, and is not merely an unimportant connective. If this is the case, then what follows the but in vv. 29-30 is going to explain why all things work together for good for believers. This working together for good happens because God has a plan for believers all along. Verse 29, since it should be connected to v. 28, means "those believers that God knew in advance, he also destined beforehand to share the form of the image of his Son."

Is Paul then talking about a pre-temporal election plan of God where the outcome is predetermined because of God's sovereign hand in and on every step of the process? This, of course, is how Augustine and his offspring read this text, but it is not how various of the crucial Greek fathers that came before Augustine read it, including most importantly Chrysostom. Paul is speaking about God foreknowing and destining in advance Christians to be fully conformed to the image of Christ. 51 It needs to be borne in mind that Paul's audience for these statements is Roman Christians, a largely Gentile audience, whom Paul apparently felt needed some encouragement due to suffering or persecution or other calamities they might be facing.

It is perfectly feasible in such a situation that Paul would want to tell believers not how they became Christians in the first place, but rather how God always had a plan to get believers to the finish line, working all things together for good, showing them how they will be able to persevere through whatever trials they may face along the way. In Christ they have a glorious destiny, and Paul will go on to stress that no outside power, circumstance, degree of suffering, or temptation can rip them out of the firm grip that God has on their lives. He is working things together for good in every stage of the salvation process.

The end or destiny of believers is to become fully Christlike, even in their bodily form. Paul has just said that the believer's hope is the redemption of their bodies; here he explains how God will be working to get the believer to that goal. P. Achtermeyer strikes the right balance:

As Paul uses [the terms foreknow and predestine], they do not refer in the first instance to some limitation on our freedom, nor do they refer to some arbitrary decision by God that some creatures are to be denied all chance at salvation. They simply point to the fact that God knows the end to which he will bring his creation, namely redemption, and that the destiny is firmly set in his purposes.... In that sense Paul can speak of "pre-destination." It means just as the word says, that the destiny has
already been set; and that destiny is the final redemptive transformation of reality. 13

In short, and particularly in light of vv. 31–39, this comforting text is about the perseverance of the saints, not about the election of some to be saints out of a mass of unredeemed humanity, the choice being determined purely on the basis of God’s fiat. That latter notion makes a nonsense of the very concept which is said to be determining this whole matter; namely love—not only God’s love for believers, but the believer’s love for God. It is “those who love God” who are called according to purpose and whom God foreknew, and that purpose they must embrace freely and fully in love. 44

Love of God can be commanded, but it cannot be coerced, predetermined, or engineered in advance, or else it loses its character of being love. The proof that this line of thinking, and not that of Augustine, Luther, or Calvin, is on the right track is seen clearly in Romans 11:2 where Paul says plainly that God foreknew his Jewish people, and yet not all of them responded positively to God’s call. Indeed, only a minority had when Paul wrote this letter. God’s foreknowledge, and even God’s plan of destiny for Israel, did not in the end predetermine which particular individual Israelite would respond positively to the gospel call and which would not. Paul will make clear in Romans 10:8–15 that the basis of that response is faith and confession. Just so, God’s plan for his Elect One, Jesus, does not inexorably predetermine who will end up being “in Christ.” What Paul has done in Romans 8 is reassured believers, saying, God has always known you and planned for your future, even from before the foundations of the universe. Some of the details of v. 29 need to be considered at this juncture.

First notice that Paul distinguishes between what God knows and what God wills or destines in advance. Knowing and willing are not one and the same with God. The proof of this, of course, is that God knows very well about human sin, but he does not will it or destine it to happen. What is implied in this is that God loved believers before they ever responded to the call and loved God. There are various early Jewish texts which speak of God’s foreknowledge (cf. 1QH 1:7–8; CD 2:8; Jer 1:5).

The word summorphaos probably does not have in view the conforming of the believer to the image of Christ that takes place internally and during the process of sanctification, or at least that is not the sole subject here. If it is referred to at all, it is referred to as part of the process that leads to the final act of conforming believers to Christ—namely, the resurrection. Notice that Paul goes on to say that Christ becomes the firstborn of many brothers and sisters through this process. In view of 1 Corinthians 15:20–24 this surely refers to Christ’s resurrection, his so-called birth (rebirth) being at the resurrection—“first fruits” and “firstborn” being two ways of speaking about the same thing, both of which imply that there would be more to follow. Käsemann is probably right to see the Adam story, grounded in the comparison in Romans 5, behind all of this. 45 Christ is the first of a new race, the race of the resurrected ones, who for now are being conformed internally but not yet externally to Christ’s image.

Romans 8:30 then sums this all up, reassuring the Romans that God is in control of all these matters. Those believers whom he foreknew, he also destined in advance; those he destined, he also called; those he called, he also set right; and those he set right, he also glorified. The tenses of the verbs here make clear that we should take them as if Paul were looking at things from the eschatological end of the process with even glorification already having transpired. Doxa here refers to the future glory of resurrection as before. Paul’s emphasis is on God’s hand of involvement in every step of this process, and so he does not choose to mention or discuss in the midst of this verse the human response, positively or negatively. Notice he does not even mention sanctification.

But he has already spoken of believers loving God in v. 28, and that should be kept in view throughout the reading of vv. 29–30. If these latter two verses stood in isolation, and apart from a clear connection with vs. 28, that would be one thing; but they do not, and they must be interpreted in the light of the broader context of Pauline thinking about grace and faith, foreknowing and human purpose and the like. If vv. 29–30 stood alone, then Paul indeed would sound like the most deterministic of early Jews, such as we sometimes find in some of the early Jewish literature at Qumran and elsewhere. But they do not. What the Romans needed to be assured of was God’s involvement, not their own, in all of the salvation process and plan. This text admirably stresses the hands-on nature of God and his providential plan. This truth, when it comes to looking at the Christian life as an exercise in persevering, will be even further highlighted in vv. 31–39.

Verse 31 begins in the first-person plural, but Paul becomes more direct and personal as the passage goes along. The tauta points back to what Paul has just spoken of, and so we are meant to see these verses as bringing to light certain conclusions that follow in view of the truths already shared. It is right to see these verses as the climax of the entire first part of the letter. Cranfield suggests that the theme here is “if God is for us, who can be against us,” and he sees this as a concise summary of 1:16b–8:30. This is correct, and it is no accident that Paul rises to an emotional climax here as well, with vv. 38–39 being in the first-person singular. This conclusion is in the rhetorical form of the diatribe, where questions are again asked and then answered by Paul himself.
In order to demonstrate the theme of “if God is for us,” Paul lists some of the things which are ranked against believers from time to time. Verse 32 sets forth the opposition, but puts them in perspective and in their place. In effect, the verse says that since God did not spare his own Son, certainly he will take care of the things that are trials for Christians, to make sure of their deliverance. Notice that the conditional statement (introduced by if) in v. 31 introduces a real condition, not merely a probability.

Some commentators have seen in v. 32 an echo of the story of Isaac (Gen 22:12, 16, LXX). The traditions about the binding of Isaac were important in early Judaism, but the dating of various of those traditions, especially the one which suggests that the unconsummated sacrifice of Isaac atoned for Israel’s sin, probably postdates the writing of Romans. If there is an allusion to such traditions here, then the point would be that Christ’s sacrifice was greater than Isaac’s, for it was completed. Romans 3:25 might also be alluding to such a tradition. Rather than sparing his Son, as Isaac was spared, God delivered him up to death “for us all,” which at the very least means for all believers. Possibly Isaiah 53:12 (cf. Rom 4:25 for the verb) is alluded to here. If God will give up even his Son to death, how will he not give all things to believers? But what are these “all things”? The context makes clear that Paul is not talking about material wealth and the like. He means all that is necessary for salvation, all that is necessary to protect believers from spiritual danger in all sorts of difficult and dangerous circumstances. Again, this is not a promise of continual good health, or that believers will never suffer or die, but rather that no third party or power or force or circumstance or lesser supernatural being will be able to separate the believer from the love of God in Christ.

As Käsemann says, the Christ event of Jesus’ death and resurrection forms the central dominant paradigm and idea out of which Paul interprets all that happens to the believer in the world, and all that is past, present, and future. Not an abstract concept of God, but rather God with flesh on, God in Christ reconciling the world to himself characterizes Paul’s understanding of deity. Paul speaks only of him as the God who reveals himself, not as the hidden God whose will and ways are inscrutable, and whose hidden counsels might actually be the opposite of his revealed Word. At the end of v. 32 we have the verbal form of charis, which we should translate “give graciously.”

Then in v. 33 Paul enumerates the real and probable situations of difficulty and danger that he had had, and that his audience might well face. Verse 33 speaks of accusations against believers, perhaps envisioning a courtroom scene, and Paul asks, Who will make accusations against God’s chosen ones? Paul does not answer by informing the listener as to who would make such accusations; rather, he chooses to say why such accusations would be fruitless and pointless and meaningless. God is the one who justifies those accused ones. If God sets them free, who could possibly condemn them? The highest judge of all has pronounced no condemnation as the verdict. Possibly Paul is drawing on Isaiah 50:7–9 here. There seems to be several probable allusions to the Servant Songs here as Paul concludes his positive arguments. It seems likely to me that Paul would indeed have seen Christ as the Suffering Servant referred to in those passages in Second Isaiah. More specifically, the language about God’s Elect comes right from the OT way of talking about the people of God as a group (1 Chr 16:13; Ps 89:3; 103:6; Isa 42:1; 43:20; 45:4; 65:9–22; Sir 46:1; 47:22; Wis 3:9; 4:15; Jb 1:29; 1QS 8:6; CD 4:3–4). What a careful reading of these texts will show is that these do not seem by and large to entail the notion that elect individuals have some sort of advance guarantee of salvation. No, the concept of “the Elect” applies to the group, and individuals within the group can, and indeed often are said to, commit apostasy. This is not because they were not chosen to be Jews, or “true” Jews in the first place. It is because they became unfaithful and chose to wander away.

Even if the accusations were valid, Paul goes on to say that Jesus paid the price. He died for believers and rose again, and furthermore is seated in the seat of honor and influence beside God in heaven where he intercedes for the believer. The thought of Jesus as our intercessor is not uniquely Pauline (see also Heb 7:25; 1 John 2:1). Here we have two relative clauses, the second one being dependent on the first. The first seems to be alluding to Psalm 110. Pelagius in a striking remark says that Christ intercedes for us by constantly showing and offering the Father his perfect human nature. The point would be: “Don’t judge them. In view of my work on earth they are redeemable.”

The list of difficulties in Romans 8:33–36 has often been related to similar pagan lists, but unlike those lists Paul does not include happier circumstances along with the more difficult ones, and furthermore Paul’s list is related to Christ and his sufferings, mentioned twice in the previous verses. All such things are to be viewed in the light of Christ’s death, resurrection, and intercession while sitting on the seat of power (a phrase perhaps creedal in origin). As Käsemann says, Paul is not simply listing chance misfortunes but rather the woes that can and do come to those who are witnesses for Christ. In short, the context is the messianic woes in all probability, a special sort of suffering or tribulation. All of the words in this list, except perhaps stenochoria, list external experiences, and refer to anguish caused by such experiences. Some of the items here are listed in pairs, and probably then we should see these
particular two (trouble and hardship) as referring to outward suffering and inward pain or anguish. Notice how the same two words are paired in Romans 2:9.

The next word in the list is persecution, and could relate to what was just listed. But the following two, famine and nakedness, go naturally together, as do danger and sword. Possibly the word sword is last here because Paul is thinking of execution. For Roman citizens capital punishment took the form of beheading (cf. Rom 13:4). Obviously execution would be the last woe a Christian would face in this life. None of these things can separate the believer from the love of God received in Christ. Paul then at Romans 8:36 quotes from Psalm 44:22 (LXX 43:23), and the point of this quotation is much the same as the point of one part of 1 Corinthians 10: no danger that overcomes Christians is anything new or unexpected for the people of God. It is interesting that in 2 Maccabees 7 this same text is applied to the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons. The botes simply functions as a colon here to introduce the quote.

Romans 8:37 makes evident that Paul does expect his listeners to experience many if not all these calamities, but to triumph over and through them: “But in all these circumstances we triumph gloriously through the loving one.” Cranfield points out that it is possible that en toutois pasin is a Hebraism meaning “in spite of all these things,” but more probably it just means “in all these things.” In v. 38 Paul states a firm conviction that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor archangels, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything in all creation (ktisis again, meaning subhuman creatures and nature) is able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. This stringing together of Jesus’ titles and names is also found in Romans 5:1.

The point of what is said at the end is that believers only really know the love of God in Christ Jesus, and experience it in him. There they know and experience it truly. Paul is saying that no natural or supernatural malevolent forces, even if they are capable of taking the believer’s very life, are capable of separating the believer from the love of God; indeed, to take a believer’s life is to send him directly into the presence of Jesus. Nothing that believers now experience or will experience can separate them from the love of God. The mention of angels and archangels is important as they perhaps represent the cosmic forces ranged against the believer (see Eph 6:12). It is not impossible that the term powers, or the term rulers refers to earthly authorities before whom the Roman Christians might be brought. The terms height and depth were traditionally thought to refer to things above the sky and beneath the earth.

Note the hymnic character of this entire passage. Paul has gone into a doxological mode here at the end of his positive arguments. There is, however, one item that Paul does not include in the list of things that cannot separate the believer from God’s love, namely the believer himself. His point is to stress that no other forces, powers, experiences, or events external to the believer’s own heart or mind can do so. Thus the believer has nothing to fear from the world in this respect. The scope of God’s love is greater than the scope of the world’s powers and forces, whether natural or supernatural. This is a great reassurance indeed and is meant, as is this whole passage, to bolster the idea of the perseverance of the saints and their salvation so long as they rest in the firm grasp of the hand of the Almighty.

In concluding this section it will be well to offer a quotation from a famous commentary on Romans by another Protestant Reformer, Philip Melanchthon. On this passage he says the following:

The Scholastics dispute whether a righteous person could lose his virtues, since Paul says: “Who shall separate us from the love?” as if he wanted to say: “In what way could we lose our love?” They thought that love should be interpreted of our virtues, that is, the love with which we love God. But this is unsound interpretation and must be rejected. It is certain that saints can fall and lose the Holy Spirit, faith, and love, as the prophet Nathan condemns David on account of adultery.

Why then does he say that the love of God is everlasting? I answer: As the evangelical promise is perpetual and valid, but in such a way that it requires faith, so Paul is here speaking to believers, as if he said: “As long as you believe, as long as you do not fall from faith, it is most certain that the love of God toward you is in force.” The meaning is this: Without doubt the love with which God loves us is always valid, firm, and certain for the believer. . . . Others have twisted this to refer to predestination, but there is no need to turn to that in this passage, for he is speaking of our victory. . . . The meaning will be simple and plain if it is understood of believers.

The point of this quotation is not to endorse all that Melanchthon says, though he is right that this passage is about those who are already Christians, and he is equally right about Paul believing in the dangers of apostasy. The point is to show that even within the Reformed, in this case the Lutheran tradition of interpretation, there were varying views on controversial texts like those we find in Romans 7 and 8. As it turns out Paul was neither a Lutheran nor a Calvinist before his time. But what of Paul’s discussion of election in Romans 9:11, what are we to make of it? As we shall see, it is of a piece with what we have found in Romans 8: election is a corporate concept, and individuals can opt in or
out of the elect group. In fact, as we shall see, Paul’s views of election have far more in common with early Jewish ones than Augustinian ones.

One more remark is in order in preparing for discussing Paul’s controversial metaphor about being broken off or grafted into the people of God in Romans 9–11. Paul, like other early Jews, is fond of calling the Christian life a “walk.” It involves certain deliberation and determined behavior by the believers in a certain direction if they are to enter the dominion of God in the future and so receive final salvation. Thus whether in Galatians 5 Paul is urging “walk worthy of your calling” or “walk in the Spirit, and you will not indulge the desires of the flesh,” walking is required for reaching one’s pre-destination. Christians are to choose the path less traveled and be prepared to enter by the narrow gate, and when in that same Galatians 5 text Paul warns all his Christians in Galatia that if they persist in or have a life characterized by any of the behavior mentioned in his vice list (murder, adultery, theft) they will not enter the dominion of God, he is not making idle threats. Christian behavior affects progressive sanctification (walk in the Spirit . . . and you will not indulge . . . ), and progressive sanctification is needed to reach the finish line: the preapproved, previewed, preannounced destination.

**The Election of Jews and Jesus**

The discussion of election in Romans 9–11 is a discussion of corporate election, in the midst of which there is individual rejection by some and selection for historical purposes of others. In other words, Paul gives equal emphasis to election and apostasy in his discussion. This is especially clear when Paul starts speaking of “you” singular in Romans 10.

To those Gentile Christians who are already saved he warns sternly in Romans 10–11 that they could be broken off the tree in a heartbeat if they choose to become unfaithful and unbelieving. Neither God’s foreknowledge nor corporate election prevents individuals from becoming unfaithful and committing apostasy. Paul says if it happened in Israel, it can happen to Gentile believers as well if they do not watch out. In other words, nothing in this discussion of election suggests that the election results are rigged in advance for particular individuals, or that Paul was an early advocate of “once saved always saved” if by that one means that apostasy is impossible for those truly chosen by God. A close reading especially of Romans 10–11 makes this clear. And there is something else. Paul speaks of non-Christian Jews being broken off and grafted in, *after* in Romans 9 he has already listed all the perks, including the election and the covenants (plural) that Jews have had from God’s grace. Obviously none of those benefits prevented one or another Jewish believer from going A.W.O.L.

Paul’s views on predestination, election, the remnant, apostasy, and salvation fall within the parameters of such discussions in early Judaism, rather than within the framework of the later Augustinian, Lutheran, and Calvinistic discussions of the matter. Those early Jewish discussions make full allowance for both the notions of corporate election and the meaningful choices of individuals who may commit apostasy and opt out of the people of God.53

If we follow the flow of the narrative in Romans 9–11 it becomes clear that Paul does indeed draw on his Jewish heritage in discussing election, rejection, perseverance, and the like. For one thing, it becomes clear that God’s foreknowledge is something that can be distinguished from God’s desiring in advance, which is to say that God’s foreknowledge does not predetermine things (see Rom. 11:2, where it is said he foreknew his whole Jewish people, but not all were saved). For another thing, Paul is capable of talking about individual Jews or Christians being broken off from the people of God, and even being grafted back in by grace through faith later. Indeed the whole drift of his argument in Romans 9–11 is that God still has a plan for Jews and that a large number will be grafted into the body of Christ by grace through faith when Jesus returns. What then are we meant to think of Paul’s view of perseverance? Perhaps a brief parable will make his view clearer.

Picture a father crossing a busy highway with a small boy by his side holding his hand quite firmly. The father has good judgment, and he is capable of shielding the child from any calamity and protecting him from any outside force as they make their way across the highway. The one eventuality the father could not prevent, however, was the child being willful, wrenching himself free from his grasp, and running off and being struck by a vehicle. The child, you see, was old enough and strong enough to do so.

This, it seems to me, is an adequate parable of what Paul means by the last powerful paragraph of the argument in Romans 8, which leads quite naturally to the discussion in Romans 9–11. Paul does mean that God has a firm, loving grip on the believer, and no outside force can separate the believer from God and God’s love. A believer cannot lose his salvation, like one might lose one’s glasses. But by willful rebellion there is the possibility of apostasy, of making shipwreck of one’s faith. The good news, then, is that one cannot lose or misplace one’s salvation or simply wander away by accident. Indeed, only by an enormous willful effort could one throw it away. Such is the loving grasp God has on his children. We must now consider one further text of relevance to this discussion: Ephesians 1.

Beginning at Ephesians 1:4, Paul talks about the concept of election. The key phrase to understanding what he means by this concept is *in him* or *in Christ.*54 When Paul says believers were chosen before the founda-
tion of the world “in him,” he does not mean that believers preexisted or even merely that God’s salvation plan preexisted, though the latter is true. He means that Christ preexisted the creation of the universe, and by God’s choosing of him (who is the Elect One), those who would come to be in him were chosen in the person of their agent or redeemer.

God, because of his great love, destined those who believe for the adoption as sons.51 This freely given love is stressed in Ephesians 1:5. This happens only through Christ and according to God’s good pleasure. Paul says “we were graciously chosen in the Beloved, Christ, and for the sake of God’s praise. The concept of election and destining here is a corporate one. If one is in him, one is elect and destined. Paul is not talking about the pretemporal electing or choosing of individual humans outside of Christ to be in Christ, but rather of the election of Christ and what is destined to happen to those, whoever they may be, who are in Christ.56 The concept here is not radically different than the concept of the election of Israel in Romans 9–11. During the OT era, if one was in Israel, one was a part of God’s chosen people; if one had no such connection, one was not elect. Individual persons within Israel could opt out by means of apostasy, and others could be grafted in (see the story of Ruth).57 These concepts of election were then applied to Christ, who as a divine person could incorporate into himself various others. Christ becomes the locus of election and salvation because in Paul’s thinking the story of the people of God is whittled down to the story of Jesus the Anointed One, and then built back up in the risen Christ thereafter. When Paul speaks of how a lost person gets “into Christ,” he speaks on the more mundane level of preaching, hearing, and responding in faith, not of God’s prechoosing of our choices for us. This doctrine of corporate election in Christ is meant as a comfort for those who already believe, reassuring them that by God’s grace and their perseverance in the faith they can and will make the eschatological goal or finish line.58

This approach to the matter also comports with the ecclesiocentric focus of this document. As R. Schnackenburg says, the Christology found in Colossians 1:15–20 is here used in Ephesians’ service of an explanation of the benefits believers have in Christ. “The faithful, the members of Christ’s body, the Church are included in God’s all-embracing plan for and accomplishment of salvation by means of that cosmic christology including Christ’s pre-existence.”59 It is possible that Jesus’ baptismal scene is in mind at Ephesians 1:6–7, for Christ is called the Beloved Son, and at Christ’s baptism there is also the language of washing away of sins. The word ἀπολύτρωσις (cf. Dan 4:34 LXX) can refer to a buying back or ransoming of a slave. Paul says nothing of a ransom paid to Satan, as God owes Satan nothing. Christ is redeeming the lost person from the bondage of sin by paying the price for that sin for them. Redemption is only had “in him.” This redemption terminology then is metaphorical, as is shown by the equation with forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness comes to the believer out of the riches of God’s grace, not because she or he merits it. This grace is said to overflow to Gentiles as well as to Jews, and it comes about by the revelation of the secret, the μυστήριον,60 which here refers to God’s plan to reconcile all things, all peoples, all worlds in Christ. Paul in this discourse favors the use of the verb made known, found here in Ephesians 1:9 but also in 3:3, 5, 10, and 6:19. This comports with the epideictic nature of the discourse which has as one of its main goals making things known, aiding the understanding of fundamental values of the community.

The revelation of the secret comes in preaching, but the preaching only comes about because God has first done something in human history through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is thus quite unlike other religions that may have had purely otherworldly mysteries in view. This open secret is about what God has accomplished in Christ in space and time. Christ was sent for the administration or ministry61 in the fullness of time (cf. Gal 4:4–5; an apocalyptic concept see 2 Esd 4:37; 2 Bar. 40:3; 1QpHab 7:13–14), summing up under one head, all things in himself. The idea of the fullness of time connotes not merely that the right and ripe time has come, thus bringing a long-awaited event or process. It also conveys the notion of the starting of a whole new set of circumstances at the precise time God chose to begin it. The word ἀνακεφαλαιοσάθαι can simply mean “summing up,” but in view of the way Paul is going to use the term head of Christ in v. 22, it is much more likely that he is playing on the literal meaning of the term, “bringing together under or in one head.” This bringing together or summing up in Christ involves both things in heaven and on earth. This would be puzzling were there not things in the heavens that needed this unifying work.

Ephesians 1:11 reiterates the theme of v. 4 that believers were chosen in him. The constant refrain of “in him” must be kept steadily in view throughout the eulogy. Christ carries out the intention of God’s good will. Verse 12 says that believers as redeemed, are redeemed for the purpose of God’s glorious praise. This is the ultimate aim of humanity: to live for the praise of God, to let all we are and all we do be doxology, a giving of glory to God. The Scottish catechism puts it well in saying that the chief end of humankind is to love God and enjoy God forever. It was in Christ that the good news was heard, the word of truth about God’s plan, good will, and intention. It was in him that believers believed and thus in him were affixed with the seal—the promised Holy Spirit.
The seal here is not likely baptism, since Paul nowhere mentions baptism in this passage, but rather the Holy Spirit. “The metaphor of a seal does not imply that the Holy Spirit has stamped us with a seal . . .. but that he himself is this seal, a sign characterizing our Christian existence.” The function of a seal in antiquity was to authenticate a document, but this term here could also refer to the branding of a slave. In that way one would know to whom the servant belonged. In view of the “ownership” or “acquisition” in v. 14 (peripioinos), it likely has the latter meaning here. The point is not the protection or eternal security of the person in question, but rather the identification of who belongs to Christ. Notice the change from “we” to “you” in v. 13. As Fee suggests, Paul is here giving a sneak preview of the discussion in 2:11–3:6 where the “we” is clearly Jewish Christians. While it is true that the “you” draws the audience into the praise, it also distinguishes them from the author and his fellow believers who were Jewish Christians.

This Spirit is also the pledge of our inheritance. The term arrabon means “down payment” or “first installment” or “deposit.” It does not simply mean “guarantee” here, though that idea is not excluded. It is the first installment, and thus surety that God plans to complete his work of salvation in the believer. The Spirit then is a foretaste, not mere foreshadowing; down payment, not mere pledge of the eternal inheritance. “Although Ephesians depicts the gifts of salvation as fully present in the lives of believers, the designation ‘pledge’ suggests a future perfection to this experience.”

The benefits Christians already enjoy are but a foreshadowing of the blessings yet to come, a fact which should stimulate even more praise to the ultimate benefactor. “Despite their minority status in the world of first century CE Asia Minor, Christians found themselves the center of God’s cosmic design because they belonged to the risen Lord, who is exalted over all the heavenly powers. Benefits that humans might expect to receive from ‘the heavens’ have been conferred by God in Christ.”

Yet still all believers await the acquisition of full redemption, or perhaps better said await God’s full redemption of his possession, namely the church. Even in Ephesians, there is a not-yet dimension to salvation. A quote from G. B. Caird can help us conclude this section of our discussion: “The salvation of man is not to be conceived as the rescue of favored individuals out of a doomed world to participate in an otherworldly existence totally unrelated to life on earth. Man’s personality is so intimately linked with his environment that he must be saved in the context of all the corporate relationships and loyalties, achievements and aspirations, which constitute a genuinely human existence.” Just so. We need at this juncture to draw some conclusions for this part of our discussion.

Awaiting the Election Results

CONCLUSIONS

Though the Reformers were not all equally indebted to Augustine, it seems clear that the indebtedness of Luther and Calvin was considerable, especially when it came to the understanding of issues like predetermination, election, salvation, perseverance of the saints, and the nature of the limited atonement of Christ on the cross. Behind all of this was a particular conception of God’s sovereignty, a conception which in the case of Augustine owed something to Manicheanism, and fatalism. Unfortunately, when this heritage was brought to bear in interpreting the Scriptures, Paul in particular suffered. It took Paul out of his Jewish context and read him as an exponent of a later and, one might add, a largely non-Jewish theology, which muffled the Jewish focus on orthopraxy, on how the believer should live.

The conclusions that seem warranted from this discussion are various. First, Paul’s conception of election is a corporate one, and it does not predetermine which particular individuals can be in or out of the group. Furthermore, Paul does not operate with an “invisible elect” amidst the people of God concept. The Israelites or Christians who are true are all too visible and evident. The tree is known by the fruit it bears. Second, Paul fully affirms that perseverance is necessary to salvation, and that it involves human effort. He also affirms that apostasy is possible for a true believer, something other texts such as Hebrews 6 fully confirm as well. One is not eternally secure until one is securely in eternity.

Third, Paul believes that Christians are under a new covenant, not any administrations of the older ones. He does see the new covenant as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic one. Among other things, this means that Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, are no longer under the Mosaic Law. They are rather under the Law of Christ.

Fourth, it is worth adding, though we have not really discussed this in this chapter, that Paul also does not operate with a concept of imputed righteousness, if by that phrase one means Christ’s righteousness is counted in place of ours. A careful reading of Galatians 3 and Romans 4 will show that what Paul says on the basis of Genesis 12–15 is that Abraham’s faith was reckoned or counted as righteousness. His faith was reckoned as his righteousness. This is a very different matter than Christ’s righteousness counting in the place of that of the believers.

Paul affirms that believers are initially set right with God by grace through faith, but that they must go on with the aid of grace to be righteous, to manifest holiness, indeed even to go on to completion or perfection at least at the point of the resurrection of the believer when in body as well as in spirit they become truly whole. Righteousness needs to be imparted by the Spirit, not merely imputed. God is not deceived,
nor does he ignore the Christian’s sin. It is not the case that when God looks at the believer he simply sees the righteous Christ. And as 2 Corinthians 5:19 (cf. 1 Cor 3) makes perfectly evident, Christians will be held accountable for their behavior when they appear before the judgment seat of Christ. If they choose to persist in their sin such that they commit moral (or for that matter theological) apostasy, as Paul so clearly warns in Galatians 5:19–21, they will not enter the dominion of God when it comes with Christ in eschatological glory at the end of the age.

Fifth, the Reformation inclination to say the atonement is limited was correct, but as texts like Romans 5:1–11 and 1 Timothy 1:15 make evident, Christ came to die for sinners, not the elect. Indeed, as 1 Timothy 2:4–5 makes perfectly clear, God desires all persons to be saved (so also John 3:16), and Christ gave himself as a ransom for all sinners. This means that it must be human beings in their response to God in Christ, not God through some process of choosing individuals, who limit the atonement.

Sixth, since numerous NT authors, including Paul and the author of Hebrews, not to mention Jesus himself, warn against the problem of apostasy, this in turn must mean that God’s saving grace is both resistible at the outset and rejectable later. There may be moments of overwhelming grace in a human life—such as, for example, at the moment of Paul’s conversion—but it does not follow from this that grace is always irresistible.

Seventh, the character of God as a God of holy love and also a God of freedom is such that he expects these same qualities to be reflected in his creatures, whom he calls to freely respond to his gift of salvation. Love cannot be coerced, manipulated, or predetermined.

Eighth, in our discussion of Romans 7 we also noted that Luther was wrong to think that Paul was discussing the Christian life in that text. Rather we have a Christian view of a non-Christian condition, perhaps a person on the verge of conversion in Romans 7:14–25, while Romans 7:7–13 retells Adam’s tale.

The tension in the Christian life is not between old person and new person, but rather between Holy Spirit and sinful inclinations, on the one hand, and inner self, which is being renewed, in contrast to outer self, which is wasting away. However, as Paul makes very clear in 1 Corinthians 10:13, the believer has sufficient grace available to him or her to resist any temptation, and as Romans 8:1–3 says (cf. Rom 7:4–5) the Christian has been set free from the bondage to sin by the powerful Holy Spirit of life. A Christian should never assume that righteousness only has to do with his or her position in relationship to God, rather than also with his or her condition.

Christians are called to holy living, and they are empowered to carry out such living. This involves realizing that God’s grace is greater than fallen human nature, and that God expects obedience and progress toward entire sanctification. We will have much more to say about these things when we turn around and try to come to grips with the exegetical weaknesses in the Arminian way of thinking about these soteriological issues. Now, however, it is time to consider a much more recent theology—Dispensationalism—that has spread like kudzu throughout the conservative Protestant Church and is threatening to overrun and overwhelm traditional Protestant theology of various ilks. As we shall see, it is exegetically by far the weakest of these three theologies we are critiquing.