



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THEMSELVES APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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The Doctrines of Grace

God's Sovereign Choice (Part-3)

(Continuation from last month)

When someone mentions the term *Calvinism*, the customary response is, “Oh, you mean the doctrine of predestination?” This identification of Calvinism with predestination is as strange as it is real and widespread.

Calvinism certainly does hold firmly to the biblical doctrine of predestination. The Reformed view of the doctrine is central to historic Calvinism. Virtually nothing in

John Calvin's view of predestination, however, was not first in **Martin Luther**, and before Luther in **Augustine** (and arguably in **Thomas Aquinas**). Luther wrote more about the subject than did Calvin. Calvin's treatment of predestination in his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is sparse in comparison to other doctrines.

Almost every church has developed some form of the doctrine of predestination simply because the Bible teaches predestination. Predestination is a biblical word and a biblical concept. If one seeks to develop a theology that is biblical, one cannot avoid the doctrine of predestination. The term *predestination* or *predestined* is used liberally by the Apostle Paul:

Table 3 The TULIP's First Petal

- 1. Total depravity**
Humanity's radical corruption
- 2. Unconditional election**
God's sovereign choice
- 3. Limited atonement**
Christ's purposeful atonement
- 4. Irresistible grace**
The Spirit's effective call
- 5. Perseverance of the saints**
God's preservation of the saint

Ephesians 1:3-12 (NASB)

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual bless-

ing in the heavenly *places* in Christ,
⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love
⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,
⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.
⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace
⁸ which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight
⁹ He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him
¹⁰ with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him
¹¹ also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,
¹² to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.

Paul speaks of believers being predestined according to the counsel of God's will. **The question then is not, Does the Bible teach predestination?** The question is, **What exactly does the biblical concept of predestination mean?**

In its most basic sense **predestination has to do with the question of destiny.** A destiny or a destination is a point toward which we are moving but have not yet reached. When we book airline tickets, we do not book them to nowhere. We have a destination in mind, a place we are trying to reach.

When we add the prefix *pre* to *destination*, we speak of something that takes place prior to or before the destination. The *pre* of *predestination* relates to the question of time.

In biblical categories predestination clearly takes place, not only *before* we believe in Christ, and not only *before* we were even born, but from all eternity, before the universe was ever created.

The agent of predestination is God. In his sovereignty he predestinates. Human beings are the object of his predestination. In short, predestination refers to God's sovereign plan for human beings, decreed by him in eternity. We must add, however, that the concept of predestination includes more than the future destiny of humans. It also includes whatever comes to pass in time and space.

Often the term *election* is used as a synonym for *predestination*. Technically this is incorrect. The term *election* refers specifically to **one aspect of divine predestination**: God's choosing of certain individuals to be saved. The term *election* has a positive connotation, referring to a benevolent predestination that results in the salvation of those who are elect. *Election* also has a negative side, called "**reprobation**," which involves the predestination of those who are not elect.

In summary we may define *predestination* broadly as follows: From all eternity God decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish. God made a choice—he chose some individuals to be saved unto everlasting blessedness in heaven, and he chose others to pass over, allowing them to suffer the consequences of their sins, eternal punishment in hell.

CONDITIONAL OR UNCONDITIONAL?

Do our individual lives have any bearing on God's decision? This is a difficult issue and one that must be treated with great care. Even though God makes his choice before we are born, he still knows everything about us and our lives before we live them.

Does he take that prior knowledge of us into account when he makes his decision regarding election? How we answer this question reveals whether our view of *predestination* is **Reformed** or **not Reformed**.

The issue is this: On what does God base his decision to elect some and not others?

In the acrostic **TULIP** the **U** refers to "**unconditional election.**" The word *unconditional* distinguishes the Reformed doctrine of predestination from that of other theologies.

During the Civil War Ulysses S. Grant was nick-

named “**Unconditional Surrender**” Grant, retaining his initials U. S. Unconditional surrender in warfare is a surrender that excludes negotiations. **There is no room for “I’ll do this if you do that.”** The surrender is total and complete. The defeated foe surrenders all, while the victor surrenders nothing. This type of surrender, observed aboard the battleship USS Missouri, brought an end to World War II. The term *unconditional* simply means “**with no conditions attached, either foreseen or otherwise.**”

Many non-Reformed churches teach that election is conditional: God elects certain people to salvation, but only if they meet certain conditions. Not that God waits for these people to meet these conditions before he chooses them. Conditional election is usually based on God’s foreknowledge of human actions and responses. This is often called the *prescient view* of election or predestination. The term *prescience* or *pre-science* simply refers to foreknowledge.

The idea is that from all eternity God looks down the tunnel of time and knows in advance who will respond to the gospel positively and who will not. He knows in advance who will exercise faith and who will not. On the basis of this prior knowledge, God chooses some. He elects them because he knows they will have faith. He knows who will meet the conditions for election and on that basis elects them.

The favorite proof text for the *prescient view* of election is in Romans:

Romans 8:29-30 (NASB)

²⁹ **For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;**

³⁰ **and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.**

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We notice in this text that God’s foreknowledge precedes his predestination. Those who advocate the *prescient view* assume that, since foreknowledge precedes predestination, foreknowledge must be the basis of predestination. **Paul does not say this.** He simply says that God predestined those whom he foreknew. Who else could he possibly predestine? Before God can choose anyone for anything, he must have them in mind as objects of his choice. That Paul links predestination with foreknowledge says nothing about whether this foreknowledge includes the person’s meeting some condition for election.

In actuality Romans 8:29–30 militates against the *prescient view* of election. Paul begins with foreknowledge and then progresses through the “**golden chain**” of salvation via predestination, calling, justification, and glorification.

The crucial question here is the relationship between calling and justification. The chain says that those whom God foreknew He also predestined. The text is elliptical: it does not include the term all but it tacitly implies the word (most translations of the Bible add it). The sense of the text is that all whom God foreknows (in whatever sense he foreknows them) he predestines. And all whom he predestines he calls. And all whom he calls he justifies. And all whom he justifies he glorifies. The chain is: foreknowledge-predestination-calling-justification-glorification.

It is significant that all who are called are also justified. **What does Paul mean here by “calling”?** In theology we distinguish between two kinds of divine calling: the external and the internal call.

We see the external call of God in the preaching of the gospel. Everyone who hears the gospel preached is called or summoned to Christ. But not everyone responds positively to this outward call. Some ignore it and others flatly reject it. Sometimes the gospel falls on deaf ears.

Scripture is clear that not everyone who hears the gospel outwardly is automatically justified. *Justification is not by hearing the call but by believing the call.*

So, at least in some sense, there are some (indeed many) who are called but who are not chosen. Many hear that external call of the gospel who are never justified.

Yet in the golden chain Paul says that those who are called by God are also justified by him. Unless one is a **Universalist**, one cannot conclude that this refers simply to the outward call of the gospel.

Theology also speaks of the **inward call** of God, which is not given to everyone. **Reformed theology** calls it *effectual calling* (which will be discussed more fully in the next section). All who get this call are included in those who are justified. **Again this assumes the text implies that all who are called are justified.** The text does not say that explicitly.

It is possible to interpret the text to mean that *some* who are called are justified. But if the term *some* is implied here at this point in the chain, it must be implied throughout the chain. In this case the text would say that some whom God foreknew he predestined, some whom he predestined he called, some whom he called he justified, and some whom he justified he glorified. This makes nonsense out of Paul's words. The implication of *all* is not vague and uncertain. It is clearly implied by the wording of the text.

THE ORDER OF SALVATION

We are dealing here with the **order of salvation** (*ordo salutis*). We note that predestination precedes calling. If calling preceded predestination, a case could be made for the prescient view. Then it could be assumed that predestination is based on calling rather than calling on predestination (although the difference between the external call and the internal call would still be problematic).

Reformed theology understands the golden chain to mean that God predestines some people to receive a divine call that others do not receive.

Only the **predestined**, or the **elect**, receive this call, **and only those who** receive this **call** are **justified**. A process of selection is clearly involved here. Not everyone is predestined to receive this call, the

consequence of which is justification. Likewise it is clear that only those who are predestined are justified. Since justification is by faith, we understand that only the predestined will ever have faith. The prescient view holds that we are elected because we will have faith.

The Reformed view holds that we are elected *unto* faith and justification. Faith is a necessary condition for salvation, but not for election.

The prescient view makes faith a condition of election; **Reformed theology** sees faith as the result of election. This is the *fundamental difference* between **conditional election** and **unconditional election**, between all forms of **semi-Pelagianism** and **Augustinianism**, between **Arminianism** and **Calvinism**.

Reformed theologians understand the golden chain as follows: From all eternity God foreknew his elect. He had an idea of their identity in his mind before he created them. He foreknew them not only in the sense of having a prior idea of their personal identities, but also in the sense of foreloving them. When the Bible speaks of "**knowing**," it often distinguishes between a simple mental awareness of a person and a deep intimate love of a person.

The Reformed view teaches that all whom God has foreknown, **he has also predestined** to be **inwardly called, justified, and glorified**. God sovereignly brings to pass the salvation of his elect and only of his elect.

The Westminster Confession declares:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestined, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

Those of mankind that are predestined unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good

works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto: and all to the praise of His glorious grace.

The Confession spells out what is meant by unconditional election. The grounds of our election are not something foreseen by God in us but rather the good pleasure of his sovereign will. Here the sovereignty of God refers not only to his power and authority but also to his grace.



Fig. 1
The Golden Chain of Salvation

This echoes what Paul emphatically declares in Romans:

Romans 9:10-16 (NASB)

¹⁰ **And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac;**
¹¹ **for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that**

God's purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,

¹² **it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER."**

¹³ **Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."**

¹⁴ **What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!**

¹⁵ **For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."**

¹⁶ **So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.**

Paul reminds the Romans of what God had declared to Moses: **"I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion."** The principle is that of the sovereignty of God's mercy and grace.

By definition grace is not something God is required to have. It is his sovereign prerogative to grant or withhold it. God does not owe grace to anyone. Grace that is owed is not grace. **Justice imposes obligation, but grace, in its essence, is voluntary and free.**

The ground on which God chooses the objects of his mercy is solely the good pleasure of his will. Paul makes this clear:

Ephesians 1:3-5 (NASB)

³ **Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ,**

⁴ **just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love**

⁵ **He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention (good pleasure) of His will,**

That God chooses according to the good pleasure of his will does not mean that his choices are **capricious** or **arbitrary**. An arbitrary choice is one made for no reason at all.

Though Reformed theology insists that God's election is based on nothing foreseen in the individuals'

lives, this does not mean that he makes the choice for no reason at all. **It simply means that the reason is not something God finds in us.** In his inscrutable, mysterious will, God chooses for reasons known only to Himself. He chooses according to his own pleasure, which is his divine right. His pleasure is described as his *good pleasure*. If something pleases God, it must be good. There is no evil pleasure in God.

In all forms of **semi-Pelagianism**, in the final analysis, the grounds of God's election rest inevitably in the actions of men. Here is where we see the pervasive influence of **Pelagianism** on the modern church.

Paul states emphatically that the grounds of God's election of Jacob over Esau did not lie in the actions of either brother. The first thing we note about the apostle's statement is **that it refers to individuals.**

Some have argued that Paul is referring instead to nations or groups and that election does not apply to individuals. Apart from the fact that nations are made up of individuals, the salient point is that Paul explains election by citing as examples of God's sovereign election two distinct, historical individuals. These individuals were as close as two people can be. They were not only brothers of one family, they were twin brothers.

Paul says that God's decree of election transpired before the children were born or had done anything good or evil. Why does the apostle say this? What is the didactic or literary purpose of saying that the twins were not yet born or had not yet done anything good or evil? The prescient view of conditional election agrees that God's election occurred before the twins were born and before they had done anything good or evil. But that is to labor the obvious.

The prescient view then states that the decree was nevertheless based on the twins' actions and decisions in the future. The apostle nowhere says that. If Paul had intended to teach the prescient view, he could have said precisely that. But we are dealing here with more than an argument from silence.

Paul makes it clear that it was not the actions of Jacob or Esau that determined God's sovereign choice of Jacob over Esau: **"It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."**

Romans 9:16 (NASB)

¹⁶ So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

In **Arminianism** the decisive factor in election **is the willing of the believer**. How could the apostle have made it clearer that this is not the case than by saying that **"it is not of [by] him who wills"**? **Arminians and semi-Pelagians** ultimately rest their view of election on the **one who wills and not on the sovereign grace of God.**

The prescient view of election is not so much an explanation of the biblical doctrine of election as a flat denial of this biblical doctrine.

ELECTION AND GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

In Romans Paul asks a rhetorical question: **"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with [in] God?"** Again we ask why Paul asked this question. He was a teacher par excellence. He anticipated objections that might be raised by his teaching, and he dealt with them up front. What objection does he have in view when he raises the question of unrighteousness in God?

Romans 9:13-16 (NASB)

¹³ Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."

¹⁴ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

¹⁵ For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

¹⁶ So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

First we consider the prescient view of election.

What objections raised against it include the charge that there is unrighteousness in God? None.

The conditional view of election is designed to protect two borders: **on one side a particular view of human freedom**, and on the other side a **particular**

view of God.

They seek to protect God from the charge that he is unfair, arbitrary, or unjust, choosing some persons for salvation without a view to their own choices. In short, opposition to Arminian or semi-Pelagian views of election does not include the accusation that it places in doubt the righteousness of God. If Paul were espousing the prescient view, we would hardly expect him to anticipate an objection of this sort.

The objection Paul does anticipate is one that Calvinists hear constantly: **the Calvinist doctrine of election casts a shadow over God's righteousness.** The complaint is loud and frequent that unconditional election involves God in a kind of unrighteousness.

My guess is that Paul anticipated the very objection that Calvinists hear because he taught the same doctrine of election that Calvinists teach. When our doctrine of election is assailed, I take comfort that we are in good company, that of Paul himself, when we must bear the cavils of those who oppose unconditional election.

The idea that there may be unrighteousness in God is related to God's choice of some for salvation while passing over others. It does **not seem fair** or "**right**" for God to bestow his grace on some but not on others.

If the decision to bless Jacob over Esau was made before either was born or had done anything good or evil, and if the choice was not with a view to their future actions or responses, then the obvious question is, Why did one receive the blessing and not the other?

Paul answers by appealing to God's words to Moses: "**I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy.**"

Exodus 33:19 (NASB)

¹⁹ And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion."

Romans 9:15 (NASB)

¹⁵ For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

It is God's prerogative to dispense his grace however he sees fit. He owed neither Jacob nor Esau any measure of grace. **Had he chosen neither, he would have violated no precept of justice or righteousness.**

It still seems that if God gives grace to one person, in the interest of fairness he "**ought**" to give grace equally to another. It is precisely this "**oughtness**" that is foreign to the biblical concept of grace. Among the mass of fallen humanity, all guilty of sin before God and exposed to his justice, no one has any claim or entitlement to God's mercy. **If God chooses to grant mercy to some of that group, this does not require that he give it to all.**

God certainly has the power and authority to grant his saving grace to all mankind. Clearly he has not elected to do this. All men are not saved despite the fact that God has the power and right to save them all if that is his good pleasure.

It is also clear that all are not lost. God could have chosen not to save anyone. He has the power and authority to execute his righteous justice by saving nobody. In reality he elects to save some, but not all. **Those who are saved are beneficiaries of his sovereign grace and mercy.**

Those who are not saved are not victims of his cruelty or injustice; **they are recipients of justice.** No one receives punishment at the hands of God that they do not deserve. Some receive grace at his hands that they do not deserve. Because he is pleased to grant mercy to one does not mean that the rest "**deserve**" the same. **If mercy is deserved, it is not really mercy, but justice.**

Biblical history makes it clear that though God is never unjust to anyone, he does not treat all people equally or the same.

For example, God in his grace called Abraham out of his paganism in Ur of the Chaldees and made a gracious covenant with him that he did not make with other pagans.

God revealed himself to Moses in a manner he did not grant to Pharaoh.

God gave Saul of Tarsus a blessed revelation of the majesty of Christ that he did not give to Pilate or Caiaphas. Because God was so gracious to Paul when he was a violent persecutor of Christians, was God therefore obliged to give the same revelatory advantage to Pilate?

Or was there a special virtuous quality in Saul that inclined God to choose him above Pilate?

We could leap over the centuries to our own day with a similar question. We believers must ask ourselves why we have come to faith while many of our friends have not.

Did we exercise faith in Christ because we are more intelligent than they are?

If so, where did this intelligence come from?

Is it something we earned or deserved?

Or was our intelligence itself a gift from our Creator?

Did we respond to the gospel positively because we are better or more virtuous than our friends?

We all know the answers to these questions. I cannot adequately explain why I came to faith in Christ and some of my friends did not. I can only look to the glory of God's grace toward me, a grace I did not deserve then and do not deserve now.

Here the rubber meets the road, and we discover if we are harboring a secret pride, believing that we deserve salvation more than others. Here is a gross insult to God's grace and a monument to our arrogance. It is a reversion to the worst form of legalism, by which we ultimately put our trust in our own work.

CORAM DEO **(Before the face of God)**

The doctrine of election means, then, that God singled out certain ones in His mind both from

among angels ([1 Tim. 5:21](#)) and from among men, and ordained them unto eternal life and blessedness; that before He created them, He decided their destiny, just as a builder draws his plans and determines every part of the building before any of the materials are assembled for the carrying out of his design. Election may thus be defined: it is that part of the counsel of God whereby He did from all eternity purpose in Himself to display His grace upon certain of His creatures. This was made effectual by a definite decree concerning them. Now in every decree of God three things must be considered: the beginning, the matter or substance, the end or design. Let us offer a few remarks upon each.

The *beginning* of the decree is the *will of God*. It originates solely in His own sovereign determination. Whilst determining the estate of His creatures God's own will is the alone and absolute cause thereof. As there is nothing above God to rule Him, so there is nothing outside of Himself which can be in any wise an impulsive cause unto Him; to say otherwise is to make the will of God no will at all. Herein He is infinitely exalted above us, for not only are we subject to One above us, but our wills are being constantly moved and disposed by external causes. The will of God could have no cause outside of itself, or otherwise there would be something prior to itself (for a cause ever precedes the effect) and something more excellent (for the cause is ever superior to the effect), and thus God would not be the independent Being which He is.

1. Pink, A. W. (2005). *The doctrines of election and justification*. Bellingham, WA:





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Hebrews 1 Overview

When studying or reading any New Testament book or passage, it is always critical to understand something about “how” the author has actually written the book. Every book, every passage has an underlying message, a divine message, and the goal is to find that message and then incorporate it into our life. The goal is not to just gain information, but to intentionally allow God’s information to produce a Christ-like transformation in our personal life. **Ro-**
mans 8:29 calls it being “**conformed to the image of His Son**”. The goal is always becoming more and more conformed to the image of Christ. **God’s information should always lead to our transformation.**

As we begin this “overview” process of each chapter, it is important to understand how to “approach” a book or a chapter, and specifically what it is that should be looked for in a passage. How does someone go about studying a passage, what should they be looking for in a passage, and how can they know what are the most important elements? When studying or reading, there are certain major elements to look for in any passage. There are key verbs, key words, important connecting words, repeated words

and phrases, promises, exhortations, warnings, doctrinal passages, dialogue passages, historical narratives, passages about Christ, parables, the word “**therefore**”, the tense and mood of the verbs (which generally identify the major thrusts of a passage), various figures of speech, and the context. If the context of a passage is not properly understood, then the reader will undoubtedly not be able to properly evaluate the passage. Take the “**therefores**” for instance. Think of it this way – what is the “**therefore**” there for? The “**therefore**” reveals that the author has just explained and provided a biblical basis for why he wants the reader to do what he is getting ready to encourage them to do. The author has provided a biblical basis for his forthcoming biblical injunction.

Of all of the elements, the verbs are probably the most crucial. Each verb has five elements – tense, mood, voice, person, number. In a verb, someone is acting or being acted upon based on the tense, mood, and voice (active, middle, or passive). The tense of the verb speaks about the time element involved in the action – past, present, future (6 tenses). The mood states how the action of the verb is related to reality – an actual fact, an objective possibility, a volitional possibility (imperative mood), etc. The imperative mood is very crucial. It is the imperative mood of a verb that most “applies” to the believer because it is dependent on the decision of the believer’s will. The author is telling the believer to choose to do something. They are the “command” verbs, or the verbs that are non-optional imperatives for the believer. They are not suggestions, but direct commands, and they are strong exhortations to live out the Christian life in a godly manner. They are non-optional, direct commands, and verbs of encouragement. That is why they are identified as being in the “imperative” mood. However, it is a command that is only fulfilled when the reader chooses to do so. It is entirely volitional. The command verb in the imperative tense is that portion of Scripture where its fulfillment is totally dependent on the believer choosing to obey. They could actually be called “obedience” verbs. So verbs are critical to understand and must be studied in some detail. For instance, many verbs are in the in-

dicative mood. The indicative mood states something as an actual positive fact, so it is that verb mood that most of the doctrinal sections of Scripture are written in. [Hebrews 1:2-4](#), for instance, has a number of verbs in the indicative mood.

¹God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ²has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; ³who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

Each of these verbs are related to God or Christ and they articulate what they did – actual positive facts. These verbs are what a believer bases their life on. This is doctrine. They are God’s facts that are critical to the Christian life.

Now, in Hebrews there are two major elements integrated within the book: (1) the exaltations of Christ, and (2) the exhortations to the believer to include the warnings. Are there other important elements? Sure, but these are the two primary ones. For instance, interspersed throughout Hebrews are seven (7) key promises. Biblical promises are either “conditional” or “unconditional”, and so it is important to understand the “type” of promise in order to be able to adequately interpret the promise. The promises, however, are not a major “thrust” of the book. In reality, Hebrews is a profoundly “doctrinal” book – one of the most doctrinal in the New Testament, but in this overview process the doctrine is not identified separately as a major element simply because the doctrine is normally embedded within the two major elements – the exaltations of Christ and the exhortations to the believer. So, by identifying the number of major elements the reader will be better prepared to understand how the book is put together.

One of the single most important places to start when studying any book is understanding the context. The context is the setting in which the letter was written and the background of why it is even being written. When studying the context, it must include an identification of the circumstances and situations that actually facilitated the writing of the letter. I.e., the New Testament writers did not write in a vacuum. They were not writing so they could sell some books. They were always addressing a particular issue or problem. For instance, some books were written to local churches such as the Ephesian church or the church at Corinth. Some were written to the general Christian population such as the “**twelve tribes scattered abroad**” ([James 1:1](#)). And then some were just written to an individual such as Timothy, Titus, or Philemon. So, understanding the circumstances that necessitated writing the letter are indispensable to a proper handling of the interpretation. If the reader does not understand why the author is writing to someone, then they will have much more difficulty in understanding the content. So what the following is what should be looked for: (1) who wrote the letter, (2) who is it written to, and (3) what facilitated it being written. It could simply be called the who, what, where, when, and why of the letter.

For instance, [I Timothy](#) was written to a young pastor in a very critical and pivotal church in Ephesus. It was written as an “encouragement” for Timothy to continue in the faith. The problem, however, was that the church at Ephesus was one with false teachers abounding all around Timothy. Paul had actually told the elders before he left that “**savage wolves**” would come into the church after he left – and they did. [Acts 20:28-31](#) records what Paul said,

²⁸Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰**Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.** ³¹**Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone**

night and day with tears.

One of the problems with false teachers and false teaching is that they both produce false converts. Strong churches are ones that are fully committed to teaching Scripture and doctrine with passion and depth. Weak teaching produces weak Christians and is the seedbed for producing many false conversions. When biblical truth is sacrificed and compromised, that weak presentation of the truth becomes a demonic hindrance to genuine salvation and the convicting presence of the Holy Spirit is drained off. When biblical truth is forfeited for cultural expediency and preferences, the call to true discipleship and following the Lordship of Christ is virtually eliminated. False conversions are one of the most detrimental elements within a church. No wonder Paul wrote these words in [I Timothy 4:16](#),

“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.”

Once a church embraces false converts, they hire false teachers and the slide just begins, and genuinely walking in the truth and meaningful discipleship becomes a constant uphill battle.

Hopefully, the impact this has on how the reader approaches a book can be appreciated. As a reader, as a student, or as a teacher, each individual has to be mentally prepared to understand what the author is trying to do, what his purpose is, and why he is even writing the book. As another example of this, in [I Corinthians](#) Paul is writing to a church that has some very serious problems that are threatening the overall health and stability of that church. So Paul’s purpose in writing is to “correct” what is not properly aligned with God’s purposes for a local church. The letter is “correctional” in nature. Does it contain doctrine? Absolutely! But its primary purpose is to address and correct the terrible spiritual abuses that were taking place in that church. So, when reading the book, the reader knows what the tenor of the message is going to be. Its overall message will be correctional.

Solomon, for instance, wrote Proverbs to help his young son. He was a father instructing his son about fundamental godly principles on how to be godly in an ungodly world. He was using what he wrote as a means of passing on his wisdom to his children. Many of the Old Testament books, for instance, are what would be called a historical narrative. I.e., they are telling a story of people who chose to follow God and many who chose not to follow God. The prophetic books on the other hand, even though they are inundated with historical narratives, are mostly written to “warn”. And all of that has a great impact on how someone reads and approaches a book. If the reader knows that a particular book has a very strong warning and a very strong message, then they have a great advantage in understanding the book.

So, what is known or not known about Hebrews? Well, it is not known who the author is or who the exact recipients of the letter are (most likely a local church somewhere). It is a logical assessment that the book was written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD since no mention of that significant event is made in the letter. We know that there are a multitude of passages exalting Christ and that the letter is overflowing with encouragements and is filled with doctrine. We know that it talks a lot about the temple and about the sacrifices and that it speaks about the most mysterious individual in the Bible called Melchizedek. It has an entire chapter on faith and a large section on discipline. And it probably has the most serious warnings collectively given anywhere in the New Testament. That is what is known so far. That is the letter’s overview.

So, what about Hebrews 1? Well, we know that it is all about Christ. In fact, there is not one imperative verb in the entire chapter. It reveals how God has spoken to us (v1-2). We know that it contains a multitude of doctrinal statements about Christ (v3-4). We know that it talks a lot about angels, but that it is certainly not about angels. We know that it has seven (7) Old Testament quotations, or one-half of the fourteen (14) verses in the chapter.

In the very beginning the author immediately, and without any hesitation or explanation, confronts the reader with this extremely high exaltation of Christ. So the

question has to be “why”? The whole chapter just resounds with this exaltation of Christ, but why? It is because these people were losing sight of the glory of the person of Christ. At the most strategic point in their lives, they were losing sight and perspective on the most powerful truth in the universe – that Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord over everything and everyone. And so the writer is straightway informing his readers of the greatness of Christ so that they can always have the proper perspective on what they are going through and how to forge ahead through it. For every committed Christian, there will be many trials in their lives and some of them very severe. And if the believer is not grounded in the exalted person of Christ, they will vacillate and fail. Every believer’s strength, wisdom, and ability to endure through the difficulties that life brings are to be fully grounded in the person of Christ. And they must know that truth, they must understand that truth, and they must embrace that truth or be crushed under life’s trials. If someone were to ask why godly men and women survive the pressures and why godly Christians seem to have a strength that others do not have, it is simply because they know something about Christ that others do not know.

This is a church age characterized by people who are not really that inclined to exalt Christ, either in their life or with their words. Men do not think much of Christ and they are perfectly comfortable with demeaning both His name and His person. It is nothing for people to use His name in vain. It is nothing for men to take His word lightly and with no personal regard or reverence for it. It is nothing for men to disregard the church as being irrelevant and an inconvenience in their life. It is nothing for men to place every other activity in life above the things of God. Men totally and completely disregard the gospel – the most important message ever given to men. [Romans 1:21-22](#) explains it this way when it says,

²¹because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish

hearts were darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools,

Why would men become “fools”? It is because they do not think much of Christ, and ultimately of God the Father. **But it is an exalted view of Christ that sustains and keeps the believer** – and every believer must have it! And that is exactly what this author is doing in Hebrews 1 – raising his reader’s awareness and appreciation of who Christ is.

On a personal note, I will never forget playing in a soccer match in Asheville, North Carolina when I was in high school. The conditions were absolutely horrible. It had snowed for several days and eventually began to have a very cold rain. The field was not in that good of a condition and for all practical purposes was unplayable. The temperature was near the freezing mark, and there I was in shorts in the freezing rain! But I knew something. I knew that the match would be over in a couple of hours. I knew that as soon as it was over that there was a hot shower awaiting my cold body. I knew that they had a nice meal planned for the team, and then we would be headed back home. And what I knew gave me the stamina and the drive to persevere through the harsh conditions. I knew something.

[I John](#) is a book filled with the phrase “**we know**”. It uses that phrase sixteen (16) different times. And that is exactly what these Hebrew readers needed – they needed to “**know**” something. Be assured that when the difficult days come, and they will surely come, that every believer is going to need to “**know**” something in order to get through those difficult times. These Hebrew believers needed to know something vital that would help them to persevere, something that would strengthen their endurance, and something that would continue to sustain them through the very worst of trials. Every warning in Hebrews is directly or indirectly related to persevering, to enduring, to bearing up under trials, and to being willing to suffer for the name of Christ – and every believer needs to know that. Every believer needs something that they can anchor their life into, and Jesus Christ is that anchor. [Hebrews 6:19-20](#) says,

¹⁹This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, ²⁰where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Those two verses are talking specifically about Jesus Christ being the “**anchor of the soul**”. Life has to have an anchor – something that stabilizes it when the very difficult moments literally seem to be overwhelming and more than one can endure. No committed follower of Christ can avoid or delete those moments. And for these Hebrew Christians, persecution, suffering, and extreme difficulty was a daily reality. [Hebrews 10:32-35](#) says,

³²But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: ³³partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; ³⁴for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. ³⁵Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. ³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:

These Hebrew Christians were desperate for a word that would help them, for a word that would stabilize their lives. They needed something to help steady their life during very difficult and trying times, and the writer’s answer was “Christ”. They needed to “know” something about Christ and who He was.

So, what else is to be learned from Hebrews 1 in an overview process? Well, first of all Hebrews 1 teaches that God is a “speaking” God. [Hebrews 1:1-2](#) says,

¹God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the

prophets, ²has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds;

God speaks and communicates and clearly articulates His purposes and His ways, and He has done so in many different ways. But the most meaningful and precious way that He has spoken is through His Son. This cannot be missed! If this is missed, then we miss the greatest way that God speaks and our entire life suffers greatly because we will always be looking for answers in the wrong places. Christ is actually called the “**Word**” in [John 1:1](#).

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The truth of God has been fully and completely articulated in the person of Christ. In [John 14:6](#) Jesus states this about Himself,

⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

The “**Word**”, the “**Truth**” has been given to us, brought near to us and it is our responsibility to bring it to others, to sinners like ourselves.

Secondly, Hebrews 1 teaches that Christ is a great and glorious Savior. [Hebrews 1:3-4](#) says,

³who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

These seven (7) attributes of Christ set the stage for the rest of the letter. They are the opening statement upon which the rest of the book is written - the ultimate exaltation of Christ. Everything in Hebrews is founded on the exaltation of Christ. He is the foundation of all that is meaningful and purposeful in life. In v2 He is the Creator of the world, and in v3 He is the One who is upholding and sustaining all things by the simple “**word of His power**”. He has “**purged our sins**” and is there-

fore salvation to the lost.. He gives strength to the weak, and wisdom to the ignorant. He conveyed the very nature and character of the Triune God in a human body and was the very brilliance and “**brightness**” of God’s glory, the “**express image of His person**”. Without any question, the doctrine and the truth concerning Jesus Christ is the central and most important and significant fact in history. The birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the most unique events in all of history. The covenants, the types, the shadows, the prophecies – they all point to Jesus Christ. **The whole essence of the Christian position is dependent on the person of Christ and what someone believes about Christ.**

So, what someone believes about Jesus Christ is the deciding factor relative to the Christian life. He is what separates the Christian faith from every other religion in the world. Other religions have founders, and obviously those founders are important to their particular religions, but they are not essential. For instance, if Buddha never existed, the Buddhists could still have Buddhism. If Muhammad had never lived, the Muslims could still have Islam. In other religions, it is the teaching that matters and the founder is important, but not essential. Someone else could have done the same thing and provided the same teachings equally as well. But that is not the case with Christianity. Christianity is Christ. It is not that He is just central to the Christian faith, but rather that without Him there is no Christianity. He is simply a great and glorious Savior.

Then thirdly, Hebrews 1 teaches that **Christ is much, much greater than the angels.** There are approximately 108 direct references to angels in the Old Testament and 165 in the New Testament. The primary purpose of their existence was to render special worship and service to God. They are spirit beings and do not have flesh and blood as we do, even though they are capable of appearing in human form. They are highly intelligent and very powerful. They do not marry and they do not die. They are extremely organized in various ranks, and they live in all three of the heavens. They can move and act with incredible speed and strength, and they minister to God and carry out his commands.

The question always arises as to why there are so many verses in Hebrews 1 relative to angels, and really the answer is quite obvious when the context and setting of the book are understood. Unfortunately, many of these Hebrews had begun to embellish the Old Testament teaching regarding angels. They had started to give the angels a very exalted status and importance, so much so that some actually worshipped various angels. And in the process, for instance, the false doctrine of Gnosticism that many had embraced actually reduced Jesus Christ to an angel. The Colossians had been flirting with all of this and Paul basically reproved them in [Colossians 2:18-19](#).

¹⁸Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

And so the author provides this very powerful argument in [Hebrews 1](#) where he quotes from the Old Testament on seven (7) different occasions. He does so to prove that Christ is better than angels. In reality, there is no comparison. Jesus is the Creator and the angels are the created. In v6, the Old Testament affirms that the angels are to worship Christ. In v7 the angels are ministers, but in v8 Christ is God – “**Your throne, O God, is forever and ever**”. In v10, Christ is the Creator of the present creation, and in v11 He will be the Creator of the new heavens and the new earth to come. In v13, He sits at the right hand of God. And in v14, the angels are simply “**ministering spirits**”. There is no comparison, and these Hebrew Christians needed to clearly know and understand that reality.

The problem with God speaking that Christ is a great Savior is that most people simply are not listening, and the results become both tragic and eternal. It is the very power of the Word and specifically of the gospel that saves. And so, to ignore that is the gravest of all negligence’s. In light of this, the believer’s personal responsibilities are enormous. It is crucial to understand what it means to articulate the gospel. The

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gospel is something that requires spoken words, a verbal presentation. The gospel cannot be brought into people's lives by just being there, or by just being loving and kind – which are all great things. The preaching of the Word is essential, irreducible, and non-negotiable to the power of God being released in people's lives. When the pulpit ministry lacks substance and clear articulation of the truth of God, the church is literally severed from the Word of God and its overall health and ultimate effectiveness are quickly diminished. The gospel requires spoken words, spoken biblical words. No one can clearly articulate the gospel without words. God is a speaking God and mere suggestions and gestures are insufficient. The gospel is not a suggestion, not a simple gesture from God. It is His message and it must be taken seriously, and it must be spoken seriously. Salvation will not come until the gospel is clearly and passionately communicated to the lost – and that is what God requires of each of us who are the containers of this life transforming message.

God is a speaking God, Christ is a great and glorious Savior, and He is superior to anything and everything and deserves every believer's genuine worship. The greatest news in the entire world is that the slaughtered Christ is the sovereign Lord over all things.

ENDNOTES

¹ MacArthur, 22-24.

² MacArthur, 24-25

³ Mohler, 49

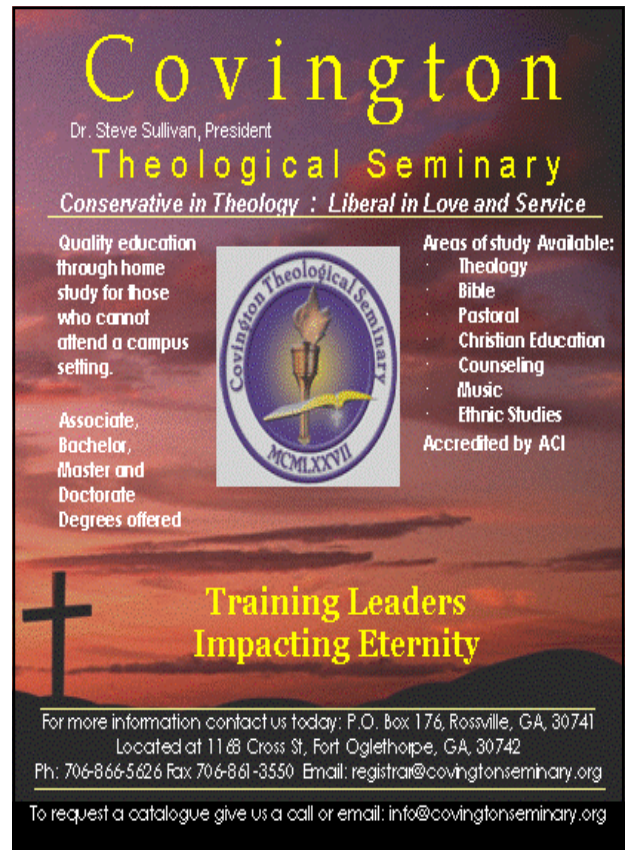
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