

According to the Foreknowledge of God

If I were to ask you this morning to identify what you believe to be several of the most theologically important passages in the entirety of the Bible, how might you answer? We all have favorite passages that we turn to. I’m fully aware of that. But I’m not referring to passages that primarily speak to the heart in a devotional or more emotional manner. No doubt there’s abundant benefit from searching the scriptures for such passages. God has been exceedingly good in giving us passages that speak to the depth of our hearts during strategic times in our lives. We’ve all been blessed in that way.

But that’s not what I have in mind. Rather, I’m referring to scriptures that contain significant, substantial and considerable theological content while at the same time providing a glimpse into the mind, purposes and providence of God. I’ve spent a good deal of time considering that question this past week. As a result, several passages came to mind for me, passages such as:

Isaiah 66:18: “The time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations. All flesh shall come to worship before me,” declares the Lord.”

John 1:12: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

John 6:62, 65: “It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is of no avail. This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

Acts 2:23: “This Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.”

Galatians 4:4: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.”

Ephesians 1: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who had blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

Would you agree that these are not primarily heart passages, but rather passages that give us a glimpse into the mind, working and purposes of God? Well, to the list of passages I’ve

just read, I'd like to add another, and it's contained in the first chapter of I Peter. We'll examine it in detail in a moment.

As you know, last Sunday we began what will be a lengthy series of messages from Peter's first letter. In our introductory message, we noted various things about Peter, including who he wrote to, as well as his overall purpose in writing. This is the Peter we know from the gospels and the first fifteen chapters of the book of Acts. Some of Jesus' most important teaching was directed specifically to Peter.

Peter wrote to a group of believers scattered throughout present day Turkey. His purpose in writing was to provide them with a measure of comfort and encouragement due to the suffering they were experiencing as Christians. Hence the title of this series of messages: Comforting Words for Suffering Christians.

We focused last week on the unique manner in which Peter identified them. He called them "elect exiles." As you know, that's the only instance in all of scripture where we see that phrase used. As such, he wanted them to know that their salvation, as well as their current situation, was due to God's providential choice, his election of them. In other words, they were specifically chosen by God, foreknown by him unto salvation, as well as to their current circumstances.

It's important that we understand and embrace that; for if we don't, we will never grasp or fully benefit from what's to follow. For a more complete introduction to first Peter, I suggest you get a CD or transcript of last week's message.

Now this morning as we continue our study, we come to a verse of scripture that I would readily include in the list of passages I read previously. In other words, following Peter's reference to his readers as elect exiles and everything that phrase involves, I Peter 1:2 ranks right up there as a passage that contains an enormous amount of foundational theology. It may not be the first passage you'd turn to as a means soothing a troubled heart; but nonetheless, in the space of a single verse, Peter made reference to God's foreknowledge, as well as the sovereign and unique role each member of the trinity plays in bringing God's plan of salvation to sinful men.

Let's look again at the first two verses of I Peter. We're going to focus then on verse two. Peter wrote, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood. May grace and peace be multiplied to you."

Now before we move ahead, I want us to have a clear understanding of what Peter meant when he used the phrase "the foreknowledge of God." It's clearly the key phrase of the

verse and perhaps of the entire book. I want us to see that there are important theological implications inherent in his use of the word “foreknowledge.”

And let me tell you, this discussion is particularly important today. There is a current and vigorous theological war going on regarding this very concept. The debate focuses on what God knows, when he knows it, and the degree to which he orchestrates and oversees that which he foreknows. This is a huge deal. You see, if we don't get this right, we will inevitably come to a place where the God of the Bible is no longer the God of the Bible. I want you to track carefully with me on this.

The place for us to begin is to look at the exact meaning of the word “foreknowledge” as Peter used it. In the original language the word foreknowledge means: “To have knowledge beforehand; to know ahead of time.” We get our English word “prognosis” from the Greek work translated as foreknowledge.

We all understand the word “prognosis.” It's used a lot in the medical field. You go to your doctor. He or she examines you and arrives at a diagnosis of your condition. Based on the diagnosis, a course of treatment is prescribed. Predicated on the doctor's experience, what's known about your condition as well as the treatment, the physician is able to make a prediction, a prognostic statement of one sort or another.

Perhaps you learn that the medication prescribed will eliminate your condition in two weeks. Or that the surgery that's recommended will cure the pain you are experiencing in your knee or hip. The list of prognostic outcomes is endless. The doctor has a general idea of what the outcome will be, but -- and this is crucially important to understand -- he or she does *not* have control over the outcome, nor can he prognosticate with perfect foreknowledge.

Now as it relates to divine foreknowledge, which is what Peter alluded to in verse two, look at the text: “...according to the foreknowledge of God.” We can't attribute divine foreknowledge to God unless we agree that his knowing something beforehand also involves his sovereign ability to prearrange and predetermine that which he foreknows will indeed to come to pass.

That's a mouthful. Let me say that again. God's foreknowledge, which is divine and faultless, must of necessity engage his sovereign ability to orchestrate that which he foreknows. We can't separate God's foreknowledge from his predetermined and sovereign actions in accomplishing everything that he's purposed from eternity past.

I trust you get a sense of how important it is to defend the theology behind God's foreknowledge. If we compromise on this, we call into question God's ability, not only to plan, but to bring his plans to completion as he sees fit. This is one of those theological principles that's worth going to war over.

There are some prominent voices who suggest that God’s foreknowledge is limited. They question how God can know something ahead of time if indeed what he might know is dependent upon human choices, dependent on the exercise of man’s free will. After all, they believe, God can’t know the unknowable because man’s choices determine what will take place. In other words, how can God know something ahead of time if what he might know is contingent on the free choices of men? That’s the core of the issue. Is God’s foreknowledge dependent on the choices of men, contingent upon men?

Think with me now. If that’s the case, then his sovereignty is also limited by man’s free will. No one put this question to rest better than Martin Luther. He wrote, “It is then fundamentally necessary and wholesome for Christians to know that God knows nothing contingently, but that he foresees, purposes and does all things according to his immutable, eternal and infallible will. Thus God’s foreknowledge is in no way dependent on men’s choices, not to any degree whatsoever.” That assertion by Luther rocked the Roman Catholic Church of his day and is as theologically powerful today as it was then.

Make no mistake. The Bible teaches clearly and forcefully that God’s foreknowledge is not to any degree whatsoever dependent upon the choices of men. And further, God’s foreknowledge includes his sovereign rule over the choices of men. That has enormous implications for how we view our relationship with God.

The issue of God’s foreknowledge is something Peter mentioned repeatedly in his preaching and writing. Let me show you what I mean. One of the most powerful sermons recorded in the entirety of scripture was delivered by Peter. We read of it in Acts 2. At a very strategic point in his message Peter said, “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know -- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”

Do you hear it? Peter alluded to God’s definite plan and foreknowledge. That speaks of God’s foreknowing, his deliberate forethought and prearranging of what would transpire, his orchestration of the events that he foreknew. There is truly no other interpretation of that passage available to us.

In Acts 3:18, we see another example of Peter applying the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. In the context of another sermon Peter said, “But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled.” Again, do you hear the linkage between God’s foreknowledge and his bringing to pass that which he foreknew?

Later in Acts 4, after Peter and John had been arrested and released, they returned to the disciples. In describing the events of Jesus’ last days in the context of prayer, they made reference to God doing whatever his hand and his plan had predestined to take place. The word

“predestined” means to pre-arrange. Once again Peter referenced God’s plan, which of course involves his foreknowledge. But note the clear association between what God planned and the fact that he brought his plan to completion.

In Peter’s writings, we see him reference God’s foreknowledge as well. In I Peter, Peter wrote to those whom he called elect exiles. But note the mechanism whereby they became elect exiles according to the foreknowledge of God. Both their salvation and their present circumstances were brought about in the foreknowledge and sovereignty of God.

Finally, take a look at I Peter 1:20. Peter wrote, “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest in the last times for your sake...” Here again we see Peter referencing God’s eternal foreknowledge and the fulfillment of God’s plan, whereby Christ was made manifest to the world.

I don’t have time to cite the numerous references, both direct and indirect, that the Apostle Paul made to the foreknowledge of God. Suffice it to say that the issue of God’s foreknowledge is paramount to understanding his character, purposes, plans, sovereignty and more. Take away God’s foreknowledge and he’s no longer God. His knowledge and power become restricted and lessened. To diminish his foreknowledge leaves us with something less than the sovereign God we know and worship.

And just in case you can’t discern my position on this, I come down squarely on the complete and overwhelming foreknowledge of God and everything it implies, particularly his sovereignty in bringing to pass that which he foreknows. I trust you see that as well. It’s the only view that ascribes all the glory throughout the course of human history to God; and further, it places the free will of men in its proper place, subservient to the sovereignty of God.

Now as we continue in the passage, I want us to see how Peter linked God’s foreknowledge to the process whereby the elect exiles he wrote to came to be elect. And by elect I mean that Peter attributed their salvation to the foreknowledge and sovereign choice of them by God unto salvation. In that light, let me point out that the issue of God’s election and call is present throughout the book of I Peter. Listen to what he said in this regard. In verse 15 Peter wrote, “As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.”

In chapter two Peter referred to the recipients of his letter as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood... a people for God’s own possession, so that [they] might proclaim the excellencies of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Later in chapter two, in speaking of their present suffering, he said, “For to this you have been called.” In chapter five he wrote, “The God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.”

In II Peter 1:3 we read, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.”

In verse ten he went on to say, “Therefore brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure.” It’s impossible to listen to his preaching in the book of Acts or read Peter’s letters apart from seeing repeated references to God’s divine foreknowledge, election and call of his saints.

But, and here’s where the second part of verse two becomes very instructive for us, what is the mechanism whereby God’s call becomes effective in the life of believers? Take a look at the text. Peter spoke of the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood. Here, friends we see the mind of God displayed in the plan of salvation manifested in the unique role each member of the Trinity plays in the redemption of sinful men. I want to spend the rest of our time examining this, for to understand it is to relish the lavish plan of God manifested in the salvation of sinful men.

Now although the recipients of his letter may have been foreigners with respect to the society they lived in, there were not foreigners to God. Peter says they were chosen. So our question becomes, what’s the process, the mechanism whereby they were chosen? The answer is clear from the text. Peter used three phrases that answer this question. He describes the relationship of Christians to each member of the Trinity, and here’s the way it works.

The order is Father, Spirit, Christ. This reflects the order of salvation as presented throughout the gospels and the epistles. Let me say that in a different way. The order of salvation -- of conversion if you prefer -- is the following. Salvation finds its ultimate origin in the mind, foreknowledge and purposes of God the Father. Salvation is made operative in the hearts of men by the Holy Spirit, and is evidenced through personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. Said differently, salvation is purposed and foreknown by God the Father, revealed to sinful men by the Holy Spirit, and made possible by the obedience of Christ the Son. We can’t eliminate or minimize any part of that process. To do so erases the fullness of God’s activity as revealed in the Trinity.

Can you see now why the issue of God’s foreknowledge is so crucial? Eliminate it and the process whereby men come to faith in Christ is altered. It becomes something other than God’s free gift. It becomes something men can find and choose on their own. You see, the New Testament understanding of God’s foreknowledge of his people indicates that God did not simply observe them or have information about them in the past. Instead, God chose them according to, and consistent with, his plan and purposes. Thus, Christians come to be redeemed by the initiative of God who called them.

But it doesn’t end there. God’s foreknowledge becomes effectual through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, in our own understanding or effort, men will never

believe in Christ or come to him in faith. The faith that results in one's salvation comes as a sovereign and gracious act, a gift of the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who first stirs in the heart of the sinner. He quickens one's understanding of the gospel, convicts of sin and points men to Christ as the savior. No one comes to saving faith in Christ apart from the work of the Holy Spirit as I've described it.

Finally, the work of the Holy Spirit has a specific goal in the life of the sinner -- that being the full understanding of their sin and the forgiveness that's available to them through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit reveals Christ to the heart of those who can never know him on their own.

Can you see it all now? The Father foreknew and orchestrated it. The Spirit reveals it. The Son makes it possible through his life, death and resurrection. That's the process whereby they became elect exiles; and the exact same process is how God works in our day as well. He hasn't changed in this regard.

Now put all of that theology into the context of whom Peter was writing to, namely suffering Christians. The encouragement Peter offered them throughout his letter is a direct consequence of their being chosen, first as elect unto salvation, and second, as elect in their exile. In that light, can you see how meaningful the last phrase of verse two would be for them? "May grace and peace be multiplied to you." He's not telling them something like, "Well, I hope things turn out okay for you." No. He's just unveiled to them the depth of God's heart and love for them. They are special to God; elect exiles.

God the Father purposed this for them. The Holy Spirit revealed the beauty and power of the cross to them. The Son purchased salvation for them. That's the basis for their hope and, might I say, ours as well? This is what we'll see repeatedly as we work our way through the book in the months ahead.

I want to close this morning with a simple yet direct question. Friend, do you know Jesus Christ as these elect exiles did? Have you come to the place of understanding yourself as a sinner in desperate need of a savior? If so, that's firm and convincing evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in your life. You didn't realize that on your own. But even more importantly, is your heart speaking to you in that manner right now? I plead with you, at this very moment; don't resist what the Holy Spirit is telling you. Tell God that you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior, that you believe Christ died in your place. That's your part. God promises to do the rest.

"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles in [Wausau, Schofield, Weston, Rothschild, Antigo, Athens, Hatley, Mosinee, Ringle, Birnamwood, Merrill, Marathon, Aniwa, and Brokaw], according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you."