

## **“Chosen and Destined”**

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*<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup>He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup>that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup>he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>11</sup>In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <sup>12</sup>so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup>In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; <sup>14</sup>this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:3-14)*

If I wanted to preach a sermon on the doctrine of predestination, this would be the perfect opportunity. The cue is right there in the opening line of this morning’s scripture: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who ... chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world...” That, right there, is the essence of “pre-destination” – that before the world began, God knew who would be righteous and who would be, well, not so righteous. Accordingly, before God uttered the first creative words, “Let there be light,” God had already chosen those who would make it to heaven as well as those who would not.

While I agree that this sounds harsh, great thinkers across the centuries have argued that such a conclusion is, from a logical standpoint, unavoidable. The doctrine of predestination naturally forms along the fault line of two massive tectonic plates of faith, two very basic ideas that we, in faith, profess to be true:

- first, that the all-knowing, all-powerful sovereign God who created the world also holds the ultimate destiny of the world in their divine hands; and
- secondly, that we as human beings have brains, and will, and some degree of free agency to make our own decisions, chart our own paths, and determine our own destiny.

It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to reconcile these two basic truths.

We could talk much more about all of this, if I wanted to preach a sermon on predestination. But I do not want to do that. I actually agree with John Wesley, who felt that talking about life, faith, and our salvation as if it were a chess match that God has rigged in advance, so that the outcome of the game has already been determined before we make a move, is inconsistent with what we know of God’s love, God’s justice, and God’s mercy. If a game is predestined, where is the life, where is the joy, what is the point of such a game?

Fortunately for all of us, there is another way to approach this scriptural passage, one that I believe is much more conducive to building faith and strengthening our trust in God.



It begins with the understanding that the book of Ephesians is a letter written in the midst of a fight. The original composer of the letter is writing from the perspective of a faithful, practicing Judaism, but they are writing to an audience primarily composed of Gentiles. Both sides are Christian, but they have been disagreeing radically about what they believe about Christ as well as how one should right practice the Christian faith. The dispute has gotten so bad that the letter uses terms like “enmity” and “hostility” – not just an everyday disagreement, but the kind of deep-rooted, irreconcilable animosity you would hold against a mortal enemy, someone committed to inflicting harm upon you.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, the writer of this letter has good news for both sides. A mighty wall may exist between two groups, but the love, grace, and sacrifice of Jesus Christ is already at work breaking down that barrier. “For he is our peace,” the letter reads. “In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... he [is creating] in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, [reconciling] both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.”<sup>2</sup>

Instead of talking about the enmity and hostility... this side versus that side... who is winning and who is losing... or who is in and who is out... this letter shifts the conversation from what divides us, focusing instead on what binds us together, what we have in common. And what we have in common are the gifts that we all receive from God through Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. They roll down upon us like waters, coming like an ever-flowing stream in one long sentence, as if to accentuate the never-ending way that the Triune God, in love and mercy, gives the world to us. All we have to do is follow the verbs:

- **God has blessed us.** In Christ, God has drawn near to us so that God’s presence could be fully with us. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, so that we might be fully and completely imbued with the spiritual blessings of heaven.
- **God chose us.** Even before the foundations of the world were laid, God knew us completely. Every hair on our head was numbered, every aspect of our life was deemed precious. And even though God knows every misstep, every mistake, every blemish on our spirits, God still seeks us, loves us, and chooses us.
- **God has destined us for adoption.** In this we see the full extent of God’s choice. Not only has Christ made us fully and completely known, but in Christ we are welcomed fully and completely into God’s family. In a binding and irrevocable way, we are given a share of Christ’s glorious inheritance.
- **God has lavished grace upon us.** In Christ, we see the extent of God’s grace and mercy – the lengths to which God will go to seek the prodigal out and bring us home. In Christ, our sins are not only forgiven, they are forgotten – buried in the deepest sea, and remembered no more.
- **God makes mysteries known to us.** In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God reveals God’s own self to us. With wisdom and insight, Christ brings the Word of God alive for us, answering the biggest existential questions are answered

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Hylen, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-christmas-2/commentary-on-ephesians-13-14-12>, accessed on July 12, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 2:14- 16.

(or at least some of them). In Christ, we begin to see the cosmic plan that God has for us – plans for our welfare, and not for harm.<sup>3</sup>

- ***God has gathered up all things for us.*** Part of that grand existential plan that God has for us is that it will be Christ who brings all the scattered aspects of human existence back together. Like a parachuter who hits the ground in the midst of swirling and violent winds, yet still finds a way to gather up his huge, billowing canopy and secure it safely away, Christ hauls in all of the loose ends of our loose, windblown lives back together, and holds them fast in the sheltering embrace of God’s everlasting arms.
- Last but certainly not least, ***God has marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit.*** Like a bow on this amazing gift-wrapped package of blessings, God’s finishing touch is a royal seal, a public and binding proclamation that we are precious cargo, that we are now, and always will be, God’s own people.

This is, I hope you see, a radically different way of interpreting this passage. Instead of dividing us into hostile camps, this opulent description of God’s many gifts in Christ seeks to unite us as children of God and followers of Christ. I hope we will be able to hold fast to this teaching in the days and weeks ahead, because we are about to be inundated with messages that see the world in terms of “us versus them” ... messages that will claim that one side is right, and the other side is wrong... messages that make assumptions about those who are chosen and those who should be rejected. These cultural winds will blow relentlessly, beating steadily and urgently upon our spirits.

I wrote those words yesterday morning, well before the attempt on former President Trump’s life. If anything that shocking event makes our hope even more urgent – the hope that -- as people of faith and people of God – we remember what it really means to be chosen and destined by God. I don’t think anyone can describe what that means better than Shirley Guthrie, a longstanding professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. When asked what he thought it means to be “the chosen people of God,” Guthrie said it is not about us being better than anybody else... it is not about winning the pearly gates lottery or being “predestined” to go to heaven... nor is it about people with whom we differ finally getting the punishment they deserve. No, this is what Guthrie said:

“We ... are chosen [by God] not *instead of* but *for the sake of* the world’s outsiders. We are chosen not to *escape from* a godless and godforsaken world with all its sinfulness and suffering, but to be *sent into it* and *live for it*. We are chosen not so that we can congratulate ourselves because we live in the light while everyone else gropes in the darkness, but to be a light that shines in their darkness. We are chosen so that those who are excluded from the benefits of God’s loving justice and just love may be included. For we too are chosen not to be served but to serve, to take up *our* crosses as we follow the Chosen One of God who was crucified because he cared for all the wrong people.”<sup>4</sup>

One that that can be said about the doctrine of predestination is that, across the centuries, it has probably fortified more walls than it has dismantled – walls that separate us from God, walls that separate us from one another. The love of God does not seek to elevate one person over another, one group over another, one country over another. The

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 29:11.

<sup>4</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) p. 140.

mission of the love of God in Jesus Christ is to break down the walls that separate us, and to tell every person, the tall and the small, “You are blessed... chosen... destined... lavished... illuminated... gathered in... and forever sealed in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God. ***Amen.***