



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

February 9, 2014

Chosen
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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, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us (Ephesians 1:3-8).

Occasionally a certain kind of Christian will ask, “When did you get saved?” They expect you to be able to say something like “It was on a Wednesday night in 2003, when I gave my life to Christ.” If you can’t do that, they may tell you that you’re not really saved at all.

Some people just find that kind of question annoying and wish the people who ask it would go away, but others are troubled by it. They think, “I should have a good answer when somebody asks me that.” And some even wonder, “Am I really saved if I can’t point to a time when it happened? How can I know, if I can’t say when it was?”

Well here’s an answer that comes right out of the Bible, and it’s a central claim of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition. The answer is, you were saved before the foundation of the world. You were chosen in Christ before you were born, even before the world was made.

Now that requires a bit of explanation.

First, how can God have chosen me when I didn’t even exist? Actually, that’s not as hard to imagine as it might sound. Most parents know that they thought about having children long before they ever did. Even little children who play with baby dolls pretend to be parents in some way. Then in our youth many of us wondered what it would be like to have a child of our own one day,

and when we got to be young adults, we looked for someone to love and took all sorts of steps towards eventually having a family. And people who adopt children choose them quite literally – by deciding to adopt in the first place, and then by following all the requirements that lead to welcoming a particular child into their home.

If we human beings routinely choose to have children before they exist, or to adopt a child before we know who that child is, then it's not so hard to imagine God's doing something like that, is it? God, whose creative power is infinitely greater than our own, can surely decide to have children too, and when God wants children the first thing he has to do is create a universe. So God set in motion all kinds of processes – billions of years' worth of processes – until at long last God's own children came into being. And God chose them, and chose to love them, before the foundation of the world.

Now in the case of God, having children also means knowing all the trouble they'll get into. God knew that we'd do things we shouldn't do, and fail to do the things we should, and that most of us would drift away, and some of us would even run away, from our heavenly Father. Knowing full well the sorts of troubles we'd all get into, God had a plan to save us from the very beginning.

God would build into us a conscience as a kind of moral compass. And God would raise up lawgivers to tell us how to live, and saints and heroes to show us how to live, and prophets to call us back when we go astray. And then, in the fullness of time, God himself would come to walk among us. He would become like us in Jesus Christ, so that we could become more like him, through the power of his Holy Spirit. That was God's plan from the beginning of time, and so you were chosen in Christ – and you were saved – before the foundation of the world.

But now you may ask, why me? If you're the least bit humble and self-aware, you might say, "Why would God choose

me? I'm nobody special. I know my faults all too well. Why would the Lord of heaven and earth pick me?" That's a good question, but the very fact that you ask it is a sign of being chosen by God. If you thought, "Of course God chose me, I'm a superior human being," then you'd have another kind of problem.

One implication of being chosen by God from before the foundation of the world is that your being saved is not the least bit dependent on how good you are, or how likeable, or how many things you've accomplished. Your being saved is about *God's* goodness, not yours. It's all about grace – the unmerited favor, the utterly undeserved mercy of your Maker.

Your parents had you before they knew how you'd turn out. In that sense, your existence had nothing to do with any of your good qualities, though no doubt your parents hoped you would have some. Mark Twain said of his mother – who was Presbyterian, by the way – that she found something to love in almost everyone, even if she had to put it there herself. God is something like that too. God knew that he would have to build into us the potential to turn out well, and then work long and hard, with a great deal of patience, to help us grow into the kind of sons and daughters God wants.

Gwenn and I have friends who recently adopted a little boy. They already have two other sons. The older one is very bright and excels in all sorts of things, and the younger one is quite lovable but has some limitations as a result of Down's Syndrome. Our friends decided some time ago that they had room in their home and in their hearts for another child. But not just any child. They figured they know how to raise a child with special needs, so they decided they could take a child that others might be less willing to adopt. And not only that, they knew there were such children in Eastern Europe, where their prospects for adoption were not very good. So last fall they flew to Bulgaria, after going through the long process of preparing for adoption, and brought home a six-year-old boy with Down's Syndrome who spoke not a word of English. We just got a picture of their family a

week or so ago, all five of them smiling brightly in spite of what we know are some real challenges.

When I think of Jeff and Tracy, I'm filled with admiration for their generosity, and I'm humbled because I don't know that I'd be willing to reach out as they did in a way that changes a person's life forever. And then I think that, like every other act of kindness and courage and compassion, our friends' graciousness points beyond itself, all the way to God, who is the source of all goodness and grace. I think of how this little boy had no idea that, thousands of miles away, a man and a woman worked for many months to get ready to welcome him into their home, for no other reason than that they had love to spare, and he would be chosen to be on the receiving end of all that love. And suddenly that passage in Ephesians about how God chose us before the foundation of the world, and destined us for adoption as his children out of the grace he freely bestowed on us, takes on a whole new meaning.

Being chosen by God is not in the least an occasion for boasting or pride. It has nothing to do with superiority or deserving. On the contrary, anyone who has the slightest idea what it means knows that it's an utterly humbling realization, an occasion for deep joy and gratitude, because we know that there's nothing we could do to deserve such love from the Lord of heaven and earth.

Now some people might imagine that being chosen by God could make you lazy and self-indulgent – as if it were a sort of “Get out of jail free” card that entitled people to live anyway they want because they know they'll be saved in the end. But anyone who thinks that way misses the point. Paul says that we're saved by grace through faith, and not by works, lest anyone should boast, but “we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” If we really do belong to God, our lives will reflect the Spirit of God moving in us, gradually transforming us into the kind of people God wants us to be.

People who really are adopted into God's family want to please God – not out of fear of punishment, or in order to get some reward, but because love begets love, and the more clearly they see God's love for them, the more they want to love God in return. They know God will forgive them when they let God down, but they'd rather not need the forgiveness. They'd rather please God in the first place, because when we love someone we want to make that person happy.

Another thing about those who are chosen by God is that they gradually grow out of any sort of jealousy or envy. That's because they're also getting over their pride – that egocentric preoccupation with the self that leads to all our other vices.

The last volume of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is *Paradiso*, his vision of souls in heaven. Dante is guided through heaven by Beatrice, a young woman he barely knew in real life, but who became a focus of his imagination. Dante discovers that there are different levels in heaven. Everyone there is saved, but the higher you go in paradise, the brighter and more magnificent the souls become. On one of the lower levels Dante meets a nun named Piccarda, and after some conversation, he asks,

But tell me, do you, who are here content,
desire to achieve a higher place, where you
might see still more and make yourselves more dear?

The nun just smiles and answers,

Brother, the power of love subdues our will
so that we long for only what we have
and thirst for nothing else ...

No, it is the very essence of this blessed state
that we remain within the will of God
so that our wills combine in unity ...

And in His will is our peace.¹

In Dante's vision, the souls in heaven are blessed and grateful to be there at all. If God wills that some should be more exalted than others, those higher up are no more proud than the ones below. And those lower down do not envy the souls that shine more brightly; they just admire and enjoy them, like beautiful works of art. All the souls in heaven are happy to will whatever God has willed for them.

To be chosen by God is to be blessed beyond all deserving. It's to be in a state of grace. You can't earn it, so you don't have to be anxious about trying to measure up, trying to be good enough so that God will love you. God already loves you. You don't have to earn it, and you can't ever lose it. All you have to do is let God's love work in and through you, and God will be pleased. "We love," John says, "because he first loved us."

Our friends' adopted son has no idea how much love went into choosing him, and how much will go into raising him, and helping him to become all that he can be in this life. And something like that, I take it, is the way God works in each of us. If we are chosen by God, it's only because of God's goodness and grace, so there's never any reason to be proud or vain about that. On the contrary, the more we grow into God's love, the humbler we become, and the more filled with joy, because we're free at last from the tyranny of the self, and free to glory in the grace of God, who chooses us to be his own.

¹ Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Robert & Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor, 2007), III.64-85.



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