

Loved Before the World Was Made

Ephesians 1:3-6

**First Presbyterian Church
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Last summer, the organization called *Desiring God* invited me to a writers' conference in beautiful Stillwater, MN. I got to interact with John Piper and some other great authors about this calling we all feel to write beautiful things about our savior. So I flew into Minneapolis and Ubered the 30 minutes to Stillwater. My driver was named Mohammed, and on a lovely summer night, he wanted to talk. He was excited to learn that I'm a pastor, and we had a very friendly conversation about what our faiths mean to us. We agreed that our relationship with God brings us peace. I wanted to know more, so I asked him, "So how would you say your faith actually helps you find peace?" He liked the question, thought for a minute and replied, "Islam brings me peace because I know that everything that happens is the will of Allah. I find peace when I submit to that will. So if the traffic up ahead stops, and we have to wait, and I am late, I could get anxious. But when I submit to the will of Allah, trusting that he is in control, I find peace. Everything is OK."

I thought a lot about that reply. My driver said, "Everything that happens is the will of God. So if I submit to that will, I will find peace in all circumstances." There's some truth in there. Paul tells us later in Ephesians that God works all things after the counsel of his will (1:11). And he tells us in Thessalonians to "give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God concerning you" (5:18). Paul tells the Philippians, "I have learned in whatever situation I am in to be content" (4:11). So are Christianity and Islam the same? For that matter, do we both find peace in the same way of an Eastern spirituality where the practice of non-attachment frees us from worry? Just let it go and trust that it is what it is?

All this particularly comes up when we have a passage before us this morning that uses the dreaded "P" word. That's right. Predestination. The bogey man of Presbyterians. We hear it all the time. "You think everything's already decided, right? It doesn't matter what we do, it was all laid out ahead of time. God decreed everything." Darin mentioned how his tour of Israel included a lot of Baptists and only a few Presbyterians. The more comfortable they got with each other, the more the Baptists would say things like, "Our bus just took a wrong turn. But Darin already knew that would happen!"

Now that was all in good fun. But it also reveals the classic mistake about what the Bible means by predestination. My Uber driver and I had a sweet conversation. But we don't mean the same thing about God's will and sovereignty, and our role in it. Christian predestination is not fatalism. We don't mean a kind of rigid determinism whereby the human will counts for nothing. We don't mean being resigned to the way things are since God already planned and decreed every event. Predestination is *not* fatalism.

And, predestination is not *fatal* to the human will. Actually, the opposite is the case. Biblical predestination means that God acts first to restore my capacity to choose to love him and serve him. The Spirit does for me what I cannot do for myself, but yet must do to have life, forgiveness and hope. The Spirit enables me to surrender my life to Jesus. He brings me back to life so I can become truly human once more. God initiates in such a way that he creates the capacity in me to participate in his love and mercy. For God does not want slaves, but children. He does not want machines but a household of brothers and sisters.

Biblical predestination is a way of saying that the triune God gets all the credit for our salvation. It's best understood as a *reflection*. Let me unpack that. Predestination, God's electing, selecting, life-giving work, is a key way of understanding what happened in me when I came to Christ. I reflect, "How did a self-centered, egotistical, pleasure-seeking hedonist like me ever come to be a disciple of Jesus? Was it because I'm so good? Was it because I'm so smart? Was it because I weighed all the options and made a reasoned choice to choose Jesus over myself? No. A thousand times No! I believe in Jesus because Jesus called me to himself. He gave me faith. He gave me capacity to surrender my life to him. All the credit goes to Christ."

While we contemplate this, let's look briefly at three more key ideas from our passage.

1) **Loved Before the World Was Made.**

God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing . . .

How has he blessed us?

He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world,

To what end?

that we should be holy and blameless before him.

Before the world was made, the Triune God thought of you. He loved you before he made you. He knew you would participate in humanity's fall. He planned for your redemption from sin before you existed, before you could even make a sinful choice. I love the opening of the book of Jeremiah. The LORD tells the prophet, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (1:5). We exist because God thought of us. He intended us and brought us into being. We reach towards him now because he determined the path of our salvation before we even needed it.

I've come to treasure this old prayer for infant baptism:

For you, little child, Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered.
For you he entered the shadow of Gethsemane and the horror of Calvary.
For you he uttered the cry, "It is finished!"
For you he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and there he
intercedes —
For you, little child, even though you do not know it.
But in this way the word of the Gospel becomes true.
"We love him, because he first loved us."

(cited in James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*)

Somehow we can feel the truth of God's eternal love for us just a bit more at the baptism of a tiny child. Long before you were made, little one, God loved you as his own. You don't know it, but he already died and rose for you. He already made peace for you with the Father. That's still true! We barely know any of this even now. Yet it's the truest part of us. Ephesians urges us to claim that beautiful truth for ourselves even now. We were loved before we were made.

2) Adoption through Jesus. Let's read a little further,

In love [God] predestined us
For adoption as sons into himself
Through Jesus Christ . . .

In his letters, Paul finds a beautiful parallel between the Roman practice of adoption and our being taken up by Christ into the Father. In that culture, an older man might determine to adopt a young man he had mentored or befriended. He could legally adopt this son and make him a true heir of his estate. Paul writes here with a single word that means the "adoption as sons." In the Roman culture, only sons could inherit from the father. Only sons had the full rights of adoption. Does Paul mean to exclude females from such adoption into the family of God? Not at all! In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes a revolutionary word, "For you are all

sons of God through faith . . . there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:26,28). Men, women, boys, girls, can all receive the full rights and privileges of the adoption of sons.

Adoption, then, is a legal act. Persons become legally part of a family. They receive all the rights and duties and privileges of that household. That’s wonderful, to be taken in and given such status and provision. But in itself, legal adoption is not enough. The human heart longs for more. We want to be truly part of a family, enveloped in the love as well as the legality. Paul knows that. Elsewhere he explains that God not only legally adopted us, accepting us on paper. He also poured the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba, Father!” (Gal. 4:9). He gave us not just the formal status of adoption, but the warm spirit of adoption. He shares his Spirit with us, so that our hearts cry like a child “Abba! My Father!” (Rom. 8:15).

How does this happen? Those who have adopted children know well the change that occurs. This child is legally mine from the moment the papers are signed. But there will come a time when this child is emotionally, spiritually, viscerally my son or my daughter. A bond develops that runs so much deeper than the law. How? Well, usually through the mystery of bodily fluids! It’s a weird thing. You wipe off a lot of drool. You change a bunch of overflowing diapers. You get thrown up on a few dozen times. And one day, it’s not off putting. It’s your own flesh and blood. Cough on me! Bring it on. I’m yours and you’re mine. When the Father wanted to adopt us, God who is Spirit took up our flesh and blood. He shared fluids with us. He came to nurse, spit up, sweat and cough so we would know God is really with us. And we can get truly adopted by him, with his own Spirit flowing within us.

3) Accepted in the Beloved. All this happened, we read,

according to the purpose of his will,
to the praise of his glorious grace,
with which he has [graced] us in the Beloved.

God purposed to adopt us because he is full of grace and mercy. This last line is crucial. The grace with which he has *graced us* in the Beloved. Our ESV Bibles say that God has “blessed us in the Beloved.” But Paul doesn’t actually use the word for blessing. He uses a word here that means to show great favor, to grace someone with acceptance, to extend full welcome. I love the way the King James translates it: accepted in the Beloved.

This is so important. We get extended the favor of God because of Jesus the Beloved. My acceptance is because Jesus is acceptable. When Jesus was baptized, the Father spoke, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3: 22). And on the mountain of transfiguration, the Father spoke again, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35). This whole discussion of predestination, adoption, and choosing has to be understood in terms of Jesus. We don’t get chosen in and of ourselves. We get chosen in Christ the Chosen One. We don’t get adopted on our own. We get joined to Jesus the true, natural Son of God. He became Son of Man so there would be a bridge between God and humanity. Jesus made it possible for us to get taken into the Father’s family. It’s never just me and God. It’s always me taken into Jesus who takes me to the Father.

Some years ago, I led a Bible study group for men who were struggling with unwanted same sex attraction. I loved those brave, funny, faithful, sometimes knuckle-headed guys. We named our group from this passage. Accepted in the Beloved. I am in Christ. That’s how I know I am accepted. We all struggle. We all fail and fall. We all wonder if we could really be chosen. We can only understand God’s electing love when we claim this lovely phrase. We are accepted in the Beloved. I am included in the faith and faithfulness of Jesus. He became my brother in the flesh so I could be adopted into his Father’s family.

John Calvin cautioned us regarding teaching on the “P” word. It is so easily misunderstood. He knows that just mentioning predestination can plague us with worry, “What if this person is not chosen? What if *I* am not chosen?” He said that if you look within yourself to find reasons for why the Father chose you, that’s like looking into a bottomless abyss. Rather, look upwards to Jesus. Look to the Beloved. Look to the Father’s Chosen One. Look to your redeemer. He is acceptable. He is worthy. If you want to know if you are chosen, look to Jesus giving himself to you and know that you are!

Finally, whenever someone asks me if I believe in predestination or freewill, my answer is always “Yes!” One supports the other. And if this seems hard to understand, my counsel is very simple. This is a word that can be spoken to every person in the entire world. The message of the gospel: *Believe in Jesus and discover your chosenness*. And if you do believe in Jesus, rejoice that the Father has shown you that he simply will not be without you. You belong, for you are accepted in the Beloved, the Chosen, even Jesus our Savior, brother and Lord.