

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“In Christ: Chosen”
Ephesians 1:1-10

If you were with us last week, you’ll remember that we began this new sermon series “In Christ.” That little two-word phrase “in Christ” pops up all over the place. It’s about who we are and what we have been made to be, and throughout Ephesians Paul tackles some of these foundational questions about God, about Christ, about salvation, about the church. We looked last week at a passage at the end of the third chapter, kind of skipping ahead. But now we’ll be starting back at the beginning of the letter and work our way forward. And this week, we’ll explore just how Paul chooses to begin this letter. It might surprise you. It surprises me. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

In the past few months, I’ve reached out to a few pastors I know and respect, getting their input about starting at a new church, things they’ve done or didn’t do. And they were all really gracious and generous with their advice. (But let’s be honest. Not exactly hard to get a bunch of big-church pastors to talk about themselves.) I’m only kind of kidding. Anyway, they were really helpful. Except for this one guy.

This one pastor, who will remain nameless, offered this groundbreaking advice: “Jay, preach great sermons.” My mind was blown. Why didn’t I think of that? This whole time I was thinking I’d come in and throw down a few clunkers just to see who *really* wanted to be here. Some of you might be thinking, “Jay, after last week, mission accomplished.”

I’m really not being fair. On the very slim chance that he ever watches this, he actually was very helpful, and what he meant was, “Preach great sermons. Keep it pastoral and inspirational for a while.” Meaning, keep it light, uplifting. Don’t dive into controversial topics or political commentary. And I thought that was good advice. Really did.

And that’s why in this second week with you, I figured it’d be a good time to talk about predestination.

I didn’t want to do it! Paul did it. He did it right here. After he says hello, he launches into v. 3: “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,” [so far so good, and then in v. 4] “just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

At first, when you hear this, sounds kind of nice, doesn’t it. God “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” I like those spiritual blessings. And “he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.” I like that too. God chose me. And not just yesterday, but from like forever ago. Not because of anything I did or will do. God just chose me. Pretty good feeling. So I got that going for me, which is nice. And that’s predestination. God chose you. You were destined to be chosen.

Gotta be a good thing, you're thinking. Every spiritual blessing. Being chosen by God. Sign me up.

Until you start thinking about the other side of it. So, God chose me, but what about everybody else? And *that*, if you're not careful, is where this thing about predestination can take a really dark turn. Do we belong to God, are we justified in Christ, are we saved in Christ because we chose to do something, to believe something? Or is it because God chose to equip us, equip some, save us, save some, with the capacity to believe in the first place? And this is the subject that nearly made me not be Presbyterian.

Quick side note here, because I'm about to launch into a lot of Presbyterian stuff, just because we're still getting to know each other. I am sure that for some of you here, the whole label of "Presbyterian" might not be what you care about, might not be what you grew up as, or whatever. You're a part of this church because of the community you've found, because you've been spiritually fed in worship or in a Sunday School class. Awesome. Glad you're here. If you're in this camp, the last thing I want you to feel right now is, "Oh, I didn't know the whole Presbyterian thing was so...Presbyterian. Not sure I belong here." So, want to put some brackets around this whole discussion.

If you ever want to get me going on a long rant, ask me about the importance of the unity of the church. The very short version: being Presbyterian is a particular theological lens for interpreting Scripture, and a particular system of church government, and it's something I'm proud of. But, if I take more pride in my identity as a Presbyterian than in my identity as a sinner redeemed by grace, as one in Christ, then my priorities are wrong.

Now, on to why I almost stopped being Presbyterian.

When I was in college, I was really fortunate to be in a steady Bible Study with a few guys. Really meant a lot to me. Big reason, I suspect, why I'm up here right now. But the make-up of this group included a few guys with fairly black and white views on the topic of predestination. And when I mean black and white views, I mean what some would call a classically Reformed or classically Presbyterian approach to predestination, which is also known as "double election": double meaning "two", election meaning a choice, meaning God makes two choices in predestination, the choice to choose some, as in Ephesians 1:4: "just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world," and the choice not to choose others. More to the point, God chooses to save some, while choosing not to save others. And this being a strong Presbyterian church, my guess is that some of you here, especially those who have really studied aspects of Presbyterian theology, would agree with that.

And there is a strong, biblical case to be made for predestination and double election in those terms: that God chooses to save some, and chooses not to save others. Many faithful disciples far smarter and more devoted than I have studied Scripture and have come to that conclusion.

And that was what a few of the guys in that college Bible Study thought. Again, that was perfectly fine. Trouble was, it came up every single week. We could have been studying Christian charity or loving your neighbor as yourself, and it would still become a debate about predestination. It was absolutely exhausting.

I was pretty uneasy about it. The notion that God would from the foundation of the world make an eternal choice, to choose some for salvation and redemption in Christ and to be with him in heaven, to, as v. 5 puts it, "destine us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will," and then by process of elimination choose others for condemnation or separation or annihilation, and because it wasn't based on anything that anyone

would do or say, the choice was completely arbitrary, it just didn't feel right. That didn't seem to be the good news of a loving God.

It's like this. Earlier this year the biggest movie of all time came out, Avengers: Endgame. It's one of those comic book movies, and I actually like them a lot—Frances makes fun of me. And Endgame is part two to a movie that came out a year ago, Avengers: Infinity War. Because it came out a year ago, I feel okay about spoiling it. It's all about how a bunch of heroes are trying to stop a big bad villain from getting his hands on the most horrible weapon ever. If he puts this weapon on his hand and simply snaps his fingers, he can indiscriminately wipe out half of all life everywhere. And that's exactly what he does. He gets the weapon, he snaps his fingers, and half of all life everywhere disintegrates. Turns into dust. And in that part of the movie, you see one hero turning into dust, and the another not, and then three into dust, and then two that are not. And so on.

This analogy fails on a few levels, but at least in the respect that whether someone disintegrated or got dusted or whether someone was spared, it had nothing to do with strongly they believed or how heroic or good or bad or strong they were. It was completely, horribly arbitrary.

And for a while that's what I thought predestination meant. Turned God into a monster, indiscriminately plucking some out of danger, while condemning others to perdition, like a sadistic kid with a magnifying glass looming over an ant hill on a sunny day, I thought. And in the Presbyterian world, honestly, because it is so challenging to talk about this, if a preacher is smart, this whole thing about being predestined, about God's choice, not our choice, is often kind of swept under the rug. Too challenging. Too many sharp edges.

Paul, however, was stupid. As he is drafting this letter about the foundations of faith, about God about Christ about salvation about the church, instead of doing the smart thing and sweeping it under the rug, he takes the eternal choice of God, and he puts it front and center. Now why on earth would he do that?

It was compelling to me, and remains compelling to me today, that for Paul, speaking of God's eternal choice was not a matter of grim fate. And ultimately it was tone with which Paul speaks of this choice that started to change and even liberate how I saw all this. If you read this text, you don't find a description of a capricious God. Instead, you find it peppered with language of blessing, like in v. 3, the *good* pleasure of his will like in vv. 5 and 9, the praise of his glorious grace, like in v. 6. These aren't the words of a brow-beaten prophet. These are the words of an awestruck apostle, filled with joy and wonder at the unfathomable love of God.

And then, at the end of this passage, Paul drops something that he'll talk more about later, and really *this* was what changed the ballgame for me in how things like predestination and the eternal choice of God truly spoke of the glory of God. There's a greater purpose to it, and it was always a part of the plan.

One way to look at the scope of history and the narrative of Scripture is that it's all one big recovery or restoration project. But there are differences in opinion about at just what point that plan was put in place. One way to look at it is this: God made the world, and it was good, and humanity was with God, and it was good, but humanity screwed it up, so then God had to turn to plan B, and that's where Jesus comes in. I think that would've been an amusing conversation to behold. God sidles up to Jesus—and there's some kind of Trinitarian blasphemy wrapped up in this—God sidles up to Jesus, and says, “So, Jesus, how ya doin’? I need a favor. Things have gone a bit south down there, and to fix it, I’m gonna need you to sort of sweat and

bleed and die a horrible death. Okay? Thanks.” Point being that the whole story of Christ and the cross and the resurrection is all really just an audible when the game plan went out the window.

And then there’s the way, that I believe Paul talks about it. That from the foundation of the world, God makes a choice, a choice to raise up for himself a people, a people whom in Christ his Son he would bless and redeem and forgive and empower. And here’s the kicker: all that blessing and redemption and forgiveness and empowerment, is not merely for the sake of who gets to go into that VIP club in the sky. There is a greater purpose at work, one that is a mystery, as v. 9 puts it, revealed and set forth in Christ.

Now just what exactly this greater purpose looks like is something folks disagree about, but Paul gives us some language here.

He calls it, in v. 10, “a plan for the fullness of time.” It’s something big. And he says that plan is “to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” Now initially when I hear that, I think of God swooping in for a big bear hug, but that might not be what it means. That word there, that term “to gather up,” is actually an accounting term. It literally means to bring under a head. Other translations have it as “to sum up all things in him.”

You know, Frances makes fun of me for my spreadsheets. This is the second thing today I’ve told you she makes fun of me. But she makes fun of me for my spreadsheets for our household budget. Why she married me, I do not know. No accounting for taste, I suppose. I’m admittedly pretty meticulous when it comes to budget stuff but I don’t have any accounting training. So, this budget spreadsheet is just a mess. It’s got numbers and formulas scattered across this page and that, and it’s just a big jumble that anyone with a bit of training would look at it and say, “How could this possibly be of any use?” But, I know, that if I look at one square, and I see it at zero, I know that all the jumbled mess of formulas and bills and savings all evens out, all in harmony.

Now, in this analogy, I suppose I am in the position of God, so let’s not dissect this too closely. But in a similar manner, when we look at creation and see the jumbled mess that it has become, when we look at our lives, and we see the jumbled mess that they have become, even though we might look at it all and ask, “How could this possibly be of any use?” there is this promise that all will be summed up. All will be accounted for. Now it’s starting to sound more and more like good news to me.

It means that embedded in the foundation of the world is the choice of God to redeem, and woven within the fabric of creation are the threads of salvation, and somehow through all of it, everything will be made right, and you could have a part to play. I wonder what that might be.

In the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**