

In Christ We Obtain God's Blessings

Ephesians 1:3-14

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Today we contemplate a great mystery. You may know of it as the doctrine of Election. This mystery examines who has been chosen (or elected) for salvation, how that came to be, why that came to be, and what the ultimate result of that election will be. Now, it has been well said that the Bible doesn't have all the answers to all our questions. In the doctrine of Election it certainly doesn't. One of the questions that are impossible for anyone, theologian or otherwise, to answer is, "Why some and not others?" or in Latin, "*Cur alii prae aliis?*"

The reasoning goes this way: if God wants all men to be saved, and God is omnipotent, why are all not saved? We delve deeper, and we see that some are saved and some are not, and so we ask that question, "*Cur alii prae aliis?*" What made those who are saved able to be saved, and what put those who are damned outside of salvation?

There is a division of responses. One opinion, which I believe is losing in popularity today, and which once we could lump under the broad title of Calvinism, believed that God chose some to salvation, and he likewise chose others to damnation. This is called "double-predestination." The purest form of this heretical doctrine states that we can't know why God chose some to be saved and chose others to be damned, and that in fact we can't know ourselves if we have been chosen to salvation or

damnation until we die. Perhaps if we live a good Christian life that will serve as evidence of our being predestined for salvation, but we can never be really sure.

The other opinion, which is far more rampant today, we sometimes call Synergism. This teaches that each individual, in some way, is responsible for his own salvation or damnation. Some shades of Synergism teach that God predestined those whom he foresaw would have faith—a view called *intuitu fidei*, “in view of faith.” There is meant to be some quality in each individual that makes him more receptive to faith, so that God elected only those who had that receptive quality to salvation.

Neither of these views is acceptable, for they seek to rationalize the mind of God, to make it sensible to our human ability. In the Lutheran Church we refuse to seek out an answer, for “no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:11). In our church body and bodies in our fellowship a great divide occurred in the 1880s, and again in the 1910s, largely over this very doctrine. It was first called the Election Controversy, and then the Merger of the United Lutheran Church. This is one of the reasons we have so many Lutheran Synods – the ELCA grew out of that controversy, and the ELS was founded on its confessional stance which refuses to allow either of these rationalistic answers to the question of *cur alii prae aliis*. Instead we are able to say this: if anyone is damned, it is because of his own stubborn resistance of the grace of God, and of his own sin; likewise if anyone is saved, it is entirely the work of God who blesses people with his grace in Christ Jesus.

This is what we attest today. Paul gives us a great doxology, twelve verses of high praise glorifying the Trinity in each person (as we’ll see), ten times with the phrase

“in Christ” (or “in him” referring to Christ), because this doxology praises no remote God, but a God who has approached his creation to save it, a God who even participated in the troubles of his creation, all in the person of Christ; this leads one commenter to remark, “Christ is the golden string on which all the pearls of this doxology are strung. He is the central diamond around which all the lesser diamonds are set as rays” (Lenski 350). This mystery, this doctrine of Election, is not a terrifying thing as the Calvinists would preach; nor is it a thing to build up man in himself as the Synergists would preach. It is in its entirety only a doctrine of grace and blessedness, for in this mystery we examine the way in which we obtain God's blessings, all in connection with Christ.

I. Decided in Eternity – Given in Time

St. Paul embarks upon a majestic task in these verses, seeking to contemplate profoundly the whole work of God for our salvation. He seeks to communicate to his readers, the Ephesians and us, some glimpse into the perspective of God. But here's the problem: we are limited human beings who perceive things linearly, in just a few dimensions. God is outside dimensions, and therefore views the whole as a unit. We can think of time in this way: we see time as a line, event stacking upon event and following in sequence down a great timeline. God turns that line on its side and sees it all at once. Use another illustration: we human beings standing upon this earth see the ground as a plane, a broad flat thing, and we must move along it to perceive anything beyond a few miles; but from space an astronaut is able to see the earth in its curvature, as the sphere that it is. The point of all this is that the perspective of God is

incomprehensible to us. We can't imagine how things look from his standpoint; but we can realize that he sees things in a fuller way, a more complete way, so that we can confidently trust in his superiority.

Notice how Paul weaves this concept together: "In him [in Christ] 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." Think backwards in this verse: God predestined us according to his unimpeachable will, his impenetrable mind and the counsel of the Trinity in eternity – we don't know *cur alii prae aliis*, but we rejoice that his grace elected us – and because he has authority and power to work everything so that it is in line with his eternal blueprints, he did indeed work all things for the good of those he called, so that in Christ he brought about the culmination of his plan, so that we might believe in him and therefore in the connection which that creates actually receive the blessing God predestined for us.

So this is the concept of election or predestination: God made his predestinations in eternity (we can say "before the world began," but where there is no time it is difficult to conceive of a "before"; better perhaps to say "outside time"); then that predestination, that blueprint he decided on he began to put into motion *inside* time.

Can we conceive of eternity? No. The best illustrations only come to a picture of a really, really long period of time. I've heard the picture, that if you filled the United States with grains of rice, piled higher than all the mountains all over the land, and then you had a sparrow come and take one grain of rice at a time and fly it across the Atlantic, place it somewhere in Europe, and then come back and do it again, eternity is

how long it takes to move all the rice from America to Europe, one grain at a time. But this is imperfect. Eternity is not a *really long time*, but it is in fact *no time, outside time*. You and I being trapped in time, we can't conceive it. So God in his grace reveals the things that were decided in eternity to us in time. And this is why "in Christ" is repeated so frequently.

Now notice, there are three sections of Paul's great doxology, one for each member of the Trinity. Notice how "in Christ" is used in the first part:

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, even as he chose us *in him* before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us *in the Beloved*.

This first part praises God the Father, proclaiming him "blessed." And we bless him only because he blessed us first. How did he bless us? "*In Christ*." See the second part:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth *in Christ* as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things *in him*, things in heaven and things on earth. *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, so that we who were the first to hope *in Christ* might be to the praise of his glory.

This praises God the Son, Jesus Christ who purchased us with his blood and won for us the forgiveness of all our sins. This is really the key portion for understanding what this "in Christ" means, but before we round this out, look finally at the third part:

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed *in him*, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

We praise God the Holy Spirit, who is the “seal” and “guarantee” of our inheritance.

We’ll discuss that in a moment, but notice: we obtain the Holy Spirit “in him,” in Christ.

“In Christ” means three things simultaneously: 1) God was *in Christ*, blessing us; 2) God blessed we who are *in Christ* in faith; and 3) most importantly, all God’s actions toward us are *in connection with Christ*, bringing us into a unity with himself *in that same connection*. Eternity, remember, is inconceivable to our limited human minds. Besides that, we are chock full of sin, so sinful and evil that even if we *could* climb up to heaven with a tower made with human hands – a tower of stone as at Babel, a tower of mind as modern humanism believes, a tower of good works as Roman Catholicism and all other man-made religions teach – we wouldn’t be allowed in, because we are worse than the foulest garbage in God’s nostrils. Don’t try to deny it: you yourself are worse than the mud tramped on by horses in their stalls. You daily, repeatedly sin against God and your fellow-man with your actions, with your careless and hate-filled words, with your unkind thoughts. You think you’re getting away with it. You think, “I’m not hurting anyone. This is the last time.” God sees all things in eternity, and has authority over all things. Your sins against him are a rejection of his grace. He would choose you for salvation, but by your sins, you decline his invitation and damn yourself.

That is what makes this doctrine so heavenly and gracious. There is no ladder that we can craft that will bring us before God and make us acceptable to him. So God

cast a saving rope down to us: that rope is Christ. This fact Paul writes elsewhere: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, *in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself*, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19). This election, that we are predestined to salvation, is entirely the work of God. He decided upon it in eternity, and for our limited minds, he put it into action in time, connecting our time to eternity, and connecting us to him, all in Christ.

II. Begun in Time – Finished in Eternity

God sees this whole work as a unit, but again, we, being limited, see it linearly, in stages: we speak of Justification, Sanctification, and Glorification, in that order.

Justification has two stages: Objective Justification, followed by Subjective Justification. The Objective occurred once: it was when Jesus died on the cross. When that event occurred, all the sins of the world were placed on his shoulders, and he paid the punishment price for them all. But that which happened once far distant from us had to make its way to us in order for it to be of any benefit. Paul phrases it this way: "In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us," and how upon us? – "in all wisdom and insight *making known to us* the mystery of his will." We heard about it. This is the work of God's Word. The Bible, as well as the Sacraments which are connected with God's Word: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is Subjective Justification, when through these means of grace that which was won by Christ on the cross is piped to us and received by us in faith. Then we ourselves are saved.

The next step we term Sanctification. This is “holy-fication,” the process by which we are made holy. And it is a process. There are no degrees of Justification – you’re either justified or you aren’t – but Sanctification is a steady building upward through time. Paul states, “In [Christ] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him,” notice he speaks of Subjective Justification, “[you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” As soon as we come to faith, the Holy Spirit is set in us as a seal – and a seal is an indicator of ownership, like branding livestock or writing your name in a book – and then he begins his work. Paul writes, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). Throughout our lives the Holy Spirit is in us, moving us to perform good works toward God and our neighbor, in fact making all that we do in faith as Christians holy in God’s sight. This is an incomplete work until our deaths, until the Last Day.

And this brings us to the last: glorification. This, like sanctification, we do not yet have. We are still inglorious, limited human beings on earth. Glory is an attribute only of God, and yet we are promised glory when we enter heaven; we will share in the glory of God. That Christ said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” which Paul rephrases saying, “to unite all things in him, things in heaven and on earth,” means that Jesus is working now on earth, “that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28), and also he is working in heaven, as he promised, “In my Father’s house

are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:2-3). He prepares that place, so that when we come into that mansion, we will be glorified.

And yet this is already begun now. Right now we have the down-payment of our future glory, of our full inheritance, because in Christ we "were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance, until we acquire possession of it." This "guarantee" is the pledge or down-payment. We can trust that God will make good on his promise; we have the Holy Spirit working in us already as assurance to that fact.

And this is what our life looks like in the midst of all this: we are dedicated, as Paul says three times, "to the praise of his glory." God has blessed us, he has shined the glorious light of his grace on us, and in return now, how can we help but to praise him, to "let [that] light shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16)? To us now it is in progress, sometimes uncertain like the unsteady waves on a stormy sea, but take comfort in this: God has seen it all to completion in eternity, and now in time he begins it, so that we, too, will see it finished in eternity. He gives us all this in Christ Jesus, who is the blessed golden cord tethering us indestructibly to God and his glory.

Amen.