

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Christmas Day, December 25, 2007

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Hymns: 100 (273:4) 98, 108:1-7, 108:8

Lessons: Micah 5:2-4; 1 Timothy 3:15b-16; Luke 1:26-30

Text: Ephesians 1:3-7

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

In the name of Christ our Savior, dear friends,

We have all heard the slogan, "Keep Christ in Christmas!" The fact is that there is no Christmas without Christ. Take Christ out of your Christmas celebration and you are not celebrating Christmas, but merely a worldly festival. The majority of people celebrate such a worldly festival. Into this category belong the commercialism of stores, the over-spending, the wild office parties, the over-eating, and all the other celebrating that worldly people have made a part of what they call Christmas.

For us who believe in Jesus, Christmas Day is a day on which we should want to concentrate our thoughts on Christ. Our text is not what might be called the regular Christmas text. It takes us far back into eternity before the world was ever created, when God elected us. Then it takes us some 30 years beyond Jesus' birth to the time when he shed his blood for us. Both things, our election and our redemption, are centered in Christ. So we can see how important it was that God sent his Son to become true Man for us. Let us on this Christmas Day join St. Paul in his song of praise and learn to say:

PRAISE BE TO GOD FOR HIS GRACE IN CHRIST.

- 1. By grace in Christ he has elected us as his own;**
- 2. By grace in Christ he has redeemed us.**

Our text is at the beginning of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. After his formal greeting to the believers at Ephesus he begins what we call a doxology of praise: "***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.***" Paul begins his song of praise with praise for all of God's blessings in Christ. We note that the praise is directed to him who is identified as the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God whom Paul praised is not some unknown deity, not a false god like Allah of the Moslems, or some heathen idol, but "***the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.***" This is the only true God. We know him as our dear heavenly Father, for it is true what Paul says of all believers, "***You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,***" Galatians 3:26. All the spiritual blessings we have and enjoy as Christians come from God in heaven. We sing in the common doxology: "***Praise God from whom all blessings flow.***" (The Lutheran Hymnal, 644) These blessings are given to us only for Jesus' sake. All spiritual blessings are appropriated to us on the basis of Christ's redemptive work. If it had not been for Christ's work of redemption there would be no blessings of salvation at all.

Furthermore, all these blessings can be traced back to the election of grace in Christ in eternity. This truth our text clearly states, "***he chose us in him before the creation of the world.***" This same truth Paul writes to the Romans in this comforting passage, "***we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,***" Romans 8:28. God so directs the lives of those whom he has chosen so that everything works out for their spiritual good. He blesses them so that they

finally obtain eternal salvation in heaven because they are his elect, his chosen ones. What a comfort this is in times of sickness, sorrow, affliction, and persecution!

The doctrine of eternal election of grace, however, has not always been received as a comforting doctrine because people do not fully understand this teaching of the Bible. This doctrine has also been the subject of bitter controversy in Lutheran churches for many years. It is one of the teachings that separated us when we were in the Synodical Conference from the American Lutheran Church in the years before the ELCA was organized.

Let us, therefore, learn the correct Scriptural definition of this doctrine: ***“By election of grace we mean this truth, that all those who by the grace of God alone, for Christ’s sake, through the means of grace, are brought to faith, are justified, sanctified, and preserved in faith here in time, that all these have already from eternity been endowed by God with faith, justification, sanctification, and preservation in faith, and this for the same reason, namely, by grace alone, for Christ’s sake, and by way of the means of grace.”*** (Brief Statement of 1932) This is what the Bible teaches as we see from these passages: ***“we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth,”*** 2 Thessalonians 2:13. God ***“has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,”*** 2 Timothy 1:9. Election is also called predestination, ***“those he predestined, he also called, those he called he also justified, those he justified, he also glorified,”*** Romans 8:30.

Now let us look at this definition in its specific parts. First, our text says, ***“He chose us.”*** God picked us out; he selected us from the whole mass of humanity. He set us aside for himself. God did this in eternity already. Our text says, ***“before the creation of the world.”*** Before the beginning of time, before any of us were in existence, God thought of us in his grace and chose us for his own. God the Father did this in Christ. Our text says, ***“he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.”***

Our text also teaches that the eternal election was an act of God’s good pleasure, ***“in accordance with his pleasure and will.”*** It is an act that originated only within the freedom of God’s thoughts and his loving counsel. This was done ***“to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”*** God did this as an undeserved gift of his love for Jesus’ sake and through the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. This means that God did not see anything in us that caused him to choose us. He did not, for example, foresee that we would believe, or that we would not resist the Holy Spirit’s working in our hearts through the Gospel as much as other people, and for that reason choose us. It was all done according to God’s pleasure and will, purely as a gift of love. He elected us in eternity, and therefore he called us by the Gospel, justified us, and sanctified us. Furthermore, we may be assured that he will also preserve us in the faith and glorify us in heaven. Jesus says, ***“I know those I have chosen,”*** John 13:18. He also says, ***“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand,”*** John 10:27-28. How comforting it is to know this!

Our election in eternity also has a direct bearing upon our sanctification. He chose us ***“to be holy and blameless in his sight.”*** God chose us that we might also serve him in Christian living while here on earth. He is our dear Father and we are his dear children in Christ, and he wants us to act as his own dear children. The will of the holy God cannot be otherwise than that he wants us to be holy too, blameless in our conduct, loving him and our fellowmen, even as he has loved us. This is to remind us that holiness, blameless moral conduct and love are characteristics of true Christian living. We should remember this also in our Christmas celebration, and always be mindful of what is pleasing to God according to his Word.

We have already stated that the eternal election of God was an act of God in and through Christ his Son. Now our text amplifies that thought and teaches us that by grace in Christ God has redeemed us.

2.

In his doxology Paul speaks of our eternal election as being ***“to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”*** To say that God elected us in Christ means that God brought his eternal election into execution through the redemptive work of Jesus. Everything depended upon Christ. Our text says that God ***“predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.”*** Jesus is the beloved Son of God of whom he says: ***“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,”*** Matthew 3:17. God sent his only-begotten Son into this world for the specific purpose of redeeming sinful mankind.

For our great comfort we know that Jesus performed this work of redemption perfectly. He redeemed us, that is, he bought us back from sin, Satan’s power and from the threat of everlasting damnation that hung over us because we were conceived and born in sin. David wrote, ***“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me,”*** Psalm 51:5. Jesus bought us back. He paid the price for our redemption by shedding his holy, precious blood. Peter writes, ***“you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,”*** 1 Peter 1:18-19. John writes, ***“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world,”*** 1 John 2:2. All through the Old Testament years this blood atonement for sins was prefigured by the in-numerable bloody sacrifices offered up while God’s people were still under the Covenant of the Law. Then, ***“when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons,”*** Galatians 4:4-5. John the Baptist, the Forerunner of the Messiah, pointed to Jesus and said, ***“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*** John 1:29. And so it was that Jesus gave his life for us on the cross and shed his holy, precious blood for us poor sinners. If Christmas is to be a happy festival for us to celebrate, these two truths must be uppermost in our minds: ***“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,”*** John 3:16. ***“Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God,”*** Ephesians 5:2. In that one great sacrifice on the cross, the Bible assures us, ***“the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin,”*** 1 John 1:7.

This is the reason why we may be certain of this precious truth: We have ***“the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding,”*** Ephesians 1:7-8. Now no one can accuse us of still being guilty of our sins. We need not be afraid of dying and going to everlasting punishment in hell. As long as we live and are still subject to the all the problems and afflictions of this life, on the basis of our eternal election by God’s grace in Christ, we can say with Paul, ***“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all --how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us,”*** Romans 8:31-35 and v. 37.

May what we have learned from God’s Word today be the comforting truth that gives us true joy at this Christmas time. Amen.