

And how can we be sure that God has also called us? Paul concludes, *"When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory."* What a beautiful picture of God's amazing grace! When God works saving faith in our hearts, he marks us with a seal, the sign of faith. In ancient times, people would use a ring or cylinder that contained their official stamp to mark something that belonged to them. Think, for instance, of the brand that ranchers put on their livestock today. Putting my seal on something was like saying, "Hands off!"—a way of telling others to leave my stuff alone. Paul's point is that, when the Holy Spirit enters into and takes up residence in our hearts, he marks us with the seal of faith, and that faith is a deposit that guarantees the inheritance that's awaiting us in heaven. We've been stamped by the Holy Spirit (for most of us that happened in our baptism) as being God's own, as belonging to him for time and into eternity.

What grace! What amazing, incredible grace! God chose us to be his own from the creation of the world. God accomplished our salvation in the life and death of his one and only Son. And God gave us this gift of salvation when the Holy Spirit, working through Word and sacrament, brought us to saving faith in Jesus. At the empty tomb of Christ, we see how full our empty hands really are. They're filled with the riches of God's grace: we are the children of God—redeemed, restored, and forgiven; we are marked with God's own seal, the seal of his Holy Spirit; and we are set free from sin for a life of service and an eternity in heaven. What grace! What amazing, incredible grace! Amen.

Ephesians 1:3-14 – *Empty Hands* – 147 (1-3, 5), 158, 148, 752
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As someone who's familiar with the process of adoption; as someone who's experienced the blessings of adoption—not once, but twice; as someone who's counseled other couples as to the pros and cons of adoption, I believe that I can speak with some degree of intelligence on the subject of adoption. But let me say this: All my experience and expertise fall by the wayside when I try to comprehend God's adopting us as his own sons and daughters. Then I must join with the Apostle John and simply marvel: *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 Jn 3:1)* Again today we stand before the open and empty tomb of Jesus and are powerfully reminded of how rich we are because of his resurrection. My friends, no matter what:

Our Empty Hands Are Full of God's Grace

- 1. God chose us to be his own.**
- 2. God redeemed us to be his own.**
- 3. God called us to be his own.**

1. What's truly amazing about our adoption is when God chose us. Paul writes, *"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. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."* Wow! Even before he created the world, even before he laid the foundations of the earth, God chose us. How important that is for us to understand. It took me a year after our first date to ask Sue to marry me. Seven years after we were married we adopted our son, and our daughter six years after that. But God chose us in eternity past. He chose us before there could be any reason in us for his choosing. It truly was a choosing by grace. God simply chose us, as Paul says, *"in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace."*

Do you understand what that means? All our life through, we are subjected to the painful process of human selection. We are measured and determined to be worthy or unworthy by the fickle and frivolous standards of the world. The coach chooses only the really athletic players to make the team. Sally whimsically chooses who gets to be her friend for the week. Ingrid is chosen to make the honor role, while Carl is not, even though their grade point averages are only 1/10 of a point different. How often have we not been chosen for something simply because we didn't measure up?

Can you imagine if God had used this method of choosing us? Can you imagine if he had lined all of us up against the wall and decided who should get to be his children based on how well we stack up against each other? Who of us would ever be considered fit for his kingdom? Who of us could be ever confident that God had chosen them? For isn't it true that we can always find someone who's more devout, more determined, more dedicated than we are?

That's why it's so comforting to know that God chose you and he chose me before the world was created—not by merit, but by grace. He chose to love us not because of who we are; not because of what we someday would accomplish; not because our potential was greater than someone else's; not because we were among the brightest and best of all the world had to offer. No, God chose to adopt us into his family only because of his grace, his amazing and incredible grace.

But note well the one little phrase in our text that's so important in understanding God's choosing. Paul reminds us that all of this is *"in Christ."* In fact, Paul uses this little phrase or one like it no less than eleven times in this text.

2. During my senior year at the seminary, I worked part-time at the M&I Northern Bank on 35th and Fond du Lac. On break one day, the security guard, whom I'll call Pete the Agnostic, was paging through a book of pictures and came across one of a beautiful snow-capped mountain. He said, "You, know, David, when I see this, I really believe there's a god." Sensing this to be a good witness opportunity, I said, "That's great, Pete, but how do you stand before this god?" He said, "Well, I figure that anyone who made such a beautiful world must be a good god and will accept me just the way I am."

Pete was close, but not close enough. Should God accept me just the way I am? Should God accept me with my mind that's often in the gutter, with hands that have repeatedly been dirtied by sin, with lips that love to gush gossip? I have sinned against God in so many ways that it would take a lifetime, if not more, to count them all. Why should God choose me, why should God choose you, to be a part of his family to spend an eternity with him in heaven?

Paul's answer? Because we are acceptable to God *"in Christ."* Listen again to Paul's words: *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ...in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins."*

Pete the Agnostic was wrong—dead wrong, wrong to his damnation. God doesn't accept us the way we are; he accepts us in spite of what we are. He accepts us *"in Christ."* He accepts us only because Christ lived and died to pay for our sins, and then left his tomb—open and empty—as a guarantee of our forgiveness. God accepts us only because we are bathed in Jesus' blood and wrapped in his righteousness. That—and that alone—is what makes us *"holy and blameless in his sight."* *"Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling" (CW 389:3).*

Perhaps this explains why some of us have such an issue with the biblical teaching of election. In our minds, we tend to separate election from salvation; making them unrelated to each other. But God connects them—intimately; one can't exist without the other. God chose us (election) in view of what Christ would do for us (salvation). So, if you want to be confident of your adoption, if you want to be sure that God has chosen you, go back to the cross, go back the empty tomb, go back to where God filled your empty hands with his grace, and know for sure that, just as God has forgiven you in Christ, so also has he chosen you in him to be his own.

Which brings us to the final point Paul makes about our election. Not only is election connected to the cross and to our salvation; it's also connected to the work of the Holy Spirit as he calls, enlightens, and sanctifies us by the gospel.

3. Perhaps it's best to look at election as one part of God's all-encompassing—and I really do mean ALL-ENCOMPASSING—plan of salvation. For the better we understand that our salvation depends on God's planning and purpose, the more confident we'll be of being in heaven one day. First, God chose us from eternity and adopted us to be his children. That's the first part of this sermon. In order to fulfill that plan, God had to make salvation possible. So, some 2000 years ago, in the most detailed and orchestrated plan ever devised, God sent his Son from heaven to live, suffer, and die for our sins. That's the second part of this sermon. But, in order to save me, in order to save you, Christ's redemptive work had to include a personalized plan that would bring you and me to faith in him. That's where Paul's words apply, when he says, *"In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation."*