

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
The Bridge and Contemporary Service
April 30, 2017

Empty Hands?

Come an Empty Tomb to be Filled

“Every Spiritual Blessing in Christ”

Ephesians 1:3-14

I'll need a young person who is not allergic to peanuts and who likes peanut M & M's to come up and help me.

Here are two M & M's. I want you to hold one in each of your hands as tight as you possibly can. Imagine that I'm going to try to pry those M & M's out of your hands, so hold on tight. Are you holding on? Now try to catch as many candy bars as possible without opening up your hands. (I pour a big box of candy bars over his/her hands). Do you think you could have caught a lot more candy bars if your hands were empty? Of course you could have!

In our lives, it is easy to be content with good things that God gives us here on earth... the M & M's that we hold on to tightly. It might be money, power, prestige, success, a house, a car, a vacation. The trouble with holding on to these is the M & M struggle. You always want “more and more.” You are happy with the M & M's you have until you see that someone else has more.

And when we hold on to these smaller gifts that God gives, we don't have room in our hands for the truly greater blessings that God wants to give, spiritual blessings, eternal blessings.

Paul is writing to Christians living in a wealthy society like ours. Even to this day, the ruins of Ephesus are impressive. It could be easy to see the Ephesians approaching life with the M & M mentality. All we want is more and more.

But Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with a reference to “every spiritual blessing in Christ.”

That's why I am praying that we can approach this very special portion of Scripture today with empty hands... thankful for the little things that God places into our hands in this life... family, health, friends, possessions, but open so that he can take that away if he wants but so that we can grasp the greater gifts that God wants to give, “every spiritual blessing in Christ.” Let's read this incredible section that talks about a mysterious teaching of the Bible that we call “election.”

³ 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. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹¹ 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, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

1. Empty hands and candy bars – Election is an “empty hands” doctrine.

Election is the ultimate empty hands doctrine. It teaches us that we come to our God empty, with nothing to make us appealing to him. Notice how he emphasizes this “empty hands” aspect of our spiritual life.

The timing of God's choosing us says, “We didn't bring anything to this party.” He chose us before the creation of the world. Before you and I could do anything, he chose us.

He chose us in Christ. In fact, when you get home, reread this section again and count how many times there is a reference to “in Christ” or “in him.” I think there are 11 references to “in Jesus.” What Jesus has done for us is like the candy bars pouring over our hands. In Christ. In Christ. In Christ. We have all this “in Christ.” But if we approach our relationship with God as “full hands” people, thinking that we are worthy of being chosen, then we miss all of the good promises that God gives us... for they are only found “in Christ.”

He chose us according to God's grace. Grace by definition excludes our actions. In Romans 11 Paul explains: “At the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by work; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (Romans 11:5,6).

What is the result of this choosing in Christ? We are holy and blameless in his sight. Brothers and sisters, do you see yourself as a saint? Do you see yourself as “blameless”? It is hard to feel that way... lots of things going wrong that I feel at fault for... inadequate, a failure. But that is part of the empty hands... I come empty... and God in his grace says to me, “You might not think you of yourself as worthy of being chosen for my team. The reality is, you are not. But I

chose you before the creation of the world. I knew all your failures before they even happened (Psalm 139). That's why I chose you in Christ. Only in Christ can you be holy and blameless."

2. Empty Hands and a Rubik's Cube – Election is an insolvable puzzle.

So your faith is caused by God's choosing of you. But that makes us start to look around. We see the wonderful choosing that God has done... that God has filled our hands with every spiritual blessing in Christ, and we start to wonder, "Why me and not that person?"

This is like picking up a Rubik's cube. It is a puzzle that we think we can answer. But it is more complex than a Rubik's cube. This is one of the world's largest Rubik's cube at 22 x 22 x 22. It has 4.3×10^{1795} possible combinations. These are incredibly complex! That's my picture of the doctrine of election. It is amazing and insolvable.

What we know is that it is in accord with God's plan. He works out everything according to his plan. It is the praise of God's glory. God gets the credit. You are like a monument to God's greatness, like the Lincoln Monument... look at how great God is, he can make someone like you and me into his dear child. Wow!

Romans 8 explains this plan a little more. Let's turn there.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

This plan is why you have the comfort that all things work out for your good... because he works out everything according to his plan. Then Paul explains God's plan. His plan includes that he foreknew you. On Friday evening, George W. Bush was at Wisconsin Lutheran College. I know who he is, but I can't say I know him personally. The word for "know" here in Greek is the idea that God doesn't just know that you would exist, but that he knew you in advance like a dear friend, even closer, like a dear child. He predestined you... decided in advance... I want you! Think of it! Chosen to be adopted. In the past it was common for adoptive parents to walk into a ward and choose. That is still that case in some countries. How would you choose? But God wandered into the ward and said, "I choose this child who won't be born for another 6000 or 10000 years!"

Predestined, called... he makes the world spin in the right direction so that the gospel came to you. Then he worked the miracle of faith in you. And ultimately he will take you into glory. Wow! You are chosen. And saved.

But then, just like we start to wonder, “Why do people have more earthly stuff than we do?” we start to wonder, “Why did God choose us and not others?” That’s when you have to realize that you have just picked up a 22 x 22 x 22 Rubik’s cube. It is an insolvable puzzle.

Here is what we know. That God wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). The Lord is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

That people can resist the Holy Spirit. At the end of his defense, Stephen, the first Christian martyr, said to the Jewish leaders who were accusing him, “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51) People can resist God’s saving will. They can say “no” to God.

So our text says God works out everything in conformity with his plan, which comforts us as we undergo trial. I believe because God planned it. I will be preserved in my faith because God planned it.

But if that is the case, then logically God should be able to save everyone. That’s why some people started to conclude, “If everything happens according to God’s plan, and some people are lost, then it must have been God’s plan that they be lost. Did God choose some people before the creation of the world to be damned?”

That contradicts the truth that God wants all people to be saved.

But if God wants all people to be saved, and he works out everything according to his plan, then people shouldn’t be able to resist God’s will that everyone be saved. But that contradicts the truth that Jesus also expressed about the people of Jerusalem, “How often I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not!” (Matthew 23) A person can oppose God’s will and say no to his gospel call.

So what is the answer? This is another example of the truth of Deuteronomy 29:29: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” There are some things that we just will never understand. The logic behind the doctrine of election is one of them.

The proper response when you see a puzzle this complex? To admit that God is wiser than we are. He hasn’t given us the puzzle to solve. Election is a puzzle insolvable for us but assuring to us that God knows all the answers... you have been chosen and have every spiritual blessing.

3. Empty hands and the church seal. When you question your election, feel the seal.

But how can you know that you are a chosen one? What if you are on the outside? That’s the issue that Paul deals with in the last section of the text. Could the Ephesian Christians reading this letter have any assurance that they were God’s chosen ones? Can we? Paul’s answer.

¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

The seal of the Holy Spirit is your guarantee that you are chosen, that you have an inheritance in heaven. Sometimes you will feel the seal of the Holy Spirit. You'll see the fruit of the Spirit growing in you. But when you question your faith and your election, you probably won't. So go back to the seal of your baptism.

At the end of the Pentecost sermon, the Apostle Peter talked about baptism:

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

In your baptism, you received the promise of the Holy Spirit! The same Holy Spirit that worked the miracle of speaking in tongues for the apostles... that is the Holy Spirit working in you. He is the deposit guaranteeing your inheritance.

Feel the outline on the worship folder. Do you feel the seal? That's the seal we use on our baptismal certificates. Let it take you back to your baptism... feel the seal of baptism upon you. The Spirit is working in you.

That seal or guarantee... you can only feel it if your hand is empty. They may be empty in this world. But they are full because the tomb is empty. You have an eternal inheritance guaranteed because God has chosen you before the creation of the world. Let's close by reading this section together again.

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you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

My Next Steps

- **Find comfort in your election.** Use www.BibleGateway.com and search “elect” to see how Jesus uses election to reassure you as you think about the end of the world.
- **Feel the seal of election in your baptism.** Study some of the promises connected to baptism: Acts 2:38,39; Galatians 3:26,27; Ephesians 5:25-27; Titus 3:5-7; 1 Peter 3:21.