

onance and nuance as the story of creation and salvation is told across the centuries: God blessing Abraham; David and Zechariah blessing God; Mary identified as blessed; Jesus blessing the children; children praying a blessing over a meal; the unthinking reflex *gesundheit*, “bless you,” at a sneeze; parents blessing their children; pastors and priests dismissing their congregations with a blessing. Everybody says it, and many do it. The word permeates our language and experience. We can’t get away from it.

\* \* \*

Verb two: God *chose*. “Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph. 1:4).

Everybody I have ever become acquainted with has a story, usually from childhood, of not being chosen: not chosen for the glee club, not chosen for the basketball team, the last chosen in a neighborhood sandlot softball team (which is worse than not being chosen at all), not chosen for a job, not chosen as a spouse. Not chosen carries the blunt message that I have no worth, that I am not useful, that I am good for nothing.

Not many of us take it lying down, at least not at first. We insist on being noticed. Sometimes we do it by borrowing a recognizable identity from others, loyally following and cheering an athletic team or embracing a political cause. Others develop the persona of a bully who breaks decorum and rules, compelling notice even though it gets us expelled from a classroom or club or saloon, and maybe even puts us in jail. And there is always hair dye. Dye your hair purple and you can be sure of being noticed in a crowd. And nobody with a well-placed tattoo is invisible.

These and a host of other compensatory strategies often work quite well, sometimes spectacularly well, but they don’t have much staying power.

Against this background, common to all of us, of not being noticed, being ignored, being dismissed as of no account, being indistin-

guishable from the background, the verb “chose” is a breath of fresh air: God *chose* us.

And yes, *God* chose us. It wasn’t a last-minute thing because he felt sorry for us and no one else would have us, like a stray mutt at the dog pound, or an orphan whom nobody adopted. He chose us “before the foundation of the world.” We are in on the action, long before we have any idea that we are in on the action. We are cosmic.

\* \* \*

Verb three: God *destined*. “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:5-6).

“Destined” has affinities with “chosen.” Both words carry a sense of intention. Life is not random. Human beings cannot be lumped into impersonal and abstract categories. As difficult as it is to imagine, maybe impossible to imagine given the billions of men and women involved, we are not a swarm of bees buzzing in and out of a hive, not a colony of ants following a scent in and out of an anthill. Deep within God and deep within us there is a relational element of intentionality: God chooses us, God destines us — the verbs can be synonyms. But not quite.

“Destine” provides a slight tilt from the intentionality in God conveyed by “choose” to something that takes place in us: “destine” clarifies into “destination.” God notices, identifies, and chooses us. But that generalized choice now gels into an appointment that is congruent with God’s choice.

The verb “destine” (*prooridzo*) derives from the noun “boundary” (*oros*).<sup>4</sup> Literally, it means to set a limit, to mark a boundary. A fence line on the prairie sets a boundary, determines where the land that a farmer has been appointed to work begins and ends. Without that fence line, the farmer would be paralyzed by the ocean of prairie, the endless possibilities stretched out before him — “Where do I start? Is there any

4. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), vol. 5, pp. 452-56.

end to it?" When God destines, he marks out the boundaries in which we live the purposed life to which he appoints us. We aren't set loose in the cosmos to find our place and way in it as best we can. There are lines of God's purposing appointments that intersect our chosenness. Being chosen is not an abstract category; it develops into a relationship that is mutual and reciprocal.

A few years ago my wife and I were in the airport in Athens, returning home from Israel by way of a few days in Rome. We obtained our boarding passes and went looking for our gate. I was surprised to recognize a Greek word over the gate entrance, *Proorismos Roma* — "Destination Rome." I was familiar with that word from reading my Bible. But I had assumed that *proorismos*, "destination" (or "predestination"), was a uniquely Bible word, one of Paul's special words, a word reserved exclusively for what God did.

It is a wonderful thing when a word we had thought was reserved exclusively for God's revelation and occurs only in the Bible shows up on a street in our town, or, in this case, in an airport while looking for our way home. All during that flight to Rome I mused with delight on the earthy, practical presentness of what I had always assumed referred to one of the more arcane theological dogmas.

There is more, of course, to "destine" than getting me to Rome, but I had a good time for those few hours realizing that I, among others, was "destined . . . for adoption as his children" in much the same way that having walked through the gate marked *Proorismos Roma* I was headed for Rome. Sit back and enjoy the flight.

\* \* \*

That God destines, or, if you prefer, predestines, encompasses huge mysteries. The moment we recognize that virtually everything that has to do with God takes place previous to our knowing anything about it, it becomes obvious that since we are not gods ourselves, we are forever unable to totally comprehend this "everything." This has two very salutary effects on us: it absolutely demands humility — we don't know enough to either protest or approve; and adoration is spontaneous. We

become aware that we are in the presence of a reality that cannot be used, cannot be packaged, cannot be grasped on any other terms than are given to us by God. We open our hands and receive.

That has not prevented a number of very bright, very learned men and women from decontextualizing and depersonalizing the word so that it is flattened, emptied of mystery, into a blueprint that determines the way we will live our lives in each detail. Some even go so far as to say that the blueprint actually determines the eternal fate, salvation or damnation, of each and every person who has ever lived. George Eliot's comment is both acerbic and appropriate: "The dunce who can't do sums wants to solve the problems of the universe."<sup>5</sup>

Since none of us has access to the blueprint, a great deal of speculation is squandered in guessing, over study Bibles in churches and over pitchers of beer in saloons, exactly what the dimensions and specifications of predestination might be. Almost inevitably this fuels an enormous amount of neurotic soul-searching on how to get inside information of the blueprint, so that "I don't miss the will of God for my life." The blueprint version of predestination wreaks havoc in too many lives. It is not a satisfactory formula for growing up in Christ.

Markus Barth, whose father Karl Barth wrote magnificently on these matters, distinguishes this Ephesian passage from any taint of determinism by noting that the tone throughout is adoring rather than calculating. This is a rescue from impersonal fate, from astrological charts, from karma and kismet, from "biology is destiny."

The God who destines/predestines cannot be depersonalized into a cosmic blueprint — even if the blueprint has "God's will" inscribed on it and a host of angels are energetically making sure its specifications are being enacted in each and every life on planet Earth.

\* \* \*

Verb four: God *bestowed*. ". . . grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6).

5. George Eliot, *Felix Holt* (New York: The Century Co., 1911), p. 69.