

## ***Since God Is For Us...***

Ephesians 1:3-14

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When you think of God, what kind of picture comes to mind? Even though we have been prohibited from worshiping any graven image of God, each of us still has a mental picture of what God must be like. So what kind of picture comes to mind when you think of God?

Some people hold to a common view that God is full of wrath and vengeance, looking for us to stumble so that God can smite us with a bolt of lightning. I remember reading about one preacher who was getting wound up as he preached about the wrath of God. He pulled out a glass of dirty water and said, "This dirty glass of water represents your filthy sinfulness." Then he pulled out a hammer and raised it above his head, ready to strike. "And this hammer represents the destructive wrath of God Almighty." Then he swung the hammer toward the glass, and just before the hammer reached the glass of water, he pulled out a skillet and intercepted the hammer before it smashed the glass. He looked at the stunned congregation and said, "It's only because Jesus Christ died on the cross that God doesn't smite you right now."

I don't know about you, but that's not the picture I have of God.

Unfortunately, that's the way many people perceive God. Many people see God as having an adversarial position toward us. To them, God is an angry, vengeful God who is just looking for a reason to condemn us to hell. While it is true that there is a breach in the relationship that we have with God, it's not because God is against us; it's because in our sinfulness we have turned away from God.

The truth is, the story of Scripture is that God is for us, not against us. The story of the Bible from the moment that Adam and Eve are first expelled from the Garden, all the way to the very last book of Revelation, is the story of God working through history--through his establishment of the people of Israel, through his sending of the prophets to call for repentance and reform, and ultimately through his sending of his Son, Jesus Christ--it is a story of God working through history to restore us and to reconcile us unto him, not to send us away for all eternity. If God were against us, why would God need a Bible 1,200 pages long to tell us that? If God were against us, God could zap us all in an instant, or even simply withdraw from us and ignore us altogether.

But you cannot read the Bible and come to the conclusion that God is against us. Make no mistake about it: God is for us.

Just look at this morning's text from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. In these opening verses of his letter, what jumps out is the preponderance of words and terms that describe God's positive disposition toward you and me. He is the God who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing... He is the God who chose us to be holy and blameless in his sight... He is the God who adopted us as his children, in accordance with his good pleasure and will... He is the God who has freely given his grace...

How could anyone ever read these verses and come to the conclusion that God is out to get us?

Can you appreciate what it means that God has not tossed us aside, but instead has chosen us? Believe it or not, when I was growing up, I wasn't among the first ones chosen to be on a team; often I was the last one

picked. Being among the last to be chosen will have an effect on a person. After a while, it will convey the message that maybe a person isn't worth picking at all.

But look at what Paul says: God has chosen you. God has chosen me. God has picked us, not to be on his team, but for something even more fantastic: God has chosen us to be part of his family! God has adopted us as his children!

Adopted children are special. They are part of a family, not out of biology, but because someone made a conscious decision to bring them into the family and take responsibility for their welfare. A lot of times, biology just happens, even when you don't mean for it to. Adoption, on the other hand, takes place because someone says, "I choose to be your parent; I choose you to be my child."

God has chosen us! God has adopted us! God is for us!

And God has redeemed us. Redemption is the language of purchase of buying our freedom. Before, we were slaves to sin. But through the blood of Jesus God paid the price for us to be freed from the bondage to sin, free to follow God. It is a redemption that we don't earn. It is a gift from God, freely given according to God's good will and the riches of God's grace.

God is for us!

Hans Hoekendijk taught at Union Seminary in New York City. Before and during World War II, he lived in Amsterdam, where he and his friends hid Jewish children from the Nazis. Their efforts were eventually discovered. As a result, Hoekendijk and his friends were locked in a railroad car and shipped off to a death camp in Germany. One morning the train suddenly stopped. The doors were opened. The prisoners were told to climb out and lined up alongside the railroad tracks. They assumed they were in Germany, and they thought they were going to be shot. But they were in Switzerland. Someone had thrown a switch on the track, and now they were free. For the rest of his life, Hoekendijk kept asking, "What do you do with such a gift?"<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, what do you do with such a gift? How do you live when you have been rescued from the clutches of certain death? God has chosen us, and adopted us, and redeemed us.

And so since God is for us, what do we do with such a gift?

The answer also is found in Paul's words. A phrase that surfaces at least three times in these verses is the phrase, "to the praise of his glory," or similarly, "to the praise of his glorious grace." It is clear to Paul, and I hope that it is clear to us, that the proper response to the God who is for us, is for us to be for God.

What do we do with the gift of God's goodwill toward us? We live to glorify God. We live in such a way that our lives are pleasing to God. As the adopted children of God, it is now up to us to live in such a way to bring honor and glory to the family name.

In a few minutes we will celebrate the sacrament of communion. As we break the bread and share the cup, we remember that Jesus went to the cross in order to redeem us from our sin. This sacrament is the reminder of the totality of God's commitment to us, to be wholly and completely for us, and not against us.

God is for us. God has chosen us, adopted us, and redeemed us.

What will you do with that gift?

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Richardson, Jr., Lectionary Homiletics, December 2002 / January 2003, p. 40.