

November 26, 1972
Deuteronomy 26:16-19 (N.E.)
Ephesians 1:1-6 (N.E.)
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CHOOSE AND BE CHOSEN

I promised you earlier this year that about once a month I would be preaching a sermon dealing specifically with some part of the Bible. This is one of those sermons and perhaps the one with which we should have begun, for it is a sermon dealing primarily with the first book in the Bible--Genesis--whose very name denotes beginnings.

The birth of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition and heritage lies in the book of Genesis. There is a story of creation, a story of how God permitted evil to enter his good world, a story of how languages became diversified, and finally an account of the origin of that particular people who were designated "The Chosen People", the descendants of Abraham and his wife Sarah.

It is primarily with this idea of the chosen people with which we wish to deal this morning. Were the Jews, and are the Jews, the chosen people of God? And if they are why were they so chosen, and what does it mean to be chosen?

Certainly we can say one thing about the Jews; as a group they seem to have been chosen to endure more than their share of suffering during the past 2000 years. Almost everywhere they have gone, wanderers upon the face of the earth who up until recently had no national homeland, they have been persecuted and made scapegoats for international and national difficulties. We saw it in Nazi Germany. We see it again in Soviet Russia. We even heard about it in the Academy Award winning "Fiddler On the Roof".

Part of the difficulty of course is gentile jealousy and envy. The Jewish people have produced what would seem to be more than their share of great actors, great comedians, great musicians, great scientists, and successful financiers. They now have a homeland, the result of much controversy and bloodshed, which they have made flower and produce as it has not previously done for over 2000 years. The Jews as a people seem to have peculiar talents and abilities. But whether these are the result of heredity or environment we will not be able to resolve here this morning.

This, however, is not the thrust of this morning's sermon. I do not care to argue with anyone the pros and cons of supposedly Jewish traits and characteristics. What we concern ourselves with here is what it was that made the Jewish people of 5000 years ago the chosen people of God. The fact that they were once God's chosen does not mean that they still retain that blessing. Indeed my argument will be that any person and any people can become God's chosen if that is what he or they choose to do.

II

If Abraham had not been receptive to God's will; if Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses had not been receptive to God's will; then the Jewish people as a whole would never have been God's chosen people. Indeed at the time of Jesus' birth the Jews had ceased to be chosen. They, religiously, had become like many modern peoples, indifferent and apathetic to the moral

and ethical principles revealed by God to their spiritual fathers. They had rejected God; had ceased to choose him, and so were no longer the chosen.

Joshua long before had warned the Hebrew people that the choosing was their responsibility. God had long since made his choice. He chose whoever would choose him. Joshua cautioned, "Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

God has chosen all of us to be his children. He has willed that we all heed his laws and his commandments. In that sense we are all his chosen people. He chooses to draw all mankind into the sheltering safety of his love and concern. But God gave man one gift which precludes even God from always winning. He gave men free will. Unless they exercise that free will and choose to be God's people his own choice is blocked. It is not blocked forever, but that is a matter we will discuss a little later.

And so we have the situation wherein we are all the chosen children of God because he has chosen us. But his choice is only a part of the equation. Until we choose God the matter is not resolved. It is a dual choice--God's and man's.

If you wish to pursue the matter it is not difficult to do so. It is evident in the Bible itself. The chosen people had innumerable and tremendous difficulties every time they turned from God's will. They succeeded in their endeavors only when they were in harmony with God's purposes. Over and over again they disobeyed God, and over and over again they suffered because of it.

It has happened throughout history. Augustine, the great saint and savant of the early church, tried with all his might to avoid choosing God, only to discover that the prayers of his mother, Monica, were too much for him. He finally had to choose the God who had already chosen him.

Francis Thompson must have experienced the same thing or he could not have written of it so beautifully and accurately in "The Hound of Heaven":

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him down the arches of the years;

I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes I sped;

And shot, precipitated,

Adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears,

From those strong Feet that followed,
followed after.

But with unhurrying chase

And unperturbed pace,

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,

They beat--and a Voice beat

More instant than the Feet--

"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.

*Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched
caressingly?
"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."*

III

We today as individuals, or as a group of individuals, can become God's chosen people if we will choose God. God has already chosen us and now with eternal patience he waits for us to choose him. Listen to what God is recorded to have said to Moses concerning that little handful of Hebrews who had escaped from slavery in Egypt and fled across the Red Sea into the wilderness of Sinai:

"The Lord has recognized you this day as his special possession, as he promised you, to keep his commandments."

That's what we are chosen for. We're not chosen to become rich, or famous, or talented, or powerful. We're chosen to "keep his commandments", to obey his will. Then when we do that there are consequences. There is life, peace, and mental and spiritual security.

Listen again as Paul says the same thing to the Ephesians 3000 years later:

"He chose us before the world was founded, to be dedicated, to be without blemish in his sight, to be full of love..."

And the consequence according to Paul?

"...That the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ."

Do you see how foolish it is for us to beat at the doors of heaven with our prayers, crying to God to give us peace, give us security, give us a new and better world?

God has already chosen, already willed all of that for us. Now we must choose, and most of the time we choose that which makes the new and better world, the peaceful and secure world, an impossibility. We make wrong choices, the selfish and self-centered choices, the choices we think will rebound to our own personal honor and glory.

We said a few moments ago that our free choices could block God's will, but not forever. I wish to elaborate on that for it can be very easily misunderstood.

Are we more powerful than God, that we can estop his will from being done? There is a sense in which the answer must be "yes". You and I can refuse to choose God throughout all the years of this life and thus effectively shut off from ourselves the vision of God. But that is because in this life "we see through a glass darkly", as Paul put it. In eternity, when we see God as he is, when we confront absolute love, then we must of our own free will choose to be won by God. Nothing can resist the absolute love of God when it is once seen and understood. God has no rival.

IV

Let us conclude by emphasizing one of the great differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament the emphasis is on the tribe, the group, the people. In the New Testament the emphasis is always on the individual. Jesus was concerned with each person. He always spoke to men as individuals, not as groups. You are responsible. You are the light of the world. God cares about you. God is seeking you.

As God chose Jesus to come into this world and redeem it by his life, (not his death) so he chooses you and me to do all that we can do to likewise redeem this world. God has chosen you. How will you choose?