

Choosing Favorites

In the name him in whom God the Father is well pleased, dear friends in Christ: Though they don't usually intend to do it, it sometimes happens that parents choose a favorite from among their children. And it's not only parents who do this; anyone in a position of authority is subject to it. Teachers choose favorite students, coaches choose favorite players, bosses choose favorite employees ... even a child will choose a favorite kitten from among a litter of ten or more of the mewling little monsters. Why? Because in each case the one making the choice can say, "*This one* pleases me more than the others." It could be for any number of reasons; but, "There's something special about *this one* that draws me most to him or her."

And really, when you think about it, it's kind of funny. None of us would have a problem with a child choosing a favorite kitten or puppy from a litter. And we all have favorite friends and neighbors that we prefer over others. But when it comes to teachers or coaches or bosses or most especially parents, we have the sense that it's inherently wrong for them to choose a favorite. Why? Well, because they are in charge of other people, and with respect to those people under their authority they ought to feel the same about them, no matter what. It's only fair. Right?

Friends, who ever said life was fair? Anyone who goes through life imagining that everything ought to be fair and equal all the time is in for lots of disappointment. Life is anything but fair. And as people blessed to be born in this nation where we enjoy the relative freedoms and comforts we do as opposed to having to endure the wretched conditions in which something like two thirds of the rest of the world lives, we better than anyone ought to know that *life is not fair*. We wouldn't like it if it were. And just because a father or mother may have a child whom they favor above their siblings, it doesn't mean that they don't love and care for their other children too. Of course, it's easy for me to say this; after all, among my own siblings, mom favored me the most. Not really, I'm just kidding.

But I'm not kidding when I say that parents choosing favorites from among their children is a major biblical theme. Just look at the lives of the Patriarchs: much of the storyline revolves around the fact that parents choose favorites. Consider: Abraham has two sons, Ishmael and Isaac; but in the end he favors Isaac over his older half-brother. Isaac alone becomes the heir of the Promise that God made to Abraham. Ishmael is forced to leave without an inheritance from his father. In the next generation, we learn that Isaac and Rebekah have twin sons: Jacob and Esau. Isaac favors rough and tumble Esau. Rebekah favors the more delicate Jacob. The latter two conspire against the former pair with the result that Esau is forced out without an inheritance. Jacob gets everything. And then in his generation there's all kinds of favoritism going on. Jacob favors his wife Rachel over the other three women he's married to. And then he favors his son Joseph over his ten older brothers. It's this that leads the ten brothers to betray Joseph and sell him into slavery. Then they concoct a story, telling their father that Joseph was killed by wild animals. When Jacob hears this and believes that his most beloved son is dead, he goes into inconsolable mourning. His only comfort is his youngest son Benjamin who becomes his new favorite.

I could give you many other examples, but I'm sure you get the point: choosing favorites is a consistent biblical theme. But we have to ask, why? Is it some manifestation of human sin? Is it that we just aren't geared to play fair? Those are good guesses. And it could happen that a parent might choose a favorite child with evil motivation. But that's not why we see it so often in

the Bible. No, in the Scriptures we see parents choosing favorites because *that's what God does*. Follow the biblical storyline and you will see that the Lord chooses favorites over and over again.

He chooses Abel over his brother Cain, with the result that Abel is murdered. With Abel gone, the Lord decides to favor Cain's younger brother Seth instead. Several generations later, the Lord chooses to set his favor on a man named Noah. Only he and his family are saved from the flood. And make no mistake, it's not because Noah was less sinful than anyone else or in any other way more worthy of being rescued. It's only because the Lord chose to favor him. Then, generations later, the Lord sees the whole world slipping into pagan idolatry and chooses one man, Abraham, to be his new favorite. The Lord calls him out of his pagan ways, and promises to make of him a great nation.

We later learn that this nation is Israel – and please understand that when I say nation, I mean a group of people, not a piece of real estate. It's the children of Israel, the physical descendants of Jacob and his twelve sons—*that's* the group of people the Lord singles out from all the other people on earth and says to them, "You. I have called you by name, you're mine. I created you. I have redeemed you. And therefore you have nothing to fear; for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." This is what the Lord is saying in today's reading from Isaiah. It is one of the most blatant statements of divine favoritism in the sacred Scriptures. And I'd like to unpack it a bit, because there's some great stuff here; but also because we need to get over this idea that somehow it's not right or fair for the Lord to choose favorites. He does. We've got to deal with it – and try to understand it.

First he says to Israel, "I created you". And we might be tempted to think, "Well, sure, the Lord created every nation. What's so remarkable about that?" The point is that the creation of Israel *was* remarkable. It was a nation that did not come into being through normal channels; there was something supernatural about it. Recall that Jacob (who was renamed Israel) was the son of Isaac, who had a miraculous birth. He was the son of Abraham and Sarah, a couple who couldn't have children. When the Lord finally gives them Isaac, they are both well past the age of fertility, which they didn't have when they were younger anyway. So the Lord created Israel through a single child of promise who was born of miraculous means.

Then the Lord says, "Fear not, I have redeemed you". To redeem something means to buy it back, to restore it after it was lost, or to regain custody of it after it had been held by someone else. And there are levels of meaning here. Historically, when the Lord says he redeemed Israel, he's referring to the deliverance of the nation from their slavery in Egypt. They were in cruel bondage, forced into labor for others; but the Lord rescued them from their futile toil and misery with great wonders and his mighty outstretched arms. That was Israel's first redemption. But in the context of Isaiah where this passage occurs, the prophet is also referring to a future redemption the Lord has promised to his people. Earlier the prophet declared God's coming judgment against his chosen people. He said he was going to destroy them as a nation and drive them out of the Promised Land because of their constant turning away from him to sin and idolatry. Like any good parent dealing with a rebellious child, he was going to have to discipline them to correct their unacceptable behavior. And understand that applying discipline is the loving thing to do in such a situation – even though it may not seem that way at the time to the child who is being disciplined. "Ah, but after I've punished you", the Lord tells his people, "I'm going to redeem you yet again. I'm going to bring you back from the places where you were scattered, and I'm going to restore you to the Promised Land and again show you my special favor." This too happened in history. After the complete destruction of Israel and Judah in particular, the Lord brought his people out of their exile and restored to them what they'd lost. And the point to stress here is that the Lord is always the redeemer of his chosen people. And

he'll redeem and restore them every time they lose their way. That's why they have nothing to fear.

The Lord continues to address Israel: "I've called you by name." That's important for two reasons. First, because it speaks of a *personal* relationship. This isn't the Lord calling just anyone who happens to hear. No, he's calling someone in particular. He's got a certain someone in mind who is the intended recipient of his call: "I've called *you*." Second, the name the Lord calls, Israel, was given by God. *He* named the nation. The name Jacob, the original name of Israel given by his human parents, means "liar, cheater, con-man" – something like that. And if you remember his story, the name fit him perfectly. But the Lord changed it. He renamed Jacob and his descendants *Israel*, which means "He who contends with God and overcomes". And there's real irony in the name. When the Lord renames him Israel, Jacob isn't standing over the Lord as the victor; no, he's on the ground, curled up, crippled, and clinging to the Lord's ankle for all his life begging for a blessing. It's in admitting his weakness and sin, and trembling with fear, that Jacob overcomes the Lord and receives a blessing and a new name.

The Lord goes on to promise his people divine protection: "When you pass through waters, I will be with you; and through rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." Hearing this we can't help but think of how the Lord divided of the Red Sea, letting his people safely cross through on dry ground and using the same water to destroy the pursuing Egyptian army that was sent to enslave them again. And later, when it was time to enter the Promised Land, how the Lord held back the water of the Jordan River even through it was in full flood stage, allowing his people the cross over to the other side. But it isn't only dangers of water the Lord promises to save his people from. He continues, "When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, the flame shall not consume you." The obvious biblical examples are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were thrown into the fiery furnace for their refusal to worship a golden idol and yet were not even singed a bit. These individual cases are illustrations of the greater reality: the Lord is saying that no force of nature and no evil of man will be able to harm his chosen ones. He will be with them and protect them from every threat and danger.

And then comes what has got to be the most extraordinary statement. The Lord says, "I will give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life." Do you understand what the Lord is saying here? He's saying that to save Israel, he will sacrifice the people of other nations. That's how much he loves Israel. And that idea might not set very well with us, but again, it's a fundamental biblical truth. Think about the deliverance from Egyptian slavery. What was it that ultimately forced the Pharaoh to let Israel go free? It was the death of Egypt's firstborn sons. They died in order that God's chosen ones could live in freedom. Likewise, what happened when Israel began to occupy the Promised Land? Answer: the Canaanites who lived there were either killed or forced out so that God's favorites could own the land and live in it. The inheritance of the Canaanites – the land they lived in for centuries and planned to continue living in – was taken by force and given to Israel. Why? Because God chose to place his favor on Israel. The others lost; lost their homes, their property, their goods, and in many cases their lives, so that God's people could gain.

God, who is the creator of all people, just doesn't play fair. And he makes no bones about it. He wants us to know it. He wants us to know that he chooses to favor some above others. And in our sinful way of thinking, we want to sit in judgment of him and complain about the way he does things. "That's not how you should treat people, Lord. You should treat everyone the same." The trouble is, if that's where we get stuck, we'll miss the whole point of the Lord's blatant favoritism. He's telling us something by it. It's this: what seems so unfair when viewed from above as if we had the right to judge him, which we don't, would look pretty

good from below if you happened to be one of the people of Israel. Favoritism is good if you're one of the favorites. And that's the point.

Before I mentioned that a parent's choice of a favorite child is based on something that they find pleasing in that child. The same is true of God the Father. He looks into this wide world and sees all the children he has created. And guess what? Not one of us measures up. We are all in sin and rebellion against him. We want nothing to do with him. But then the Father looks at Jesus, his only begotten Son who was born a man. And he says, "This is the one. This is my favorite. With him I am well pleased." And it's important that he says this specifically at the Baptism of Jesus.

Without going into a long, drawn out theological discourse, we have to understand *why* Jesus was baptized. I'll give you the short version. Everyone else coming to John was being baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. It's like their sins we're being washed into the river water. But Jesus didn't have any sins. He was pure and holy and perfect. So, what would happen if you put someone completely clean into a river polluted by the sins of so many? Why, he's get dirty, of course. That's the idea. Jesus isn't baptized to remove sins, but rather to take them on himself. And this is what pleases the Father: first that Jesus is perfectly righteous and has no sins of his own, and secondly that in love he chooses to take our sins upon himself.

And this is what Christian Baptism is all about. It's about us going into the water with Jesus. It's about our sins being washed from us and placed upon him. It's about his death for our sins that he bears. It's about Jesus being given in exchange for us. It's about his burial and his resurrection to new life. It's about us being united in and with him through Baptism. It's about the Father saying to us when we are in Christ, "I am well pleased with you. You are now one of my favorites."

And as his favorites, we can go back and look at what the Lord says to Israel in Isaiah, and realize that he is speaking to us – we who have been baptized into Christ. The Lord says, "I have created you." It's not a normal creation; but a supernatural one. It's a miraculous re-creation through the Lord's own Child of Promise born of the Virgin. The Lord says, "I have redeemed you. By the blood of my Son I've bought you back from sin, death, and the power of the devil." He says, "I've called you by name" – the new name he's given us: Christian, which means "little Christ". And he promises us his protection: "When you pass through the water, I am with you; and flames of fire will do you no harm. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One, your Savior."

Friends, that the Lord chooses favorites is good news for those who have been chosen. And your Baptism proves that he's chosen you. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!