

First Devotion “Love Chose” Ephesians 1:4

**“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world
to be holy and blameless in his sight.”**

How do you choose? How do you choose the person you might date or eventually the one you will marry? How do you choose what college to attend? How do you choose which ice cream to get when faced with all those tubs of cold, sweet goodness—especially now that Blue Bell ice cream is back in the state?

How do we choose anything? Well, far and away we make those choices based on selfishness. We are, after all, devoted to caring for ourselves—emotionally and physically. We are primarily concerned with *our* interests, *our* desires and *our* preservation. Deep down, that is who we are and so we largely make choices that we feel serve us best. Now, it's not always true that our choices *result* in what's good for us. We can choose to be around or with people who are not good for our emotional health. We can choose a college for all sorts of reasons other than those that prepare us well for life and career. We are free to choose ice cream for dinner every day, but that's not too smart.

How different we are from the holy God who only makes perfect choices!

And don't get too carried away when you realize that God only makes perfect choices and then consider that God chose *you* to be his before the creation of the world. God makes perfect choices but that doesn't mean the things that he chooses are perfect...or even mostly-good...or in our case, even good at all!

Occasionally you'll hear someone suggest that God chose people to believe in him based on what he knew they would eventually do, that God knew the people who would eventually choose him. The problem with that is that it ignores the grim reality of sin that God explains in the Bible AND it minimizes God's grace, his undeserved love—which he also explains!

To kind of capsule what Scripture says about the sinfulness of every person, let me put it this way: the sinful nature in every person is so corrupt that NO ONE would ever choose God. Well, here's the way God says it: **...every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood (Genesis 8:21)**. That's from Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. And then there's this from the New Testament book of Romans: **The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (8:7-8)**.

When you realize the total corruption of every human heart, the inherent evil, the spiteful opposition to God, and then you hear this: **“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight,”** it is mind-blowing! If you are sitting here today with a love for God and a trust in Jesus for forgiveness, you have the comfort of knowing that—even though you in no way deserved it—God chose you to be his child, to love him and be loved by him, before this world was created!

That means God knew you. Out of all the people who have ever or will ever populate this planet, God saw you coming and he picked you out to be holy and blameless before him through his Son, whom he would send to pay for your sin, and through the faith he would give you to trust in Jesus. Before God said, **“Let there be light,”** or **“Let us make mankind in our image,”** he was thinking about *you* and wanting you—and he chose you. Just let that sink in as you listen to “You Thought of Me.”

You Thought of Me

words & music by Stephen Bautista

when you made the universe formed the heavens and the earth
when you planned eternity did you really think of me?

when you breathed that living breath made us into your likeness
when you said that you were pleased did you really think of me?

and on the day that we rebelled
was I in your thoughts as your tears fell

when you left your mighty throne to fix the damage we had done
when you became the least of these did you really think of me?

when you were betrayed by a kiss and felt the nails go through your wrist
when you suffered agony did you really think of me?

and the moment when you left the grave
was I on your mind as the debt was paid

you wrote your word upon my heart to say you knew me from the start
and that you planned out everything all because you thought of me

“This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

How do you show love? One of the simplest, earliest ways we show love for another person is something even little kids do—and maybe they are the very best at it. Giving hugs. Not a word has to be said; arms wrapped around another person says a lot! *“I love you.” “I care about you.” “I’m here for you.” “I’m sorry. I’m happy for you.”*

We do also show love by expressing it with words—spoken, texted, written in a card. We love others by giving of ourselves—our time spent with someone, our money spent on fun gifts or something that is really needed. True expressions of love are not things we do or say expecting something back from the other person either. True love doesn’t require a response—but what we often find is that the appreciation of the other person brings expressions of thankfulness and love in return.

These things happen in our relationship with God as well. The Bible tells us this about God’s love: **“This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”** The sending of Jesus—God’s very own and only Son—into this world to bring forgiveness for sins and the hope of salvation after death, is the expression of God’s love for you and me. God the Father unselfishly sent Jesus to save all people and in doing so gave a hug that wrapped around the entire world.

The Apostle John, as he writes about true love, focuses on a love that is above all other expressions of love. Love that comes from us is not the starting point. The love of God is—the pure and holy love of God for sinful people who in no way deserved to have God feel that way about them or to receive the most precious gift of God’s Son. You see, God considered the sinful condition that separates us from him, the holy God, and he loved us with such a deep love that he had to do something. He had to remove our sins from us. The only way to do that was to send Jesus to do what we couldn’t do, to live a sinless life and to give that life to his Father in place of ours as a sacrifice for sin. This would make atonement for the sins of all people.

The Father sent his Son in love for sinners and Jesus was willing to be sent into the world and to the cross to pay for our sins and bring eternal life in heaven. These divine actions involved deep sacrifices and are the highest expressions of love. If you and I can appreciate how good a loving hug or kind gesture from a friend feels, then let me ask you, how good do these actions of love from God feel to you?!

What A Night That Must Have Been

words & music by Stephen Bautista

A peaceful night and starry skies Were all we saw from earthly eyes
The night you came into our midst But I wonder what that night was like
On the other side of heaven's light When you embarked for your visit

I'd imagine giving up your throne Wasn't just business as usual
Or another ordinary day Did you have a grand send-off by chance
Complete with pomp and circumstance Where all the souls of heaven came?

Chorus:

When you laid your crown down on your throne Did you walk out on the streets of gold
Where the angels lined up to bid farewell? Did they cheer as you went through the gate
To reverse the course of mankind's fate? Were they solemn as you began your earthly
dwell

From the annals of what goes on in heaven? What a night that must of been

In the moments before you arrived Did your kingdom really come alive
With a flurry of activity? Were the final orders then conveyed
To initiate the plans you made At the dawning of all history?

Chorus

Were the patriarchs all gathered there Intently watching you prepare
To bare the task that they foretold? Did they stand in awe and contemplate
That you'd leave behind your royal place To save a world of fallen souls?

Chorus

Third Devotion “Love Found” Ephesians 1:13

“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.”

How do you make it clear that something is yours? A Sharpie—a permanent marker—comes in handy for all sorts of things you might want to put your name on. No one is going to erase that! When you log onto your computer, your name pops up—or whatever you’ve named your computer. And then you type in your password. The same goes for your smartphone. You’re secretive, or at least selective, when it comes to sharing your passwords and logins because they are your personal identifiers. They mark these things as yours. We do this with our things because we don’t want to lose them or have them stolen. They are important and valuable to us.

Did you realize that God has done something like that with you too?! Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 1: **“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.”**

Did you realize that when you heard the saving truth we talked about a few minutes ago—the truth that the God of love sent his Son to live and die for you, to pay for your sins and bring you forgiveness—and you believed that—did you realize that in that moment you were marked as God’s child with the Holy Spirit?

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit is the one who works as the saving gospel—the good news of what Jesus has done—is shared with us at the time of our baptism and whenever that gospel is preached or taught or read by us. The Holy Spirit is the one who creates faith to trust in what Jesus has done.

But that’s not all the Holy Spirit does. Scripture also tells us that the Holy Spirit actually lives within us and that he moves us to do the things God wants his people to do. It tells us that he prays to the Father on our behalf when we don’t even know what to pray and that he works to keep us in faith until our dying day. Does it makes sense then when Paul summarizes all this as he says that the Holy Spirit is a seal that marks us as God’s child?!

What comfort is ours when we realize the love that God has shown us when he found us and made us his through the saving gospel! What comfort is ours when we realize that God continues to love us by giving us the Holy Spirit to be with us daily! You see, God found you when you were lost in sin and he saved you. He does not want to lose you. You are important and valuable to him. So he’s marked you as his child with the Holy Spirit.

A Sweet Sweet Sound (with Marissa)

words & music by Stephen Bautista

there's a sound rising up through the air
drowning out the bitter cry of despair
bellowing over the voice of fear
it's the sound of hope

resonating out where the hurting are
it echoes through the walls a broken heart
penetrating down through the deepest scar
it's the sound of hope

Chorus:

it's the sweet sweet sound of a sinner's praise
when their wayward soul is found
as they sing a song of amazing grace
all their voices rise
in a sweet sweet sound

it wells up to the tops of cathedral halls
reverberating out through chapel walls
ringing in the streets like a distant call
it's the sound of hope

it beckons to the hearts of a world in need
telling them the story of the redeemed
proclaiming that Jesus has set them free
it's the sound of hope

Chorus:

Bridge:

a sweet sweet sound
a sweet sweet sound
it's a sweet sweet sound when we sing our praises in the name of Jesus
and our hallelujahs ring
in a sweet sweet sound
a sweet sweet sound

Chorus X2:

amazing grace, how sweet the sound

Forth Devotion “Love Returned” Ephesians 5:1,2

“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

How do you honor someone? We all have or have had people in our lives who are important to us. They’ve done significant things or lived a certain respectable way. They’ve made an impression on the world and in our lives. And for that we want to honor them.

Maybe it was our parents who showed us what it meant to be a godly woman or man or who modelled and taught us the important things about life. Honoring them is living in a way that doesn’t disappoint them, following in their footsteps. We honor our spouses in the way that we talk about them, revered grandparents as we share the stories of their lives. With any of these people, we will often take the admirable qualities we see and incorporate those into our own lives.

That’s a concept that God talks about when it comes to our faith. In Ephesians 5 he says, **“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”**

The loving sacrifice of Jesus, given *to* his Father and *for* you, is what dearly loved children of God are encouraged to imitate. In no way is God telling us to offer our best-lived life on a cross—that is not possible and not necessary. Jesus did that once for all to bring us forgiveness and life. What he is saying is that we are to have the kind of love for God and for other people that Jesus had. We are to honor God and thank him by living that kind of love. That is our offering to God!

It would help your faith and your ability to do this if later today you were to read through the last half of Ephesians chapter 4, the section right before this. I say that because these verses begin, **“Be imitators of God, therefore...** The “therefore” means that this hinges on something that comes before this. And what comes before this is a whole bunch of examples of Christian living, of ways to live a life of love for God and for other people. God tells us his desire for the way his people talk to one another, the way we think about things, the things we do, the way we are to forgive one another.

All of these things we *want* to do because they will please the God who loved us first. God has done eternally significant things for us. Jesus lived in way that was more than just respectable. Jesus made a perfect impression on his Father and he has made a loving impression on our hearts. And for all of this, we want to honor our Savior with our lives. We want to live in a way that makes a difference to God and makes a difference in the lives of those around us. May God continue to work in our hearts and minds as we hear his Word so that we follow through on returning love for the love he has given us. Amen.

Offertory—Make A Difference

words & music by Stephen Bautista

I was a broken man, damaged goods, sinful through and through
then you changed it all in an instant
now I'm a forgiven man, full of life, restored and renewed
and your grace made all the difference
and there's no way to repay this gift of life you gave
but I can...

Chorus:

share your words
speak your truth
tell the world all about you
be your hands
be your feet
and make a difference
'cause you made a difference in me

now there are other souls, struggling, hurting through and through
while living a life that seems hopeless
they need to hear about the promises and hope that's found in you
and how grace makes all the difference
so let my life brightly shine reflections of your light
and...

Chorus:

Bridge

the guy with the cardboard sign
the gal in the coffee line
the neighbor who lives next door
the soldier who goes to war
the one marching in protest
the brother I grew up with
they all need someone to make a difference
so I will...

Chorus x2: