

**Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas January 5, 2025 jj**  
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We're five days into 2025. Do you know where your resolutions are? Are you looking for them, like Mary and Joseph frantically searching among their relatives for a young Jesus? If you have, in fact, made any new year's resolutions, the statistics according to a Forbes Magazine study predict only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of you are still keeping them after one whole week into the year! Not to fear, though, because by June there will still be nearly half of those who made resolutions who have actually kept their goals. We want to know their secrets; how do they succeed for six months in fulfilling the promises they make to themselves, which you would think would be the easiest promises to keep! What gets in your way so that it becomes impossible to make good on your resolutions?

The motivational speakers point out the usual culprits: that we often don't make a feasible plan, or our goals don't provide for specific and measurable results within a specified frame of time. You just need the right motivation, so you might be told. Now when this all gets serious, and stretches out of our reach, especially when we ponder some deep questions about God and ourselves, what are we meant to do with our lives—thoughts like that—we might start feeling helpless and all our petty, human resolutions begin to recede into the background. Maybe you have gotten to the point where you've just told yourself it's not worth the effort to grow anymore in your Christian faith. What do you do when everywhere you turn it looks like man-made resolutions are all doomed to fail?

That should tell you it's about time to pay attention instead to God's resolutions. Of course, our Maker and Redeemer made promises, too—not just at the beginning of the year, but before the beginning of time itself. His promises translate into real, specific blessings

for you, and our Epistle today, which is Saint Paul's introduction to the Book of Ephesians, lists out at least five of them as we together pray for our Lord to be with us as we introduce ourselves into this new year. Sure, we can ask God in this span of 365 days to keep our health in ship-shape, to help us manage our finances better, to get better grades, or to improve our relationships. But these five resolutions of your heavenly Father go much deeper than what is often on our minds. Think of them as five windows that open up from within our dark and lonely spiritual houses to let in the vast, sunshiny view of God's infinite blessings that are really and truly yours as this season of Christmas continues.

Let's go to the first window that Paul has opened up for us in Ephesians 1. With great exuberance the Apostle exults in this, the first magnificent mystery to be uncovered. Our Creator, the heavenly Father, chose us, that is, singled us out one by one, snatched out of a fallen world that was entirely consumed in its own wickedness. And here is an important phrase that Paul uses, because it helps us to see all five resolutions, these glorious windows, very clearly; that is the phrase, "in Him." In whom? In our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Father. Every spiritual blessing has been showered upon us from heaven above, and Christ is the showerhead, if you don't mind that metaphor. So in this first chapter of Ephesians, every time you notice "in Him," you'll open another window to see what our God has resolved as a blessing for you.

And for God, whatever He has resolved is already as good as done, because it was actually set in motion before the foundation of the world, before even Adam and Eve fell into sin, that you and I and all believers were predestined for adoption. Don't let the word "predestined"

scare you, because it is truly a Biblical word. Yes, it has been misused and turned into something it isn't, but when its pure teaching comes to the believer's ears, it is quite comforting. Simply stated, for us who this very day admit we are sinners and that Jesus' death and resurrection have saved us, we are granted an additional assurance that there was never a moment when our salvation was in doubt or left to chance. He made it all happen for us since, "in Him," we were included in His self-made plan. Standing at this window, you can just breathe in all the holiness and blamelessness that is fully yours, clothed in God's love. Your relationship with God—it has always been; there was never a time when you had to reach out to your Father in order to begin a relationship. He will not set us up to fail and fall away.

Saint Paul opens the next window for us, turning our attention from something that was decided before all time, to an event that occurred in the midst of earthly time. He wrote, "In Him we have the Redemption through His Blood, which for us specifically translates to the forgiveness of sins." This is the keystone of the arch, the hub around which the entire wheel turns, everything leads up to and flows back from forgiveness. That's what you receive here today, yet it was what our Lord Jesus earned through His mission of death and resurrection.

We have already now kicked off the portion of our Church Year that marks this magnificent accomplishment of our Savior, once He came in the fullness of time to walk around in our human flesh and blood. He earned for us not the potential to be forgiven, as if we have to wait for it to be realized someday—the gift is totally complete and yours now, in Him. This is the wisdom and insight that our God has lavished upon you: it's a true and godly wisdom found not just in your intellect, but especially in the heart (as it was in Solomon early in life and it was perfectly located in Jesus, even at age 12). When you are made aware of this awe-inspiring

mystery of the Father's saving will, you then know with personal experience what God's love is for you and for the whole world.

The third Ephesian window reveals to us something else that takes place alongside and together with our Lord's great blessing of forgiveness. We are united together with all things in Him. That makes us one, holy Christian Church, not just a humble gathering under this roof, and not just the sum total of separate faithful all around the world. We are united with all true believers who have ever lived and now we together have joined the heavenly host, gathered under Christ, who is the Head of the Church.

We are absolutely correct when we emphasize forgiveness like we do in the Lutheran Church. It's exactly what the Bible emphasizes. But we would be remiss if we only thought of forgiveness as a mere one-dimensional transaction and didn't also include this marvelous blessing of (also, at the same time as the forgiveness) being made into a unity, a community, sharing God's love with one another. I would think it would do a lot to dispel the myth that Lutherans only talk about forgiveness just because they want more excuses to keep sinning. Nothing else would tear apart more all that Jesus did to unite all things in Him. Rather, it is indeed a blessing to be gathered together with all the blessed, sharing in the love of God, as we were created to do in the first place.

The next blessing that we have in Him is we have obtained an inheritance. This Paul ties in with the first window, because our predestination naturally leads us to be certain of this privileged standing as heirs of God. We didn't earn our place in His kingdom; we weren't less unworthy or in any way more deserving of our Father's love. It was totally God's good pleasure to reach out to us, as well as all people around the world who have put their faith in Him. How comforting this truth is

to those who have believed and suffered, who have thought that it is too difficult to endure what this evil world throws at us, the temptations that constantly try to seize you. Do not fear! You have obtained an inheritance, in Him!

those many gifts that have this day come to you, in Him!

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The final window we find in this Epistle today is our exalted Lord's precious Gift of the Holy Spirit, a seal of the guarantee that is to be fulfilled on the day Christ returns. We don't always see God's blessings for what they are. You may have often been disappointed, dejected, and those days it doesn't look like our Lord has remembered you. After all this effort I have made, and I see nothing from God in return. But remember what Jesus says, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8) This guarantee, or you could even call it, down payment, is Christ's surety to you now, with a promise that He will bring to complete fulfillment when He comes again in glory. Until then, the Holy Spirit will help you grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Yes, it's true: we desire the final glory now; we cannot always stand firm against the attacks of the devil or our sinful nature. These enemies want you to say no to God's blessings and desire sinful things instead. But with the Holy Spirit, He who came to you in Baptism, who enabled you to believe in the first place, He will sustain you in your inheritance.

As the Christmas season merges into Epiphany tomorrow, remember from these five windows of blessings that we have discovered in Paul's letter to the Ephesians that you are included in the Gospel that has been extended to the Gentiles. Our God has resolved forever that you are the whole Christian Church and part of the vast kingdom of Jesus. Our resolutions may succeed or fail, but their significance will slowly crumble away. What stays forever is all