

# God's elect are secure in all time of need and trouble

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Every home has a collection of unfinished projects. There is that bookcase father started, but has let sit since money or time ran a little short. There is the half-done quilt mother began years ago. There is the plastic model airplane little Lars worked on so faithfully until the wing wouldn't fit right and he gave up in frustration. There are sister Sara's half-painted artistic masterpieces. Some of these projects seemed like good ideas when we stated them, but we lost interest once we found they were bigger jobs than we anticipated. Others remain good ideas; it is just that they never make it to the top of the priority list. Some of our unfinished projects will get done eventually; others will never be completed.

Thank God that the Holy Spirit leaves no projects unfinished. He completes what he starts. When the Spirit enters a heart and places saving faith there, he makes a pledge. He promises to continue working in the believer to keep him or her in that faith. The Holy Spirit keeps his promise! He preserves saints in all times of trouble in this world, and then, when the time is right, he brings them safely into Heaven. Paul expressed this Christian confidence when he wrote: *He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus* (Phil 1:6).

## THE LAST DAYS WILL BE FILLED WITH TROUBLE

The confidence that the Holy Spirit will complete what he started in us and bring us safely to Heaven is very important as we live out our life in this sinful world. God's Word speaks clearly about the hardships we can expect to come our way. The troubles of the last days will make our life difficult and try to rob us of our faith and salvation.

*"Watch out that no one deceives you,"* Jesus warns. *"For many will come in my name, claiming, I am the Christ, and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places... [And] because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold"* (Matt 24:4-9).

We need only to recall the tragic events in Uganda, Africa this past spring to see that such false prophets continue to be effective in misleading many. When Jesus speaks of wars and rumors of war, we think of Bosnia and Chechnya, to name just two examples. Famines and earthquakes? Who can see the pictures of Africa's starving children or Turkey's crumbled towns and doubt Jesus' prophecy? These are merely some of the more recent events that have made headlines in newspapers. In 1999, the world had to grapple with a major calamity almost every single day. (The actual tally was a shocking 326.) Over 100,000 people lost their lives. Jesus wants each generation to feel a sense of urgency about the Last Day.

Moreover, Jesus indicates that we can expect these signs of the end to become more frequent and more intense as the Last Day draws closer. Although we may feel that the world is in bad shape now, Jesus warns us that things are going to get worse. Today's scientists agree. They report that the number of great natural catastrophes has skyrocketed over the last decade. They have warned that there are far more typhoons, tidal waves, volcanoes, earthquakes and floods to come.

There will be extra hardships and troubles for the believers in the last days. *Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other* (Matthew 24:9-10). Persecution and martyrdom have dogged the trail of the Christian Church from the days of Pentecost on. Even today, those who remain faithful to God's Word and refuse to compromise their convictions are not

popular with the majority anywhere. The result of such pressures and persecutions will be apostasy. Many will renounce their Christianity rather than bear their crosses.

*You will see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel... (15).* Jesus continues his description of the troubles of the last days by pointing to the activity of the Antichrist. The Antichrist is not merely a political or military leader, but a figure in the church who *exalts himself* (2 Thessalonians 2:4). He is anti-Christ -- which means that he puts himself *in place of Christ* -- seeking worship of himself and his authority and demanding obedience to doctrines not found in Scripture. The emergence -- perhaps we should say re-emergence -- of the pope in recent years seems to be clear fulfillment of Jesus' words. The pope parades all over the globe to promote his cause, while in his statements he denies even the most basic of Biblical teachings. And now we find that even the majority of "Lutherans" have joined his entourage and surrendered the Reformation without a fight by signing the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification."

It is not a pretty picture which our Lord Jesus paints for us of the Last Times. *For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now - and never to be equaled again (21).*

But let's not overlook the encouraging words in Jesus' description. *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations (14).* Even in the worst of the last days, Christ's enemies will not be able to silence the gospel. Through its preaching precious souls will be won for the Kingdom of God up to the very end of time.

Jesus lists a second encouraging fact. *As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man (37-39).* In spite of the troubles of the last days, everyday life will continue in this world right up to the end. Society will not break down completely and grind to a halt. People will go on with life, thinking that wickedness, lovelessness, and godlessness are entirely normal and nothing to be alarmed about.

For us who believe in Jesus Christ there is a third encouraging thing to notice in his description of the end. *But he who stands firm to the end will be saved... If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.... For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect -- if that were possible (13-24).* Even in the worst of times, there are some, the elect, who will be protected and kept from falling.

Even more amazing, the evil things of the last times work for our good. Paul writes: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who has been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).* When Paul says things will work out for the good for those who love God, that tends to make us uneasy. We immediately ask ourselves whether we love God enough to fit into such a category. The apostle at once sets our hearts at ease, however, when he points out that it is not what we do but what God has done for us that makes all the difference. All things work for the good of those *who have been called according to his [God's] purpose.*

Consider a Biblical example. After Pentecost the church grew rapidly in Jerusalem. As a result the Jewish opposition resorted to drastic means to try to stop the growth. Persecution began. Stephan was put to death and who knows how many others. The Christians were forced to flee for their lives. And what was the result of this persecution? The Bible says: *Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went (Acts 8:4).* The result was that the Church spread throughout the world. If it hadn't been for the persecutions -- those evil, ugly, hateful persecutions -- such rapid expansion of the church would not have happened.

Let me give you another example. In 1966 a madman named Charles Whitman climbed a tower at the University of Texas in the U. S. and from that lofty perch gunned down dozens of people as they walked innocently on the sidewalks below. When the tragedy was over, 16 people lay dead. One of those shot was a classmate of mine who had quit theological study and joined the Peace Corps. He was on that university campus for training prior to being sent to India. Well, God used this near brush with death to change my classmate's mind. He decided to continue his seminary training and become a pastor. God used the dastardly deed of Charles Whitman for one very definite good. God used it to gain another pastor for his church. But there's more to the story. A little later since he did not get to go to India with the Peace Corps, my classmate traveled there as a tourist. While there he met T. Paul Mitra, an Indian street missionary. In part through my classmate, Mr. Mitra was led to attend our seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin, and he graduated with us as a pastor in 1971. He has been doing mission work for the WELS in India ever since. Isn't it amazing what good God brought about -- in part through the bullet of Charles Whitman, mass murderer? Things probably have not happened as dramatically in our lives, but we can be sure that it is true for us also. In all things God works for the good of those whom he has called.

### **GOD WILL BRING US SAFELY INTO HEAVEN**

The Bible is rich in promises for the elect, those God has called according to his purpose. Certainly we want to be sure that we are included in that number. We want to be sure that we are saved and have a place waiting for us in Heaven. God wants us to be certain also.

Our gracious God gives us reasons we can be certain of our salvation. We can be certain, first of all, because God has declared the whole world righteous through Christ. This amazing truth is called *universal* or *general justification*. It means very simply that God has forgiven the sins of all -- whether they believe it or not. Paul writes in Romans 3: *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (22-24)*. Notice that the same *all* who have sinned -- and that's every human except Jesus -- are the ones who have been justified. It is the same subject for both verses. All have sinned and all have been declared righteous. Paul says it again in 2 Corinthians: *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them (5:19)*.

We can be certain of our salvation, secondly, because God has given us faith. By *grace are you saved through faith, and that, not of yourself, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8)*. God gave us faith through the gospel: *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation (Ephesians 1:13)*. For many of us the gospel first came to us through Baptism. Because God has planted faith in our hearts, we are saved. As the Bible clearly says, *whoever believes in the Son has eternal life (John 3:36)* or again *there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)*.

We can be certain of our salvation also because of the Holy Spirit in us. *Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession -- to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:14)*. The Holy Spirit in our heart is a deposit, or a down payment, guaranteeing eternal life. The picture is familiar to people in our modern world who frequently buy on an installment plan. A down payment is a pledge that the balance due will be paid in full later. In the spiritual realm the Holy Spirit is God's pledge assuring that full payment of all God's promises will follow. Paul uses this same comforting description of the Holy Spirit in 2 Corinthians 1: *God set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (22)*. The Holy Spirit in us guarantees that, when the time is right, God will rescue us from all evil. Paul says it again in Romans 8: *And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give*

*life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.... The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs -- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (11,16-17).*

The Bible draws our attention to still another reason we can be certain that we have salvation and eternal life. We can be certain of our salvation because of our election or predestination. God says: *I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion (Romans 9:15; Exodus 33:19).* God exercised that divine prerogative when he selected certain human beings, definitely known to him, to be brought to faith. Numerous Bible passages speak about *the elect, whom he (God) has chosen (Mark 13:20).*

Paul speaks about election in Ephesians 1: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will -- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.... In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:3-12).*

God chose us in Christ *to be holy and blameless in his sight.* This holiness and blamelessness is ours through the imputed righteousness of Christ. Moreover, God chose us in Christ for a changed life. We are predestined *to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.* This second purpose includes the sanctified life which faith produces in us. It is God's doing, so that he be praised and glorified.

The doctrine of election is a doctrine of pure gospel. Our salvation is entirely by the grace of God and dependent on what he decreed before time began. It is vivid evidence of the Lord's words: *I have loved you with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3).* Our salvation is based on the redemptive work of Christ, not upon any merit or effort in us. God chose us before we were even born -- apart from anything we did or would do. Then he worked with his powerful Means of Grace to give us faith and keep us in that faith unto the end. So great is God's love for us! He did not leave our salvation to chance, or in any way condition it on something we would be required to do.<sup>1</sup>

Our faith is in no respect the cause of our election. Rather election is the cause of our faith. The elect are converted to faith because God so ordained and planned it from eternity. We are Christians, not of our own doing, but because God wanted us to be Christians.

Paul sets forth the steps God followed to carry out our salvation: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those... who are the called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).* Things began with God's purpose, foreordination and predestination, which all took place before the beginning of time. Before the universe was formed, God thought about us! Then in time God called us (that is, brought us to faith). He justified us (declaring that through faith Christ's righteousness is ours). The final step is that he glorified us. Note the tense. Although we don't see the glory fully now, it is based on God's promise -- and that makes it as good as done. Paul regards it as a certainty -- a fact in the future.

We will look briefly at the main Greek words. Paul gives a rather complete list in Romans 8: *πρόθεσιν, προέψνω, προώρισεν, ἐκάλεσεν, ἐδικαίωσεν, ἐδόξασεν.* In Ephesians 1 he adds also *ἐξελέξατο*

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<sup>1</sup> FC SD, XI, 8: "The eternal election of God not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also, from the gracious will and pleasure of God in Christ Jesus, a cause which procures, works, helps and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto."

All happened "according to his purpose" (κατά πρόθεσις. The word πρόθεσις means *a plan* or *a resolve*. What happens is all God's plan; it's God's project.

"He foreknew" (προέγνω). The Greek verb προγινώσκω means *to know someone personally*. The προ adds the idea of knowing *in advance* or *beforehand*.

"He predestined" (προώρισεν). This verb προορίζω means *to decide upon something beforehand*. As used in the New Testament, it means that God has planned or determined beforehand to save us.

"He also called" (ἐκάλεσεν). The basic word καλέω means *to call by name, to invite, to summon*. In New Testament usage it means *to bring someone to faith* or *to summon one to salvation*.

"He also justified" (ἐδικαίωσεν). The important verb δικαίω is used in the New Testament in its declarative sense and means *to pronounce or treat someone as righteous, to acquit*. Because "justified" is placed after "called" in this sequence of events, we conclude that here Paul is talking about "subjective justification." Objective, or universal, justification took place in connection with Good Friday and Easter. But that justification is credited to us (subjectively) and becomes our personal possession when we believe.

"He also glorified" ἐδόξασεν...δόξαζω means *to praise or honor*, as we do when we worship God. δόξαζω also means *to clothe in splendor* or *to make one glorious*. In this second sense it is used to describe the glory that awaits the believer in Heaven.

God the Father "chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world" (ἐξελέξατο). The Greek word ἐκλέγομαι means *to choose or elect*. Here, and throughout the New Testament, it is a middle form. That means that it has a reflexive idea. God *selected or chose us for himself*. We can picture it like children on the school playground as they choose football teams. Out of mankind in general, God selected us to be on his team.

As we look over the words Paul uses, there are three things that stand out. First, the subject always is God. These are God's actions, not ours. Secondly, the verbs are in the aorist -- that is, the past tense. These are all actions that have already been taken and completed. Thirdly, we notice that the first three words in the series begin with προ (pro). The prefix means *before* or *earlier in time*. God's plan, his knowing us personally, and his deciding to save us are things that were completed before he called us to faith, declared us righteous and gave us eternal glory.

Throughout the Scriptures God assures us that from eternity he sincerely willed the salvation of all mankind. At the same time he tells us just as plainly that he chose certain definite persons and decreed their salvation. Thus both God's desire to save all people and his decision to save certain individuals are facts taught in Scripture. Judged by human standards of reasoning, these two facts are contradictory. If it is God's will that no sinner should perish, why should he have chosen only some to certain salvation? There is no way for us to harmonize the two statements without modifying or denying one or both.

Those who try to solve the seeming contradiction regarding universal justification and election usually fall into one of two serious errors.

On the one hand, some end up teaching a predestination to hell and a limited justification. That is, they say that God condemns some people to hell without any possibility of them coming to faith, and, therefore, Christ died only for the believers. By saying this, such false teachers deny the many Bible passages which teach that God has reconciled the world and that God wants all to be saved. As a side "benefit," they turn God into an evil fiend who creates people and then sends them to Hell with no chance of escape.

On the other hand, some say that God elects those whom he knows in advance will come to faith (*in tuitu fidei* -- *in view of the faith they will have*). In other words, God looks ahead in time and sees which people will believe or at least will offer less resistance to faith. Then God chooses them to be saved. Such a way of harmonizing universal justification and election, however, eliminates grace. We become the cause of our own salvation. We are saved because there is something in us that makes us more ready or able to believe than others. The bottom line of this false teaching is that we save ourselves, which violates the clear teachings of Scripture also.

The Christian faith accepts both universal justification and election as being unmistakably taught in the Scriptures and therefore true. When two doctrinal statements of the Bible appear to us to be in contradiction, we must accept both as true. We are not given the right to harmonize them to satisfy our reason. Rather we are to *take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ* (2 Corinthians 10:5). The Formula of Concord describes the Bible-believer's attitude: "One must with special diligence distinguish between what God has revealed and what he has not revealed -- for God has kept silence on and concealed much concerning this mystery (of election) and reserved it only for his wisdom and knowledge, and we should not seek to search out or pursue it with our thoughts and speculate and brood about it, but rather hold ourselves to the revealed word."<sup>2</sup>

Christians know that God's Law and God's Gospel present a similar contradiction. The law says: Be perfect or go to Hell. The Gospel says: God forgives sins and regards you as righteous. God's wrath against sin and his love for the sinner find their harmonization in Jesus Christ and Golgotha's cross. We can be certain that God has a solution for the seeming contradictions regarding predestination also, but he has not revealed it to us. Rather God comforts us doubly with the truth that in love he wants all to be saved and with the truth that in love he chose us for salvation even before the world was created. Dr. Becker writes: "This doctrine of election has not been revealed to us for idle, useless, and extremely dangerous speculation, but to give us poor mortals, so insecure in this transient life, the assurance of eternal security in the everlasting God."<sup>3</sup>

God alone knows who the elect are because saving faith is a matter of the heart. At the same time, God wants each one of his elect to know himself to be foreordained to life. Since God decided to save the elect by faith, the fact that we believe in Jesus as our Savior is certain proof that we are among the elect. Paul writes: *We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction* (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5). In other words, the faith in our heart is proof positive of our election. For faith is not an accident. It is a gift that God gives -- according to his plan -- to those whom he has chosen and will bring safely into Heaven.

When doubts arise, we need to fix our thoughts on God's clear promises to all who believe. For we can be sure it remains true today, as in days of the Apostles: *All who were appointed for eternal life believed* (Acts 13:48). Martin Luther speaks again and again about precious advice given to him: "When Luther was a monk in the monastery, he was greatly troubled by the doctrine of election, and he worried about it day and night. One day he told Dr. Staupitz, who was vicar general of the Augustinian

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<sup>2</sup> FC, SD, XI, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Siegbert Becker, "The Relation of Time to Eternity in God's Dealing with Man as concerning the Doctrine of Election," *Our Great Heritage*, Milwaukee: NPH, 1991, III, p.74.

order of monks to which Luther belonged, about his fears. Dr. Staupitz told him, ‘Brother Martin, first find yourself in the wounds of Christ, and then you can be sure of your election.’”<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember that in the Bible predestination is never a subject addressed to the unbeliever. Predestination is revealed only to believers for their comfort. In Romans chapters one through five, for example, at least 18 passages explicitly state that sinners receive God's verdict of justified, or forgiven, only through faith in Christ. When Paul first speaks about election in chapter 8, he is speaking to those who already understand that God has forgiven their sins and made them his children through the Holy Spirit. Paul comforts such believers with the assurance that God did this because of his grace and mercy.

## **GOD WILL KEEP US SAFE IN THE EVIL LAST DAYS**

The original Greek work for "predestine" gives a vivid picture. It envisions the erecting of a fence or boundary around one's property. The erecting of a security fence is not done in any haphazard way, but with determination. So when we speak of God's predestining us for life in heaven, we might think of it as his way of putting a fence around us. He has made us his own property! That, of course, means “hands off” to our adversaries, sin, death, and the devil, who also desire to have us as their own.

Because of our predestination, we can be certain that God will bring us safely into Heaven. We can be certain that he will allow nothing to rob us of our faith. “Wait a minute,” you may be saying about now; “don’t the Scriptures warn of the possibility of falling way and losing our faith?” Yes, the Scriptures contain strong warnings of the danger of losing our faith and also beautiful assurances that the Holy Spirit will preserve us in saving faith. In fact, at times the Bible gives warnings and assurances side by side in the very same passage. The following are two examples:

*If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! [Warning]. No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it [Assurance] (1 Corinthians 10:12-13)*

*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith [Warning].... And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power forever and ever [Assurance] (1 Peter 5:8-11)*

Is there a contradiction here? It seems so. For in the same passages we are both warned of the real danger of falling and assured that God will not let us fall. To resolve the seeming conflict, we need only recall our needs as sinner-saints. We are prone to self-confidence, and therefore we need the warnings. We can easily become discouraged, and therefore we need the promises.

In the warnings and the assurances we see law and gospel. Our old sinful nature needs to hear the law as a warning against worldly security and self-confidence. On the other hand, our new Christian nature trusts the gospel and its gracious promise of divine preservation.

Troubles come when we misapply law and gospel. We fall into serious spiritual danger when we tell our sinful nature: “Don’t worry about sin and Satan. God forgives.” We fall into self-righteousness and serious false doctrine when we tell our new nature: “You can be assured of salvation if you do this

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<sup>4</sup> Becker, *The Word Goes On: Sermons*, Milwaukee: NPH, 1972, p.70.

or that." Our Old Man needs the warnings of the law lest we grow careless or indifferent. Our New Man needs the assurances of the gospel lest we worry or fear needlessly.

How are we, the elect of God, to respond to the love and grace our Savior-God has shown us? Paul says that we respond with confident trust which has no fear. *What, then, shall we say in response to this? God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* (Romans 8:31-32)

Since God is for us, who can be against us? The answer, of course, is: "No one! With God on our side, there is no one who could possibly be successful against us. Since God did the greater thing of giving his own Son into death to win salvation for us, won't he now also do all the lesser and easier things to see to it that we actually get that salvation? Of course, he will!

Confident trust, first of all, needs to have no fear of condemnation despite the accusations of our foes. *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died -- more than that, who was raised to life -- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us* (33-34).

The second part of confident trust is that we need have no fear of separation from God no matter what circumstances may confront us in life. *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (35-39).

Paul operates with the assumption that trouble, hardship, persecution and all the rest will happen. Jesus told us: *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (Matthew 16:24). But in all these dangers, we will be the conquerors. Paul says that we will be "hypervictorious" or "super conquerors"<sup>5</sup> -- all because of God's love.

We can be certain because our Savior now sits in power at the Father's right hand. God *"raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way* (Ephesians 1:20-23).

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<sup>5</sup> I.e. *more than conquerors*.