

The Awesome God of blessing

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 September 2016

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Good morning, St Silas. If you could keep your Bibles open at page 1173, that would be a great help to me. Let's look at Ephesians 1 together. Thanks, Ruth, for reading that for us.

We're starting this new series in Ephesians, and we'll be looking at it in growth groups as well. It is an absolute belter of a book in the Bible, but it is a challenging book, and some of us might be challenged, very challenged, by what we see of God this morning in the portion of the letter that we've just had read.

And I just wanted to open by saying that if we find this morning, or generally as we look at the Bible, that we come to points where we hear things we don't want to hear, and we hear things that we find very challenging, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

In fact, it can be a really important thing. If we respond in faith to what God's saying to us, that's when the Holy Spirit often is at work most powerfully in us, reshaping us and drawing us closer to know God better.

So don't feel kind of that it's disastrous if you're feeling very challenged by the Bible as we look at it together. But let's pray. Let's pray for God's help to respond rightly to what he says of himself.

[1 : 16] In Psalm 47, it says, So Father God, as we turn to your word this morning, we praise you for your majesty and your authority, and also for your goodness, your immense love, your mercy.

Open our ears to hear your voice, and incline our hearts towards you, that we might grow in our knowledge and love of you, our maker and our redeemer.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Speed dating. I don't know how many of you have been speed dating before. Let's have a show of hands.

No, just joking. Not really. So speed dating is where you book in for the evening. You have two or three minutes with each person.

Everyone's got a number. And at the end of your three minutes, all you have to do is circle, No thanks. Or let's meet up. Now, a couple of interesting things about speed dating.

[2 : 23] One is that apparently the women are much more choosy than the men. I don't know whether that's a surprise to you. Also, it's becoming less popular after a huge popularity surge about ten years ago.

And people seem to be preferring internet dating websites. And I guess we would understand that, wouldn't we? Because you do find out more about a person if you've got the time to interact with them a bit better rather than your two or three minutes that you've got.

Some people apparently still even value the chance to get to know someone first before dating is on the agenda. So don't go for any of that. Now, Christians have the unparalleled privilege of knowing God.

And yet, we go on getting to know him better, don't we? And we don't want to hold back and think, Well, I've got my idea of God and I won't let him challenge it, reshape it, fashion it.

I take it that as we spend time in somewhere like Ephesians 1, even when we're challenged by things we hear about the Lord, that helps us because we love him. And what we really want is to know him better.

[3 : 33] So let me ask at the beginning, what is your view of God really like? Let's just take a moment, perhaps have a think to yourself. When you think of your God, what do you think of? How would you describe him?

Let's think about that. Let's think about that. I don't know what you thought about.

Sometimes, though, we do think, functionally at least, in our relationship with God, as though God, he's a bit like me, only much bigger. That's kind of how we think about God a lot of the time.

A more powerful version of me. The start of Ephesians explodes that view of God. And we're going to look at these 14 verses over two weeks so that we have the chance next Sunday to really drill down on a couple of things that we won't cover today.

Now, Paul wrote this letter, the Apostle Paul, to a church he'd established in Ephesus, but it seems clear from the outset that it was meant for a more general circulation around the churches, and that's what's still going on today.

[4 : 46] And it's arrived in St Silas this morning, the letter. And his aim, Paul's aim in the first little section, is very clear at the start of verse 3, where he said this, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the aim. Paul wants to bombard us with truth about God that leads us to praise God. And primarily, the reason that he calls us to praise God is because of what God has done for us, if we're Christians today.

So he goes on, he says, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. And he will go on to explain those. Now, next week, we're going to do that.

We're going to focus in our time on these heartwarming blessings that God has given to us. So stick with us for that, as we look at that next week. But to pave the way for that, this morning, we're going to focus on the God who gives us those blessings.

So the big idea is this. God, who does what he pleases, has a plan to act for his glory by blessing his chosen people in Christ.

[5 : 58] So I've broken that down on the notice sheets, if you find it helpful, into four points about God, you can see inside the notice sheets. First, he's a God who takes pleasure in giving.

Let's just look again at the way that his giving is emphasised in the verses. In verse 3, he has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing.

Every one. If you look down at verse 6, it says of the grace of God that he has freely given us in the one he loves. Freely given. And the one he loves there is a reference to the Son.

God the Son. So God is one, but there are three persons in the Godhead. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And without that trinity, God couldn't be love.

We couldn't describe God as love. The God of Islam cannot be love because he's one person. And so, he'd either be a God of self-love or he'd have to create people and depend on them to be who he is if he was love.

[7 : 01] So the God of Islam cannot be a God of love in the way that the true living God is because in eternity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit have always had other persons to love.

And they're each filled with this kind of other person-centred love for each other. And that means that God didn't create us because he was lonely and he needed us. He created us because it was just a natural overflowing of the joy and other person-centred love within himself as God.

He created you because he wants you to share the love that God has within himself. Now, Paul continues with his language of God as this giver in verses 7 and 8.

If you look at the expressive language here, he says, in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.

Great word, isn't it? He lavished. Now, why has God lavished things on us? Well, it's not because we're great. It's not because we deserve it.

[8 : 10] It's because he wants to. Three times in this section, Paul leaves us in no doubt that God is acting for his own good pleasure.

Look at the end of verse 5. In accordance with his pleasure and will. In verse 9, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure.

In verse 11, 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 other words, God does whatever he pleases. And to just think, if you imagine you're on the subway and the person next to you says to you, what is God like? Describe God to me.

What sort of things might you say to them? You might say, powerful, loving, creator, promise keeper. I don't know what you'd say. But I wonder, would you say, happy of God?

[9 : 09] Would that be one of the first things that you would say? God is happy. He's a God who takes pleasure in things. And because he's absolutely free, he does whatever pleases him.

And wonderfully, what pleases him is for our good. And it's worth just pausing to think about that for a moment. You see, sometimes as Christians we would say that it seems inbuilt into human nature that we all have a kind of a sense of wonder.

And we sometimes envy the way children will just gaze at something in wonder. And we think, oh, if only I was still like that about the world. Now, the Christian argument would be that that sense of wonder can only be truly and fully and eternally satisfied in fixing your eyes on the eternal, infinite God who made us.

But there have been challenges to that in recent years by what you might call the new atheists who have said, well, we can have that same sense of wonder about the universe without God.

I don't know if you've come across the Sunday Assembly, but that's church for people who don't believe in God. And they gather, they sing, they listen to talks, they build community, but they don't believe in God.

[10:21] And their slogan includes that idea. They say, live better, help often, wonder more. Richard Dawkins says this in his aims about his books.

He says, a quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. And he said that the aspiration with his books is to touch the nerve endings of transcendent wonder that religion monopolized in past centuries.

Now, those people who are seeking to have that sense of wonder without God, it's worth saying, they don't know the God of Ephesians 1 because our God is so very different to a universe without God.

It just cannot really be compared. We just think, what is the universe like ultimately? What is ultimate reality if there is no God? If you trace everything in the universe back to its source, you would get nothing.

Or you would get energy in personal forces, matter, silence. Ephesians 1 tells us the true ultimate reality behind our universe is something altogether different to that and much more awe-inspiring and wonderful that it's a loving, happy God.

[11:41] And I take it that that's a great comfort to know even when we are very unhappy, even when we're suffering with terrible sadness and it might feel that that could never go away.

It shouldn't make us feel guilty about that, certainly not, but it reassures us that no matter how low we feel, we were made by and designed by and we are loved by a God who is bursting with goodness and happiness, who will never forget you and who is for you.

And that God has a plan. That's our second point, a God with a plan. And the plan comes in verse 10. Where is the world going? Let me read from halfway through verse 8. Just have a look.

From halfway through verse 8, So God has a plan for the whole of creation.

Things in heaven, that's where God is, and things on earth. As we go through Ephesians, we'll keep seeing those things being described. The heavenly realities that we can't see, the spiritual reality, the earthly realities that we can see.

[13:04] And God's plan covers all of that and it's to bring everything together under Christ. God has a Christ exalting plan in eternity. So Jesus isn't just the one you come to for a rescue so that you can be made right with God.

He is that. But he is more than that. God's plan for the universe is to exalt Jesus Christ. He is the focal point of cosmic history.

Again, it's worth contrasting that with a view of the world without God. I don't know whether you saw in the news last week that there was a thing about how geologists have said they now want to mark human history in the kind of geological history of epochs.

And they called it the Anthropocene epoch because they said because of things like nuclear testing which we had last week in North Korea and plastic pollution in millions of years time when you look back at kind of sedentary rocks you'll be able to see a little line and you'll be able to say oh well that was when the humans were around and that's the kind of effect they had on the geology of the world.

And I was reading that I was thinking that's fair enough but who exactly is looking at these rocks in millions of years time when we've all died out? You see the universe is not going to know or care.

[14:21] The universe just is and it won't be watching the rocks to analyse the effect that we had. Well in Ephesians 1 we see in contrast that there is a good happy God and he has a plan for history a loving Christ exalting plan that will go on into eternity.

And breathtakingly as God goes about fulfilling that plan to bring everything together under Christ we get swept up into it so that God has a plan for our lives as well. So why is God doing that? Why is God doing this in the world? Why does it please him to do that? Well the answer is for his own glory. The glory of God is another way of saying like the brilliance of God.

God wants to display how brilliant he is and his plan is his best way to do that. And again that comes in case we weren't sure three times in Ephesians 1.

So if you look at verse 6 it says he adopted us to the praise of his glorious grace. In verse 12 in order that we who were the first to put our hope in Christ might be for the praise of his glory.

[15 : 35] And the end of verse 14 to the praise of his glory. That's why God is acting as he is. I don't know what you think about that but I find that a little bit unsettling.

My wife Kathy is a GP she's a doctor and she was telling me how when she was training as a doctor one of her lecturers if you asked in the room why people had gone into medicine they would often have said things like well I want to make people better.

I want to make a difference. I find it rewarding to help people. And then her lecturer one day had got an award and they were talking about this award that he'd been given for his medicine and he said well yeah it's good for the glory and at the end of the day that's what we're all in it for isn't it really. We're all in it for the glory. And Kathy said there was this kind of shudder in the room of oh that doesn't sound right but is that what's going on under the surface?

Are we actually in it for our own glory? The thing is that even if we think that's not right with God it is right for him to act for his own glory because he actually is glorious.

[16 : 43] He is brilliant and so it is only right that in the universe he is recognised as brilliant. It's not an eagle if you actually are the centre of the universe.

It's only an eagle if you are not and you act like you are. And again if you think about God in the Trinity God is acting for his own glory but within the Godhead the three persons are glorifying each other.

God the Father is exalting the Son saying look at him in eternity and the Son comes into the world on a mission to glorify the Father and the Spirit is at work today opening our eyes to the glory of the Father and the Son.

So that's our second point. We've got a God who takes pleasure in giving and a God with a plan. Thirdly he's a God who chooses and this is where things might be more uncomfortable for many of us because God does whatever pleases him and his will is to unite a people under Christ.

So what Ephesians 1 tells us is that he has chosen some people to be his people. It's clear in verse 4 if you have a look. Writing to believers in Jesus for God the Father chose us in him in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

[18 : 04] So there it is before we've done anything good or bad before we've had the chance to respond to the gospel before the world had been made God chose some people whom he would make who would be saved and it goes on in Ephesians in love but for the end of verse 4 in love he predestined us that is that our destiny our future has been decided already by God in love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace and I know that this is hard for many of us I find this difficult but it has to be this way if God couldn't choose some people and in his sovereignty in his control make sure that they would follow Jesus then if you think about it his happiness would be at the mercy of how we respond to his love we see this clearly in John chapter 6 in Jesus teaching

Jesus was teaching a crowd in John 6 and I put the verses on the screen he said this an open offer to anyone in the world for my father's will is that everyone who looks to the son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise them up at the last day so that's an offer that's open to anybody all of us if you're here this morning and you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian that offer is for you that if you'd like to know God in a relationship that starts now and lasts forever you look to the son to Jesus and you put your trust in him and it's yours as a gift but look at what else Jesus said in the same chapter he said no one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws them and I will raise them up at the last day so we can't choose Christ ourselves unless God does a prior work in our lives that makes us want to do that he changes our hearts within us again in verse 37 all those the father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me

I will never drive away so the whole human race has turned its back on God but there is a group within that rebellious group of people we would never as a group none of us would ever have turned

back to God by ourselves and so God chose before the foundation of the world a group of people within that set of humanity to be a gift from the father to the son of people who've been made right with God and it's important to say that that choosing is only ever talked about in the Bible as an encouragement for Christians we're told that to encourage us if we're believers in Jesus it's worth thinking why is that encouraging well it's encouraging because the picture we might have as a Christian of wonderfully being drawn into God's family might be a bit like this one on the screen God's my father now and I'm holding on to his hands and he loves me like a child and that's a great picture but there's something wrong with that picture and what's wrong with it is that it looks as though

I might lose my grip and let go and the message of the Bible is that after you've become a Christian and you think you've got hold of God's hand like that you find out that God got hold of your hand like that and the wonderful thing about that is it means that he won't let go he'll keep hold of you no matter what you go through that's why it's encouraging to learn that as a Christian so this news that God chooses isn't ever meant to put you off if you're not a Christian if you're worried that you might not be chosen by God don't worry just become a Christian just put your trust in Jesus and you'll be fine the gospel invitation the invitation of the Christian faith is a bit like an archway and if you imagine you're walking along the road of life and you see this archway and at the top it says Jesus' words come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest and you look into the person of Jesus and you think I want to come to him and you go through the archway and you become a Christian and once you become a Christian you look back and on the other side of the archway that you've come through

God tells you I chose you before the foundation of the world be comforted by that truth but where we find it most difficult of course as Christians is we think of our friends and our loved ones who are not Christians and it's worth just me spending a moment on that to ask is it unfair on people who are not Christians that God has chosen some people to be his because the answer is no God doesn't give anybody less than they deserve and that's because we've all rejected God every one of us has said to God get out I don't want you at the centre of my life get out and God doesn't owe it to anybody who's done that to be gracious to them now we find that hard because we think of people who are so nice that's what I do but sin isn't about not being nice it's a bit like if you imagine a pirate ship it's a ship that's in rebellion against the authorities and everyone on that ship is responsible for being on a pirate ship now on the pirate ship you might have a variety of people there might be some really nasty people on the pirate ship who are cruel and greedy but you might have some people on the pirate ship who are really nice people the chef might be a really nice guy the guy who sweeps the decks the one who is the doctor on the pirate ship and you might look at their lives for a day and think well what are they doing wrong but if the authorities catch the ship everyone would be punished because the problem is they're on the wrong ship and that's what the human race is like in our rebellion against God some people might be going about the world being very nice people but like everybody else they've turned their backs on God they're on the wrong ship and if God had decided not to choose anybody and save anybody we'd have had nothing to complain about in that sense we should find it incredible that God would choose anybody to make them right with him instead of enduring the judgment we all deserve so there was an old preacher

[24 : 47] Charles Spurgeon who said this I do not find it hard to believe that God doesn't choose everyone I find it hard to believe God has chosen me and why has God done it like this well I don't know but I think it helps us to remember that his ultimate aim is the praise of his glorious grace that's why he's acting in the world so I take it that there must be some way in which God's choosing of some people who've rejected him to save them and not to choose everyone who's rejected him will bring greater glory to him that in some way he will be glorified more in judging some as well as saving others we don't know why he's done it like that so what happens to the ones God has chosen to save what happens to Christians what's the effect of God's plan well that's the fourth point we've seen that he's a God who takes pleasure in giving he's a God with a plan a God who chooses fourthly he's a God who blesses verse 3 again he has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ now why has God done that well he's done it because of what glorifies him the most see what glorifies

God the most is when his people enjoy knowing him so much they don't need anything else see the more God can fill us as his people with unspeakable delight at knowing him the more he gets the glory so it's good for us that God is acting for his glory nothing displays the brilliance of God more

than his people Christians enjoying knowing him so much that they can say this is enough being a Christian you can take the world you can take everything away from me and as long as I have God that is enough for me we're going to enjoy drilling down into what God has given us next week as we pause and reflect on those amazing blessings that he's chosen us to be set apart for him and blameless and the slate is wiped clean and he's set his love on us and he's redeemed us and adopted us and he's given us his spirit as a seal guaranteeing our great future there's indescribable riches that God has given us in our union with Jesus Christ and not because we deserve any of them but all by his free gift and all simply by putting your faith in Jesus so stick with it come back next week but today let's make sure that we're people who from now on spend more time looking at this God as he's described in Ephesians 1 there was another old minister

I mentioned Spurgeon there was an old minister Martin Lloyd-Jones who said this in my 27 years of pastoral experience the people I find to be most miserable in their spiritual lives are those who continually think of themselves and their own condition and feelings interesting isn't it or as a friend of mine used to say when he was having a week where he was feeling fed up or frustrated or resentful he'd say Martin I've just I've spent too much time camped inside my own head this week great phrase well instead of camping in our own heads and wallowing around thinking of ourselves let's practice spending time thinking of the God of Ephesians 1 he's not just like me only a bit bigger we need to gaze in awe at the sheer magnificence of God who is bursting with love exploding with delight so that he made a plan in eternity to bring together a people in Christ and freely lavish blessings on them so that they would be so eternally and infinitely satisfied in him that they would display in their satisfaction in him how glorious he is let's have a moment of quiet and then I'll leave us in a prayer heavenly father we praise you for who you are the sovereign uncreated creator of all things that nothing limits you we marvel that you are acting for your good pleasure in all things with an eternal plan that exalts the Lord Jesus

Christ forgive us when our view of you is too small thank you that your good pleasure is to bless us from the moment we put our trust in Christ with every spiritual blessing help us by your spirit that you have given us to treasure this knowledge of you in our hearts so that we live lives of praise and worship to you for your glory amen