

God's Eternal Plan

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: 21 April 1996

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] a former president of a theological seminary in the United States was converted by reading this letter to the Ephesians written by St. Paul and he wrote to this book I owe my life I saw a new world everything was new I had a new outlook new experiences new attitudes to other people I loved God Jesus Christ became the center of everything I had been quickened I was really alive and that's one person's response to reading this letter in the New Testament part of the Bible Paul's letter to the Ephesians and it's from this letter that I'll be preaching the next five or six weeks here and certainly the first half of chapter one which was read for us earlier on is one of the grandest statements in the Bible about God and also about his purposes and it also happens to be one of my favorite passages in the Bible so before I preach I'm going to pray oh God we pray that you'll speak to us this morning through your word that you'll write it on our hearts and enable us to live it out so that we can be better servants of Jesus Christ for we ask it in his name

Amen the verses that we're looking at are on page 180 and 181 from Ephesians 1 verses 1 to 14 and from time to time I'll be referring to it and it's good to have it open the world we live in with regards to God at least is very confused and uncertain and sadly often the church seems confused and uncertain as well is there really a God is there really meaning in this world is there purpose in this world how can I know whether there is a God or not how can I know if there's meaning in this world or not for many people and for many churches sadly it seems that God is the great unknowable something somewhere that's so remote that we really can know very little if anything about him at all and so often we find in the world and in Christian circles a vagueness about God that there's some airy fairy sort of thinking some confusion about God some uncertainty about him so often what happens in church buildings is that because there's this uncertainty then people take a step back from God they put up barriers between themselves and God they build church buildings that have screens across some bits of the church as though God were behind there and we don't really know it's all a mystery some churches have lots of smoke to sort of give a sense of mystery or mysticism with regards to God some churches have assimilated into their worship all sorts of eastern mystic ideas or new age mysticism as though we can't really know much about God at all there's something there but we don't really know what it's about or what he's like

I guess there are various reasons for this I think in the last 200 years the period called the enlightenment what we call modern times has been very rational and very scientific in its thinking and because God lies basically beyond that framework of rational thinking people have tended to think well we can't really know much about God at all so they've taken a step back since that time in just recent times we have what's called post-modernity a time when everything goes and everything is all right and what you believe is okay for you and what I believe is okay for me where there's no absolute truth anymore and it's all contributed further to a confusion about God and so often people take steps back it's been contributed to by the multiculturalism in which we live in our day and age that we're now confronted by all sorts of different religions faiths, expressions of philosophy and so on and so therefore there is confusion about what is right if anything and about whether the Christian faith is right or not and in the end

God becomes the lowest common denominator of all these things and that's not very much at all and God becomes something remote and something unknown and in the end it seems something unknowable but when we read Ephesians 1 we find the opposite is the case there is nothing uncertain here there is nothing confused here there is nothing unknowable about God here for Ephesians 1 is one of the strongest statements of Christian certainty about God that we can find in the Bible and the first thing that it says about God is that God has done something he's acted he's not just some ethereal being that's remote he has acted in this universe and in this world and so in this passage that was read for us God is the subject of the main verbs that are there so in verse 3 blessed be God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for he has blessed us in Christ

God has done that and in verse 4 God has done something God has declared his hand in what he's done but what God has done is not in response to people it's not in response to what we do it's not in response to the world situation for what God does is initiate things God acts before anything else and verse 4 makes that clearest of all God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world God didn't choose you when you were born he didn't choose you when you were adults he didn't choose you when you became a Christian he didn't choose you sometime in the past in the sort of immediate past but God chose us before the foundation of the world that's before we were born before we were thought of before our parents or our grandparents were thought of before Jesus died on the cross before he was born in Bethlehem before the events of the Old Testament even before Adam and Eve and even before the creation of the world

[6 : 17] God chose us so he didn't choose us because of anything about us he didn't choose us because we're good or we're going to go to church he chose us before we were even thought of it's God who's acted to declare his hand to show initiative in what's going on in this universe that's the first thing I guess about God but the second thing is just as important God has acted in everything that he's done in and through Jesus Christ notice how in this passage that's clear in verse 3 blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ there's no blessing from God that is not in Christ he doesn't bless us in any other way but in Christ and in verse 4 the same even as God chose us in Christ we can't be chosen by God unless it's in Christ there's no other sense in which God chooses us or establishes a relationship with us apart from being in Jesus Christ verse 5 the same

God destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ we can't be children of God in any other way but through Jesus Christ verse 6 is the same what God has done is freely bestow grace on us in the beloved that is in Jesus Christ there is no reception of God's grace in any other way but in Jesus Christ the same again in verse 10 which is a statement of God's purpose for this universe it is a God's plan to unite at the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ God's plan is not the union or a happy harmony of people wherever they are it's a union of people and all things in Christ and union that's not in Christ is not God's purpose union in Christ is his purpose for this world verse 12 says that Christians are those who hoped in Christ verse 13 says they are those who believed in Christ and are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit in Christ there is nothing God does without working in and through Jesus Christ for us so that's the second main point

I guess of this passage and that's how God is understood that's how he's known that's how we can understand what God is about because he's made it clear by acting in and through Jesus Christ that's how we can know God that's how we can know his purposes in this universe and in this world I want to concentrate on just two of the things that are mentioned that God has done that are mentioned in this passage the first I want to mention is in verse 7 in Christ we have redemption now the word redemption is not a word that's used very much today there aren't many things that we redeem but the idea here is a bit like the idea of being a captive being hijacked on a plane periodically as you know I'm sure usually in the Middle East or North Africa planes are hijacked and the demands are made and if those demands are met then people are told that the hostages will be released so some terrorists bought a plane and they demand that the plane flies to such and such a place and that such and such happens whether it's the release of prisoners in another country or whatever that demand is if you like a redemption price and that has to be met in order for the prisoners in the plane the hijacked victims to be released so a demand is set a price has to be paid whether it's dollars or the release of some other prisoner or something and if that's paid then the hijacked prisoners will be released now that's the idea here as well the New Testament perspective on humanity is that human beings are people who are basically failures in God's sight we may be good but we're not perfect and the New Testament calls it that we are actually slaves to sin that by ourselves we aren't perfect we're not good enough for God and we can't change that in ourselves we are slaves to sin and so in order to be released from that slavery a redemption price has to be paid and the price that's paid as Paul says in this verse 7 is Jesus' blood that is his death on the cross that's the price that's paid in order to release us from slavery to sin another word that means the same thing in this context is the forgiveness of our trespasses in the same verse that is that Jesus' death his blood on the cross is the means by which you and I are forgiven for our sins that's what we've actually recognized in this baptism service this morning that this is not sort of a naming ceremony in some ways a baptism service is a very serious and very grave affair because the symbolism is that a person is baptized into the death of Jesus which is not a very pleasant notion but the idea is that a person who's been baptized is acknowledging that God has forgiven them their sins that they are redeemed from their sinfulness and all of it because Jesus died on the cross for us the second thing

I want to point out about what God has done in this passage is in the preceding verse in verse 5 God destined us in love to be his sons or his children through Jesus Christ many of us would say perhaps that when we're born because we're human we are a child of God but again that's not the New Testament perspective and nor is it the perspective of baptism which we've had today in the older baptism service we baptize children or adults in order that they may have something which by nature they cannot have by nature that is by being human by being born as a human being we are not children of God we are human beings we are made by God but not every person is a child of God for we are not naturally God's children we are adopted children of God and just as with a normal human family we would have natural children and we may have adopted children with us we are adopted children of God there are no natural children of God apart from Jesus we are adopted children of God and the only means by which we are adopted into God's family is through

Jesus Christ no other way not by being good not by being religious not by being churchy not by being baptized but by but through Jesus Christ it's the only way in which we can be adopted as God's children through Jesus Christ because through his death on the cross we are forgiven our sins are forgiven we are redeemed from our sinfulness and God accepts us as part of his family it's the only way through Jesus Christ no other way but through Jesus Christ and baptism acknowledges that the parents and the godparents today along with us have expressed Christian faith that they are sinful people who need God's forgiveness we have all if we have said those words acknowledge that that's what we have proclaimed today as Christian people that we are God's children not by right not because we're human not because we're here not because we're baptized not because we're good not because we're religious but because Jesus died and through his death we are forgiven that's the only way in which we're adopted into God's family all of these things that this passage speaks about

[14 : 29] God doing in Christ are not random acts it's not as though from time to time God sort of looks at the world and thinks well what am I going to do now well now I might adopt some as my sons or children and now I might send Jesus no God from the beginning from the before the foundation of the world had a plan and a purpose and time and again in this passage it expresses the fact that God is a purposeful God the word it talks about God's will God's purpose God's pleasure God destining things God choosing things God guaranteeing things it's all directed for a purpose when God even before he made the world he had a purpose for it and he and Paul sums up that purpose in verse 10 God's purpose is to unite all things in him that's in Christ things in heaven and things on earth you see God's purposes are not a mystery

God is not a mystery though it talks about a mystery in verse 9 whenever the New Testament talks about the idea of mystery it's in the context of what was unknown therefore a mystery is now known it's revealed God has declared his hand in Jesus Christ that's what verse 9 says God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will and that is that in Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ God is bringing all things together the word unites in verse 10 is not just meaning a sort of harmony between people it's actually a fairly rare word and what it's the word that's used at the end of an argument when you sum up the argument that is you've had all these things and now you sum it up in one little sentence or one heading or one slogan and that's the same word here that God is bringing the whole universe summed up into Christ Christ is its head or its Lord if you like that's the overarching thing and that's what God's purpose is for this universe not just a happy union but a union in and under

Jesus Christ its head the other expression in this passage about God's purpose comes in verse 4 where God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world for the purpose of being holy and blameless before him I think this explains a bit about what it means to be united in Christ who is the head that it involves holiness and blamelessness that is perfection it's not that we do that in order to be right with God but that in response to God we are to live holy and blameless lives now as you know this is the first week I'm here in this parish and my first Sunday here and it happens that the vision statement of Holy Trinity Doncaster is taken from Ephesians 1 verse 10 that God's purpose is to unite all things in heaven and earth under Christ the head that's God's purpose and that is the purpose of this church in its vision statement which has been devised in previous years so when we as a church are setting our agenda and deciding what we should be doing this is a criterion for deciding whether we should or should not do such and such a course of action is it contributing to God's purpose for this universe to bring all things under Christ the head not bringing things to church not bringing things into union or harmony but bringing things under Christ that's God's purpose and that's the vision statement of this parish as well there are so many good things that a church can do and could do there are many many many good things that we could do far more things that we could do that are good and good things right things to do even but we don't have the time the money the resources we have to decide what are the best things to do as we establish our vision our ministry as a parish and we decide that in line with this principle here

God's purpose is to bring all things together under Christ who is the head and that should be the guide for us as a parish as we set our agenda for the next few years the next decade and the next century and the next millennium as well let me conclude then there is no uncertainty in Ephesians 1 there is no confusion in Ephesians 1 about who God is and what he's on about in this universe and what his purposes are for this world we cannot sit back and think God is an unknowable thing God's purposes are unknowable it's not true we may not know everything there is to know about God but we know sufficient God has declared his hand enough he's told us enough for us to know what he's on about in this world and therefore for this church and therefore for us as individual people there is no doubt here there's no confusion here there's no uncertainty here it's absolutely clear

God can be known because he's acted and declared his hand in Jesus Christ and there is no other way in which he's acted and there's no other way in which we can know God and there's no other way in which we can be part of God's family except and only through Jesus Christ so if we're looking elsewhere we'll fail to find God only in and through Jesus Christ will we find God and find his purposes for this world and therefore meaning for our life and our life as a church so let us make sure that we as Christians but we as a church as well have the same confidence and assurance as Paul has in this letter the same knowledge of God's purposes as Paul has here in Ephesians 1 let us pray O God our Father we thank you that you have acted in this world and in this universe to declare your hand in Jesus Christ we thank you that you have chosen us in Christ you have destined us in love to be your children through Jesus Christ that you've redeemed us in Jesus Christ you've forgiven us through Jesus Christ you've made your will known for us in Jesus Christ and that your purpose is that we should be people who hope in Christ believe in Christ and are sealed with the Holy Spirit in Christ

[21 : 03] Father we pray that we as individuals and as a church will have Jesus Christ as our focus as our centre and as our goal in all that we do think, say, feel and imagine we ask this for his sake Amen