

God's Ambition

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[0 : 0 0] I'm a Christian Union, part of AFES, the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students, just to get the definitions out of the way there. And, of course, I work with uni students, and I wonder what you think of when you think of uni students.

Pardon me if you are a uni student. How do you think of yourself? Do you think of yourself or do you think of uni students as ambitious people, I wonder? People who go to uni must be ambitious. They certainly worked hard at school so they could secure their places at uni.

And most came, if not all, came with ambitions. All sorts of ambitions, I think. So for many, university is basically a job machine, isn't it?

You go to uni to get qualified so that you can get the right job, that pays the right amount, that secures the right kind of lifestyle. That's one kind of ambition that many people coming to uni have.

But there are others, believe it or not. There are still arts students, I'm glad to say. There are still those who hope to find answers to questions or to discover the right questions to ask.

[1 : 0 4] They're idealistic in their quest for truth and for meaning. They want to know what the world is about and where they fit in to that. What is the meaning of life?

Things like that. Others, though, have political ambitions. They're keen to have an influence, firstly at uni and then in the wider world when they graduate.

One of the more famous presidents of the Monash Christian Union from the late 60s went on to politics. He was actually part of the Labour Club at uni. His name's Peter Costello. He works for a different party now.

Others hope to find love, the woman or the man of their dreams. That's what they're hoping to find when they get to university. University students, whether they're Christian or whether they're not, have all sorts of ambitions which they come to uni hoping to find fulfilled.

So what am I doing at Melbourne Uni? What's my job? Well, there are lots of things that I do. There's lots of activities that I help to run. I teach the Bible in different contexts. I run training courses.

[2 : 0 7] I help to organise camps. I help others to organise camps and things like that. But essentially, my job has one main aim. And that is to open up the Bible with students so that together we can discover what God's ambition is for the whole universe that we, whether we like it or not, are caught up in.

I wonder if you heard it as Michael read the reading tonight from verse 10 of Ephesians. We get this ambition of God summed up. You might actually like to turn to your reading if it's not open at the moment.

Page 949 in the New Testament. We're looking at Ephesians 1. I'm actually going to read the NIV translation of verse 10 here. I think it's better at this point. He says, This is God's plan from eternity to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

This is God's great ambition for the universe. And it's true, isn't it? Whether willingly, with joy or unwillingly, all people, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

This is God's great ambition that he is conforming all of history and every human life to. Now, it's a challenging job sharing with people God's ambition.

[3 : 29] It's challenging sharing that with people who aren't Christians, actually, because they think, Well, you know, I know why I've come to uni. I have my ambitions. And suddenly you're telling me about someone with competing ambitions. I don't like the sound of that.

This doesn't fit with my plans for my life. That may be obvious, that non-Christians don't share God's ambition. But many Christian students that I meet, people who've grown up in the church, have a very different view of God, I think, when they started uni.

I think many students have a magic genie view of God. That is, God is there to help me realise my hopes and my dreams, my ambitions.

It's all about what God is doing in my life, God's will for my life. So we make our plans, we dream our dreams, and then we go and invite God to be a part of them and to help us realise them.

So I prayed that God would get me to uni. And I got to uni. That's good. That's the first part of the plan fulfilled. Now let's see the rest of it come to fruition. It's all about what God's doing in my life.

[4 : 32] So you rub the lamp when you need some supernatural assistance. Out comes the genie. Everything's all right. But then you leave it on the shelf next to your Bible, perhaps, for the rest of the time. That's not the picture we get when we open the Bible, is it?

We have it the wrong way around so much. We have our ideas, our plans, and that we think God can come and help us with. But when you open the Bible, you see that God actually has plans of his own. He has his own ambition for the world.

And he invites us. In fact, he calls us to be caught up in his plan to bring glory to his Son, to bring everything under one head, even Christ.

So as we dig into this passage tonight, what we need to think is, well, what is God's ambition? And how do my ambitions, or perhaps how do my ambitions for friends or relatives or children or whatever that I have at uni, how do they fit with what God's ambition is here?

Well, as we open up to Ephesians, we're, of course, looking at one of Paul's letters. And it's easy to get a bit ho-hum when you open up another letter of Paul, because we feel that we've heard the start before.

[5 : 38] Yes, I know who's writing. It's Paul. I know he's writing to some Christian somewhere and some church somewhere. Let's just get on to the important stuff. But it's actually really important to know who's writing you a letter.

It changes the whole way that you read that letter. So when I go to the letterbox and I get one of those form letters from the real estate agent with the fake signature written on the bottom that's meant to look real, it goes straight into the circular file, doesn't it?

That's where it goes, into the bin. Apologies to any real estate agents here. But if I get a handwritten letter from the Prime Minister with a Prime Ministerial seal on the back, this is something that makes me want to stand up and take notice.

This is important. I make time and space in my day to read this letter. Why am I being sent this letter? By this person. This is important. I need to pay attention. This is kind of what this letter's like, although it's even more important.

Listen to the way Paul describes himself. He says he's an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. That is, he is sent by Christ with the authority of Christ to speak God's words to God's people.

[6 : 44] He didn't just wake up one day and decide, I think I might jot a few thoughts down to sort of stimulate people. No, it's by the will of God, isn't it? God has raised him up to speak his words to the Gentiles, to the non-Jewish world.

And look at who he says these people are, who he's writing to. You are God's people. You are saints. Not St. Kilda supporters, although I could include that. Not necessarily, though. But people who've been set apart by God for God.

The faithful in Christ Jesus. Those who have come to have faith in Christ. So it's like this. Paul says, listen up. You're God's people. And God, through me, his chosen mouthpiece to the Gentiles is addressing you.

So you need to listen to what God has to say. And I think we need to listen to what God has to say to us tonight about his ambition. Now when we come to verse 3, we see that basically what we have in verses 3 to 14, if you like, is one long song of praise to God.

It's how this section begins and ends. He starts by saying, blessed be God. He ends by saying, praise be to God. In fact, in the original, it's one continuous sentence from verses 3 to 14.

[7 : 57] It's sort of like a snowball rolling down a hill, getting bigger and bigger and gaining momentum and gathering speed. And it's quite difficult sometimes to work out all of the bits because it is quite detailed and chunky, if you like.

But if we remember that it's basically one snowball with one key message, we should be able to navigate our way through. And that is that this is all about God's great plan concerning Christ, the cosmos and us.

That's basically what it's about. And actually verse 3 is a really great summary statement for what he's about to say. It says, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

It's just overflowing with blessing, this verse, isn't it? Blessed be God because he has blessed us in Christ. Now God is blessed simply because he is God.

We're only blessed when God blesses us. And we discover right from the outset that he has blessed us in Christ. And please notice it says not some spiritual blessing in Christ so that after a while the Christian has to go to another place to get a top up for what they haven't got in Jesus.

[9 : 13] No, it says every spiritual blessing, everything God has for us is found in his son, the Lord Jesus. Every blessing of the Holy Spirit.

We don't need to go anywhere else. And in contrast to mere material blessing, it's spiritual blessing. It's a blessing that's bigger than just this world.

He says we're blessed in the heavenly places. Let's talk about how big the wide the scope of this blessing is. The blessing from God in Christ by the power of his spirit has cosmic dimensions.

We are blessed not only in the context of our life here on earth, but in the context of spiritual powers, both good and evil. But powers over whom Christ has the ultimate victory and rules.

And Christ gives us the whole blessing of God through that victory. So have a listen how else this blessing is described for Christians. In chapter 2 verse 6 we're described as people whom God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

[10 : 21] Or chapter 3 verse 10. So that through the church, what is the church doing? The wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

God's people send a message to the universe about God's power and grace and the blessing that he has given us in Christ. I wonder if you ever think about what it means to be a Christian.

And if you do, whether you ever think in terms of this, the kind of blessing that is yours in Christ. I don't know about you, but one of the biggest traps I fall into is comparing myself with other people and becoming envious of them.

So I compare myself with the non-Christian world around me. I see people who have more money than I do, who have more things than I do. They seem to be more blessed than I am. And I think, gee, it would be good to be blessed like they are.

Wouldn't that be good? But then I come to church on Sunday and I see Christians that have gifts that I don't have. I see people being able to relate to people in a way that I just can't do.

[11 : 28] And I think, well, gee, I'd really like to be blessed in the way these people have been blessed. Well, do you see what sort of antidote this passage is to that kind of blessing envy?

Whether or not you feel like it at the moment, you have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. And notice the past tense there.

God has achieved this blessing once for all in what his son has done for us. Do you see this? For all of us here tonight who have put our faith in Christ, God holds nothing back from us that he wants to give us now and in an even more complete way in our glorious future with him.

So it's a great encouragement, I think. But I think there's also a bit of a sting in the tail here. I think there's a challenge. Because I think that if we don't believe or if we don't remember that we have every spiritual blessing in Christ, that will show itself in our life in very practical ways.

For example, I think our ambitions will shrink to become much smaller than God's ambitions. You see, if I forget what I have in Christ, what am I going to do? I'm going to look in every other conceivable place I possibly can to find blessing.

[12 : 45] I'm going to look for it in things. Or I'm going to look for it in people. Or I'm going to look for it in money or whatever it happens to be. And slowly my ambitions will be shaped around those things.

And they'll shrink compared to God's ambition. Well, the antidote to that too is clear. And Paul's doing it for us tonight in this passage.

It's to remind ourselves of how we have been blessed. How we are blessed in Christ. So let's look at it in a bit more detail. How have we been blessed?

Well, verse 4. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. Lots there, isn't there?

[13 : 51] Lots of ways of describing the blessings that we have in Christ. But two themes, I think, emerge from these verses. And the first one is this. We're dealing here with a proactive God with a plan, aren't we?

This is a proactive God. Again in this passage, it's God who takes the initiative. It's God who makes the first move. See, this is not a God who's sitting around waiting for us to choose him.

He's not sitting around quietly waiting to see how he can fit into our arrangements, if that's okay. No, this is a God with a plan. This is a God who's been actively seeking to choose us, actively seeking to choose us for himself before we, or the world for that matter, were made.

That's what the passage says. In verse 4, he chose us in him, that is in Christ, before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in his sight. See, there's no room for any boasting here, is there, that our good deeds have earned us this relationship with God, this blessing, because he chose us in Christ even before the world was made, before any good deeds were done, in fact.

Again, it's not because God saw that we were holy and blameless, that he chose us. Rather, he chose us so that we might become holy and blameless in his sight.

[15 : 09] But Paul pushes back even further into the past to trace God's blessing. And we find that God's blessed us by choosing us because he's already destined or decided in advance that that's what he's going to do.

Verse 5. That means that our salvation is, it's not an afterthought, it's not an accident. It's not because we happen to be in the right place at the right time. No, this has been God's plan from before the beginning.

He destined us to be adopted as his children through Christ Jesus. Again, the fact that as Christians we can say we're God's children is not because this is an inherent right that we're born into or something that we've managed to earn by impressing God in some way.

No, we've been given the right as a gift by God through his Son to be his children in accordance with his good pleasure and will. In other words, the initiative for our salvation from beginning to end has been God's.

That's why it doesn't say praise be to God and Andy that he can now be called a child of God. No, verse 6. It's to the praise of God's glorious grace which he has freely, literally engrafted us with in the beloved, that is in Christ.

[16 : 26] Now, I don't know if you're still awake or if you heard what I was saying or whether you're thinking of the logies that are happening even as we speak. But I mentioned a dirty word as I was reading. It's a dirty word for some people. I mentioned the word predestination.

And this is a word we don't like to talk about, I think. Surely, yes, we like to think God is in control. We like to say, looking back on my life, I'd like to be able to see God's plan unfolding.

But to say it up front like this, to say that God has made us Christians, well, that seems a little bit offensive. What about free will? Well, let's think for a moment.

What is freedom? What is freedom defined by the Bible? Freedom according to God is living as he made us to live in a loving relationship with him and with others made in his image.

But you see, from the moment of Adam's disobedience in Genesis 3, humankind has attempted to redefine freedom to mean independence from God.

[17 : 25] Self-rule, autonomy. God has no control over me. I'm free to choose my own adventure. I don't really need God to have life. I can get that myself. But that's a lie, isn't it?

It was the lie that the servant told Adam and Eve that they believed. The lie that says we don't need God. We're independent from God. But see, the tragic irony of this is that having believed the lie, they exchanged real freedom for slavery.

God's blessing for a curse. They thought that by choosing independence from God, they were choosing freedom. But actually they chose slavery to sin, the world and the devil, as Paul puts it at the start of Ephesians 2, verses 1-3.

And consequently, death and judgment. Now, this isn't the only reason, but I think that one reason we find doctrines such as predestination hard to take is because sometimes I think this definition of freedom, that is being independent from God, that the world asserts, creeps back into our thinking.

God doesn't choose me, I choose him. But listen to how Paul talks about this. It's actually a very comforting truth. Listen to his pastoral heart here as he tells us about God choosing us.

[18 : 36] Because it tells us about God's initiative to free us from slavery, to redeem us, to give us his freedom. It tells us, doesn't it, of his proactive love that reaches out to us first when we didn't want to have a bar of him.

Of course it challenges our pride. It highlights God's free will, the free will of God to be God. It humbles us, it exalts God and it's hard to get used to that.

But think about what it says about your salvation. We are eternally secure in it because it is God's power that makes us and keeps us Christians, not just our good intentions and hard work.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we know how weak we are, don't we? How easily we turn away from God even daily. How can we ever have assurance that we will persevere as Christians?

Well, this passage gives us that assurance because it points us to the God who wanted to save us, who planned to save us and actually did in Christ.

[19 : 41] It's God's power and love that is made and will keep us Christians and nothing can separate us from that love. So that's one thing that emerges from these verses.

We're dealing with the proactive God, the ambitious God, with a plan. The other thing that comes out here is that we're dealing with the God who has done all of it in Christ.

And we've already touched on this, but I don't know if you noticed how many times these words in Christ or in him or in the beloved occurred in reference to Christ. Someone's counted them. I think it's 11 times in verses 3 to 13.

He chose us in Christ. He destined us through him. He's given us grace in him, redemption in him. What does he mean that God chose us in Christ to be his children?

I think it means that God's will was to make us his children, that that will was carried out in Jesus Christ and his death for us. In other words, how was God going to carry out his plan of adopting us?

[20 : 40] In Christ and in his death for us. Blessing comes in Jesus Christ. He is the source, the centre of all God's blessing.

Because it's in Christ that that curse I talked about before, the opposite of blessing, is removed. The curse that is a consequence of our rebellion against God, that has been the reality of the human race since Adam.

So in Adam, in our natural state, there is curse. But now in Christ, there is blessing. And that's because he removes the source of this curse, our sin.

Listen again to verse 7. It says it much better than I can. Redemption means being bought out of slavery at a price.

What is the price? The death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Redemption through his blood, which includes the forgiveness of sins. We've been redeemed.

[21 : 46] And who are we now? We were told in verse 1. Saints before God, holy and blameless. People who can now live out the reality of that as they pursue holy lives.

Lives in obedience to God in the practice of our lives. Do you see how great God's love is for us? That he should lavish his blessing on undeserving people, adopting us into his family by giving his son to die for us.

This is God's wisdom. This is God's understanding. Well, let me summarise here. Your head may be hurting as mine is. This is a chunky passage, as I said at the start.

What are we learning here? Well, God has blessed us. How has he done that? By choosing us in Christ to become his children. How does he do that? He chooses us in Christ because it is only in Christ that our sin is dealt with and that we are blessed by God.

That is, we have freedom from sin. We have forgiveness of sin. We enter into God's family. No wonder Paul is praising God in these verses. But see, it's even better than that because Paul not only tells us what God has done, he's blessed us.

[23 : 01] How he's done it. He's saved us in Christ. But he tells us why he's done it. He gives us God's vision, his game plan, his goal in all of this.

In verses 9 and 10, the curtain is lifted on God's cosmic plan that Paul's been nibbling away at and hinting at in this passage. But before we lift the curtain, I want to ask you a question.

Let's build the suspense a bit. I want to ask you a really important question. When you think of God's will, and that's what verses 9 and 10 are going to tell us about, what God's will is. When you think of God's will, what do you think of?

What does that expression mean to you, God's will? Well, I think most of the time we think in terms of God's will for my life. And what are the big things that we want to know?

Well, what course, obviously? What job? What woman? What man? What house? What ship overseas? What retirement plan? What coffin? Roughly in that order, these are the things that we want to know.

[24 : 03] How many prayer meetings have you been to where these things have formed the heart of the requests? See, sadly, I think what we try to do often is turn God into the Women's Weekly astrology section.

God is there to tell me the details of future months and years so that my hopes and dreams will be fulfilled or realised. Now, don't get me wrong.

Again, God in the Scriptures is concerned about the details. He provides for His children. He's concerned for the details of His children's life. But shouldn't we be more concerned with our ultimate destiny and not just the next 5, 10, 20 or even 50 years?

Shouldn't we be more concerned about the direction He's taking the whole of the universe? Well, let's have a look then at God's will. He has made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure that He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Christ or under the headship of Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

You see, God's will was a mystery in the sense that God has revealed His will. His will that was purposed in Christ, as we've seen, put into effect at just the right time, God's timing, at the climax of all history, all eternity.

[25 : 25] And what was that will? It's a great plan, isn't it?

Think about it. A divided world, no longer. People united to each other and united to God. Imagine this future, God in Christ, lovingly ruling over a world where there's no more hostility or division or strife, where the enemies of God and His people have finally been defeated, where one great multinational family, bound together in their common love and praise to the Lord Jesus, are gathered together to share and enjoy His love forever in a universe where everything is geared towards the glory of God.

It's a big vision, isn't it? And look at the scope of these blessings. Who is it for? Verse 11. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of Him who accomplishes all things according to His counsel and will, so that we who were the first to set our hope on Christ might live for the praise of His glory.

In Him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in Him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of His glory.

See, Paul first starts by saying, we, that's talking about Paul and the first Jewish Christians. We, he says, the gospel went first to the Jews. Think of Acts. It started in Jerusalem, didn't it? But Jerusalem couldn't contain it.

[27 : 02] It spread out. And so he talks about you also. He's writing to people from a Gentile background, people in Ephesus and the rest of Asia, and even as far as Melbourne and even Doncaster.

You also, he says, were included in Christ and His great plan when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. See, if this is where the universe is going, surely this is where we want to be, isn't it?

This should be what shapes our ambitions, rather than the promise of living in a better place here, a better suburb or something, or driving a better car, or whatever it happens to be.

You can name it. See, this is what we should be spending our time praying towards, if you like, investing in. Spending our time thinking about, talking about.

But notice there too, if it's all about God's choice, well, how do we know we're included? Well, look at verse 13. When you heard the word of truth and believed. You see, if you've heard the gospel, if you've said yes, that's what I want.

[28 : 10] Well, this passage assures us with all confidence that God has called you. And the assurance comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Verse 13. When you believe, you are marked in Him, in Christ, with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

See, the fact of your faith in Christ and the changes in your life that this has brought about, that others will be able to see, that points to the fact that God has done something. He has set His seal, His stamp of ownership on you.

It's like sometimes when people lend me books and they've got a nice stamp in the front. This is out of the library of David Walter. I need to give him some of his books back. But I know that it belongs to him. It's got his stamp on it.

That's what he's saying, that the Holy Spirit marks us out as God's people. We are authentic works of God. Predestined, called and adopted. We belong to God.

Verse 14 says something else about the Holy Spirit. He's also a down payment of our complete redemption or the first pledge of our inheritance, the first instalment. If you think it's good now being a Christian, well, there is more to come, Paul says.

[29 : 19] It's only the beginning of the blessing that we experience and have in Christ for all eternity. Do you see what this is saying?

You are God's chosen people, His special possession. You are caught up in God's great plan for the cosmos. Your future with God is forever assured.

But that brings us back to where we start. Could somebody looking at your life tell that? That that was your ambition? That that was why you went to work each day?

Why you studied? That that was why you conducted your relationships in the way that you do? What are your ambitions? What are our ambitions? Again, many at uni, top mark in your subjects.

Find the girl, the guy of your dreams. Earn lots of money in your part-time job so you can save up and buy a car at uni. Accumulate your chosen possession of whatever it happens to be, software or whatever it is.

[30 : 25] How closely do our ambitions resemble God's ambition to see everything under Christ? Here's another question that might help us with that. Where is our confidence for life founded?

Where is our confidence for life? Is it in our health or our wealth or our gifts or our family? Or is it in Christ who's done everything to deal with your sin to make it possible for you to share in God's blessing?

How is what we've heard tonight going to shape the way we share our faith? We heard at the start of the service that Good News Week is coming. Are we confident going into Good News Week that God is at work calling people to himself?

Or do we think that it's all about our power to be able to explain the gospel? Do we hesitate because we think we're not articulate enough? Or our programs won't be slick enough? Or whatever it happens to be.

Do we believe that God has a plan that he is carrying out? And as the word of truth goes out, as his people take that out, he promises that he is bringing about that plan. Do we believe that?

[31 : 30] Do we have that kind of gospel optimism? What about the way we pray? This passage should shape the way we pray. How do we pray? What do we ask for?

Why do we pray? See, if as we've learned tonight, this is God's plan to bring everything under Christ, if he catches us up in his purpose to do this, as we tell the truth, as we speak the words of the gospel, and as we rely upon God in prayer, it makes sense, doesn't it, to share God's ambition.

It makes sense to pray in the light of this. Do we share God's ambition? And could somebody looking at our lives and looking at our church tell what that ambition is?

I'm going to ask that God would make that true in our lives and our church. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you that you are a God with a plan, that you are a powerful God, that you are the sovereign God with a plan, and yet you are also a loving and merciful God, that you choose to gather us up into this planet, to use us, to use our prayers, to use our words as we share our faith with others, as we live as your people day by day.

We thank you for your amazing power and your amazing mercy in our lives. And Father, we thank you most of all for saving us in Christ and for telling us of your ambition and catching us up in that.

[33 : 00] Please help our lives and the life of this congregation to be increasingly conformed to your ambition rather than our own, that we might long to see all things under the Lordship of Christ, that that might be our great desire, the thing that informs and shapes and inspires the way we pray and live each day.

And Father, we pray these things for Jesus' sake. Amen.