

Communion with God the Father

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[0 : 00] One of the most precious and beautiful parts of life is the relationships that we have with other people.

If you think about your life so often, the happiest memories we have are moments that we share with others. And of course, that's one of the reasons why the past year has been so hard, because these kind of moments have been restricted or maybe even taken away.

It's such a beautiful thing to be close to someone, to be with them in their company, enjoying their presence. It's amazing when we have things in common with other people, the same interests, the same thoughts, the same dreams.

And it's such a privilege to be involved with somebody else's life, to participate in things together, to achieve things together, to walk side by side, to stand shoulder to shoulder.

And it's a huge blessing when we can share our lives with other people. So talking, laughing, crying, sticking together through it all. These connections that we have with other people are so precious.

[1 : 14] In fact, in many ways, these are the best bits of life. And I think that's one of the reasons why social media is such a massive phenomenon today, because we all crave that social connection with other people.

There's no big multinational websites for isolated media, where we just post stuff up that no one else can see, because everybody longs for a connection to other people.

That need for a connection is one of our deepest human needs. And that connection, that involvement, that relationship, that sharing with other people, there's a word that captures all of those things.

It's the word communion. It's a wee bit of an old fashioned word, but it's a brilliant word, because it conveys the idea of a union and connection with one another, of having things in common with other people, of being part of a community together, and of enjoying that amazing blessing of having other people in our lives.

I'm sure that if you were to think of the best stuff that happened in the last week of your lives, I would be pretty confident that many, if not all of them, would be examples of communion with others.

[2 : 49] So a good laugh with a friend, an encouraging comment from your boss, a successful task with your colleagues, a gentle kiss from your wife, a big hug from your child.

And if you didn't have any of these things, I'm pretty sure you probably wish you had. Communion with others is a massive part of life, and it's a beautiful thing.

But for the next four Sunday evenings, we're going to be looking at something even more amazing, something even more beautiful.

We're going to be looking at the fact that if you are a Christian, or if you become a Christian, you can have communion with God.

This week, we're going to be looking at communion with God the Father. Next week, God the Son, then God the Spirit, and then the last sermon in the series at the end of June will be God as One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[3 : 59] And there's loads of places in the Bible we could go to look at this, but we're going to pick one place to focus on, and that's the chapter that William read. For all four of our sermons, we're going to go to Ephesians chapter one.

So tonight, our focus is on communion with God the Father. Let me read again from Ephesians chapter one, verses three to five.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who's blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love, he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the beloved.

Now, Ephesians one is one of the richest chapters in the New Testament. It's kind of like the Niagara Falls of awesome theology. And even though we're going to spend four weeks in it, we really will be only dipping our toes in.

[5 : 02] I want to start tonight with a quick survey. So I'm going to put four questions up on the screen. You don't have to answer it loud, but I want you to answer them in your own heads. For each of the questions, you're going to answer them on the scale of one to 10.

Okay. So I want you to, as you do that, as you answer the four questions that will come up, I want you to think of other people in your life. So maybe family or friends or colleagues and think about these four questions.

So here they are. How significant are you in their plans? So scale of one to 10, one, not very 10, immensely significant.

How wanted are you in their eyes? How much do you belong in their company? How indispensable are you to them?

For each of them, I want you to give a score, one to 10, thinking of a person. And depending on who you're thinking of, your answers will be different. So if you had thought of a close family member, then your numbers would probably, I hope, be higher.

[6 : 08] But if you thought about your boss or your friends at school or the girl or guy that you secretly have a crush on, your numbers might have been lower.

Now I want you to do it again. But this time, I want you to think about God.

How significant are you in God's plans? One to 10. How wanted are you in his eyes?

How much do you belong in his company? How indispensable are you to him?

I don't know what you gave yourself, but I'm pretty sure you would be inclined to give yourself fairly low numbers.

[7 : 15] And the reason I think that is because that's how I think. I instinctively feel that my numbers would be kind of on the low side. I think of all the stuff that God is doing in the universe.

I don't see myself as a particularly significant part of that. I think of all the stupid mistakes that I've made in my life. And I see them all as reasons for God to not really want me.

I don't feel that I deserve to be near to God, and I can think of dozens of people who belong in his company a lot more than I do. And I think God could do fine without me.

That's really, you know, I'm not that big a deal. But with you, how do you feel?

As Christians, these feelings can really discourage us and cripple us as we want and try to live our lives following Jesus.

[8 : 30] But this is where we need to remember that it's often the case that our feelings are like bad politicians, very powerful, totally unreliable.

And we need to replace, to try and replace our feelings with theological facts.

And in this chapter, Paul is giving us key theological facts that answer all of these questions for us. And to show that, I want to just pick out four key words or phrases that will help us find the real answer to these four questions on the screen.

So how significant are you in God's plans? The answer is 10. And the word that tells you that is in verse five, in love, he predestined us.

You are saved as a Christian because God has predestined you to be part of his family. Now that's our word and a concept that people can easily struggle with.

[9 : 47] So sometimes we come to those, sometimes it could be one of the words that's in the Bible that we kind of just try to pretend is not there and we just play it down and we think, well, I'm not really going to think about that because I can't really get my head round it.

I can't really get my head round it and I can't play down that whole idea of what predestined is referring to. Others actually use it, rather than playing it down, they actually make it the biggest problem of all.

And they use it as the kind of big reason for not becoming a Christian. So people, when they're called to follow Jesus, will say, well, well, I don't know if I'm predestined, so I'm not going to do anything.

I can't respond to God's call. It's easy to think like that. If anybody here thinks like that, I just want to point out and say that that way of thinking is a little bit ridiculous.

It's actually very ridiculous because if you are being consistent, if you really believe that you need to confirm that you know that you're predestined before you do something important, what happens if you apply that to breathing?

[11 : 13] So if I ask, are you predestined to breathe for the next minute of your life? Do you stop breathing and not do anything until you have the answer?

Or do you just do the thing that you need to do to prevent death? When you are called to follow Jesus, pausing to establish your predestined status is a ridiculous thing to do.

Stop asking the wrong question and just do the thing you need to do to prevent death. Put your faith in Christ.

And of course, the whole reason it's the wrong question is because the word predestined is not written there to explain the metaphysics of how time interacts with eternity or how God's sovereignty interfaces with human responsibility.

It's not there to explain that. It's there to tell you something else. It's there to tell you that your salvation is absolutely crucial in God's plans.

[12 : 19] So how significant are you in God's plans? The answer is 10. Your salvation, your place in God's family is not some afterthought for God.

It's a key part of God's eternal plan of salvation. That means that you are sitting here before God tonight as someone who really, really matters.

And when you became a Christian or if you become one, which I hope you will, I hope you even will tonight. If that happens, God doesn't say, oh, wow, splendid.

That's a bonus. He says, yes, this is exactly what I have been working everything towards.

And as he says that, the whole of heaven roars with joy. Our second question is how wanted are you?

[13 : 20] In his eyes, how wanted are you in God's eyes? The answer is 10. And there's two key words that show that one in verse four, one in verse five chose and will.

Now, these two words go together. They're highlighting God's choice and God's will. And these are crucial concepts for understanding how God's salvation works.

When we speak about how much God wants you, it's actually easy to make God look a wee bit pathetic as though he kind of needs you and he's like begging you to follow him or notice him.

That is not true. God is God almighty, a consuming fire, creator of all. And he does not need you in any sense of kind of dependantness or neediness, but the incredible truth is that he wants you.

And these two words, choice and will, are telling you that all that God the Father has planned and implemented and accomplished for your salvation is because he wants you.

[14 : 38] He actually wants you. How wanted are you in God's eyes? The answer is 10, not nine, not nine and a half, 10.

You think of God's great plan of salvation to bring you into his family. Think of how it's planned from all eternity, worked out across history, revealed throughout Scripture, accomplished by Jesus, applied by the Holy Spirit.

Why does all that awesome stuff happen? It's because God wants it. It's what he's chosen to do.

It is his will. Third question, how much do you belong in his company? I think you know what I'm going to say.

But this is maybe the hardest one to believe of all because surely our brokenness, our sin, our mistakes, surely that makes us unsuitable to be in God's presence.

[15 : 43] But again, Ephesians one is telling us that the answer is 10. Verse four reveals that he says that God chose us so that we would be holy and blameless before him.

This is God's goal. His great plan of salvation is in order for us, for you to be holy and blameless before him.

It's only possible through what Jesus has done. Paul explains that in verse seven, where he speaks about our redemption through Jesus' blood and the forgiveness of sin that that brings.

This is getting us to the very heart of what the Gospel achieves. Our sin and our brokenness and everything that's mucked up with us, that does make us unworthy of God.

That does make us unable to approach him. There's that what we call alienation and separation between us and God. And that of course is because he is holy and perfect.

[16 : 53] We are unholy and we are to blame for that. But the whole reason Jesus came is to fix that. He came to cleanse us from our sin, to restore us into our relationship with God, to set us apart as holy, and the fact that he took all the burden of our sin means that we are now blameless before God if we put our faith in Jesus.

So if you are a Christian, where is the place that you most belong?

The answer is that it's in God the Father's presence. In fact, it is in God the Father's arms.

And that of course is why we want to turn away from sin, because sin is trying to pull us into places and circumstances and activities where we do not belong.

Fourth question, how indispensable are you to God? You know the answer. It's 10. And we know it's 10 because of this word, the word adoption.

[18 : 19] The great goal of God's saving plan is that you would be adopted into God's family. That means that if you are a Christian or if you become one, you are now God's child.

And he is your Father. And every parent in here, let me ask you, are your children dispensable? Never.

And that is true of us. How much more is it true of God? God's saving work through his son, Jesus Christ, has brought you into God's family.

That means that you're utterly secure, indescribably precious, and God is totally, eternally, and irrevocably committed to being your Father, and he will never let you go.

The answer to all four of our questions is 10. The 10 is supposed to be above the arrow. Forgive me for the technical glitch, but imagine that the 10 is at the end.

[19 : 30] It's supposed to be there. If you're a Christian or if you become one, all of these are at 10.

Now, if you doubt that, or if you struggle to think that, or if you think, yes, every other Christian in here is at 10, but I'm not, if you feel less than 10, then you have majorly underestimated the power of the cross.

The whole reason the cross happened is because God has an eternal plan to save you. The massive cost of the cross was paid because of how much God wants you.

The effect of the cross is big enough to present you holy and blameless before God. The security of the cross makes you safe in God, the Father's family, forever.

The cross is mind-blowingly powerful, and that's why Paul can say that in Christ we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

[20 : 47] Jesus has done so much on the cross. And it's all to make a massive difference to you.

So what does all of that mean for our communion with God, the Father? Well, what I really hope that all of that is going to help us see is that we, all of us, I think, probably need to change the way we think about what God the Father thinks.

I know I do. We need to change the way we think about what God the Father thinks, because we can so easily think that we're not significant to Him.

We're not particularly wanted by Him, that we don't belong with Him, and that we are pretty dispensable. And the reason that we can think that that's how God thinks is because so often that is the way the world and the culture around us makes us feel.

So often in life, we're only important to people as long as we're useful to them, not always but very often. So we can get picked up and put down in relationships, at work, in friendships, we're easily overlooked, quickly forgotten.

[22 : 10] And that's why so many people are trying so hard to be noticed, whether that's in the workplace or on a night out or in social media. People put in a huge amount of effort to be noticed or to be seen as significant.

Very often to have communion with people, we need to impress them. Often we're wanted as long as we conform to certain expectations.

So if we look good enough, or if we're smart enough, or if we can bring in enough money, or if we say or believe the right things. All too often, people will want us, but only if we do what they are actually wanting or expecting us to do, to have communion with people.

Very often we've got to tick all of these boxes. Very often we can feel like we don't belong, or that if we're going to belong, we need to change either a personality transplant or a major physical makeover or whatever.

I can remember in high school, being really, like early years of high school, being really embarrassed at the thought of anybody finding out what kind of duvet cover I had at home.

[23 : 24] Because I was embarrassed by it, but I actually loved it, and I didn't want to change it, but I did not want anybody to know about it. It was Thomas the Tank Engine.

Don't judge, Jesus said, don't judge you. But isn't that true? How many of us have got stuff like we don't want anybody to know, especially in high school, there's just all that ridiculous pressure from people around us.

And we think, well, you know, I'm only going to be accepted if I fit in, and if I change, and if I don't let people see all the stuff that's going on. So often we can feel rejected and judged.

One day everyone likes us, the next day we don't. One year work is going well, the next year it isn't. We have communion with people for a while, but all too often life or people or circumstances can move on, and we are left feeling a little bit disposable.

And that leaves us in a really difficult situation, because as we've said, we long to be close to people, because every human craves communion with others.

[24 : 31] But all too often we're left feeling overlooked, awkward, like we don't fit, or that we're unwanted. And the result is often we can push people away, because we don't want to expose ourselves to those kind of bruises, because we think people just look at us and think of us in these ways.

If you are a Christian, or if you become a Christian, Ephesians 1 is telling you that God will never think of you like that.

God does not think the way our culture thinks. God will not treat you the way people might treat you, because when God the Father looks at you, what does He actually think?

What does He see? He sees someone so, so important, because you are part of His predestined plan.

He sees someone that He wants so much. In fact, you are His choice. Communion with you is actually His will.

[25 : 58] He sees someone so suitable for Him, someone who's been made holy and blameless through the cross, so that when you come into God's arms, you come to the place where you just belong so perfectly.

And when God sees you approach Him, He's not looking at a stranger or a customer or even a servant. He's looking at His child, a child who He is going to love forever.

And that means that when you say, Father to God, whether that's as you worship Him just now, as you pray tomorrow morning, as you ask for help at work, as you cry out to Him in trouble, as you lie awake in the middle of the night, or as you flop at the end of a hard day, when you say, Father to God, whether that's the first time you said, or the thousandth or hundredth thousandth time to say it, when you say, Father to God, He never sighs or rolls His eyes or gets exasperated like people often do.

Instead, God responds with a fully satisfied, totally delighted, never-endingly patient smile.

And He says, Yes, my dear child, I am here. As we conclude, there's three things I'd like you to remember and I'd like you to think a little bit more about.

[27 : 45] One, communion with others is a wonderful thing. It's one of our deepest human needs. And for me, just personally, looking back over the past three years, the best part of being in Edinburgh has been the times of communion we've enjoyed with you all in so many different ways.

Communion with others is a wonderful, wonderful thing. But please don't look for it in the wrong place.

And I'm going to just lay into social media for a moment. Now, there's a lot that's really good about social media. There's a great example this morning, the painting I got given, which is so cool.

We found out about that through social media, through Instagram. So that's an example of how social media can be so amazing that an artist in America painted this awesome picture of St. Columbus and I got given it.

That's so cool. That's a wonderful example of what's good about social media. But please don't make that the place where you go for real communion.

[28 : 53] Don't make it the cornerstone of your identity or your security or the place where you feel most wanted. And the same goes for superficial relationships.

It's the wrong place to go and it's the wrong kind of communion. Please don't go looking for significance or belonging or specialness in the latest fads or nonsense in the culture around us.

You don't need to because God is offering you something far better. God is saying, you can have communion with me.

And in fact, when we have closer communion with God, that can really help us use things like social media in a much healthier way. So please don't look for communion in the wrong places.

Second thing I want you to think about is that, and we sort of touched on this at the start, communion with God the Father does not rest on feelings. It is grounded on theological facts.

[29 : 58] So if you are praying tonight or tomorrow and if you feel rubbish about yourself and rubbish about your prayers, please remember the words that we've been looking at.

You might feel like a terrible Christian. The theological fact is that you're predestined in God's perfect plan to be His.

You might feel totally unlovable. The theological fact is that you're chosen by God. You might feel like the last person God would want near Him.

But the theological fact is that Jesus has made you holy and blameless before God. You might feel like an outcast.

The theological fact is that you are God's precious, beloved child. And all of these facts mean that you can go straight into your Father's arms.

[31 : 05] And what I am pretty sure you'll find is that the more we do that and the more we let these theological facts shape our thinking, the more all these rubbish feelings will go away.

Communion with God the Father doesn't rest on feelings, it's grounded on awesome theological facts. And then the last thing I want you to think about is this. Communion with God the Father is totally free, but it came at a monumental price.

God's purpose, desire and commitment to have you in His arms came at the cost of giving up His own Son.

That means it costs God the Father everything. It costs you nothing. It's all a gift, as Paul says, it's all of His glorious grace.

And that grace, that free gift is reminding us of the fact that all of God's salvation is being freely offered to us all.

[32 : 22] And that's why if you are not yet a Christian this evening here in the building or if you're watching at home, if you're not yet a Christian, you are not being excluded from this.

You are being invited into it. All of this is what God wants for you too. And I don't know where you are in your own minds.

And I know that maybe some of you have been thinking about Christianity for a long, long time. I am only here with you for one more week. So please listen to the three most important words you'll ever hear from my mouth.

Go for it. Go for it. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you so much that we are more important to you than we've probably ever realized.

[33 : 29] We thank you that you want us more than we'll ever really be able to understand. We thank you that through Jesus we belong with you more than anywhere else.

And we thank you that your commitment to us as our Father is so great that you'll never let us go. You are an absolutely amazing Father.

And we love you so much. And we pray that every person here and everyone watching at home would come to know that amazing love, that amazing communion that we can have with you.

Amen.