

## Teaching 1: “Reconciled to God through the death of his Son”

The Psalm we’ve just heard - Psalm 145 - praises God because he is great and glorious, powerful and righteous... but it speaks also of his “abundant goodness”. It says that he is “rich in love”, “gracious and compassionate”, “good to all” and “faithful to all his promises”. It says that he “is near to all who call on him” and “satisfies the desires of every living thing”.

And it’s not just this psalm, or even all the other psalms. The Bible is drenched with God’s abundant goodness: his bounteous creation in the opening verses of Genesis

his promise to Abram: “I will bless you”

his self-revelation to Moses as “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands”

his offer to Solomon: “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

his care for Elijah: “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.”

his love outpoured for us through Jesus Christ.

Isa. 30.18 makes a promise: “the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion.”

And Psalm 34.8 offers an invitation: “Taste and see that the LORD is good.”

So my starting point this morning is that God loves us and longs to bless us with his good gifts.

What do we need to do, in order to receive God’s gifts?

“Blessed are all who wait for him!” (Isa. 30.18)

“Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.” (Psalm 34.8)

“Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Ps. 37.4)

We need simply to wait for the Lord - to take refuge in him - to delight in him.

Rom. 4.4 “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.”

God’s gifts to us are not earned. We don’t need to deserve them.

1 John 3.1 “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”

God’s gifts are a token of his love for us.

Ps. 37.4 says “Delight yourself in the LORD *and he will give you the desires of your heart.*”

And God’s gifts to us are personalised: they meet our deepest individual needs.

God longs to bless us. He gives not because we deserve it but because he loves us. And he knows us so well that his gifts match our deepest needs.

But many of us find it difficult to receive all that God longs to give us. We find it difficult to receive like little children, as Jesus asks us (Luke 18.17 “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”): in trust, utter dependence, helplessness, humility and knowing that we have done nothing to deserve it.

We struggle with that, sometimes. But Rom. 4.25 tells us that Jesus “was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

Jesus *died* so that we can receive all that God longs to give us. How dare we refuse?

Rom. 5.1-2 “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith...”

Eph. 3.11 “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

Through Christ’s death, we are at peace with God and have unhindered access to him.

Heb. 4.14-16 "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

John 16.24 "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."

As we go into our first time of silence, you might like to reflect on God's longing to give us his good gifts.

We do not need to deserve them. We do not need to compare our own needs or deservingness with other people's. God's gifts are the outpouring of his grace and love to each one of us.

Although God knows exactly what we need, he wants us to be in a relationship with him: to invite him in and tell him our deepest longings.

Nothing stands in the way of our approaching him. Jesus died to reconcile us to our Father God.

Jesus asks now, as he did 2,000 years ago: "What do you want me to do for you?"

## Teaching 2: "Saved through his life"

Psalm 36.5-9

5 Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the skies.

6 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,  
your justice like the great deep.

O Lord, you preserve both man and beast.

7 How priceless is your unfailing love!

Both high and low among men

find refuge in the shadow of your wings.

8 They feast on the abundance of your house;

you give them drink from your river of delights.

9 For with you is the fountain of life;

in your light we see light.

God the Father supplies all our needs "From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another." (John 1.16)

"In him we live and move and have our being." God gives us life itself ... our physical and mental health ... our earthly and spiritual gifts ... our relationships ... all our material possessions ... beauty and joy, goodness and love ... All that makes our hearts sing and be thankful comes from God.

He orders and reorders our lives in accordance with his good purposes for us.

He is the God who heals.

As Paul says, "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." (Acts 17.27)

God reaches out to us, reveals his nature and his love for us, and even sends his Holy Spirit to convict us of the truth of his revelation.

God the Holy Spirit not only convicts us but also empowers us;

he conforms us to the character of Christ;

he unites us in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ;

he prays through us;

he speaks through scripture;

he imparts and unlocks our gifts;

he directs and guides us;

he explains and enlightens us.

But even all this - all that we receive from God the Father - all that God the Holy Spirit does in us and through us - isn't everything. At Christmas we remember the divine power and unmerited favour that are poured out for us through the gift of God the Son.

Through Jesus Christ we are recipients of the "incredible gift" of "the surpassing grace God has given." (2 Corinthians 9. 14-15)

Rev. 22.17 "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."

It's through Jesus Christ that we all have access to this "living water" (John 4.10).

We have life "to the full" (John 10.10) when God's kingdom breaks through into our lives; when God's order is

restored and his will is done, bringing healings and deliverances and transformations.

All of this comes through the forgiveness that we receive through Jesus Christ; through the power of praying in his name; through the grace that he gives us to forgive and to live in a right relationship with one another as well as with God. That's when we experience the truth that "the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever." (Dan. 7.18)

But perhaps we experience God's grace most completely at those times when we feel most distant from this picture of life in all its fullness - of life lived under Christ's rule.

2 Cor. 12.7-10 "To keep me from becoming conceited ... there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul suffered unimaginably for Christ, and in particular Satan tormented him with this "thorn" or "stake" in his flesh - presumably a physical ailment - some think an eye problem of some kind. Let's be clear: weaknesses and sufferings are not God's will and are not to be welcomed for their own sake. Paul himself, a godly man of enormous faith, prayed repeatedly for it *to be taken away*.

But God did not give Paul the answer for which he was pleading. He did not take it away; he did not put an end to Paul's torment. Instead, he made a promise: *My grace is sufficient for you*.

Why? Because *my power is made perfect in weakness*.

Again, it's important to remember that God is not saying that weakness - torment - is good in itself, or what he wants for us. What he's saying is that when Satan is doing his worst, and when we've struggled against it for so long that we can bear it no longer, then he can use it, if we let him, as an opportunity to do even greater things than he can do when we're enjoying that full life of joyful communion with him and our brothers and sisters. His strength and power can be most effective when we're so weak that we surrender completely to him.

Satan intends the suffering for our destruction, but God can use it for our salvation and for his kingdom.

When Paul accepts his suffering for Christ's sake, and gives it to God - when he lets God use it for his good purposes - that's when he experiences God's power - the enduring power of Christ - in all its strength as it dwells in him. That's when he can experience for himself the truth that God's grace *is* sufficient for him.

And that's why he can accept his weaknesses and struggles and sufferings and even be content in them - because he knows that they provide the opportunity for Christ's victory in him and through him.

None of this is easy. God *does not* take away Paul's suffering.

He uses it as an opening for his power to be active in and through Paul.

But he can only do this because Paul lets him. Paul knows that *nothing* we can suffer is worse than separation from God, so he gladly accepts everything else that Satan can throw at him, in order to know God more closely and bring in his kingdom.

And in so doing, he receives the indescribable gift of God's grace.

We experience the "indescribable gift" of "the surpassing grace God has given" when we know the power of Christ dwelling in us.

The power of Christ can dwell in me only when I make room for him by putting myself aside, and it's in my weakness that I finally surrender and do that.

What is the power of Christ dwelling in me? We need to look at Jesus Christ himself, to see what it means.

When God took human form, he entered into and bore all of our sufferings. So the power of Christ living in me enables me to persevere - to keep going - gives me strength to endure.

Throughout it all, Christ's union with God enabled him to preach, heal and serve with absolutely sacrificial love. So the power of Christ living in me is the source of the grace and love with which I can continue serve others, although all my own reserves have failed.

Jesus Christ reconciled us to God, triumphed over death and sin and opened the gates of heaven. So the power of Christ living in me enables me to be victorious over the circumstances that Satan throws at me, seeing and speaking God's truth in them - even welcoming them, because of what God can do through them.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

### **Closing prayer**

I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!  
Amen.

(Ephesians 3.14-21)