

Does Church really matter?

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Date: 01 July 2015

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[0 : 00] We are spending this week and next looking at Ephesians chapter 3, so do you please turn with me there to Ephesians chapter 3. You'll find that on page 977 in the Church Bibles if you have that there, 977.

And this week and next we'll be looking at verses 1 to 13 together. Let's turn now to God's Word and read together Ephesians chapter 3 and I'll read verses 1 to 13.

For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation as I have written briefly.

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men and other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.

[1 : 22] To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery, hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. Well, in a moment we'll consider verses 1 to 9, but before we do that, let's pray together, shall we?

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.

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for all that you have done for us and for all that you have promised to do for us. Once we were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked, now alive together with Christ, you have richly blessed us and we thank you, Heavenly Father, for all that you have done.

[3 : 13] Would you please help us to see the height and the depth and the breadth of the love that you have for us in Christ so that seeing that, we might respond in obedience to your word and walk in a manner worthy of your calling.

please would you help us now by your spirit to sit under your word together so that we might go from here expressing faith in Jesus and in showing love for all the saints.

We ask it for Jesus' glory and in his name. Amen. Amen. Is the great and glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel, is it really trustworthy?

Is it really true? No doubt that is a question that surfaces in the mind of believers, in your mind, from time to time, particularly when times are perhaps tough, difficult.

It was a question that would surely have entered the mind of the Ephesian believers to whom this letter was written. You see, this is a letter that blows our minds as it sketches out God's great plan for all of history.

[4 : 47] It's a letter that tells what God has done for the believer. And it's almost too good to be true. But as we will see, it is a message that is trustworthy.

It was a message that the church in Ephesus needed to hear. They were a distinct minority in a pluralistic city. They needed to know the hugeness of what God has done and was doing for them.

Ephesus was a city where the political clout of Rome was very clearly evident. In fact, Ephesus was second only to Rome in terms of power and wealth.

It had a population of over a quarter of a million people. Not only that, but the worship of false gods was all over the place. The city housed the Temple of Artemis, the largest building in the Greek worlds.

It could comfortably house a tenth of the city's population. In fact, when Paul was there in Ephesus ten years before this letter was written, he was proclaiming the gospel and there was an uproar in the city.

[6 : 05] People were becoming Christians, but the Temple Shrine Builders Union felt that their profit margins were being threatened by this new religion. there was a riot.

Thousands gathered together at the temple shouting, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! They were shouting it all day. Now imagine what that would have been like for that young, small church in Ephesus.

New Christians, those from Jewish backgrounds, those from Gentile backgrounds, a distinct minority in a pluralistic and sometimes hostile city.

We don't really need to try too hard to imagine what that might have been like. And it's against this backdrop that Paul writes to his dear brothers and sisters in Ephesus.

He writes to reassure them, to give them the big picture about who God is, what he has done for them, what his plans are for all of history, how he has blessed them.

[7 : 10] Great promises and truths pour forth in the opening two chapters of Ephesians. And just a few weeks ago, Terry was preaching from Ephesians chapter 2.

Let me just read some of these great promises that Paul has already mentioned. 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.

Even when we were dead in our trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ. For through him, we both, that is, Jew and Gentile, have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. I could go on. Great truths about those Christian believers in Ephesus.

Amazing truths. Question, is that really trustworthy? Is Paul's message really true?

[8 : 20] It's almost too good, too amazing. Enter Ephesians chapter 3 verses 1 to 9. This is not something that Paul has made up.

this is a message that has been revealed to him. It is a trustworthy message. And it is a message about the mystery, to use the language of Ephesians.

It's a message about the mystery. This whole section that we're looking at today is about Paul and his ministry of the mystery. But firstly, what is the mystery?

What's the mystery? This mystery that Paul mentions crops up four times. Take a look again at verse 3. How the mystery was made known to me.

Verse 4. My insight into the mystery of Christ. Verse 6. This mystery. And then again, verse 9. Now we need to be careful that we don't just import our understanding of the word mystery into the text here.

[9 : 27] If we do that, we're going to get very confused. We need to ask, what does Paul mean by the word? And he doesn't mean something that is difficult or impossible to understand or explain, not at all.

The first time we encounter the word is back in chapter 1, verse 9. Let me take you there. Verse 9. Making known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

There, he is talking about God's great plan, his all-inclusive purpose, which has as its ultimate goal the uniting of all things in heaven and on earth in Christ.

That's the mystery. It's a plan that's been made known. And here in chapter 3, he's talking in a more focused way about the mystery. He's speaking about the uniting of things here on earth.

Paul states exactly what he means there in verse 6. Just look again. Chapter 3, verse 6. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

[10 : 53] Here is the heart of the mystery. Jewish believers, Gentile believers, together, are fellow heirs. They are together in Christ.

This is what Paul has just spent all of chapter 2 on. Just look back to chapter 2, verse 18. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then you, Gentile, are no longer stranger and alien, but are fellow citizens. Jew, Gentile, united with Christ through the gospel.

That's the mystery. And far from being mysterious, this is an open secret. It's now been revealed by God. And the truth is God's great eternal plan to bring all things together under Christ's authority. And it's already happening. Right there, in the Ephesian church, God's great plan is already unfolding. This is great stuff, isn't it?

[11 : 57] And it is greatly reassuring to that first group of Christian believers in Ephesus. That's the mystery. mystery. But it's been made known. It's an open secret.

But the question arises, how was this mystery made known to Paul? He spends a lot of time on himself in these verses. And he speaks particularly about his ministry of the mystery.

And we see that it has been revealed to Paul. And he, in turn, has made it known to others. He's proclaimed it to the Gentiles in order to equip the church for its extraordinary role, which we'll see next week.

But again and again in this passage, Paul emphasizes that the message about the mystery has been given to him. It's not something he's cooked up.

It's not something he's imagined himself. It's not something he's gone searching for. No, it was given to him. Paul proves in these verses that he was ordained as an apostle, not as one who thrust himself forward, not as one put forward by man, not as one who fell into the job as if by accident.

[13 : 14] No. He was made an apostle by God's work and God's choice. Paul's ministry was given to him. And it was given in spectacular fashion.

Just think back to Paul's conversion. He was literally floored on the way to Damascus. the risen Lord Jesus appeared to him. He gave him the task to carry his message to the Gentiles.

It was a message that was given to Paul. Just look again in our passage. Verse 2. It was given to me for you.

Verse 3. This mystery was made known to me by revelation. Verse 3. The mystery has now been revealed to his holy apostles. Verse 7. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me.

Paul repeatedly mentions the fact that the gospel was given to him in order to reassure his readers and to validate his message. It is a message that comes with awesome authority because it comes from God himself.

[14 : 25] And that means that we have an obligation not only to hear it but to respond in obedience to it. Paul's message, the one that he's been unpacking in the first few chapters, is a radical message.

It is an astonishing message. The Gentiles he wrote to there in Ephesus were once far off, aliens to the commonwealth of Israel.

people, but now they have been brought near, they are included. They are part of Christ's body, the church. They've left behind the cults and religions of Ephesus.

Imagine the pressure put on them from friends and family to turn back, to conform, to come back to the temple. They needed to know, didn't they, that the gospel message that Paul proclaimed was reliable, that it was true.

And Paul gives them great grounds for confidence here. It's not his message, he's been given it. And I'm sure there are many times, if you're honest with yourself, when your confidence in the gospel is shaken.

[15 : 40] Those Ephesian Christians must have felt shaken on a weekly basis. The big, impressive temple of Artemis, filled to capacity week after week. The hostility from those still committed to those false religions, the pressure to conform.

Don't you feel that too now? The common consensus pushed by the media on all sorts of things, sexual ethics, the meaning of life, the source of the universe.

The question rings in the back of your mind, is the gospel really true? Is it really trustworthy? Is it certain?

Yes is Paul's message. Yes is his message to the Ephesians and to us.

The gospel is solid and reliable, not because your favorite preacher is witty or intelligent or good-looking, not because your church is perfect. The gospel is true and reliable because of the

source of the message.

[16:48] it is given by God himself. The gospel is not a man-made phenomena. It's not Paul's gospel as if he made it up. It is God's gospel.

It is given by him. The forgiveness of sins, the riches of the blessings that we have in Christ are too precious a thing to be assured by the authority of man.

man. Thank God that it is his revealed truth. It's not a man-made thing. So the question is, when we come and sit under the preaching of the word, what message are we hearing?

Whose message are we hearing? Is it Paul's message, the message given to him, the message that we have written down in the Bible? Or is what we're hearing just man's opinion, ideas that concur with whatever seems to fit in with the general consensus in the world around us?

Be careful what you listen to. But if the message that you hear week by week from the pulpit accords with Paul's message, the gospel that was given to him, then give thanks.

[18:08] Give thanks that your minister is faithful to the gospel, that he is a faithful messenger. He may not be flash or witty or impressive, but if he faithfully passes on what was passed to Paul, that sort of ministry will give you confidence to keep going.

So that was Paul's ministry. It was a message given to him. What did he do with the mystery? What did he do with the message?

Well, look at verse 8 where Paul sets out clearly his purpose, his mission in life. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Christ. What a privilege it was for Paul to be the one who brought this wonderful use of grace and inclusion to God's family to the Gentiles. Remember how they were described in chapter 2, separated from Christ, aliens, strangers?

Gentiles were without hope, lost. But the great truth that Paul had the privilege to proclaim was this, the Gentiles could now be fellow heirs with the true Israel, members of the same body, partakers of the promise of Christ.

[19:37] It was a gospel message that Paul was to suffer for. As he writes this, he's in chains. But it's a true gospel, it's a great gospel. And this is the same gospel that we are to hold out to our city, to our next door neighbors, to the guy that sits across the desk from you at work, to your dear family member.

It's the same gospel, and it's a great gospel. It's a wonderful message. It's an astonishing message, isn't it? It's almost too good to be true. If you're a Christian, you know that.

once dead in sin, now alive in Christ. That is Paul's gospel, that is our gospel, and it's not one to be ashamed of.

And Paul is not a man to be ashamed of either. You might hear people seeking to malign him, to marginalize Paul, to rise him off as being a bit hardline or extreme. But Ephesians chapter 3 dismisses any sort of criticism like that.

Paul was given the task of proclaiming the gospel message by God. His message really is true. All that Paul says here in this letter is true.

[21:01] It is true and trustworthy because it is God's message. Knowing that would enable those Ephesians to stand firm. To stand firm in a place where they are regularly tempted to return to the old ways, to go back to the temple of Artemis.

So you and I can take confidence from Ephesians as well. Listen to Paul's words because they are God's words.

Be careful to listen to what God has revealed to us. Be careful to be satisfied with what God has revealed to us. It is enough. It is sufficient.

It is sufficient for us, a distinct minority in a pluralistic city, to keep going, to not walk away from our Lord and Saviour.

Trust Paul's gospel. It is God's gospel. And it is just breathtaking, isn't it? it is comprehensible to us for our salvation, yet it humbles us in its scale and magnitude.

[22:18] Let us give thanks that God has made known to us his great plan of salvation. Let us take confidence in all that God has said and promised to all who are his.

we may be a distinct minority, but we have a great God. He has a great magnificent plan for his world, and we are part of it.

Trust Ephesians, because it is God's message. Let me pray. Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks.

We thank you that your message is a great message that speaks of our being made alive.

It speaks of forgiveness of sin. It speaks of your great plan for all of history, and how those that are yours are in that plan and have great assurance of where everything is going in history.

[23 : 38] So would you enable us to hear Paul's message to us today, to take confidence, because it is not his message, but it's yours. Help us to trust your words, to stand firm, we ask it for your sake.

Amen. Amen.