

Church of God, Elect and Glorious

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles, as we always do on Sunday mornings, and to the New Testament and to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Josh Johnson is going to be speaking to us this week and next week, and we're particularly focusing on aspects to do with the church.

What does it mean to be the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ? And so we're reading this morning in Paul's letter to the Ephesians in chapter 3, and I'm going to read verses 1 to 13.

And Josh is going to be opening these words up to us in a little while. But Ephesians 3 then, at verse 1. For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you've 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've 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 in 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.

[1 : 25] Of this gospel, I was made a minister, a servant, according to the gift of God's grace, which was given to me by the working of his power.

To me, although 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 the 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'm suffering for you, which is your glory. Amen. And may God bless to us this his word.

Well, do grab your Bibles and have them open again at Ephesians chapter 3. Hospitals, supermarkets, parks, garden centers, shops, golf, tennis, shopping, sunbathing.

[3 : 02] These are just some of the places and activities that have been allowed to open before churches and before corporate worship has been able to be back. And whilst there are some factors that count in favor of these things over gatherings and church buildings, I can't help but think that it's all rather reflective of the feeling at present in Britain.

The church en masse, drifting out of sight and mind, and increasingly irrelevant. In fact, I read just this past week an article from a well-known writer who happens to be an atheist, and he was decrying the national church's silence in the midst of the crisis.

As the government was weighing up what could or couldn't be done without, churches were deemed non-essential. And the silence from those who hold high office in the national churches was deafening.

And his conclusion was basically that whilst the nation might be confronted by its mortality and may be pondering what might fill the void, the churches scored a huge own goal with their silence.

And he finished with these words, perhaps it would have been different if the virus had hit us harder, the deaths had been at the rate we were expecting, if the plague had truly roared across the land, then perhaps the churches would have risen to the occasion, taught the Christian religion, told us of the love of God, and shown us the correct manner in which to prepare to meet the Creator.

[4 : 33] But they didn't. They laminated notices saying, worship anywhere but here. They locked the doors and disappeared completely from our national life. An unrecoverable wound, I would guess.

Maybe there will be some churches who have disappeared that won't be able to make it back. Sometimes even as Christians, we can get caught up with the feeling that the church is doomed, that it will disappear without even a whimper.

Well, it's true that any local church could be gone within any generation. And if a church is absent of any kind of ministry in the midst of a crisis, then that likely would spell the end of it.

But we must remember the words of the Lord Jesus himself, who said that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church. Now, of course, that isn't any local church as such, but the church as God's chosen people from the world over who are joined together and joined to Jesus, and who will see that as a reality at the last day.

The church won't be overcome. It won't be done away with, because it is front and center in God's plan for the universe. It's often said that the church is out of date, that its days are numbered, that it's non-essential.

[5 : 58] Well, the Bible has a very different perspective altogether. The church has always existed in God's plan, and at the climax of history, the church will be at the heart of a glorious future.

The church was envisaged in eternity past, and the church will be victorious and vindicated in eternity to come.

Nothing in this world will outlast the church. And so we're going to look this week at something of the church's nature, and this grand cosmic significance that it has.

And then next week, we're going to think a little about one of its key characteristics. And so we turn this week to the little section at the heart of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

And this letter is all about the church, possibly more than any other of Paul's letters. And there are two things that Paul draws our attention to in this passage. We'll call them first, unity decreed, and then secondly, unity demonstrated.

[7 : 04] So first point, verses 1 to 6, unity decreed. God's plan has always been to draw everything in the universe together to himself.

His plan was always to unite all of his people to himself, whether Jew or Gentile. In eternity past, God decided and decreed that through the gospel, people would be drawn from every tribe and tongue and nation to be joined to Jesus.

Look at verse 1. Paul begins, For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, on behalf of you Gentiles. But then he goes on something of a diversion.

And the diversion goes right up to verse 13. And then you can see in verse 14 that he picks up again with the same phrase, for this reason I.

And so verses 2 to 13 are the diversion. But that's not incidental. It's key to what Paul is saying. He begins, Paul's a prisoner on behalf of you Gentiles.

[8 : 16] And he breaks off from what he was about to say to explain his own role in the Gentiles receiving the gospel promises. Paul's focus then is on God's grand plan of seeing the Gentiles sharing the inheritance that God had promised to his people.

Jew and Gentile united in the person of Jesus. But let's take a step back briefly. Ephesians has a couple of themes that run throughout it.

And the church is one of those key themes. We're told of the blessings that the church has. We're told about how the church is to conduct itself with one another. And we're told that marriage is even a picture of the church and its relationship to Jesus.

And there are lots of uses of the word one. One body, one spirit, one Lord, one baptism, and on and on. The joining together as one in the church is a key theme.

But there's another key theme worth noting this morning. Ephesians takes us behind the curtain to see what is really going on in the world. At the theater, you only really see what's on the stage.

[9 : 30] But all kinds of things are happening behind the curtain. Things that appear to be flying. There's ropes and pulleys holding them up and letting them dangle. That's what's going on behind the scenes.

And Paul explains at various points in Ephesians what is going on in the heavenly places behind the scenes. So in chapter 1, verse 3, we see him use that phrase in the heavenly places. He says it again in chapter 1, verse 20. In chapter 2, verse 6, we see again the heavenly places. And we see it in our passage today too in chapter 3, verse 10.

And he uses it again in chapter 6. And as Paul talks about the heavenly places, he also takes us outside of time and into eternity. He tells us about God's plans before the foundation of the world in

chapter 1, verse 4.

He talks about things that were predestined, things that were prepared beforehand by God. And so we're getting a serious peek behind the curtain here.

[10:38] What we can see and feel and touch here and now is not the full extent of reality and all that exists. And so Paul, in verses 1 to 6, pulls these things together by explaining that God's plan, a plan that was decided and decreed before the foundation of the world, has now been made known and central to that plan is the church.

Look at these verses. Paul speaks three times in verses 1 to 6 about a mystery. Sometimes we think of the word mystery as something slightly spooky.

The one that always jumps to my mind is the mystery of the Mary Celeste with the disappearing crew. What on earth happens to them? Who knows? Nice story to tell children at school.

But that's not what Paul means here by mystery. Mystery here is something that was hidden but is now revealed. And that word mystery is a word, again, found all across this letter.

But it comes into a particular focus here. So he says in verse 3, the mystery was made known to Paul by revelation. So despite the fact that Paul was a prisoner, verse 1, he's also someone who's been given a vitally important message.

[12:04] Someone who to the world would look weak, terribly weak, yet someone who was given a truly world-changing message. Verse 4, Paul's writing enables readers to understand something of that mystery.

He's written it down. Paul's purpose is to spread that vitally important message, as we'll see later on. And then verse 6, Paul tells us what the mystery is.

He doesn't want it to be like one of those mystery stories we tell children where they can't work it out. He tells us 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.

We see something similar in chapter 1, verses 9 and 10. Paul says, it was made known to Paul the mystery of God's will according to his purpose, 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 is God's cosmic plan. All things brought together in the person of Jesus, united in Jesus, drawn to him, even to the extent that Jew and Gentile become one.

[13:33] Now, throughout the Bible, sin has a scattering, dividing effect. In the garden was perfect unity between God and man, and then sin scattered them.

The Tower of Babel, more scattering. God's first great rescue in the Bible, the Exodus, gathered people together at Sinai. Sin divides, God's rescue joins together.

It gathers. God's great plan is to gather. His plan is to unite all things in his Son.

And that cosmic plan has broken through the curtain and into this world through Paul's ministry. Now, many who would have called themselves Jews would have opposed this with everything that they had, believing that these privileges were theirs and theirs alone by virtue of being God's special people.

In fact, some of the most severe Jews of the day believed that Gentiles were created for the sole purpose of being logs or coal for the fire of hell. But through Paul, it has been revealed that the Gentiles are fellow heirs.

[14:52] They too are to be united to Christ. Astonishing. But look at verse 5. It tells us that Paul has had something revealed to him that hasn't been revealed in previous generations.

And if we were to leave it here, that the mystery was simply that Gentiles could inherit God's promises too, then we'd have a little bit of a problem. Because the Old Testament tells us that Israel were to be a light to the nations.

And we knew that there were Gentiles who were brought into God's family throughout the Old Testament. Think of people like Rahab or Naaman and many others. So that isn't a new thing as such.

It's hinted at. We see glimpses of it. But look again at verse 6. There are three phrases that Paul uses that Gentiles could be fellow heirs, the first phrase.

And then the third phrase, he says, partakers of the promise of Christ. And these things are hinted at. They're not a surprise. But look at the middle phrase.

[16:02] Paul says, it'll be members of the same body. I think the thing previously hidden and only now revealed is the fashion in which the Gentiles would share in the promises.

Absolute unity. Clues beyond compare. How close? Members of the same body. Inseparable. No division. And the church as a body is a well-used metaphor by Paul. And here he is saying that the mystery revealed through him for the sake of the Gentiles is that they are every bit as much an arm of the body as those who truly belong to Abraham.

Those once considered logs for the fire of hell can now every bit as much be joined truly and really and inseparably to Christ as much as any faithful Israelite could be.

To continue the body metaphor, if an eye can't say to an ear that it doesn't belong to the body because it isn't an eye, well, no more can an Israelite say to a Gentile that they don't belong to the church.

[17:15] before this world existed, God decreed that through Jesus Christ his people would be joined together with a bond, a union so pure and so profound that it will last forever.

No matter their ethnicity, no matter their background, no matter their cultural identity, marriages will pass away, friendships come and go, even our own flesh and blood, even our own family relationships are eclipsed by the closeness of our bonds in Christ.

So just picture people in our own church family, picture those you often sit beside, think of those who you miss dearly at present, think of those who you find hard work and then look at your hands. Those Christian brothers and sisters that come to mind are joined to you in a way that is comparable to how much your hand is a part of your body. And that was designed and decreed to be so before a blade of grass grew in this world or a drop of rain fell.

And the union is so close and so strong because we're joined in the person of Jesus, one with him and so one with one another.

[18:47] Gaining Christ means gaining the church. Not wanting the church means not wanting Christ. Why not read over Ephesians this week and just spot how often that phrase in him in Christ is used.

It's everywhere. All our privileges, all our blessings are ours in him. And that's true for every other Christian and so we're joined inseparably to them.

All of God's people, all who see in Jesus their Lord and Savior receive in him all spiritual blessings and not least among those blessings is a family of other believers with bonds deeper than anything in this world.

But why is this God's grand plan? Why on earth did he plan to do this? Well that's what we see in our second point because the church is unity demonstrated verses 7 to 13.

the church is unity demonstrated. God's platform to display his glorious grace to heaven and earth is the church.

[20:06] The church is the demonstration of true unity that endures eternally. And so its very existence testifies to the universe that God is gracious.

Paul continues to show us his role in God's plan. Look at verse 7. The gospel is what Paul was made a minister of.

And the fact that it was Paul who was given this role has a sweet irony about it. It's an irony that's utterly in keeping with how God does things. He continually turns earthly wisdom on its head.

again Paul emphasizes in verse 8 that he was given to preach to the Gentiles. The special task of preaching to the Gentiles.

Paul the Hebrew of Hebrews Paul of the tribe of Benjamin Paul who was a Pharisee Paul who in his zeal for Judaism had been a persecutor of the church.

[21:08] this Paul is the one given to make known to the Gentiles that they can be members of the one body with Christ and with Israel.

Paul uses a very strange word for himself in verse 8. In our Bibles it reads that Paul was the very least. Literally it reads that Paul was the leaster of all the saints.

He was less than the least. And no doubt he says this because he's so conscious of what his previous zeal for Judaism led him to. Yet here he is the one proclaiming to the Gentiles that they can be his brother.

That they can be joined in the same body under Christ. What is it that can turn such enmity on its head where the one who stood and overlooked as a Gentile was stoned.

could then be proclaiming the grace of Christ to the Gentile world. Paul tells us in both verse 8 and verse 7 that God's grace does this.

[22 : 25] It's God's grace that can turn that enmity on its head. And so Paul's ministry was verse 9 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 be made known.

So that through the church God's wisdom will be made known. I think it could be tempting here to take this as a commission to the church that this is the church's job this is what we're to do that this is our extension of Paul's ministry and of course we do share in his ministry but I think taking it like that would slightly miss Paul's point.

I take it that the church is the demonstration it is the platform that displays God's glory to the world through its mere existence. the body of Christ joined together from all tribes and tongues and nations in all its diversity is evidence of God's glory.

Here's what one commentator points out about the Jewish feeling towards Gentiles. The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentile said the Jews were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell.

It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came the Gentiles were an object of contempt for the Jews.

[24 : 05] The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out.

such a contract with a Gentile was the equivalent of death. How could such contempt ever be overcome? How could a Jew and a Gentile ever be acquaintances with that as a backdrop?

This world has no answer for division like that. This world has no answer for bringing people together in true unity. marches and protests won't overcome divides like that.

Education isn't the answer. There is only one thing that can possibly overcome it. God's grace. That's the great leveler in this world.

How can one sinner who's encountered the outpouring of God's grace possibly look at another sinner saved by grace and feel or have any sense of superiority?

[25 : 17] Grace is the great leveler and the very existence of the church is a triumphant celebration of God's wisdom, his grace and his glory.

That is why God decreed that he would unite all things together in his son and that he would do so in the church. Chapter one tells us again and again that this great mystery, this great plan of God was enacted for the praise of his glorious grace.

The church is the showroom of God's grace. It is the visible display of grace to the world that a motley crew could be brought together, that they could belong to God and that they could get on and commit to one another.

it is the display to the world because it is made up of all kinds of sinners drawn together only because of Jesus.

The church is where true unity, true equality is made manifest. One of my non-Christian friends is stumped that I could have friends who are 20 or 30 years older who in many ways we have very little in common.

[26 : 34] friends with someone who is 10 years younger. All the clubs and societies and hobbies and interests that he stumbles across are monocultured. So that an 18-year-old student could be friends with a 65-year-old doesn't happen in most people's experience.

But in the church we have a bond that can bring anyone together, even the greatest enemies, and where in this world there are clubs that aren't monocultured and the ties that bind them together are incredibly flimsy.

That is not so in the church. We have a bond in Jesus that can bring anyone together. Now maybe you're thinking, well I've been in a church before and it wasn't much of a display of this at all.

So we must understand in what way the church does demonstrate this. When Paul says that it is through the church that God's wisdom is displayed, he is speaking in a sense about what's behind the curtain.

There is a gathering of the church around Jesus now in the heavenly realms. we do belong to it. We belong to it now through faith and one day we'll have it by sight.

[28 : 06] And so that's why Paul can say that the church displays God's wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. But as well as that, each local church is a manifestation of this heavenly reality.

So it might not look like we're intimately joined together, but the heavenly reality is that we are. And so that means that the behind the scenes reality, whilst it is perfection, whilst it is ours, it is so only by faith at present.

The earthly reality won't yet be that perfection. But one day, the behind the scenes, the heavenly realms reality will be ours by sight, where grace will no longer be needed to relate well with our church family, where it won't be a struggle to love our brothers and sisters.

It won't be a struggle for them to love us. But until that day, much, much grace is needed in the church. I can say that simply because I'm in this church and I know what I can be like.

I need others to be gracious with me. Paul finishes here by reminding us that this world is not the heavenly places yet.

[29 : 39] He wants the Ephesians not to lose heart because the present reality doesn't look like the heavenly one. he has said already that verse one, he's in prison.

Verse 13, he's suffering for them. And that is the earthly reality, toil and struggle, weakness and ignominy. But isn't that a picture of the church in this world?

Wouldn't the world love to lock the church away, to keep it quiet? You can do your own thing as long as it's away from everyone else and not bothering anyone. Perhaps that article I read was insightful.

It raised some bracing points. But any prediction of death for the church is doomed for failure. The church is where the future is heading.

The behind the curtain reality is the future guaranteed. And so even now as we bumble our way through as a church, as we awkwardly get on at times, as it's hard work to love our church family, all of that is evidence of God's grace.

[30 : 56] Look at our church. We're an incredibly eclectic mix of people, but that's part of what makes a church a showroom of God's glory to the world.

Men and women, nine year olds and 90 year olds, doctors and dinner ladies, solicitors and shelf stackers, baristas and baristas, Scottish, Singaporean, Cuban, Colombian, Iranian, even the Irish. And it's in our multi-cultured, multi-ethnic, multi-personality makeup that God's great grace is evident. So when you look around at your group group and you see someone who's so unlike you that they're hard to get on with, that's an opportunity to display to the heavens the wisdom of God. when it's hard work with others, when awkwardness happens, when friction's present, when differences are obvious, that isn't a mistake.

It's a master stroke because it displays to the world, to the cosmos, to the heavens, that God is glorious in his grace.

[32 : 09] through the church, the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Let's pray. Lord, we marvel at your wisdom. We marvel at what you planned.

We marvel at your grace. and we ask that you would make us a people who are indelibly marked by your grace, united as a true family, loving, serving, cherishing one another, to the praise of your glorious grace.

Help us in this, we pray. Amen. Amen.