

Does Church really matter?

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[0 : 01] But welcome. This is the second of two Wednesdays we're having in the book of Ephesians, chapter 3. So perhaps you'll turn with me there to Ephesians, chapter 3. It's page 977 in the Church Bibles there.

Let's read together, shall we? Ephesians, chapter 3, and we're looking at 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 is 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 : 29] 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. Amen.

Well, in this moment we will spend a few minutes thinking about that together, but before we do, let's pray, shall we, as we come to our Heavenly Father. Let's pray. Our Father, Creator of heaven and earth, we come to you this afternoon as dependent creatures, thankful for all the blessings in Christ that you have given to us by your grace.

We are entirely dependent upon you. And I ask that you would give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation and knowledge of you, that our eyes would be opened to see clearly and with certainty the hope to which you have called us, to know that we are Christ's inheritance, to know the immeasurable greatness of your power at work in us, the very power that raised Christ from the dead, the very power that has seated him on the throne, ruling over the entire universe.

[3 : 47] help us to know these things to be true. And help us to see the truth about your church as we look together at your word.

would you transform our thoughts, transform our desires, would you transform our actions, that we might better serve you, our maker.

And we ask this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Church.

Going to church. Being a member of a church. I wonder what sorts of thoughts, ideas, feelings begin to filter into your mind as you think about church.

I guess if we're being honest, many of us might confess to feeling just a little bit lethargic about church, just something to get through, to endure perhaps.

[5 : 02] Some of us find it boring from time to time. Something to be attended when it suits us. Perhaps after a big Sunday lunch, as you think about heading to the evening service at your church, the couch beckons you, calling you to come for a nap, and you give in.

Perhaps you do see the vital importance of church, but you see others in your church, maybe a younger generation, who just don't get it.

They're not committed. What might you say to them about the church? You see, church often just feels very ordinary.

Church often feels very unexciting, doesn't it? For most of us, most of the time. But Ephesians chapter 3, and particularly verse 10, blows that sort of thinking clear out of the water.

Paul gives us the true perspective on church, and really his vision could not be bigger. The church, according to Paul, is God's showpiece, his glittering trophy, that shows to all the world, to the entire universe, his great plan to bring everything together, one day, in Jesus Christ.

[6 : 31] The ordinary church, just by existing, is front and center of God's plans for all of history.

This is a section where Paul has been speaking about his ministry of the mystery. We saw that last week as we looked at the first nine verses of the chapter.

The mystery, as Paul puts it there in verse 6, is that Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers in the promise of Jesus Christ through the gospel.

That's the heart of the mystery. Jewish believers and Gentile believers together, fellow heirs, united together under Christ. And Paul's task was to proclaim that message, that gospel message, the message that was given to him.

Look again 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.

[7 : 40] 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, start of verse 10, so that, Paul's task is to preach the gospel, to make known God's plan, so that, and here's our key point this afternoon, so that, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

The church displays, for all to see, God's great plan. Just look again at verse 10. Keep your eyes on that verse.

It tells us something of what the church is about. And it's something we don't really ever think about. The church proclaims to the heavenly rulers and authorities the wonderful plans of God.

That's what the church is doing. It displays, for all to see, God's great plan. To read a few verses from James Philip about these verses here.

[9 : 02] He says this, we begin to see in these verses something of the scope and grandeur of the apostles' thoughts in his conception of the gospel and the church.

It is a great and glorious unfolding of the divine purposes, far exceeding anything we could possibly have conceived, reaching into the ages to come and into the unseen and eternal worlds.

verse 10 is just staggering in its magnitudes. Through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Now, as you read that, you might be asking, what is all this about the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places? It sounds a bit odd, doesn't it? But this mention of rulers and authorities should ring a few Ephesian bells for us.

Just turn over in your Bibles to the next page and to chapter 6. Chapter 6, verse 11 and 12. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

[10 : 22] For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

We see here what Paul is talking about when he mentions the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. It's the unseen spiritual realm. It's the cosmic powers.

It's the devil. Paul is equipping his readers for spiritual battle. And in this letter, in chapter 3, he is speaking to the church.

He's speaking to the church on the stage and he throws back the curtain and we catch a glimpse for a moment of the unseen reality, the unseen realm, the spiritual forces in the heavenly places.

the church there on the stage proclaims to the rest of the theater God's eternal plan. And it's a plan that speaks bad news for the devil.

[11 : 37] It's a plan that speaks great confidence to his readers in Ephesus and to us. You see, these Ephesian Christians that he was writing to, they would have been all too aware of the spiritual cosmic powers out there.

They lived in a city awash with religion, awash with the dark arts and magic. Everywhere they looked, they would have seen evidence of that around them.

They needed to hear, didn't they, that what they were, a very ordinary looking church spoke to those powers, those authorities.

What they were, declared to them, Jesus Christ's certain victory. The mundane, everyday looking church, far from being ordinary, is extraordinary.

The church, to them, probably seemed to be very unimpressive indeed. But in fact, the church is God's megaphone. It's directed at the heavenly powers, declaring what he was ultimately going to do in the end when he returns.

[12 : 49] The church is God's trophy. It's there on display for all to see. It's almost as if the church is the subject of some reality TV show.

You know, the kind of thing you see on Channel 4. Those in the heavenly places are watching. They're watching their TVs. They're watching this reality show called the church.

They see all that's going on. And what they see going on is the manifold wisdom of God in action, in the church. You see, the church speaks of a God who is uniting things together here on earth.

Two groups that once were separated, Jew and Gentile, are brought together through the gospel. And this uniting together speaks of what God is ultimately going to do in history.

This is the plan that Paul tells us about in chapter 1 verse 9 and 10. Just cast your eyes over there. A plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven, and things on earth.

[14 : 02] That's the big picture of Ephesians. And that's what's going on here in chapter 3 verse 10. It's the uniting of things together on earth. It's the great reversal of the great divide that happened at the fall.

This is a plan that spells curtains for Satan. It's a plan that speaks of Christ's ultimate victory. The bringing together what was divided.

And this is a plan that is proclaimed just by the very existence of the church. The church, your church, this church, is therefore of huge significance if this is what it's doing.

Now, for the church that carries on Paul's pattern of gospel proclamation, for the church that declares God's eternal plan, that sort of church is going to be ruffling serious feathers in the heavenly places, isn't it?

Satan and his minions will not like it one bit. Why? Because that sort of church is demonstrating to them their demise.

[15 : 21] The church speaks of his end, and Satan will attack that sort of church. church. So don't be surprised if the church you're part of, if the church here faces tough times when the work of the gospel is going on.

Satan will not stand it. The new building that we have here, the new entrance way and new facilities have been open for a few months now, and it's a building that speaks of our commitment to the gospel.

It provides a home for Cornhill, which seeks to build up and train and send out gospel workers year after year. He will disrupt that if he can.

We need to be aware of what we're doing here, declare something to them. So be aware, but do not fear. Remember the great truth that the church proclaims.

It proclaims Christ's victory. The evil powers and authorities in the heavenly places will in the end lose. So if in a few months from now we find ourselves thinking very ordinary thoughts about the church, we do remind ourselves that the ordinary looking church is extraordinary.

[16 : 50] The ordinary work of equipping Christians for the work of ministry, for building up the body, it looks ordinary. It doesn't look spectacular, but it is extraordinary.

It declares to everyone that's watching what God is doing. We may find ourselves thinking ordinary thoughts about church. The temptation to skip one or both services on Sunday will pull hard.

The thought that my small group won't really miss me when I don't turn up. God let's think in line with Paul's teaching about the church here. What we do week by week, Sunday by Sunday, in the small group you're part of, in the ladies Bible study, speaking to each other over coffee, sharing tears over hardship, joy over good news, all of that, all that regular day-to-day stuff, proclaims to the heavenly places, to the whole cosmos, the wonderful plan of God.

His wonderful plan to bring everything together one day. All things that were broken by the fall now are reunited. That's God's great plan, and the church declares that plan to everyone that is watching.

Far from being ordinary, the everyday stuff of church is extraordinary. So, in our minutes left, some implications flowing out from this in terms of the church.

[18 : 39] Implications firstly in terms of how we think about church, how we think. Paul's vision of the church could hardly be bigger, could it? Couldn't be more explosive, more significant.

The church is God's prototype of what is going to happen in the end. It's the foretaste of his great plan to unite everything together. And of those who are part of the church, we are caught up in the eternal purposes of God.

The church isn't some side interest of God's. It is right front and center of his plans. Now is that how you think about church?

Paul gives us the cosmic perspective on church and it's mind-blowing. The church is where history is headed. The church is not some quaint hangover from the past, but rather it's a picture of the glorious future.

The church is going somewhere. the church is worth investing in. Nothing is of more lasting significance and importance than Christ's body, the church.

[19 : 55] The church often looks very unimpressive indeed, which is why Paul wrote what he wrote. Allow your thinking to be shaped by Ephesians chapter 3.

The ordinary stuff of church is far from ordinary. Keep doing the ordinary looking stuff because in reality it's extraordinary.

Implications about how we think about church. Secondly, implications about our contribution to the unity of the church. Church is a bringing together of people from all sorts of different backgrounds.

people from all sorts of backgrounds being brought together. That's to be celebrated, to be encouraged.

So give thanks for the church that you're part of. You may have people from all over the place. America, Australia, Iran, China, Edinburgh.

[20 : 59] People from all over the world here in this church, your church, in Glasgow. People even from England. So let us make every effort to treat each other in a way that speaks of the reality of what we are.

No matter where we're from, we are united together in Christ. We are brothers and we are sisters. You express that by speaking to each other, getting to know each other, sharing hardships, sharing joys, praying together.

That's just the stuff of church, brothers and sisters in Christ. And that sort of thing declares to the heavenly authorities what God is doing.

It declares God's eternal plan. So we're to be caring for one another, building each other up. That's the work of the church. Paul applies this truth about the unity of the church for us in the second half of the letter.

Just look down to chapter 4 where he urges them to walk, chapter 4 verse 1, in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another, in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[22 : 33] And then a bit later he says this, therefore, having put away falsehood, that each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.

Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down in your anger and give no opportunity to the devil. Paul speaks very directly as he applies the truth of the first half of Ephesians to the church.

Be careful how you walk, be careful how you bear with one another, be careful how you speak to each other. You see, left unchecked, false speech will breed disunity.

Left to fester, anger gives the devil a foothold he longs for in a congregation. So let us as a group of believers, as a congregation, continually strive for unity.

It's where the church is going. It's where the future is going. It speaks to the devil of his ultimate destruction. It speaks to the world around us beautifully of what God is doing.

[23 : 42] A uniting of a broken world. How else could a group of us be in a room together like this, surrounded against one purpose? It's a work of God, isn't it?

He's bringing together his people, the church. So perhaps you are tempted to think and behave as if the church is very ordinary.

Don't buy it for a second. Listen to Paul. Hold to his gospel. Humbly hold out the good news to those around us. Understand that the church is where the future is headed.

Invest in it. Strive to build it up. Build on the unity of the church. The church displays for all to see what God is doing.

So let us think in that way and let us ask now for God's help to do so. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

[24 : 49] Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and for the vision of your church that these verses have set out for us. Thank you that the church is a uniting together of a people who once were far off, strangers, dead in sin.

But in Christ, those who trust you are brought to life, are included in Christ's body, the church. And what a vision of the church you give us here. The church proclaims to the whole cosmos your great and eternal plan.

We ask for your help, Father, to understand these things. Strengthen us with power through your spirit to enable us to understand the hugeness of Christ's love for his church so that we might follow Paul's example, proclaim his gospel, and stand united in our triumphant, ever-reigning King.

Amen.