

The Glory of the Christian Church

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn now to our readings, and Edward is continuing his series through the book of Ephesians. And if you don't have a Bible with you, we have plenty of visitor Bibles. At the side, at the back, please do grab a Bible if you don't have one with you.

And turn with me to Ephesians chapter 3, and that is page 977, if you're using one of the visitor Bibles. So Ephesians chapter 3.

And we're reading from verse 1. 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'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 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. 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.

[2 : 0 6] 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. Well, amen. May God bless his words to us tonight.

Well, good evening, friends. Very good to see you. Let's turn to Ephesians, Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, and you'll find that on page 877, I think.

977 in the hardback red Bibles, if you've got that. So our passage is the one that Paul read to us a few moments ago, chapter 3, verses 1 to 13.

And my title is The Glory of the Church. The Glory of the Church. Now, it's nearly three months since we were studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians together.

[3 : 1 3] And at that point, back in the month of June, I think it was, we'd worked our way through the first two chapters. And all being well, I've got a run of several weeks now, and I hope that between now and late October, we can cover chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

And I hope we'll be able to see in this passage tonight, from Paul's words, what a remarkable phenomenon the Church of Christ is, and what a remarkable privilege it is for sinful men and women to be invited to belong to it.

Now, the secular world does not rate the Church highly these days, but Paul the Apostle does. And we need to be taught by him, and not by the secular world.

And just a little bit of recap. In chapters 1 and 2, Paul has been opening up the very heart of the Gospel, and in the first 10 verses of chapter 2, if you have a look back there, verses 1 to 10, he has given us one of the clearest statements of the Gospel, which you'll find anywhere in the New Testament.

There he shows the Ephesians and us how we were dead in our trespasses and sins, chapter 2, verse 1. How we were by nature, verse 3, children of wrath.

[4 : 34] In other words, the objects of God's righteous and fully deserved anger. But, verse 4, because of God's rich mercy and great love, even when we were dead in our trespasses, exhibiting every sign of spiritual and moral putrefaction, God made us alive with Christ, and raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Christ, in the heavenly places.

And that phrase, with Christ, together with Christ, is very important. You'll see a pattern here, if you look back to chapter 1, verse 20, where we see that God's great might was worked in Christ, when God raised Christ from the dead, and seated him in the heavenly places.

So what has happened to us, if we're Christians, is exactly what happened to Christ himself. Dead, raised to new life, and then seated in the heavenly places.

So the pattern of our experience exactly repeats the pattern of his experience. Now, I know that we haven't yet died physically, and we haven't yet been raised, and we haven't yet been taken to heaven.

But in terms of spiritual reality, in other words, real reality, these things are already true of every Christian. Our deadness towards God has been replaced by being very much alive towards God.

[6 : 02] That's why we now want to know him. We want to praise him, and pray to him, and listen to him. And already, our hearts are beginning to wing their way towards heaven. And we have a growing anticipation of being in his very presence, and seeing our Lord Jesus face to face.

If we are Christians, we were dead towards God. We valued him no more than we value a stick or a stone. But now we look to him daily and hourly in love and trust, and what was dead is now alive, alive, and is on its way to heaven.

But at chapter 2, verse 11, Paul suddenly and strikingly brings a new element into his argument. He reminds the Ephesian Christians that they are Gentiles.

Gentiles who were, have a look at chapter 2, verse 12, who were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.

As one Bible commentator has put it, Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless, godless. But, verse 13, now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off, you Gentiles, have been brought near.

[7 : 22] How? By the blood of Christ. So it's his death on the cross that has not only secured the forgiveness of their sins, but, verse 14, has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile.

And this has brought to Gentile believers peace and reconciliation. Verse 16, through the cross. Reconciliation to God, but also to Jewish Christians.

So whereas they were once, look again at verse 12, aliens and strangers, they are now, look at verse 19, no longer strangers and aliens, but are now fellow citizens and members of the household of God.

So in chapter 2, verses 11 to 22, Paul has been saying things which would have been an immense relief and joy to these Gentile Ephesian Christians. Paul's message is, you belong, you really belong.

You belong to Christ, you belong now to the true Israel, you belong to the true God. You're no longer outsiders, you are incorporated into the very heart of the church of God.

[8 : 33] Now we're almost into chapter 3, but I want us to follow the train of Paul's thought as he moves from chapter 2 into chapter 3. In these later verses of chapter 2, Paul has been frankly rejoicing in what the Lord has done for these Gentile believers.

Paul is excited and Paul is delighted. And you can sense the thrill in his voice at chapter 2, verse 19. He says, so then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, your fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God.

It's as though he's holding out his arms to them at this moment and embracing them and hugging them and kissing them on both cheeks because that's the way they do in the Mediterranean lands, isn't it? He's saying to them, we belong, you belong.

We are one body, we're not two bodies. The whole structure of the church is growing up into a holy temple in the Lord Jesus. You two Gentiles, you are a fit dwelling place for God to live in.

We are together being built into an everlasting and glorious building. And for this reason, chapter 3, verse 1, for this reason, because God is doing this wonderful new work of bringing Gentiles to salvation, for this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, then there's a dash, do you see, at the beginning of verse 2?

[9 : 58] Just cut to chapter 3, verse 14, for this reason, I bow my knees before the Father and I pray for you. That seems to be what he was trying to say and going to say at verse 1, but he suddenly gets deflected.

In verse 1, he uses this phrase, a prisoner on behalf of you Gentiles. And that's a phrase all about his own position in relation to the Gentiles.

And that phrase, on behalf of you Gentiles, opens up Paul's mind to a flood of memories about the work that he's been doing over the last couple of decades for the Gentiles.

It was very hard work. It was hard labor. Much of his hard labor was directed towards Jewish Christians who could only be persuaded with great difficulty that God really was bringing Gentiles into the church.

Paul had been working so hard to persuade Jewish Christians that Gentiles didn't need to become Jews in order to become Christians. Because many of the Jewish Christians were saying to Paul, well, these Gentiles, all very well for them to be believers, but they must be circumcised.

[11 : 10] They must commit themselves to obeying the food laws of the Old Testament. The Old Testament, after all, is the word of God. It stands forever. To which Paul would have replied, yes, indeed, it is the word of God, but parts of it have been fulfilled and superseded by the coming of Christ.

All foods are now clean. Circumcision is no longer required. And Paul, by the grace of God, had gradually been winning that argument.

And to go back to chapter 3, verse 1, he was in prison precisely because he'd been working so hard for the Gentiles. The reason he was in prison was because, well, he'd been arrested in Jerusalem.

He'd been arrested there because a hostile mob of Jewish people, knowing that he was so pro-Gentile, had accused him, on no good grounds, of taking a Gentile into the temple in Jerusalem where no Gentile was allowed to go.

These Jewish people hated his pro-Gentile stance. If he hadn't been laboring on behalf of the Gentiles, he would never have ended up in prison. So he gets to this phrase on behalf of you Gentiles at the end of verse 1, and he then, as it were, puts his pen down thoughtfully and pauses.

[12 : 30] He's going to come back to that verse 1 sentence when he gets to verse 14, but he wants to include something else. It's as though he's thinking like this. It's some years now since I was in Ephesus.

There will be new Christians there in the church whose understanding of recent history will be vague and foggy. I've just told them in chapter 2 about the lovely reality of Gentile inclusion in the church, but some of them won't have a scooby about the part that I've played myself, and they need to know about my role.

Not because I'm a fine man. In fact, if you look ahead to verse 8, you'll see how Paul describes himself, the very lowest and least of all the saints. But he's thinking they need to know about my role because if they can grasp how God has brought the good news to the Gentiles, their faith and their joy will be greatly increased.

Paul knew that assurance about salvation is greatly increased by understanding the history of salvation. And the part played by Paul in bringing the good news to the Gentile world is something that every Christian needs to be well acquainted with.

If we can get to know how the Lord used Paul, our own assurance of salvation will be greatly strengthened. Christianity is not a philosophy.

[13 : 55] It's not just a clever way of learning how to organize our inner thoughts and our lives. It's a faith which is based upon a certain history. It's the facts recorded in that true history that we stake our lives on.

So we have the history of Old Testament Israel, supremely and centrally the facts about Jesus, but also, very importantly, the facts about the apostles amongst whom Paul plays a key role.

And it's that role that he describes here in verses 2 to 13. In fact, you might say that in this first half of chapter 3, Paul introduces himself.

He has said nothing about himself in chapters 1 and 2. In chapters 1 and 2, the pronouns are all we and you. But as soon as he turns into chapter 3, it's I and me.

He wants them to understand his role so that their grasp of what really has happened will be made secure. And we need to understand Paul's role every bit as much as the Ephesians did because growing understanding brings growing assurance.

[15 : 07] So let's turn to verses 2 to 13 where Paul is going to develop two main ideas. They're both about his role. He speaks first of the mystery revealed to him and second of the ministry entrusted to him.

So first of all, let's just oil the wheels. That's better. first then, the mystery revealed to Paul.

As Paul puts it here in verse 3, the mystery made known to me by revelation. Now what this mystery was and is will come in in just a moment.

But let's first look at the way Paul frames his words about this mystery. In verse 2, he says, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace given me for you, he's saying, I'm assuming that you may have heard of it.

But you might have heard of it without really understanding it. So what you have heard of perhaps vaguely, I'm now going to tell you about clearly. I've been made a steward.

[16 : 19] In other words, I've been given a responsibility to dispense something. Not money, not possessions, but God's grace. And God's grace here in verse 2 means the wonderful good news about salvation for the Gentile as well as for the Jew.

And this stewardship, this responsibility has been given to me, given to me by God for you. So being the apostle to the Gentiles is not something that I dreamed up.

It wasn't as though I woke up suddenly one morning shouting, Eureka! I shall evangelize the Gentile world. No, it's a responsibility, he says, given to me by God.

Now incidentally, just how he was given that responsibility is recorded in Acts chapter 9, which records his conversion. Paul, you'll remember, has just been met by Christ on the road to Damascus.

He's been dramatically converted, he's blinded, he's overwhelmed. And as he gets into Damascus, a Christian man, just an ordinary member of the church there called Ananias, has been sent by God to Paul to lay hands on him and restore his sight.

[17 : 32] And the Lord says to Ananias, because Ananias has said to the Lord, I do not want to go and see Paul, this is a terrible man, don't you know what he's been doing to the church? The Lord says to him, go to this man, you must go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and the children of Israel.

So on the very day of his conversion, Paul was given this responsibility towards the Gentiles by the Lord himself. And that's why he speaks of it here in verse 3 as a revelation, a mystery made known to me by revelation.

It was not the product of his own thoughts and dreams. God revealed it to him and that's why he knew it was true. That revelation at Damascus was simply overwhelming.

Paul knew that it was from God and that's why he spent all of his life obeying it, journeying around the Gentile world and preaching salvation through Christ to the Gentiles.

And he goes on in verse 4. 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.

[18 : 52] So, what is the mystery? Well, he tells us in verse 6. The mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Fellow heirs, in other words, having exactly the same rights of inheritance as Jewish people who had turned to Christ. These Gentiles are not second-class citizens of heaven, but members of the same body on the same footing, people who could now trust the promise of eternal life in Christ.

They were fully included. And that would have brought such joy to the hearts of these Ephesians because they knew that there were still a lot of Jewish Christians around who differed from Paul, people who were still saying that Gentiles had to submit to all these Jewish laws if they were to become real Christians.

But the truth of their inclusion has come about by divine revelation. Now let's dig a little bit further into this paragraph. I've got a couple of questions to pose.

Here's question one. Why does Paul use this word mystery? If the truth about Gentile inclusion has been revealed to Paul, why does he use this word that suggests that something is still under a cloak of secrecy?

[20 : 19] After all, we use the word mystery to describe something which is dark and strange and incomprehensible. For example, the mystery of the dog that barked only once.

Or the mystery of the boat that sailed to the Isle of Lewis and was never seen again. We need to understand that this Greek word he uses, the word *mysterion*, means a secret that is no longer closely guarded but is now open.

Once it was veiled but now it has been revealed by God. Now question two. Paul says in verse five that this mystery was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets through the Spirit.

Now that's a rather puzzling statement at first sight because the Old Testament did reveal that it was always God's purpose to include Gentiles in the blessings of salvation.

God said it very clearly in his initial call to Abraham that through Abraham's family, the Jewish nation, all the families of the earth would be blessed. And it's a promise repeated many times throughout the Old Testament.

[21 : 34] For example, Isaiah speaks of all the nations coming to Jerusalem as pilgrims, flowing towards Jerusalem like a mighty river. Jesus takes the idea up in his great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel when he sends his disciples out to make disciples of all nations.

So what does Paul mean in verse five when he speaks of this new revelation given to the apostles? Well, what is newly revealed is the radical nature of God's plan, namely, that the old theocracy, the Jewish nation under God's rule, would be brought to an end and replaced by a new international community, the church, a community no longer centered upon Jerusalem but worldwide.

So geography is now irrelevant. And this church would be, as Paul puts it in verse six, the body of Christ, organically united to him, and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms and without any distinction.

Paul puts it like this in Galatians chapter three, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek. You are all one in Christ Jesus. And to Paul, that was the grandmother of all revelations.

Think of Paul. nobody was more deeply Jewish than Paul. Paul had drunk in with his mother's milk the idea that Jews are hugely superior to Gentiles.

[23 : 12] Before his conversion, and he tells us about this in Philipians, he regarded himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews, of the quintessence of Judaism. He prided himself as being of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee educated in the scriptures under the best teachers in Jerusalem.

In his own eyes, he was the bee's knees, the cat's whiskers, and the cream on the milk of Judaism. But the Lord Jesus stopped him in his tracks on the road to Damascus, overwhelmed him, blinded him, and revealed to him on the very day of his conversion that he was a chosen instrument to carry the name of Christ to the Gentiles.

He said later, when he was on trial before King Agrippa in Acts 26, he said to the king, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. He certainly was not.

That vision on the road to Damascus became simply the driving force of his whole life. The man who had been deeply prejudiced against the Gentiles began to love the Gentiles and to realize that Christ had a much bigger plan in view than simply to refresh Judaism.

Now let's just pause to think of some of the implications of this. If somebody were to ask you to describe your national identity, I wonder how you'd reply, I am Scottish, I am Irish, Northern Irish, I am Nigerian, I am English, I am Iranian, I am Latvian, I am Chinese, et cetera, et cetera.

[24 : 51] would you ever say I'm Gentile? I have never said that. It's never crossed my mind to say that.

I am a Gentile, but it's something I hardly ever think about. But I need to if I'm to take Paul's teaching seriously. What I particularly need to see is that my inclusion as a Gentile in the kingdom of heaven is an enormous privilege.

I've been brought in from beyond the pale. I was like an untouchable, a dog in the eyes of Bible Jews, a kind of street cur that you kick out of your way and shout at.

But the great barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles, that dreadful wall of hostility, has been removed. Access to the kingdom of heaven has been opened up to me and to countless other Christian Gentiles.

We now belong to the king of the Jews. We belong to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Let's be deeply thankful and humbled by this access granted to us by the love and mercy of God.

[25 : 59] In the words of Hosea, the prophet, once we were not a people, now we are a people, God's people. But it's not only the barrier between Jews and Gentiles which has been removed.

The further implication of this is that in Christ, in the church, every other human barrier that separates people and divides them from each other is removed.

Just look for a moment around this building. Just look around. Come on, turn your necks. Won't hurt. Look around. Have a look at everybody. How many colors of faith and how many different nationalities can you see?

Black, brown, white. Or if you're like me, pink as a salmon. But seriously, it's a joy, isn't it, that we have people from many tribes and languages and nations under one roof together.

If we belong to Christ, we are one with each other. We are brothers and sisters. We're not divided by ethnicity or color or by educational background or by social class.

[27 : 04] Those categories disappear in the Lord's church. The mystery, look at our verse 6 again, the mystery, once concealed but now revealed, is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body.

And if we're not divided from Jewish Christians, it's impossible that we could be divided from other Gentile Christians by ethnicity or education. And one of the great joys of belonging to the Lord's church is that the ties of love and friendships that we have, they simply grow stronger over the years as we learn to care for each other and support each other and challenge each other to serve the Lord with growing commitment and enthusiasm.

Well, let's turn now from the mystery revealed to the ministry entrusted to Paul. Verse 7, of this gospel, this good news that Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian are fellow heirs of God and members of the same body, of this gospel, I was made a minister.

I was made a minister. I didn't make myself a minister, but my appointment was a gift of God's grace, which was given me, given to me.

So the initiative in all this comes from God. And Paul uses almost identical words back in verse 2, where he speaks of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you.

[28 : 34] So the mystery revealed was a gift of God's grace, and now the ministry entrusted is equally a gift of God's grace. And then Paul adds, in verse 7, by the working of his power.

Now just think for a moment of earthly power being at work. The power, for example, of a great ship's engines as it drives the ship down the river Clyde, or the power of a hurricane as it blows a tree down or takes the roof off a house.

Those are little powers, even though they seem mighty powers to us. But this power here, the power of Ephesians 3, 7, is the great power that transforms a human life, that takes a life which is, if I can put it crudely, wallowing in the muck.

And it power hoses that life and prepares it for heaven. It's the power that brings salvation. Paul writes in Romans 1, 16, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

So if you have become a Christian, you have been subjected to nothing less than the power of God. And his power continues to be at work in you, in the growing Christian, as he continues to reconstruct our life and our thinking.

[30 : 01] But now look on to verse 8, where Paul again uses this phrase, this grace was given. Well, to whom was it given? Paul tells us, to me.

And then he surprises us by his self-description. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints. And we read that and we perhaps think, Paul, you cannot be serious.

You are the great Paul, the great apostle, the mighty intellectual, the intrepid missionary who has survived beatings and lashings and shipwrecks and a thousand insults. No, says Paul, no, you misunderstand me if that's what you think about me.

His Greek phrase literally reads, I am less than the least of all the saints. Not just the least, but less than the least, lower than the least. The word saints simply means Christians.

So Paul is saying that nobody could have been less eligible than he was for the work to which God had called him. Now this is not a mock humility or a false humility.

[31 : 06] Paul is absolutely serious. He is saying nobody could have been less worthy than I to receive this commission. And the reason he said this was because Paul could never forget his past.

He knew beyond any doubt that he was forgiven, but he could never forget what he had been and what he had done. Do you remember the very first words that Jesus spoke to him on the road to Damascus?

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he was on his way to Damascus in order to round up Christians and send them to prison and some to their deaths.

He had been an approving witness to the stoning of that godly man, Stephen. He had hated the church. He had hated Christ. He had been a religious terrorist.

He puts it like this in 1 Timothy chapter 1. Our Lord Jesus appointed me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man.

[32 : 11] And what he said here about himself in Ephesians 3 verse 8, it was a true estimate of himself. The hymn writer John Newton had a similar view of himself.

You'll know this story, many of you, but he'd been the captain of a slave trading ship in the middle of the 18th century. He had captured many men and women from West Africa and had treated them brutally.

Many of them died as they were being ferried across the Atlantic. Their bodies would simply be thrown overboard to be eaten by sharks. John Newton never forgot his past, but he was wonderfully converted, and later he wrote, Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

There was no mock humility there. Paul and John Newton had blood on their hands. They had acquiesced in murder. God is able and willing to take the most brutal and hate-filled human being and to turn him into a lover of God and one who loves men and women.

If you're a murderer here tonight, don't despair. Come to him and find forgiveness. If you're less than a murderer, but you have been filled with hatred, come to him and be transformed as Paul was and as John Newton was.

[33 : 29] To the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, verse 8, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Now, we're looking at the ministry entrusted to Paul, and we've seen first that it operates by the working of God's power. Second, that it's entrusted to the least of all the saints.

That gives great encouragement, doesn't it, to you and me. But thirdly, this commission, this ministry, is to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, as Paul puts it in verse 8.

Now, that is some description of the gospel, don't you think? The unsearchable riches of Christ. What does Paul mean by unsearchable? The Greek word he uses literally means not to be tracked out, impossible to be traced out.

We might say, you can go on and on exploring, but you'll never reach the end of your explorations. Paul says something similar at the end of Romans chapter 11, where he speaks of the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways.

- [34 : 45] For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? So this phrase, the unsearchable riches of Christ, surely invites us and provokes us to extend our own searching and our exploration of these wonderful riches.

When we start the Christian life, when we're first converted, we are frankly enormous ignoramuses. Yes, by the grace and kindness of God, we've put our trust in Christ as Savior, and we are beginning to acknowledge him as Lord.

We're saved. Hallelujah. We've left the broad road that leads to destruction, and we're now setting out on the narrow road that leads to life. But our knowledge of the Lord initially is very thin.

But this is where the exploration of Christ's unsearchable riches begins. Unsearchable does not mean that searching is fruitless or pointless.

It simply means that his riches are so vast and so varied that we will never be able to search them out exhaustively. But Paul's words spur us into action. We begin to read the Bible, not as a chore, but as a hungry man sits down to dinner of beef and Yorkshire pudding.

- [35 : 59] We begin to ask questions of the Bible. We perhaps read a passage and we say, what does this mean? It's a good question to ask. We join a Bible study group.

Good thing to do. We say to the group leader, for example, what is this verse 23 all about? And the leader says, well, it's this and it's this. And we say, oh, yes, yes, I see now the penny is beginning to drop.

And over the years, penny after penny drops. And our knowledge of the riches of Christ develops. If I can change the metaphor, it's rather like having a 5,000 piece jigsaw to put together.

Initially, you can hardly see how any two pieces fit together. But slowly, you press forward and the big picture begins to emerge. Now, look at verse 9.

As Paul preaches the unsearchable riches of Christ, the effect of his preaching is to bring to light for everyone, not just for a special little group, but for everyone, what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God.

- [37 : 07] So one of the joys of the Christian life is that together, as we study the plan of the mystery, we search out the riches that can never be fully searched out. But we do this together.

And it's one of the joys of growing up in the Christian life. So this means that the church is part hospital, part barracks, part family home, and part school.

Hospital, because the gospel brings healing and rest to our troubled hearts. Barracks, because the gospel equips us to be soldiers of Christ, armed against the deceits of the devil.

family home, because the gospel unites us as true brothers and sisters. And school, because the gospel invites us to think and to study, to search out the truth so as to be mastered by it and shaped by it.

But the church has another function described in verse 10. And I want us to notice this carefully because it's striking and very surprising. Just picking up the thought through verses 8 and 9.

- [38 : 14] Why does Paul preach the unsearchable riches of Christ? Well, the immediate effect of his preaching is to bring to light the plan of the mystery hidden for long ages in God, but now an open secret that Jew and Gentile belong together in the one body.

But what is the further effect of Paul's preaching? Verse 10. It is that so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Now, Paul doesn't tell us in verse 10 exactly who these rulers and authorities in the heavenly places are. Clearly, they are thoughtful and intelligent beings and we can be sure that God has delegated real power to them because they are rulers who have authority and they couldn't get it unless it came from God.

It seems likely then that these beings are angels, the seraphim and cheraphim of the Old Testament, perhaps the Lord's army, the heavenly host who do his bidding.

But it may be that Paul also has in mind the minions of Satan, fallen angels who are opponents of God and the Lord Jesus. They're described here as authorities in the heavenly places and that might make us think that they could only be good angels if they're in the heavenly places.

[39 : 38] But if you turn over a page to chapter 6, verse 12, you find that there are authorities and powers and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

So in chapter 3, verse 10, it may be that Paul is describing every angelic power in the unseen world, the evil as well as the good. We can't be quite certain about that.

But what we can be certain about is the place of the church in all this. Look again at verse 10. It's through the church that the manifold, the many-colored, many-splendored wisdom of God revealed in the mystery of Jew and Gentile being incorporated together.

It is through this church that God's amazing work and plan is made known to the angelic world. As one writer has put it, the history of the Christian church becomes a graduate school for angels.

Now, we don't see the angels, but they're looking at us. That's what Paul is saying. And just remember, Paul was writing this when the church of Christ was only 25 or 30 years old, but it was growing rapidly.

[40 : 51] All over the Mediterranean area, churches were springing up, and Jewish and Gentile Christians were discovering their true brotherhood, their true identity as belonging to each other on equal terms.

So Paul was witnessing an astonishing phenomenon as he saw these churches growing and multiplying. Once upon a time, Paul had despised Gentiles.

Once upon a time, he had hated and despised all Christians, Jewish and Gentile, but he was now seeing the real nature of the church. He says in verse 11 that this was happening according to God's eternal purpose, eternally conceived, eternally planned, but now being realized in current history, giving the church, verse 12, boldness and access with confidence to the Lord.

So this means that the angelic world looks with great interest and amazement at the growth of the church. And through the mystery of Jew and Gentile belonging to one body in Christ, the angels see something of the manifold wisdom of God.

The church then is a glorious and astonishing body. It is a work of wonder. It's something which the angels look at and they are in awe at the power and wisdom of God.

[42 : 17] So friends, if we ever feel dispirited or discouraged by the world's view of the church, let's allow Paul to change our thinking and to teach us the reality. Yes, the world will sometimes, quite often, speak of the church with contempt.

So the church is a thing of the past, a spent force, just a little club for the elderly where they drink weak tea and eat Jaffa cakes. No, the church is the product of the working of God's power.

In it are the treasures of the unsearchable riches of Christ. And this is why Paul says in verse 13, don't lose heart over my sufferings, over the fact that I'm in prison now.

Yes, they are sufferings for you. They've come to me on account of you Gentiles and my preaching the gospel to you. But my sufferings, he ends up, are your glory.

I'm paying a very small price. I'm happy to go to prison on your account. I'm happy to suffer bad food and rats and chains and dysentery and everything else because the consequence is glory for you through the revelation of the mystery that Jewish and Gentile Christians, all Christians, belong together in one body as fellow heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

[43 : 37] well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray to our King and God. Our dear Heavenly Father, we praise you that the church is your creation, planned by you, initiated by you, an eternal plan brought to realization through the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Help us, we pray, to love the church, to grow in it, to serve it, to rejoice in it, and to keep discovering in it the unsearchable riches of Christ.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.