

The church - God's wisdom made known

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[0 : 00] your illumination by your Holy Spirit so that we can understand your word and allow it to shape our lives. So indeed we ask, Father, that we would grasp just how wide and long and high and deep is your love and how deep is your power and how wise you are this morning.

We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now as we begin today, I think it would be good for us to do just a little bit of reflection. So just take a minute or so and think, how has Ephesians so far been transforming your perspective?

So have a quick flip through Ephesians chapter 1 and 2 again in your Bibles if your brain needs some refreshing, what you have learned. And I know that this is a bit outside your comfort zone, but share this with your neighbor, unless you're a guest here today.

If you're a guest here today, just say, hello, that's okay. But for our regulars, just take a minute or so, think about what you've been learning from Ephesians, how it's been transforming your perspective, and share one or two thoughts with your neighbor.

And I'm just going to give you a minute to do this. Well, I certainly hope that little exercise just got your brains working a little bit more to help get the book of Ephesians just dwelling inside your hearts a little bit more.

[1 : 23] But let's switch gears. And just before we examine today's passage, I want you to consider another question. How often does God seem to act foolishly by our standards?

How often does God seem to act foolishly by our standards? Consider, for instance, the story of Gideon in the Old Testament. Many of you know this story.

The Israelites have done wrong, and as a result, God judges them by allowing them to be oppressed by a group called the Midianites. But they cry out to God, and so God sends a rescuer. Except that God decides to go to this little guy called Gideon. He's a reluctant man, filled with doubts, who's not exactly always obedient himself.

He's always doubting God. He knows that his clan is the weakest in the nation, and he's not even the strongest member of his own family. Not exactly the best candidate for the job of rescuer.

[2 : 25] And yet, when God sends him the angel, he calls him his mighty warrior. Is God being foolish? And then as the story progresses, Gideon leads an army near their enemies.

But God tells him, you have too many men. Eh? Since when can you have too many men when you're leading an army to war? But God cuts down the size of his army from at least 32,000 men to 10,000, and then finally to 300.

The number of people in our church hall this morning is roughly the size of Gideon's army, sent to face a much larger group of experienced raiders.

Is God being foolish? And today, it is God being foolish when he asks me to tell my friends about him, but then he brings suffering into my life?

What would my friends think of such? A God? Eh, don't bring you much blessing, eh? Is God being foolish when he chooses to link our spiritual growth with an ancient book written 2,000 years ago in a culture different from ours?

[3 : 40] Is God being foolish in the way he asks us to do things like repay evil with blessing, forgive those who hurt you, or hold to sexual ethics that look outdated in today's age?

Well, here in Ephesians chapter 3, the question comes up again. Paul is about to pray for the Ephesian Christians. He's just described in detail God's master plan to raise spiritually dead people to life, unite them under Christ, and to bring them together as his new humanity.

We've seen all of that in the last few weeks, especially chapter 2. And, for this reason, he says in verse 1, I'm going to pray for you.

Well, at least that's what he says eventually. If you look down at verse 14, he says, for this reason, he repeats himself, I kneel before the Father.

But there's something strange going on. Before Paul actually prays for them in verse 14, here's this long section in verses 2 to 13, where he seems to ramble on about his ministry.

[4 : 53] He interrupts himself before he even begins to pray. What's going on? Is Paul simply behaving like your great-grandfather, who says he's going to go to the toilet or something, but then he suddenly launches into some random life story from 25 years ago, while your force to nod politely and listen?

Well, no. Because look at how Paul describes himself in verse 1. I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus.

And that would have immediately set off alarm bells for his listeners. You see, being a prisoner during that time was intensely dishonourable and shameful. It still is today, I suppose, but it was even more so then.

To try to capture a sense of the shock that his readers would have felt, imagine if I introduced a guest preacher today, and I said about him, Mr. So-and-so has ministered in a church for 20 years after graduating from Bible college.

Oh, and by the way, he was also sentenced to 10 years in a maximum security prison. We are very glad to have him here this morning. Well, I suspect there will be some silence in our congregation, and you're already thinking about making sure that your children in Sunday school are okay.

[6 : 18] So Paul needs to do some explaining. Given that he's been talking so much about God's power and victory, he needs to explain why God's messenger himself looks defeated and humiliated in prison.

He needs to show us that God is not being foolish in the execution of his master plan. And he needs to reassure us that God has not chosen the wrong man.

Instead, he is exactly where God wants him. Look at verse 13. He tells the Ephesians, I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Don't worry, Paul says. In my sufferings, God has a plan. It's for your benefit. I'm actually fulfilling God's role for me, though right now I might look weak and shameful.

I might look like I'm in a terrible situation now, but I'm actually in the most privileged position. God is not being foolish. And that's what Paul wants to show us in verses 2 to 13.

[7 : 37] So let's just give Paul the chance to explain his role in God's master plan and let that encourage us. So firstly, as Christ's prisoner, Paul is the steward of God's mystery.

The steward of God's mystery. You probably notice the word mystery comes up a lot in verses 2 to 6. And it comes up again in verse 9.

Now, when we hear the word mystery, what comes into our mind is a great puzzle. Mystery is something strange, something unusual that we can't possibly know.

Some of us would say it's a great mystery why men don't leave the toilet seat down, for example.

Indeed, the great scientist Stephen Hawking, who just passed away very recently, was once asked what mystery he found most fascinating.

Women, he said. I have a PhD in physics, but women remain a mystery. There's something we can't possibly figure out. But jokes aside, that's what we typically mean when we talk about mystery.

[8 : 52] Something that cannot possibly be known. But Paul is using mystery in a different sense here. He's talking about something amazing that can and has been made known.

He makes that clear in verse 3. This mystery he's talking about has been revealed to him. But what is this mystery?

What is this secret that he's uncovered? Well, verse 4, it's simply Christ himself. For this knowledge of Christ is a privilege that has been extended to Paul and the other apostles in a way that it has never been done in previous generations.

Look at verse 5. This mystery of Christ was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Now, if you've been coming to our Friday nights to God's Big Picture, the course that we've been running, you will discover that the Old Testament points profoundly to Christ.

[10 : 09] So for example, this past Friday, you would have already heard about the promise of the serpent crusher as far back as Genesis 3. The clues are already there that Christ will come.

But, although the Old Testament points to Christ, Old Testament people would never have realized just how glorious he would be or what he would actually achieve.

That remained an undisclosed mystery to them. It is the difference between looking at the blueprints for something like the Taj Mahal or the Petronas Towers and actually seeing those buildings in real life.

This mystery of the gospel was a God-given privilege that had not been granted until the first generation of the apostles to people like Paul and now to people like us.

And the great figures of the Old Testament, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, they would never have guessed verse 6.

[11 : 26] Let me read it. This mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

They knew that the Gentiles would be blessed in some way. They knew that God had a plan for the Gentiles. But none of them would ever have guessed that God would make the two groups one, never in their wildest dreams.

Would they have imagined that God was going to make one new humanity the way he did, the way that we heard about last week? And just listen to the emphasis of verse 6.

The Gentiles are heirs together. They are members together. They are sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus.

They are on equal standing with the Jews, now able to have the exact same blessings in Christ. And now Paul's job is to be a steward of this mystery, to make it known to others.

[12 : 49] Look up to verse 2. this administration of God's grace, in other words, this mystery, has been given to Paul to be made known to others.

And that's exactly what he's been doing in the book of Ephesians. He's been telling the Ephesian Christians about their spiritual blessings in Christ, that they have been made alive by grace, and that they are now part of God's family.

And Paul is saying to them, do you see this is precisely why I am in prison? It's because God has given me knowledge of this mystery to be made known to others.

When Paul came into possession of this good news on the road to Damascus, when he heard about God making people new, about God reconciling Gentile with Jew, he couldn't keep it to himself.

He traveled all over the Mediterranean and declared this wonderful news in synagogues, in homes, in public squares. We can read all about that in the book of Acts.

[14 : 05] And it's precisely because he had this wonderful privilege of knowing and sharing this God-given message, the gospel, that he ended up in prison.

And so Paul is saying, my imprisonment is not evidence of my lowly status. It's actually evidence of my exalted status as one of these apostles who had the privilege to receive this good news and share it with others.

And so don't be discouraged by the fact that I'm in prison, Paul says. It's all part of God's master plan. If I wasn't in prison but I'm just at home watching TV, well that means I wasn't given the privilege to pass on the gospel.

But that's not all. Secondly, as Christ prisoner, Paul is the proclaimer of God's wisdom.

He's the proclaimer of God's wisdom. Now in verse 10, Paul is going to say something incredible and that's going to be the headline of this section.

[15 : 25] But before we get to verse 10, let's just look at verses 8 and 9. There Paul is going to give his job description. In fact, he's going to give two job descriptions.

We find job description number one in verse 8. Although I'm less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me to preach to the Gentile the boundless riches of Christ.

So that's job description number one. And then job description number two is in verse 9. And to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for the ages past was kept hidden in God who created all things.

So to summarize, Paul has been given two tasks. Preach to the Gentiles and make plain to everyone, to enlighten everyone. Now, let me try to show the connection between these two job descriptions.

Let's go back to Paul's first job. He's to preach to the Gentiles. And when he preaches, God creates his church.

[16 : 38] After all, he's preaching the gospel and the gospel will reconcile people back to God and then to each other. And in the process, God's new people are formed. So when Paul preaches, God creates the church.

But in carrying out job number one, Paul will also fulfill job number two. This is how it works. When Paul preaches, the church is created and what happens is that everyone is enlightened about the impact of the gospel.

And Paul wants to enlighten one audience in particular. And this is the big shock. This is the incredible claim. It's not a human audience.

look at verse 10. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

You see, this is Paul's audience. The rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. That's referring to non-human beings. It's referring to the spiritual powers.

[18 : 06] Let me try to help you understand the incredible statement being made here. Imagine that the world right now as a piata. And in the audience are all sorts of spiritual beings, angels and demons.

and they're watching this show and they're watching this prisoner pole at work. And the evil powers are laughing at him. He's in prison.

He's been persecuted and tortured. He's been humiliated and all he has are words, nothing else.

But God, who's also in the audience, smiles, folds his arms and says to them, keep watching.

And as they watch, they begin to notice that the gospel pole is preaching impacts lives. It brings back the spiritually dead. It transforms people filled with transgressions to be filled with beauty.

And it begins to heal divisions and creates a community that's never been seen before. and the spiritual powers now begin to murmur among themselves.

[19 : 26] Because things that they could never imagine, like the Jew worshipping with the Gentile, like the Hutu worshipping with the Tutsi, like the BN supporter worshipping with the Pakatan supporter, it's happening right before their very eyes.

the spiritual powers, you see, are into division and alienation and isolation. They love it when they see things like the racial riots of May 13.

They love it when they see broken relationships everywhere. But before their very eyes, they're seeing the gospel coming like a reversal of May 13.

As God brings into existence a unified multiracial body consisting of every tribe and tongue, all unified by the gospel.

And they are struck dumb. You see, when they see the gospel bring together people, they are really seeing that God himself is a master director.

[20 : 37] The gospel after all, seems like foolishness to the world. It speaks of God sending his son as a man of sorrows, coming in weakness, to offer forgiveness to his very enemies by dying on the cross.

And that foolishness continues because it's being proclaimed by a prisoner who's been opposed, persecuted, and chained up.

But God has the last laugh. Because 2,000 years on, we know that although Paul may be chained up, the gospel cannot be.

We know that because 2,000 years on, God's authentic church continues to exist. The gospel has moved from Jewish territory to Rome, which was the most significant city in the world at that time, all the way to the ends of the earth to Sarawak.

And whenever we meet together on a Sunday, as those from different tribes, from different backgrounds, and yet we are one in mind and one in heart, we are actually bearing witness to the master director.

[21 : 55] In fact, that's what we're doing right now. What you're actually watching, God says to this audience of spiritual powers is my very wisdom at work.

And the evil powers are now especially worried. Why? Because suddenly they are remembering Ephesians chapter 1, verse 9 to 10.

Let me read that to you again. Ephesians chapter 1, verse 9 to 10. God is saying, through the work of Paul, my prisoner, Ephesians chapter 1, verse 9 to 10, has begun.

heaven and earth are beginning to unite under Christ. And you can see that because God's church exists. And that's bad news for you spiritual powers.

Because as heaven and earth begin to unite under Christ, that means the evil powers are heading for defeat. So do you see now why Paul says to the Ephesian Christians, don't be discouraged.

[23 : 30] The God who is in control is the God who is all-wise. God knows what he's doing. He's a master strategist using something as unlikely as the gospel to bring about transformation to the entire community.

Who else but God would have come up with a plan that required sending his only son to die to defeat death. And that reassures us.

For the Ephesian Christians, it would have reassured them living in a world where people practice magic and sorcery. It changed their perspective about who's in control and what sort of God is in control.

And it changes our perspective too. And so when God brings suffering into your life, he knows what he's doing. When he causes you to become weak, he knows what he's doing.

When he makes you look foolish, he knows what he's doing. He's wise beyond what we can imagine. And it changes our attitude to church, especially.

[24 : 47] You see, God has made it such that the church is central, not peripheral to his master plan. It is in the humble local church, with all its weaknesses, with all its failings, with all its frailty, that God wants to put on display his very wisdom.

In the Christian world, we often put a lot of emphasis on our personal relationship with Christ. And that's an important emphasis. But when we overemphasize that to the exclusion of everything else, we actually fail to do justice to the Bible's overall teaching, because we make church sound like it's optional.

But that's not how the Bible thinks about church. No, God thinks of the church as his very instrument that he uses to make known his manifold manifold wisdom to everyone, even the rulers and authorities in the spiritual realms.

It is in the church where he executes his master plan. brothers and sisters, do you look at church this way?

Or do you think of church just as this little thing that you do on a Sunday? Do you see how valuable the church in all its weakness is to God?

[26 : 25] Paul knows. Indeed, that's why Paul has chosen to suffer. Look again back at verse 1.

He's a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles. And he repeats that in verse 13. His sufferings are for them. He is prepared to pay the price because he is so concerned for the church.

And indeed, he sees his sufferings as part of God's master plan. That's counter-cultural for us, isn't it? We think God's master plan for his church must include a big building or political influence or spectacular services.

But when we think like that, perhaps we have absorbed the world's ideas of power without realizing it. For if the world's ideas of power were God's ideas, then Jesus would never have gone to the cross and Paul would never have gone to prison.

Could it be that sometimes when we look weak, when we are suffering and marginalized, that we are actually walking in the will of God?

[27 : 48] and like Paul, when we suffer, we are actually fulfilling our commission. But because this is so different from the way that we normally think, we need all the help we can get.

And so we come to Paul's final role this morning. Thirdly, as Christ prisoner, Paul is a petitioner for God's empowerment.

He's a petitioner for God's empowerment. So finally, Paul comes to pray. And we won't have time to examine everything in this prayer in detail this morning, but I want us just to notice his two main prayer requests.

The first one begins in verse 16. Let me just find it. Here we go. At its heart, this is a request for the Holy Spirit to empower us, specifically in our hearts.

That's what inner being refers to. In biblical thinking, the heart is the very center of our being. It's the very place which controls our character, our thinking, our decision making.

[29 : 19] And so Paul now prays that the Holy Spirit would specifically strengthen our very core. Why? Verse 17 tells us, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

faith. Now, at first glance, that sounds like a strange thing to say. After all, don't Christians already have Christ in them? Well, the idea here is this.

Imagine that you are buying your very first home. It's pretty difficult nowadays, but you manage to secure a place. It's not the best. The curtains and the wallpaper, it's ugly.

The sink is leaking. The lights are all in the wrong place. But at least you have a home and you're grateful for that. And as the years go by, slowly but surely, the house begins to get a facelift.

The curtains and wallpapers are replaced. The kitchen is completely remodeled. The lighting is rewired. And there's now even a nice little garden.

[30 : 34] 10, 15 years on, that house is not just a place to live in, but it's truly become home. And Paul is praying that the Holy Spirit will act as a renovator in our lives.

He's praying that he would slowly but surely, replace all the dirty and broken bits in our lives and remodel the homes of our hearts so that we will become more and more a suitable residence for Christ to dwell.

That's the idea. And we need his power, don't we? We need his strength to trust in his plan, especially when his plan looks like foolishness.

We need his strength to act as God's new humanity when there is still so much of the old human in us. And we need his strength to remain committed to God's people, especially when they are so unlike us.

And Paul's second prayer request is also a request for power. power. This time, however, it is a request for power to comprehend.

[31 : 57] Just look at halfway through verse 17. God's love. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Again, do Christians know Christ's love? Well, of course they do. But once again, what we know is so little. We don't actually know how vast and wide Christ's love is.

It's a fountain. We only have a little drop. And this morning, I began by asking you how Ephesians has been transforming your perspective so far. And for some of you, the honest answer is it hasn't. You've heard all the spiritual blessings we have in Christ and remain unmoved. You've heard about being made alive in Christ and just shrug your shoulders.

You've heard about how God has made one new humanity and feel like it's no big deal. And if that's you, then you must especially pray that you will grasp how wide and long and high and deep Christ is.

[33 : 26] Because your spiritual eyes have become blinded. You only have a drop when there's a fountain to be had. And you must pray not out of a spirit of skepticism, but a spirit of humility.

And all of us, whatever stage we're at in our walk with Christ, we can pray this. love is endless. And he wants us to taste the glories of his love and power.

So as we reach the halfway point of this letter to Ephesians, I hope already you are seeing how big God's master plan is. How powerful he is, how wise he is.

Ephesians chapter 1 to 3 has given us so much insight into the mystery of Christ. And so let's continue to act in accordance with his master plan.

Let's make plain to everyone the boundless riches of Christ. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask and imagine, according to his power at work in us, to him be glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

[34 : 48] Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we want to pray the prayer of Paul once again.

We pray indeed that you will strengthen us with power, that you will change our hearts and remodel it so that it will be more and more like a home for Christ to dwell.

And we pray that as we are rooted and established in love, we pray that we may have power to grasp just how wide and long and high and deep is your love, is your power, that indeed we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

We ask that the book of Ephesians will continue to take root in us and see how blessed we are in Christ. We pray all this in Jesus' name.

Amen.rawn