

God is gathering his people

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Date: 27 January 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Now after service finished last week, two young ladies came to ask me a few questions about the sermon. They were good questions, asking me to explain again things like, give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's.

It's very likely that I didn't explain that and other things clearly enough. So just to say one more time, in our January series, we are covering a lot of ground and a lot of verses in the sermons very quickly.

And if you are not clear on something, please do come and chat with me more after the service. And I'm very happy to do that. But this month, we've been asking the question, what in the world is God doing?

And the first thing we saw was that God is pursuing the wayward. All of us are lost, wanting independence from God rather than intimacy with Him.

But praise God, He finds us and He lavishes upon us grace. And as those who are found, we are to have God's heart for others and especially those who are wayward.

[1 : 1 3] And then in our second sermon, we saw that God is establishing His kingdom. God is not interested in selling us fire insurance. He's not interested in giving us a Jesus who simply keeps us out of hell, but is otherwise out of sight, out of mind, just like our insurance policies.

Rather, He calls us to be part of His good and beautiful kingdom, where Jesus is King, whom we are now subject to. And then last week, we saw that God is restoring His image in us.

We saw that we are made in God's image, meant to reflect Him. But because we all turn to other gods, we become like broken, shattered mirrors.

But God's perfect image, Jesus, comes in our place to represent us. And He's now in the business of renewing us to reflect Him. And so as people being renewed in His image, we commit ourselves to pursuing Christ-likeness.

And if you miss any of the sermons, they're all up on our website. And also over the last two weeks, I hope these sermons have begun to help you to see and read your Bibles as one big story.

[2 : 3 0] That's a secondary aim of mine throughout this month, and I'm hoping that it changes your perspective. When we read God's Word this way, we avoid misinterpreting God's Word, and therefore we avoid misunderstanding God Himself and His purposes for you and I.

Well, today, once again, one more time, we're going to go on a journey from the beginning to the end of the Bible. But just like how different maps can highlight different things on the same route, you know, one map might highlight all the tourist spots, another map might highlight all the petrol stations, so this sermon will once again be highlighting something different.

We're going to bring a different theme into sharp focus to help us see what in the world God is doing. And today, we're going to see that from beginning to the end, God is gathering His people. Another way of saying that, as I hope will be clear by the end of the sermon, is that God thinks church is significant. The Greek word for church, ekklesia, after all, was originally a word that simply meant assembly or gathering.

That's what church is, a gathering of God's people. And that's what God is doing. God is gathering His people.

[4 : 0 0] And we're going to think about the nature of this gathering as we move through the Scriptures. Let me just acknowledge that I found the work of Christopher Ashe, who is a trainer of pastors, who also knows Bill and Shirley Lees, long-time missionaries to Sarawak.

I found his book a big help for today's sermon. So if you read his book, Remaking a Broken World, which is in our library, you will see his fingerprints all over today's sermon. So like the last two weeks, I'm going to divide the Bible story into five episodes.

And I will try to draw some implications along the way and at the end. But I'm going to cheat a bit. And I'm going to start not with episode one, but episode zero.

Think of it a bit like the behind-the-scenes feature in a DVD. And on episode zero, we're going to see the plan before Eden.

The plan before Eden. Turn with me to Ephesians. And let me just ask the writer, Paul, three questions. First question.

[5 : 09] Paul, what is God's plan for the universe? And he answers in chapter one, verse nine to ten. You might remember this from last year.

Great. Great. So second question, Paul.

What specifically is God uniting under the Lord Jesus? Well, as we read on in Ephesians, we will discover the answer. Here's Ephesians 2, verse 15, starting halfway through.

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, the two being Jew and Gentile, thus making peace and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility.

And then as we read on, we hit 3, verse 6, which says this. 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.

[6 : 45] In other words, God's plan is to unite Jews and Gentiles under Jesus. His big plan is to bring people from every nation to know his son, to love his son, and to serve his son.

And third question, when did God decide to do all this? Well, if we were to go back to the beginning of Ephesians in chapter 1, verse 4, we realize that God had planned this before the creation of this world.

And so even before Eden was created, God was planning to gather his people. He wanted to unite them all under the Lord Jesus. And if you were the Ephesian church listening to Paul's word during those times, it would have been quite a shock.

You see, the Ephesian church looked utterly insignificant. They were small, they had no power, they had no influence. Artemis, the goddess that most of the citizens of Ephesus worshipped, had plenty of statues and a big temple in the city.

She looked powerful. The Christians had no statues and no temple. And so they very well could have started questioning, what's so special about our church?

[8 : 16] And that's true for us as well. Many of us, I'm sure, want to be faithful to God's will. But we're rather doubtful that the church is a big part of its grand plan.

After all, our local church doesn't always look impressive, does it? Your pastor up here isn't tall, dark or handsome. Our services, let's admit it, sometimes feels flat, although not today, I think. Our relationships feel superficial and fleeting. Our impact on the community sometimes feels minimal. And so we're tempted to sideline the church since it seems to be a hindrance rather than a catalyst to fulfilling God's purposes.

Other Christians just slow us down, we might complain. But the implication of episode zero is this. From even before the beginning of the world, God wants to make his church, his feeble, weak, struggling, unimpressive church, central to his plans.

In fact, he prizes God's gathered people so much that by the end of Ephesians, we're told that God's own son died for her. And so we are to see the church as supremely valuable, exasperating as she sometimes might be.

[9 : 49] And so that's why we have episode one, gathered in the garden. In the beginning, God created.

And yes, he created nature and the plants and the animals. He values all of those things. But he values something even more. People. And that's why we have Genesis 1 verse 26.

Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. And God calls people the climax of creation. Why?

Simple. Because God is beginning his plan to gather his people. In the Bible, God is definitely the main character.

We must make sure that that's always the case. But people are important too. People are the ones God wants to be in relationship with. And that's why the focus throughout the Bible is not so much on God's relationship with the plants or God's relationship with the animals, although that is present, but on God's relationship with people.

[11:02] And look at how he's made his people to be. Genesis 1 verse 27 to 28. God created mankind in his own image.

In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them. God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it.

Now notice there are three things we can say from these verses. Firstly, from the very beginning, there is unity. All humans are made in God's image.

No exceptions. And of course, Adam and Eve are meant to complement each other. But secondly, there's diversity. God created humans, male and female.

This is not a homogeneous group. And indeed, it is this very differentiation, that there is male and female, that directly leads to the third thing that we can say.

[12:09] Humanity is meant to become a multitude. As male and female, Adam and Eve can now begin creating a worldwide family who would fill the earth with God's glory as his stewards and representatives.

So Adam and Eve start off as a little gathering. But as Christopher Ashe puts it, As Adam and Eve reproduced, they were meant to become God's own people.

This is God's intention for the world. And just before we leave episode one, let me just make one more observation.

And it's this. God's word governs this gathering. God's word governs this gathering. In Genesis 2, verse 16 to 17, God leaves some instructions for Adam and Eve.

And the Lord God commanded the man, You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[13:37] For when you eat of it, you will certainly die. So at the center of life in this garden is a word from God, which endures either the life or the death of God's people.

obedience equals life. Disobedience equals death. That's the original blueprint, if you like, for church.

People gathering in relationship with God, with his word governing them. And sadly, it doesn't take too long for this gathering to fracture.

That's episode two, Scattered by Pride. As soon as Adam and Eve disobey the command of Genesis 2, this gathering has to be broken up.

Adam and Eve have to be expelled. Well, you might think, well actually, they can still do what they're supposed to do outside of Eden, right? I mean, they can still gather, they can still have children.

[14:51] But two stories in Genesis 4-11 show us that it's not that simple. In Genesis 4, we read about Adam's two children, Cain and Abel.

But Cain gets jealous of Abel. And before we know it, he murders his brother. And by the end of the story, we learn that Cain is now condemned to be a restless wanderer on the earth.

That's the exact phrase used. Instead of one united family, under God, looking after his world, we have a broken family.

alienated from each other, scattered away from God's presence. All is not well, for sin has corrupted us.

The second story is even more direct. In Genesis chapter 11, we have the famous story of Babel. And actually, notice how it begins.

[15:59] Now, the whole world had one language and a common speech. That sounds promising.

They are gathered together again in one accord, to use the line from one of the songs we sing here at KEC. And, imagine if you said to me, you and I speak the same language.

You don't just mean that we both speak English. What you mean is that we appear to be on the same wavelength. We understand each other.

And that sounds like how the world is like at this stage. Because, in verses 3 and 4, when the people gather together, they have agreement on a common plan and purpose.

They are on the same wavelength. What are they thinking about? Verse 4, they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves.

[17:07] Otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole world. Whoops. Here's the problem. They are gathering together.

Yes, they are. But it is not God who is gathering them. Rather, they are gathering to replace God. They are attempting to access the heavens to rule in place of God.

They are not gathering for His glory, but for their own name. They want to gather in opposition to what God wants. Remember Genesis 1, God desires the whole earth to be filled with people. They don't. They are determined to stay in one place. But of course, their attempts are futile. God looks down and verse 8, The Lord scattered them from there over all the earth and they stopped building the city. Babel, you see, is a godless gathering.

[18:12] It's a picture of the pride of the human heart that seeks to govern ourselves rather than live under the governance of God's word.

And so that's why Mary, Jesus' mother, would sing centuries later as we heard during Christmas time in Luke 1, verse 51. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm.

He has scattered those who are proud in His inmost thoughts. And this scattering, of course, is not just physical, it's linguistic.

There are now so many different voices, different languages, and they all probably have different agendas. A godless gathering results in godless scattering.

scattering. And two implications emerge from this picture. Firstly, Babel is a picture of how broken a world without God is.

[19:17] All throughout history, humans have pursued unity and harmony, a good community, an integrated society. In Malaysia, we talk and long for this all the time.

We try to come up with as many policies and solutions as we can. Let's have vision schools. Let's replace BTN with some other new program.

Let's promote sports to bring people together. Let's uphold multiculturalism. And those are all good initiatives. But as Christians, we must realize that the fundamental underlying problem behind our disunity is that we now live in the shadow of Babel.

Human beings are no longer a people united by the worship of the one true God. And as long as that's true, those initiatives on their own cannot provide lasting solutions.

People will continue misunderstanding each other. People have broken relationships with one another. People are racist and sexist. People pursue their own agendas.

[20:37] People have Babel inside of them. And secondly, second implication, Babel is a reminder that not all unity is good unity.

Throughout history, people have always gathered. Think of concerts, think of sporting events, think of political rallies. And yes, people even gather in the name of Jesus.

But gatherings that do not truly have God's priorities and God's purposes at its heart do not enjoy God's blessings.

Even if they call themselves Christian gatherings. What matters is not the name, but where the heart of that gathering is. Babel reminds us that unity for the sake of unity is not good enough.

It may even be idolatrous. It must be a unity centered around God himself. And so Babel is now a picture of what the world has become.

[21:53] And God is determined to do something about it. Think about IKEA furniture. You know, most of the time it comes in disassembled pieces, doesn't it? And it requires assembling to become what is supposed to be, a bookshelf or something.

And that's what God is doing. Gathering scattered pieces to make something good, to assemble things into what it was meant to be. And so we come to episode number three.

New assembly required. New assembly required. In Genesis chapter 12, God comes to Abraham Abraham and makes these promises to him.

12 verse 2 to 3. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Now notice the similarities to Adam.

[22:58] God wants to fill the earth again with the seed of Abraham. As he will say later in Genesis, multitudes are to come from Abraham as many as the stars.

And notice the end goal is so that a diversity of nations will be blessed. And God keeps repeating these promises throughout Genesis.

Let me just give you one of several examples. In Genesis chapter 35 verse 11 God tells Abraham's grandson Jacob God said to him I am God almighty be fruitful and increase in number a nation and

a community or gathering is the same word of nations will come from you and kings will be among your descendants.

God clearly still wants to gather his people. And the psalmist himself looks forward to this day.

Here's Psalm 47 verse 9.

The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham for the kings of the earth belong to God he is greatly exalted.

[24 : 17] So the psalmist is looking forward to that day where he sees this kind of assembly. So what we have in Genesis if you like is the promise of a church a gathering of God's people.

And as we go along the Bible storyline we find that God's promises begin to be fulfilled. From the promise of a church we will get a prototype church.

In other words God begins to gather his people in a way that will anticipate the New Testament church. And so in Exodus we get a picture of such a prototype church and it has three characteristics.

Firstly they are redeemed. God is gathering a redeemed people. So by the time of Exodus Abraham's descendants have indeed become a nation.

But they begin their collective lives as slaves to Egypt. They need rescue and that's exactly what God does. I'm sure you all know the story. And so as a redeemed people they are led through the Red Sea to do what?

[25 : 38] To gather at Mount Sinai. this is the very first time they've done so as a nation. In Exodus 19 we find if you like the very first church service.

Second characteristic they are gathered for relationship. Look at Exodus 19 verse 4. God is saying to them God is speaking to them you yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself.

And then in the second half of Exodus God gives elaborate instructions on how to build a tabernacle so that he can dwell and be in relationship with his gathered people just like back in Eden.

And thirdly they are to be gathered under his rule. Later on in the book of Deuteronomy Moses gathers his people together again for his final speech.

And in his speech he references this first gathering back in Mount Sinai in Deuteronomy 4 verse 10. He says remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb is just another word for Sinai it's the same place.

[27 : 03] When he said to me assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.

So notice what happens at this gathering. They hear the words of God. Why? So that when they go off to live their own lives they will know how to honor the Lord.

And we are back to the blueprint of Eden. People gathering in relationship with God with his word governing them.

But of course Sinai isn't perfect. If we were to go back to Exodus 19 we would notice that one of the things we read about is that there's big clouds trumpets there's fire and the people are very scared to approach God.

That's one of the things we notice. And so even that gathering there's still some imperfections if you like compared to Eden. And of course there's one even bigger problem.

[28 : 16] Babel still remains in our hearts. And God himself knows this. In Deuteronomy chapter 28 Moses foretells that Babel will repeat itself.

God's people will once again try to go their own way. And so therefore here's verse 64 the Lord will scatter them among all nations from one end of the earth to the other.

And of course that's exactly what happens in Israel's history. Later on King Solomon will build his temple. And during that time in 1 Kings 8 verse 14 while the whole assembly of Israel was standing there the king turned around as King Solomon and blessed them.

And the whole thing seems good because they now have the land they're in the temple and God's glory comes and fill the temple and God is dwelling with his people again.

So here they are it looks good. But within four chapters Solomon's kingdom is divided.

[29 : 29] Or listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah. He says of God's people in chapter 10 verse 21 The shepherds are senseless.

They do not inquire of the Lord. So they do not prosper and all their flock is scattered. It's Babel again. And I've put a number of similar verses on your outline where other prophets say something similar.

The people keep going their own way. Babel is the ultimate barrier to God's plan. But here's the good news.

God isn't going to let that barrier stop him. Here's Jeremiah again, this time bringing a word of hope from 31 verse 10.

Hear the word of the Lord, you nations, proclaim it in distant coastlands. He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.

[30 : 36] And that's God's promise. And with this promise, we come to episode four, gathered by Jesus. Jesus comes and one of the very first things he does is this.

Just as God gathered the twelve tribes descended from Abraham to form a nation, and so Jesus gathers the twelve disciples around him to form a new Israel.

But Jesus doesn't just have the Jews in mind because God never had just the Jews in mind.

Remember the parable of the two sons from a few weeks back?

Who was listening to the parable? Sinners, tax collectors, Pharisees, all kinds of people were gathering to listen to him.

And Jesus says he has come to give his life for all. Look at John chapter 10 verse 14 to 16. Jesus says this, I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep, and my sheep know me, just as the father knows me, and I know the father, and I lay down my life for the sheep.

[31 : 57] I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and they shall be one flock and one shepherd.

In other words, Jesus is saying, I must gather the Gentiles to myself as well. That's who the other sheep refers to.

Because in the end, there's no such thing as two kinds of God's people, one Jewish and one Gentile. There's only one flock.

There is only one shepherd whose word they listen to. Any teaching that radically separates Jews and Gentiles into two separate peoples of God, I'm afraid, is completely mistaken.

For there is only one characteristic that marks out whether you are part of God's people, whether you listen to the voice of Jesus or not. As Jesus himself says in Matthew chapter 12, verse 30, whoever is not with me is against me and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

[33 : 17] And so Jesus comes as this shepherd who dies and as a result as John chapter 12, verse 32 tells us when he is lifted up on the cross he will draw all people to himself.

God is gathering his people. But that's not the end of the story. Jesus dies on the cross and then he is raised to life and ascends to heaven.

And then as we move to Acts chapter 2, God's people are all gathered together in one place again. And as they gather, the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

And what happens? They all speak in different languages but with one voice they are all praising the wonders of God. What is happening here is the reverse of Babel.

At Babel people spoke with one language but they wanted to glorify themselves. Here in Acts chapter 2 people speak with many languages but they all want to glorify God.

[34 : 38] There is diversity and yet there is unity as well. They all witness to him and open the way for Peter to give his wonderful speech where he tells the crowd about the good news of Jesus Christ.

Here at last Babel is overcome. God's people are now those who exercise faith in Christ whether Jew or Gentile.

They are people who have the Holy Spirit. They are his rescued people in relationship with him and now living under his rule.

And this gathering of people is even better than the prototype church of the Old Testament. In Hebrews chapter 12 verse 18 to 24 which was our Bible reading today the writer contrasts the experiences of the people at Mount Sinai with Christians today.

I'm just going to summarize part of it for you. Don't worry too much about the screen. When the Israelites came to Sinai they couldn't even touch the mountain or they would die.

[35 : 54] And everyone in the assembly even Moses because God was so terrifying in his holiness. But now the writer to the Hebrews says when we trust in Jesus well we don't have to gather at an

earthly mountain anymore to meet with God.

Instead we become part of a heavenly assembly a group of people whose names are registered in heaven. We can draw near to God because we have Jesus whose blood opens the way.

And we listen to his word. In verse 25 the writer assumes that Jesus is speaking and then he counsels us as to what our response should be.

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. God has gathered his people and is speaking his word to them.

Now I suppose there could be even more that could be said. But I think I'm just going to pause here. I think that's enough material for this morning. And what I'm going to do now is I'm going to draw just some lessons that we can draw from this morning.

[37 : 16] Firstly, never think of the Christian life in individualistic ways. From beginning to end, the Bible pictures us as being part of God's people.

It has no room for lone ranger Christianity. God rescues us to belong to a community of people. And this has implications for how we treat church.

God wants us to take church seriously. If church is a gathering of people who all have one common purpose, to glorify God, then we should do all we can to encourage each other to do exactly that.

We don't just do small talk and social stuff and nothing else. We want to come to encourage each other to live for Jesus. And so we don't stand aloof from one another.

Now you can certainly choose to remain anonymous in a fairly big church by coaching standards like ours. And you could choose to avoid fellowship and accountability.

[38 : 30] But when you do so you're selling yourself short because your vision of church is not the same as God's. So why not go with the flow?

Why not encourage one another on to love and good deeds? I know some of you have been visiting our church semi regularly over the last few months slipping in and out.

But we don't know you. Why not come and commit yourselves get to know others and be part of this gathering of God's people? We hope in the next month or two to set up a proper newcomer's corner in the corner there.

Why not come and say hi? Secondly, put the word at the centre of our gatherings. I hope you can see from today that the blueprint for church has always been people gathering in relationship with God with his word governing them.

That's true in both the Old and the New Testaments. And that's why Paul exhorts Timothy in 1 Timothy 4.13 to be devoted to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

[39 : 49] God's word must be at the centre not the periphery of our gatherings. It's as simple as this formula. No word, no church.

For the true sheep of Jesus will always listen to his voice. They know only God's word can shape God's people to live as God's light in this world.

So whatever church you'll become part of next time, there might be a small number of you who might maybe move somewhere else for work or whatever reason. So whatever church you'll become part of, don't just ask, is the music good?

Don't just ask, are people here at my live stage? Ask, does this church make God's word central? If not, you might have a gathering, but God isn't there.

Thirdly, have confidence that God still has people to gather. God isn't finished gathering his people. That means there are still people here in Kuching who still don't know him, but who are simply waiting to hear his voice, and when they hear his voice, they will follow him.

[41 : 09] There were two such people at our last Christianity Explored course. There are people in Padawan who don't know him yet, but simply need to hear the good news to join the flock.

There are people all around the world simply waiting for someone to tell them the gospel. That's why Dayang Amel has left Sarawak to go to the Philippines to do precisely that.

And maybe God wants to use you to gather some of those people. He's got people waiting for him out there. So take a risk.

Find opportunity to slip Jesus into your conversations. you never know unless you try. And fourthly, work hard at being as inclusive and diverse as possible.

There is one clear line which determines whether you are inside or outside God's people. And that's whether you believe in Jesus or not.

[42 : 16] So that's the dividing line, whether you believe in Jesus or not. But that means nothing else should act as the dividing line. What colour your skin is, whether you come from a certain family or not, whether you had a very messy personal history or not, and so on.

Now the church is united around the Lord Jesus who has bought and brought them to himself. And within that unity is a diversity of voices.

God is gathering his people from all nations. And when we strive to do this, we are actually giving a preview of the new creation.

We are showing what church in the future looks like. Because there is one more episode to go. Episode five, gathered for eternity.

And in this episode, I will just let Revelation chapter 7 verse 9 to 10 have the last word. After this, I look, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

[43 : 37] They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands, and they cried out in a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

At the end of time, God's people, from a diversity of nations, will be united under Jesus as one great multitude worshipping him.

God will gather his people. God will pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for showing us that picture from the end of time, where there are so many people, so many different kinds of people, and yet they have one common purpose.

They worship you and they worship the Lord Jesus who has brought them salvation. And so this morning, Lord, let us strive to give a sneak preview of what will happen at the end of time.

Help us to have hearts for those who are not yet gathered to you, and help us, Lord, to continue to want to put the word at the center of our gatherings so that we might live for you whenever we scatter out into the world.

[45 : 01] thank you again for rescuing us from the curse of Babel. And indeed, Lord, help us now to be your people and to live the way that you want us to.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.