

The surprising value of the church

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 May 2019

Preacher: Ali Sewell

[0 : 00] It would be worth keeping your Bibles open in front of you if you've got them as we work through that passage together. I have a slight confession to make that a couple of weeks ago I watched the Antiques Roadshow.

It was an accident. I like to point out it's not something I usually watch. I was waiting for the program that came on afterwards and I was just sort of five minutes earlier and I just caught the last item. It was very interesting actually. I could become a regular.

This lady brought a teddy bear. She brought a teddy bear along. It looked very normal, a fairly average white teddy bear and yet apparently this teddy bear was very unique.

It was very special and a teddy bear expert who knew there was such a thing, a teddy bear expert valued it at 15,000 pounds. Amazing.

And at the end as the kind of credits rolled you saw the owner with this teddy which apparently had been in like a bag in the bottom of a wardrobe suddenly holding it incredibly carefully and delicately wondering what do you do with a 15,000 pound teddy bear.

[1 : 05] I suggest eBay is probably a good starting place for that. But in chapter 3 of Ephesians that we're looking at this morning, Paul is almost like this expert on the Antiques Roadshow and he's telling the Ephesians the incredible value of this thing that they have in the church.

The incredible worth of the church. This new community which is built and founded on the gospel. And it might look fairly average or unimpressive, a bit like this bear.

But Paul speaks about the amazing worth and significance of the church. And then bearing that in mind he goes on to pray that the church would know how to move forward in light of that incredible truth of the incredible value that it has.

And this chapter fits together in a slightly unusual way. Paul starts to pray for the Ephesians in verse 1 of chapter 3. And then you might see verse 2 he breaks off almost immediately to say basically, here's some stuff that you need to know before I pray.

And then if you look at verse 14 he gets back to his prayer. For this reason I bow my knees before the Father. And it's this kind of detour that he takes before the prayer. Verses 2 to 13.

[2 : 22] This section, this detour, is to remind the Ephesian church just how significant it is. This incredible value that the church holds.

And he does that in order that they might be encouraged. And having done that, having encouraged them, he then prays for the church. That in response to that encouragement that they would grow.

That they would be able to live out these truths that he reminds them of. And so those are the two sections that we're going to look at this morning. Firstly, encouragement. And then after that, this prayer for growth.

So encouragement, first of all. I don't know this morning if we were to ask you quickly, you know, what are your thoughts about church? I don't know what your answer would be. I don't know if anyone would say they're excited about church.

That's perhaps not the word we'd automatically think of. I'm sure for a lot of us, church is something that we've done for a long time. Church is somewhere that we've been week by week for a long time.

[3 : 23] And like anything that we've done a lot, it can become slightly routine. Or perhaps you're kind of at the other end of the spectrum. Church is something that's quite new for you. And you're wondering, well, what's this all about?

Is this really worth something worth coming to? Is this something worth getting involved in and committing to? Well, in this first section, Paul's trying to encourage the Ephesians by helping them see that the church is something incredible.

And he does it not by speaking about the things the church does. So he doesn't say, you know, the Ephesians, you should be encouraged by your church because the singing is good.

Or the people are friendly. Or you've got good stuff for your kids. No, he points the Ephesians to the truths, the foundational truths about what the church really is.

And the great news for us is that these truths are true for our church. These truths are true for all true churches of Jesus Christ. And so we can look at this.

[4 : 24] And if we get this, if we can grasp this, it gives us that real encouragement about the church. That whatever our previous involvement in church has or hasn't been, that this would spur us on.

This would re-energize us to say the church is something I'm excited to be a part of. And there are three reasons that Paul gives. And the first one that he emphasizes in this kind of detour before his prayer is this.

That the church is built on God's revelation. Paul says, verse 3, this mystery was made known to me by revelation.

Verse 5, he says it has been revealed to the apostles and prophets. Verse 8, he says this grace was given to him to preach this gospel. Paul's point is to make really clear, and he does this in a number of his other letters as well, that the church is not something based on his ideas.

The church isn't Paul's kind of pet project. The church is based on revelation from God. The mystery, he calls it, which is the gospel.

[5 : 33] The good news about Jesus and that rescue that he offers. You know, the church is not based on wisdom that kind of comes from a human brain, not Paul's or anyone else's.

But it comes from God. It is God who carries out this plan of the gospel. And it is God who reveals this plan, that we might know it, that we might accept it, that we might follow it and invite other people to do the same.

And he's revealed that, as it says, through the apostles and the prophets. Through those people, just like Paul, who wrote the Bible. And so we should be really encouraged as a church, because just like the Ephesians, this church isn't based on someone's good ideas.

It's not based on a kind of a clever strategy from a book or kind of a blog giving five steps to build a community. You know, all these things might be helpful, but ultimately this church, like all genuine churches across the world of different shapes and sizes, is based on God's revelation, on God himself speaking.

Just as the Ephesians had Paul's words. So we have Paul's words through the Bible. When we talk about the Bible being foundational to us as a church, we're not talking about a book of different people's kind of interpretations or ideas from a long time ago.

[6 : 53] We're talking about the revealed word of God, eternal and unchanging from beginning to end, given through the prophets and the apostles, perfect in every way. And we're talking about, as Angus said, this incredible heritage that we share as a church to be able to build on that solid foundation that God has established in his word.

I've got this Bible at home and inside the words of Jesus are in red. And it's kind of helpful sometimes. It helps me find certain passages. It's really important, though, that I remember that those red words, Jesus' words, they don't actually carry any more weight than the black words, than all the rest of the words in the Bible.

Whether written by Paul or John or Peter or in the Old Testament, the whole of the Bible, all of the words, are God's words. And so Paul is encouraging the church by saying that right from ground level, its very foundation, is not human wisdom or ideas, things that come and go, things that are in vogue one moment and then kind of out of fashion the next, but the eternal truth of revelation from God.

So that's encouragement number one, and encouragement to us that the church is built, is founded on God's revelation. Encouragement two, then, Paul says, the church is for everyone.

Paul speaks about this mystery that has been revealed to him. Well, what is this mystery? Verse six, this mystery is that the Gentiles, remember what we said last week, the Gentiles were kind of the outsiders.

[8 : 28] The Gentiles were the non-Jews, the people who hadn't previously been following God. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

And so the word mystery sometimes carries a, perhaps carries a slightly different meaning than what we might immediately think. It's not a mystery, as in something that we will never understand. You know, the mystery of why anyone would, you know, watch EastEnders, or that kind of thing.

It's a mystery that means something that was hidden, but has now been revealed. It's like a gift that was wrapped up, but has now been opened up, and you see what was inside.

And this great unwrapping, Paul says, is to reveal that the church is for everyone. And so we talked last week, Jews and Gentiles, these opposing groups, these hostile groups, but brought together in the gospel.

Paul's point is that whatever people's history, or whatever people's lifestyle, whatever people's background, that the way to God is the same. And what is that way? It's through trusting in Jesus.

[9 : 41] There's not different ways for different people, but there is one way for all people. And because of that, because we all go through that same kind of door, as you like, because we all enter through Jesus, through the gospel, well, then we all end up in the same place.

As Paul says, of members of the same body, that's part of the same church. So this morning, you might look back in your life, and you might think, well, you know, I've done pretty well. I've not had any major rebellions.

I've not done anything kind of spectacularly bad. You might have even spent a lot of time in church, and helped out with stuff. That's all really good. Or perhaps this morning, you would look back on your life, and you think, well, you know what?

My life doesn't really paint a very pretty picture. You know, how the heck have I even ended up in a church? What am I doing here? There's a lot of stuff in the Bible I don't really know or understand or kind of grasp yet.

Paul's point is that wherever we are on that spectrum, and we all fit in there somewhere, Paul says the church is for you. And the way to be part of the church is the same, to trust in Jesus and the gospel.

[10 : 46] That nobody is here on their own merit because they deserve to be part of God's family. And nobody here is too far gone, as if Jesus is not enough to bring them, to redeem them, to reconcile them to God and bring them into his family.

You know, the church brings everyone together through Jesus. There is not a church for the rich and a church for the poor, and not a church for respectable people, and then one for people with a checkered past. That we're all members of the same body, all brought together, a great encouragement, that we're invited through the gospel to be part of something that is unique.

This boundary-crossing family that brings unity that nothing else can. And so that leads us to Paul's third encouragement. The church is built on God's revelation.

The church is for everyone. And thirdly, the church reveals God's wisdom. And again, this is something Paul has touched on already in this letter, but he brings it up again as a reminder of the church's significance.

The gospel brings all sorts of people together, as he said, verse 10, so that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

[12 : 04] How kind of mind-blowing is that? How encouraging would that have been to the Ephesian church as they live kind of on the margins of society as the outsiders in Ephesus?

How encouraging is that to us as we live in 21st century Scotland where the church is moving more and more to the periphery of society, especially the church that holds onto the Bible, that is founded on that revelation from God?

How encouraging that the church displays God's wisdom? His manifold, that means kind of multifaceted, I think literally it means many-colored, his manifold wisdom.

I quite enjoy watching the Great British Bake Off. My TV habits are slightly middle-aged, you'll see it. I quite enjoy it. I pretend I watch it because Julie watches it, but I kind of get into it. And if you've ever seen it, you'll know that each episode finishes with a showstopper.

And it's the baker's chance to impress, to show what they can do, their care, their attention to detail, their kind of multifaceted, manifold skills, their ability.

[13 : 12] It's their chance literally, you know, to wow the people watching. Well, Paul is saying that the church is God's showstopper. It is the church that shows what God is able to do.

We said last week how the church has this incredible role in demonstrating to the world around us the power and the truth of the gospel, that it brings together that which the world tries to pull apart.

It creates this radical unity in diversity. Paul's saying it also has this kind of cosmic role of making that known in the heavenly places, in the spiritual realm.

The church shows that even though the devil has tried from the very beginning to separate people from God and people from one another, that God's wisdom, God's purposes, God's plan is far, far greater than that and that nothing can prevent that.

It's as if at the end of time when God proves his victory through the gospel, he's not going to hold up a winner's medal. He's not going to hold up kind of an enormous heavyweight champion's belt.

[14 : 21] He's going to hold up the church. And so being part of the church is a big deal. The main point of the church is not that we would get our kind of tastes and preferences met.

The main point is that through the gospel, this revelation from God, that we would be brought together, different types of people, as a demonstration of God's wisdom in the heavenly places.

The church exists for God's glory, for God's glory here on earth, also God's glory in these heavenly places, this spiritual realm that perhaps we don't fully grasp but which is real and which is there and which looks at the church, which looks at us, which looks at very average churches across the world and it sees the wisdom of God in action, the eternal plan of God coming to fruition, to bring people back to God, to bring people back to one another through the work of Jesus.

There's an American minister called Tim Keller who I find very helpful. He talks about this passage, this encouragement that Paul gives the church as being nosebleed theology.

It's kind of a grim thing to think about but you know, so high and lofty and kind of elevated. I suppose the question is then what does it look like on the ground? And I think Paul's encouragement is here, it's here for the church in Ephesus and to us to encourage us to stand firm in the church.

[15 : 52] We live in the midst of a world that offers different ideas and opportunities and Paul is saying in that world where everything is the next big thing or the new greatest thing or the thing that you have to have, in that world don't be ashamed of the church.

Don't be discouraged by the church. Don't think that there is something else that offers more than the church but instead prioritize the church.

Prioritize that incredible unity with God and unity with one another that God has made possible through Jesus. When I say prioritize the church I'm not talking about kind of major guilt trips if you can't make it one Sunday morning.

I think what we mean is prioritizing the church in terms of the people that we see around us in terms of the people that we know are outside of this church. Having that right at the core of what we do and prioritizing those people throughout the week.

Committing to kind of seek out the people and be part of this community built on the gospel. Looking for opportunities to share the message of the gospel that this church stands on.

[17 : 04] And not letting the church become that thing that's not that exciting of just gathering maybe once a week. But committing to the church as a priority. Not just because it's a way of supporting one another.

Not just because it's a way of receiving support. But because above all it's a body that together declares the wisdom and the glory of God. And so those are the encouragements that Paul gives.

I hope to a degree they make us excited about the church. The church is built on God's revelation. The church is for everyone and the church displays God's wisdom. These grand purposes.

Reasons to be excited even though as with the church in Ephesus we find ourselves under pressure. We can find ourselves discouraged. Paul writes to encourage us.

And it is a huge encouragement. This big picture of the significance of the church. But then having laid that down in these first kind of 13 or so verses Paul now moves on having said these are the things you need to remember before I pray for you.

[18 : 08] He now moves on to pray. And what does he pray? He prays that that church really would grow. Not really in terms of getting more people but would grow in terms of going deeper.

Would spiritually grow. Would spiritually mature. And that is what the prayer we find in verse 14 and following is all about. His point is look this is who you are and now here is the prayer that they would be able to live that out.

And it is important before we dive into this prayer that we remember that order. Paul doesn't say look if you could grow in these amazing in these ways then the church would be this amazing thing.

No his point is this the church is this amazing thing. Because of what God has done that is what this encouragement is all about. Now let's pray that we can live that out.

And that is the whole shape of the letter to the Ephesian church that Paul's message to us. Here's the amazing thing that God has done for you. Through the gospel we're able to be part of the church.

[19 : 09] We're able to be reconciled with God. We're able to be brought together with one another. God has done that. It's incredible. Now let's live in response to that. And to do that it needs prayer.

It needs God's help. And so that is why Paul turns then to prayer in verse 14. And he prays really for two things. We're just going to look briefly through this. We could talk about this for hours but we're just going to be brief.

He prays for kind of two main things which are sort of different ways of saying the same thing. First verses 16 to 17 he prays that the church would be strengthened with power through the spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. It's important to remember here and just stop that Paul is writing this letter to the Christians in Ephesus to the saints to the church and he's already told them in chapter 1 the great blessings they have in Christ that they have the spirit that they are in Christ and that Christ is in them and so how can he now pray for strength from the spirit so that Christ may dwell in them.

Christ already is in them these are Christian people although the key to understand here is this word dwell that Christ may dwell in your hearts it's a word that kind of carries the idea of putting down roots we talk about making a house a home it's that kind of idea a few years ago one of my best friends got married his new wife moved into the flat that he'd been living in for the previous couple of years and he cleared her out a drawer for her clothes which was very kind of him but then the rest of the flat there was kind of outdoor gear everywhere the lounge was sort of TV playstation and then a couch made out of a cardboard box you know it's kind of clear where the focus was in this house and whose house it was but when they got married she moved in that became her house she lived there next time I visit a couple of months later you'll be surprised to hear that things had changed slightly you know there were candles where there'd been empty bottles there was a coffee table where there had been a playstation there was a couch where there'd been a cardboard box with some cushions in it you know she'd lived there from day one but now it was becoming her home it reflected what she was like and that is what

[21 : 38] Paul is praying that through the help of the Holy Spirit our lives would reflect Jesus who is the center of our life that he would rearrange the furniture that he'd get rid of what is rubbish and replace it with what is good with what is Christ like that our lives would become more like Jesus that as we're part of the church based on these incredible truths that Paul has encouraged us with that then we would live out who we are that the reality of that relationship with Jesus would be shown in our lives and that only happens through being strengthened by the Holy Spirit Paul prays that the strength of the Spirit would help us live that life and the second thing Paul prays is very similar verses 18 and 19 and again it's a prayer for strength this time that we would have the strength to comprehend the scale of God's love the breadth and length and height and depth ultimately that we'd grasp that love that we see in the gospel that love where God sent his own son to die in our place that we might be rescued and again remember this is a love actually that the

Ephesians knew these are Christian people they believed in the gospel and yet Paul's prayer is that they would grasp it that they would know it even more even though verse 19 he says it's a love that surpasses knowledge they would know this love that surpasses knowledge it almost doesn't make sense but actually the point is that God's great God's love is so great that we can know it but we never get to the end of it and there is always more to know about God to praise God for and the whole Christian life is coming to know that love that surpasses knowledge more and more and again there's a purpose to that what's the purpose verse 19 that you may be filled with all the fullness of God so again being filled with fullness what does that mean well the fullness of God is another way of Paul of saying the perfection the completeness of God so he's not saying you know kind of Ephesian Christians you've got a little bit of God but you need some more no he's saying the fullness of God that you have this relationship with the fullness of God that you have here and now well this should be displayed more and more in how we live how is that displayed more and more well as we grasp more and more his love for us and this prayer is a prayer that bearing in mind the great encouragement of what the church is it's great significance that we would live a life consistent with that and that we would do that through God's strength that we would do that in response to God's love that our visible lives who we are day to day the way that those around us would describe us

I would more and more align with the incredible truths of that spiritual reality of what the church is it's as if almost you'd bought for someone the most incredible present you could imagine something they would absolutely love incredibly special you know the wrapping paper it doesn't alter that present does it if it's got bows on it or not if you kind of can do that thing with the scissors that makes things curl it doesn't change what is inside that package and yet still you want to present it in a way that's fitting in a way which is appropriate for the gift that you're giving and so you take care about how you wrap it in just the same way it's not our actions which give the church its significance it is those truths that Paul has shared that the church is built on God's revelation that it is for all people that it demonstrates God's wisdom this prayer is that our lives as the church would be consistent with those incredible truths that we would present them in the way that they deserve to be presented that we would follow the words of the

Bible that we would have unity with one another that we would live according to the wisdom of God Christian life is based on these truths of what the church is Paul's prayer here is to say it doesn't stop there that God is not finished with us yet we have this relationship that is done Christ's work is finished but he continues to work in us through his power that we might become more and more like Christ that through his strength we might grasp the scale of his love and so reflect back to him and reflect back to one another and to the world around us that love that we've received and just like Paul it's our prayer that God would do this in all of us that just as God has made us his people he would enable us to live that out to live as his people and that all of that would be done for his glory and that is how Paul finishes with these great verses 20 and 21 a doxology it's called literally it means a kind of a word of praise or a word of glory

Paul writes that draw this first half of the letter to a close and so let me close with these verses this morning now to him who is able to do far more than all we ask or think according to the power at work within us to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever amen