

Why Has God Given Us The Local Church ?

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Preacher: Pastor Stephen Woodard

[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is TJ Odom, and as Stephen mentioned, I am an elder at Deniston Baptist Church, though not a native, as you may can hear.

I've been in Glasgow the last 11 years, but still haven't quite picked up the accent yet, still working on that. My children are a different story, on the other hand, so rest assured in that. So good to be here with you this morning.

Thank you for having us. We've had such a good, warm welcome already. I bring you the warmest of greetings from Deniston Baptist this morning as well. All the brothers and sisters there want to say hello to you.

This morning, I also had the privilege of working with International Mission Board, sent out from Southern Baptists in America, and this is the reason our family moved over 11 years ago. And part of my role with International Mission Board is to come alongside churches and to hear their stories and to connect with potential partnerships from America in ways that we can encourage one another and strengthen one another and pray for one another.

And so I have the blessing and the encouragement of having that role. And part of that has led me to the point of having conversation with these dear brothers of how can we pray for churches here, churches in New Hampshire, pray for churches here, and have conversation about ways that we can partner together.

[1 : 14] And so the last week, we've been traveling around the Central Belt, hearing from pastors and hearing their stories in their churches and how they are ministering in their areas. And on Friday, I believe it was Friday, my days are running together this week, but Friday, we had the opportunity to spend a few hours here with Stephen and Robert and Cal and just to hear a bit of the story of Bells Hill and your faithfulness to the gospel here and how encouraged we were to that.

And so this morning, we've come back to worship with you. I have, as already Stephen did such a good job of introducing this morning, of Stephen and Les and Matt and Gabe, these dear brothers from New Hampshire, eager to worship but also eager to share their excitement for what might lie ahead.

And so I'm so thankful for Stephen this morning to come and to preach. And so we're going to welcome him this morning to read our passage and then to preach a little later. Thank you. Thank you. So I was asked before we get to our text this morning to share just a little bit about how we got here and what church is like, church life and gospel ministry is like in our part of the world.

And after meeting with a number of pastors in the Central Belt, and especially after meeting with Cal and your leaders here, it became more and more obvious to me that we serve in a similar context, at least spiritually.

So our cultures, while different by accent and different by economy, different by politics, is not very different when it comes to the state of the church.

[3 : 03] We also live and do ministry in an area where many churches are not successful and many churches have died away and many churches have even abandoned the gospel.

And so meeting with your leaders this week, I was so encouraged not only to see what is going on around the street, but also to walk into these doors and hear the testimony of leaders who want to do everything in their power to walk in faithfulness.

I'm excited to begin building relationships with Cal and with everybody else here. I'm sort of convinced that God is calling my church to do whatever we can to serve in your context and come alongside you.

Not to fix problems. Every church has problems. We're actually going to talk about that later. But to just be a friend and to be open-handed with whatever resources God allows us to have.

And that's complicated by an ocean between us. But God's big enough to handle that too. So I want to tell you this morning that my church not only has been praying for you in the past, but we've organized the schedule in such a way that they're praying for you this morning as well.

[4 : 26] Once the sun finally comes up on that side of the planet. All right. And so normally we show a nice little slide with Cal's big old grin on there. And we use the picture that y'all sent us and all these kinds of things.

Today they'll be watching a video that we made with Cal on Friday. And so they'll get to hear Cal lay that accent on thick. It was great. They're going to be in for a total shock.

It'll be amazing. But my church greets you. I get the privilege of leading the saints in Nashua Baptist Church. My church greets you and we'll be praying for you this morning. And I'm encouraged that you would allow me to even be here today because you don't know me.

I could be a problem for you. But no, because of our mutual faith and mutual citizenship in the kingdom of God, I'm excited that I get the privilege of being here today.

And so it's my prayer that as we continue in our time together that you will be encouraged and that the church will be built up here and that whatever God has in store for us in the future we'll all be chasing after really, really good things.

[5 : 37] So thank you for... Turn with me to the book of Ephesians. I don't know if you normally do this in your church family, but I feel like it's a good time, especially after holy, holy, holy.

It would be good and wise to stand for the reading of God's word this morning if you're able. Ephesians chapter 2. We're going to look at three texts.

So I'll have you turn as we go. Ephesians chapter 2, starting in verse 19. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him, you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Chapter 3, verse 7. 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.

[7 : 19] Down to chapter 4, starting in verse 11. And he gave the apostles and prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow, so that it builds itself up in love.

You may be seated. So, not only have we been praying for your church for the last few months, not only has Cal asked me to be here today and all these kinds of things, I've got to be honest with you, I was a little sad when Cal asked me to pray, and it's because, as God began to build this relationship, TJ mentioned Cal to me as we were beginning to interact on the possibility of us coming to Scotland, coming to Glasgow, and exploring future partnerships.

He says, there's somebody I want to introduce you to. And so Cal and I began emailing back and forth, sharing things about our life, and about what God had called us to in ministry, family, all of these kinds of things.

And I'm a diligent student, or at least I am now. I wasn't very good back in real school, but I'm a diligent student these days. And so I started exploring things on your website, and I listened to way more sermons than he's probably comfortable with me listening to.

[9 : 27] And I was kind of getting excited about the opportunity to hear Cal preach this morning. But then when we got here, he's like, by the way, I've been scheduled somewhere else.

Would you be with us in my place? And I reluctantly said yes, but I made him aware that he let me down. All right. It won't be the last time.

All right. What Cal did do, though, what Cal did do, or at least did not do, he didn't assign me a text. He didn't assign me a topic.

He just said, go ahead. And so whenever I'm in these situations, I always make it my aim, at least the very first time I get to be with a church family, I make it my aim to try to be an encouragement to that church, an encouragement to what you're doing here, and what God has called you to do, and called you to be.

I also want to be a help to you. I want to be a help to you.

[10 : 41] I want to help you maybe even love your church more than when I got here. Does that sound like a bold task? Maybe it is for you.

I don't know. And so in order to do that well this morning, I think I need to ask you what I would pose as an assessment question. It's really, really complicated.

It's this. What do you love most about Bells Hill Baptist Church? Don't answer it yet. Don't answer it yet. Now, I'm still getting to know Cal.

We've only shared emails. I've only met on Friday. I discovered he's a lot shorter than I thought he would be. But I think I know him well enough now. I think I've got him pinned down just enough to understand and to trust that when you hear the word church, you're not thinking a building.

You're not thinking an institution. You're thinking people, right? We're all on the same page about that? That you're thinking the people of God called Bells Hill Baptist Church, right?

[11 : 43] And so when it comes to the people of God called Bells Hill Baptist Church, now I want an answer. What do you love most about your church? And this is a place where I'm actually interested in some feedback.

What you got? What jumps off the page to you about, yeah, I really love this about my church. Who do you think it is? It's a family that cares.

That's a good answer. Anybody else? Oh, you're all shy around the American. The worship?

Y'all sing some good songs this morning. Timeless, deeply rich, massive things about who our God is.

Worship's good here. Anything else? Aha. The word is faithfully preached here as well, isn't it?

[12 : 47] Yeah. A number of years ago, I preached through a series at a different church than where God has got me now. And the premise for that series, it was kind of a topical thing.

I normally preach through books of the Bible, but I kind of had this grand, you know, creative idea that I was going to put together a series that was creative, right? And the major premise of that series was kind of a mocking play on a prosperity gospel book that was very popular at the time.

The name of the series was called Stephen's Truths for a Blessed Life Now. All right. And each week, we'd walk through different truth that, in my opinion, the American church struggles to understand, struggles to get correct, understand about life as a Christian and God's kingdom and about our place in the world that he has created us.

And the unspoken premise of that series was that all of those things stood in direct contrast to what typically gets, you know, taught by the prosperity gospel.

And we had a lot of fun with it. We tend to do more fun things in my church. It's just kind of the culture that we've got in our church family. And the first of those truths, the very first one we talked about was that Jesus demands too much from his followers.

[14 : 12] But that he also provides everything we need. Jesus demands way too much from his followers. But he also provides everything that we need.

Just in case you haven't, you know, like you had an overly exalted view of the American guy. I hate to break this to you. I'm a sinner. Anybody else? I'm not smart enough to please a perfectly holy God.

I'm not strong enough to please a perfectly holy God. I'm not creative enough to please a perfectly holy God. I am not resolute and resilient enough to please a perfectly holy God.

I cannot earn his favor or his blessing by any action that flows naturally out of me. And that's the point. That's the point.

I know we live in a world that likes to turn itself inside out trying to affirm what everybody says about who they are. But that's, you're going to run into a problem when you stand in front of this holy, perfect God.

[15 : 19] The truth is that you and I will one day stand before an infinitely holy judge. And he's not going to be as impressed with us as we often are with ourselves. But then the gospel comes in and tells a dramatically different story, doesn't it?

The gospel is that Jesus steps in to do what you and I can never do. So rather than trying to cobble together some version of righteousness that we hope one day might be pleasing to this God, Jesus steps onto the scene and pays the debt of sin that I owe for my insufficiency and he clothes us with his perfect and sufficient righteousness instead.

Right? Cal's a pretty decent preacher. I think he's told you that before. We cannot please God, but God has provided every single thing we need to draw near to him in spite of ourselves.

Another truth that we looked at in that series is that there are things that matter and things that don't on an eternal scale. I think we all kind of get that there are things that matter and things that don't, but we tend, at least it's been my own fallen experience, we tend to measure those things with an incredibly temporary measuring stick.

Right? And maybe you're a better Christian than I am, but unless I actively chase after different things that my heart just kind of naturally wants, I tend to lean towards prioritizing and valuing things that I have an expiration date on them.

[16 : 56] Things that can't last. But Jesus comes in and teaches a radically different way of seeing the world and everything in it. He says that a better way to live would be to place supreme value on things that moth and rust could never destroy.

It would be a wiser investment to place our hope and our future in things that can never be stolen away by thieves. See, at the end of the day, the kingdom of God has a radically different economy than the kingdoms of this world.

Right? And the sooner that I and the sooner that God's people lock in on that way of seeing things, the healthier a lot of us are going to be.

Right? Right? There are a number of truths that we looked at over the course of that series, but man, there was one truth in that kind of plan that I loved more than any of the other ones we talked about.

Just stood above the rest for me. Not because it was somehow more true than the other things, but because, man, I think so, so many people have never actually bothered to think through how and why it's good.

[18 : 27] And the truth was this. God has given us the local church for our good. I'll say that again because I really want it to stick. God has given us the local church for our good.

Now, I'm well aware of how simple and obvious that sounds. I'm also well aware that me simply saying that with the lapel mic on and standing in front of the people on the little platform, that doesn't just automatically make it true.

Right? I hope you don't trust me at that kind of level. All right? So, there are a lot of people in our world, I mean, just walk outside these doors for a second and ask the next person who walks down the street, you think they would agree with that statement?

There will be a lot of people in this world who disagree with us, whether it's Bells Hill or Nashua, New Hampshire. That God has given us the local church for our good. I mean, come on, don't, don't, like, let's be honest here.

Don't we all kind of sometimes think that maybe the church isn't so great? Or is that too honest? Wouldn't it be easier sometimes to kind of pull away?

[19 : 45] To keep the church at arm's length? Because, you know, churches have problems sometimes. Not here, though. Not here. Definitely not here. Only my church has problems.

And aren't there, I mean, aren't there some people in churches sometimes that are kind of problematic, difficult to love?

Don't point at anybody. It's not allowed. Truth be told, there are actually a number of things about my church, National Baptist, that I wish I could change.

A number of things. Isn't it kind of a stretch to say, oh, the church is good? I mean, that's a little much.

Sure, important. Necessary, even. Required. Good? Are you kidding me? I'm going to assume for just a second that we're all good church kids here.

[20 : 45] And we all know, just assume, that the answer is yes, of course, it's for our good. But maybe, possibly, it would be good for our hearts this morning to look into the scriptures and figure out why it's for our good.

We read three texts a moment ago. Three texts, out of my favorite book of the Bible. We could go to a hundred other places, but my favorite book of the Bible is Ephesians. If you don't have a favorite book of the Bible yet, I can petition you for why Ephesians should be your choice.

And I think there are probably dozens and dozens and dozens of reasons, but if I had to sit down and think about it, I think I can come up with three that rise to the top. Three reasons that stand above the others.

So, join me again, but this time in Ephesians 3. Ephesians 3. We're going to look back at verse 7 again. The Apostle Paul says this.

He says, So let's call time out there.

[22 : 15] So, if this were some expository series through the book of Ephesians, we would have several weeks of exegesis to stand on the shoulders of. I don't know if Cal's ever preached through Ephesians before.

One of these days, if he hasn't, I'm going to make sure he does. I'm going to lay into him. But we don't have a ton of exegesis in our back pocket this morning, so I'll give you the super quick Stephen Woodard version of what Paul just said.

The Bible teaches that God's plan from before the foundation of the world was to draw men and women from every tribe, every tongue, every people, and every nation into his good and eternal kingdom.

That's a Revelation 5 reality. If you haven't read the end of the Bible yet, that's where it's going. But this isn't some plan B. This isn't something that God has restructured his idea of what he was trying to roll out in the garden.

God's not scrambling to clean up his PR, figure out how to be a little more inclusive. He's not racking his brain trying to figure out how to rope in a little diversity into this kingdom that he's got going on.

[23 : 26] No, we're told that this is God's plan from before there was a world for that plan to play out in. It's always been his goal. Which is interesting because up until only a few years before the Apostle Paul wrote these very words, there wasn't a whole lot of peoples and nations in his kingdom.

He was working through one people group. The Jews. And he just kept that plan rolling along for a couple of millennia. Just the Jews.

And Paul says here, says here in Ephesians 3, that God kept that full reality of his plan a secret until this point so he could give it a giant reveal.

And I find that to be incredibly wonderful news. I don't know if you've noticed the accent yet. There's not a lot of Jewish blood running through my veins. That's not who I am.

I'm guessing that's probably most of your background as well. And so that means that means that I and we are the beneficiaries of this unbelievable plan that God has always had in his heart.

[24 : 46] It's incredible news. But Bells Hill, I'm sure you're very educated and smart people. I'm sure you're very competent readers. Verse 9 did not end in a period.

It ends in a comma. Which means the sentence is still going, right? So what does verse 10 say? So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Paul says so that. Now, I failed an English class in primary school. All right? So I'm not the expert in the room. But again, I'm trying to be a diligent student now and so I've learned a few things.

Allow me to give you just a super quick grammar lesson. The phrase so that is called a conditional conjunction which I definitely had to look up in a dictionary because I had no idea. All right?

So why is that important? Because it establishes something as a means to a much greater end. A means to a much greater end. Whatever comes before the word so that in a sentence is no matter how good it is, no matter how beautiful it is, no matter how lovely and celebratory celebration it deserves, no matter how good that thing is, it is the platform, it is the tool that makes possible something even better.

[26 : 16] That's what Paul's saying. I did blank so that blank could happen. Doesn't matter how awesome the first thing is, the second thing is going to be better. Second thing is going to be way, way better.

And so the Apostle Paul just said that it has been God's eternal plan to redeem and to reconcile a people for himself from every tribe and every tongue and every nation and that he has been waiting until this specific moment to begin revealing that eternity-shaping reality to the cosmos so that.

so what's the better thing coming? What's the greater end to all these really, really, really impressive means that he would accomplish this eternity-shaking stuff through the church?

Through the church. Through local gatherings of those that he has already saved, inviting as many others as possible into the fold.

Bells Hill Baptist Church, one of the reasons, hear me clearly, one of the reasons that God gives us the church is because it is one of the most powerful tools we have in accomplishing the Great Commission.

[27 : 39] to make disciples of all nations. He has given us the church for that very purpose. At our church, National Baptist, we call it our one job to do.

That everything in the life and the structure and the programs of our church either supports that effort or it stands in the way of that effort. in Ephesians 3, Paul tells us that God has given us the local church to be a primary tool in the accomplishment of that mission.

If you want to walk in obedience to Jesus' call to make disciples of all nations and I really hope that you want to walk in obedience to Jesus' call to make disciples of all nations, you do that through the church.

Recognize that God has given you your church to help you accomplish his mission. It's one of the main reasons your church exists and without that purpose what do you have left?

Without that purpose all you are is just a religiously minded social club. But that's not all he's given us the church for. We can keep going. I got a second reason we can point out. Flip back to chapter 2.

[28 : 59] Ephesians chapter 2 starting in verse 19 again. It says, So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

So there are some things that the Bible isn't very, very clear about. There are things that the Bible isn't as clear about. You've got to put in a little extra work to make sense of and be a good student of the word and all of these kinds of things.

But then there's some things in the Bible that the Bible is as clear as clear can be. One of those really, really clear things is that when an individual person becomes a Christian, when they trust Jesus alone for salvation and submit to his Lordship, the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit takes up residence within them.

Right? That we are indwelt by the Spirit. That your body becomes a temple of God and God now dwells in you.

[30 : 15] And there are countless reasons why that's really, really, really good news. Just to give you a couple of them for the sake of speed. Because if God is in you, number one, there's nothing you can't do.

And I kind of mean that literally. I don't think you go full spiritual Superman, nor are we the ones in charge of anything. But if God wants you to do something, like who's going to stop him?

Right? If God is the one who equips, if God is the one who empowers, like it doesn't matter how weak you are, doesn't matter how inexperienced you are, you're not the one doing the work.

God can and will handle it if he wants to. But there's a second reason that dwelling, God dwelling in you is a massive, massive deal. It's because there is never a single second from that moment, from the moment you meet Jesus, to the moment he takes you home to be with him forever.

There's not a single solitary moment that you are ever, and I mean ever, alone. There's an old gospel song that was popular in the States a long time ago.

[31 : 28] I don't know if they ever made it across the pond, but, no, never alone, no, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.

Yeah, you know it. It's a catchy little song. Wax, you know, nostalgic with it. Jesus said it much more succinctly, behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

The Bible is crystal clear, crystal clear that we as individuals get God. He comes to dwell, within us.

We get Him in us, and by us, and with us, and for us. It's some of the best news that a Christian will ever receive. But Paul's not talking to individuals in Ephesians.

He's talking to a church. What does verse 22 say? In Him, you are being built, you are being built, what?

[32 : 43] Together, into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. So not only does the Bible teach that God dwells in us individually, but it also teaches that God dwells in us corporately.

He creates a body for Himself here. There's a corporate reality to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He exists in the public gathering of the saints.

And this means, this means, just through the logic problem in your head, this means that you can experience some of God by yourself, but it doesn't mean that you experience all that He wants for you. Whether you thought through it, thought through that reality or not, I think we all kind of instinctively know that to be true, right?

If you've got any history in church life, every one of us can think of moments in gathered worship where the music swelled or someone said something in the middle of the prayer and everything in you just resonated, yes, that's exactly how I feel right now.

We've all experienced that moment. We experience more of God together than we can by ourselves. And I think COVID taught us that by experience, right? Churches went to incredible lengths over that time to try to replicate normal rhythms of Sunday mornings and church life and all these kinds of things.

[34 : 03] I know y'all probably did it too. We learned how to use Zoom at our church. I had used it once before that for a meeting and now I'm very familiar with Zoom and I hate it.

Anybody else? Good. I'm glad our cultures can be on the same page about that. While churches bent over backwards to try to make out of that moment whatever they could, I think we all instinctively understood that wasn't what God created us for.

Right? Nobody goes, yeah, this is the same thing. It wasn't the same thing. Didn't matter how creative we were.

Didn't matter how big the church was. Didn't matter how much money was committed to the project. When used correctly, online things can be incredible tools for temporary seasons, but they will always, and I mean always, fall short of replacing the gathered body.

always. Doesn't matter how high the production value is, virtual realities cannot replace eternal realities. They're insufficient for the cause.

[35 : 14] What God has given us in the local church, Zoom can't touch that. It can try real hard, but it will never make it there. It doesn't have the legs for it.

Yes, God takes up residence in his people individually, but the gathering of the saints is the place where God dwells in you corporately.

And so if you want to experience more of God, it's not by getting away and isolating yourself, it's actually by pressing in to the body. That's the biblical answer to, I want to get more of Jesus in my life.

Press in to the body. But there's a third reason that we can point to this morning for why I think God has given us the local church. And so turn with me to Ephesians chapter 4.

Ephesians chapter 4, starting in verse 11. It says, And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes.

[36 : 38] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. Verse 16, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

I'll make this one really quick because I think it's as self explanatory as anything can be. So the local church, no matter what you picture in your head when you think of the local church, whether it's the big church, or the small church, or somewhere in between there, whether it's a church full of programs, or it's a church that has stripped everything away trying to be streamlined for the cause of mission, whether they're meeting in a fancy building like yours, or they're meeting in somebody's house with nobody around, whether they got people on the payroll, or they don't have people on the payroll, and they can't even afford to pay the bills if they wanted to, no matter which version pops into your head, the local church, the body of believers that commits to loving each other, to serving each other, to giving to each other, to bearing one another's burdens, to being on mission together to reach the world around them, according to Ephesians chapter 4, that body is the tool, not a tool, the tool that God uses to grow you into who he wants you to be.

And I know what you're thinking, that feels like a little bit of an overstatement, Stephen. The tool, you kidding me? What about all these other really good things that God has given us? What about the Bible?

Surely the Bible is equally important, or maybe even more important, than the local church where you're good. Look what God does with the Bible. Of course the Bible is important.

We adore the Bible at my church. Like, for real, we've got regular reading plans, and Bible study options throughout the week. I tell people in our church every single week that if they don't own a Bible, take one of ours.

[38 : 36] They can have them. We'll buy some more. I normally preach straight through books of the Bible. We're decidedly pro-Bible at National Baptist Church.

Period. Period. which is precisely why, precisely why that I think that when a church is healthy and operating like a church ought to operate, like God has designed it to operate, you're going to get more Bible reading and more solid Bible teaching there than you ever will anywhere else.

Of course the Bible is important. Of course reading it regularly is important. And healthy churches are finely tuned Bible input machines. They're constantly in the Word.

Okay, okay, yeah, yeah, that makes sense. But what about prayer though? What about fellowship? What about serving? What about fill in the blank? Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding.

In God's goodness to you? In His great love for you? He has given each and every one of these things for your growth and for His glory.

[39 : 47] Yes and amen. They are tools to be used and leveraged on your own as often as you are able to use them. God will use every single one of those things in ways that will change your life and eternity forever.

Absolutely. But when a church is doing what God has designed His local church to do, it is the place where each and every one of those things meet their fullest expression. It is the place where you pray and are prayed for.

It is the place where you know and are known. It is the place where you serve and are served.

The local church, when it's healthy, and I think we can all point to terrible examples. I can too. The local church, when it's healthy, is the tool, not just a tool, the tool that God uses to grow you into who He wants you to be.

My most favorite truth for a blessed life now is that God gives us the local church for our good. So I'll return to the question I asked you at the start of our time. God loves you to grow you.

[41 : 06] What do you love most about Bells Hill Baptist Church? What is God using here to grow you? What is He using here to send you out for His mission?

What is He using here to give you more and more, God love Him, and more of Himself? But I can ask a different question this morning.

What do we do with all of this? Right? It's one thing for a pastor from a church that you've never been to and probably haven't even looked at the website for yet. It's one thing for me to stand up here and say it with the lapel mic on.

We've seen it in the Scriptures now. What do we do with it? How can we respond to God's Word this morning? Well, if you're here and you're a follower of Jesus, your response, I think, is to press into God.

I know that sounds weird. I had to explain it to my church when I started saying it there, too. The Christian response, whenever the Word is proclaimed, is to repent of sin and to press into what God has revealed about Himself in the text.

[42 : 19] All of God's people, when the Word is proclaimed, that's the reaction. Repent of sin, lean into what God has revealed about Himself. And so, what is, He revealed about Himself in these three quick little snippets from Ephesians, that He's the God of good gifts.

He's given you a really good one in your church. So, the way you lean into that is by celebrating Him as the good giver this morning. And then, by pressing in to the gift He's given, leaning into church life.

Does your church have problems? I'm going to guess that it does, right? I could probably guess a few of them. Is there a seemingly endless list of things to work on around here?

Absolutely there is. Is it also an incredibly beautiful thing given to you for your good? Yes and amen. All of those things are true at the same time. things are true at the same time.

So, maybe you've been here for a while and you haven't pressed in well yet. Haven't invested yourself here. Maybe that's not you. But let me speak just for a second to those who've been hanging out but never engaged.

[43 : 34] According to these three texts, who's on the losing end of that deal? It's not the church. It's you. So, engage this morning.

What you waiting for? Today's a good day to say yes to God's good gift for you. To cherish it. Love him through it. But listen, Christians aren't the only ones called to respond to the word of God this morning.

I don't know your hearts. I don't know your history here. All I do know is that faithfulness in preaching never leaves the gospel behind. Alright? So, how can you respond?

Maybe you're here this morning and you're not a follower of Jesus yet. How can you respond to God's word? I can tell you with, Cal's not here but I'll go ahead and speak for him. The first step for you is not to join this church.

Or any other faithful church. The first step for you is to submit yourself to the same king that all of us have. Maybe you're here today and you don't know him yet.

[44 : 43] In fact, you have no idea who this Jesus is that we're even talking about. The Bible teaches that because of your sin, because of my sin, that we're all by default separated relationally from God because of that sin.

It teaches that we deserve his perfect justice coming in the form of his wrath that is rightly owed to us. And that's really bad news, right? If the story stopped there, it would just stay bad news.

But the Bible also teaches that God is not only holy and righteous and good, but he's also rich in mercy and loves us with a great love. That even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, another Ephesians text, by the way, even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, he makes us alive again by his grace.

He came and he lived the sinless life that neither you nor I am capable of living. Because of his sinless life, he was qualified to stand in the place of sinners.

He died as a substitute on a cross to make full and final payment for sin. But he did not come to merely die, he also came to be raised to life again.

[45 : 52] He was raised as a vindication of his perfect and sufficient righteousness. And the Bible teaches as a down payment of our own future resurrection. Now King Jesus, who stands victoriously over Satan's sin and death, calls on you to respond to him in repentance and in faith, to turn away from your sin and to turn to him as Savior and Lord.

And you can do that today. And I'd love to be helpful to you. If you want to talk to somebody about it, let's talk. I'd be happy to talk to you. So I'm going to pray and we're going to sing.

That's an opportunity for all of us, follower of Jesus or not, to do something with this gift. To do something with what God has revealed about himself in the word.

But whoever you are, and however God's word is calling you to respond this morning, let's respond together right now. Father, you're good to us. Thank you for the scriptures. Thank you for the best book in the Bible, Ephesians. Thank you for the church.

With all of her flaws, with all of her shortcomings, with all of the people that are problematic, and with all of the problems I bring to the table.

[47 : 06] You are good to us. Forgive us for not seeing it correctly. Forgive us for focusing on the shortcomings instead of the glory.

Help us work through the problems. We need to fix some things, but not to make her beautiful. She's beautiful all on her own. love us for love us for love us for you.

Thank you for relationships here. Thank you for deep worship here. Thank you for faithful preaching here. May you expand your kingdom in this community.

We need your help in that. We love you. Thank you for loving us first. In Jesus' name we pray.