Why bother with church

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[0:00] Our reading is from Matthew chapter 22, verses 1 to 14. Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner.
My oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet. But they paid no attention and went off, one to his field, another to his business.
The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, The wedding banquet is ready, but everyone I invited, for those I invited, did not deserve to come.
So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find. So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests.
[1:17] But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, How did you get here without wedding clothes, friend? The man was speechless.

Then the king told the attendants, Tie him hand and foot and throw him outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are invited, but few are chosen.
Please may may may

[3:52] They're probably easier and they would certainly, to other people, seem the normal choice. So why bother with church? It's a question well worth asking. Even if it's been our habit since day one, we want to think carefully about why we come. I hope over these three weeks we'll be encouraged to recognize the value, the significance of church. Perhaps even we'll be inspired to come to church differently as we think about why is it that you and I need the church and also why does the church need us? It begins with whose church is it anyway? It's typical for us, I suppose, if we belong to a local church to say this is my church or this is our church. And there's a sense, of course, in which that's true. But ultimately, as Christians, we believe that this is God's church. And we begin with the understanding that local churches are part of God's good idea for the world. Just as the church global, the church universal, is God's good idea, the local church is for the good of God's people.

We need sometimes, I think, to put on new lenses when it comes to our approach and attitude to the church.
Because at the same time as it seeming very ordinary and routine, there's nothing particularly spectacular about what is happening to us now. But at the same time, there really is that God has said he is here and God has said he is working to establish for himself and for his glory the people of God that we call the church. And the people of God, well, we have the power of new creation life in us. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
To be part of the church is to be part of Christ's body, where he is the head. And we are the place where God himself dwells. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit.
So just to set up for us today how significant in God's eyes, in God's economy, the local church, the church really is. So having said that, our goal for today is that in the next 20, 25 minutes or so, we will do a brief overview of the whole story of the Bible, of God's redeeming work.
[6:32] But we'll really focus all our attention on how Jesus is central. How Jesus is central to God's work in the world. How it's through Jesus that God reveals his glory. It's through Jesus that God redeems sinners. It's through Jesus that whole cosmos is going to be renewed. And then we're going to connect that story, the story of God, the story of Jesus, to this story, to our story.

As we understand, we are connected to the life and the power of God through the Lord Jesus. So that we'll wonder at the church, at the privilege even of coming to church.
And coupled with that, that by God's grace, we would work because we understand that God is building his kingdom in and through us. But before we get to the church, in a sense, we need to go a little bit further back. Let's go to the church's origin story. We love origin stories. The church's origin story is Israel. And the story of Israel, the Old Testament, we discover that God works to redeem his people. The mission of God, the work of God, it didn't start in the book of Acts. It didn't start on the day of Pentecost when God sent the Spirit and then the apostles started preaching Christ.
No, the mission of God began at the beginning. It's actually helpful this morning that we were in Genesis 12 when God calls Abraham. Think about what happens there. God is working. As he is speaking, he is summoning Abraham into his kingdom. He is at the same time saving him from a pagan way of life to now live as a follower of God. And he then sends him into the world as a different person to live for God, to reveal his glory. And then think about the call to worship that Neil read for us from 1 Peter chapter 2. That was taken from Exodus 19, God's own description of his people. And when we think about that description, we discover Israel has always been given a work by God to obey him, to be his treasure, to serve God as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Representing God in the world, representing people before God. And so as we look through the story of the Old Testament, we discover that in God's plan, he is choosing Abraham and he is choosing Israel for the sake of many nations. He is asking them to live differently so that his glory and salvation would be put on display.
It's the life of the church back in the Old Testament era. Let me give you a couple of quotes that I came across this week. Michael Goheen, who has a couple of really great books. One's called The Drama of Scripture. One's called Light to the Nations. Both of them looking at the storyline of the Bible, thinking about the mission of the church. And Michael Goheen says this, he says, God redeems his people from an idolatrous way of life to live as a contrast community. So God saves people. He marks them out as holy, as different, and then gives them his law so that they live as a very different people, so that others will be drawn in. Hans Kung says something striking. He says, God makes tiny Israel, the center of the earth, the focal point of history, and the goal of creation. So

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if we were to jump into any point of Israel's story in the Old Testament, they could understand their reality in terms of God's bigger story of redemption, what God was doing through them for the world. At any point in Israel's history, they would look back and recognize God was their creator. They would look forward to the reality that God was going to restore and renew all things one day. They would look around and understand that they lived as a covenant people before the nations. And maybe this is really heightened when we get to the book of Exodus. Think about that movement since Exodus. God calls his people out, out of slavery, into freedom. Let my people go so that they may worship me. God gathers the people to himself at Mount Sinai, establishes this covenant relationship, saying to them, I will be your God, you will be my people. God then renews them morally, ethically, spiritually. He gives them the law.

[11:22] Those who have been saved by grace, well now they know how to live the way God wants them to. And then God sends them. They're on the way to the promised land, and in the promised land, they are to live as a unique people to showcase the goodness of God. So that people would look in and say, what nation is like Israel? Their God comes near. Their God listens when they pray. Their God acts on their behalf. What is the church we come back to today? Well, the New Testament tells us the church is the true Israel, or the renewed Israel. In other words, God is continuing that same work. Only now it's through Jewish people and non-Jewish people, all of us together, who belong to Jesus. We are together on this mission to make God's kingdom and God's glory known. Think about an Old Testament Israelite. When they gathered for their church, practicing the Sabbath, holding their religious festivals, celebrating the Passover,

Passover. They were doing that before the world, saying to the world, come and join us. Come and discover the one true and living God for yourself. And God was working in and through them, as we saw this morning with Abraham, that blessing to the nations would flow to and from his people, his church. And that's a pattern that God continues today.

And now we're going to see how Jesus picks up the story, how indeed he fulfills it, and he moves it forward. So we're going to spend the bulk of our time thinking about how in Jesus, God works to build his church. And we're going to consider four different acts. Because we believe that the Bible is one unfolding story. And God has deliberately put his son, the Lord Jesus, right at the heart of this drama of salvation. And this drama of salvation involves God building a kingdom, calling a people to himself.

So scene one, Jesus calls his people. And I think actually, yes, the texts are up on the screen. That's really helpful. Let's read this one. Mark chapter one. This is how Mark records the beginning of Jesus' ministry. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news. As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will send you out to fish for people.

[14:13] At once, they left their nets and followed him. And so Jesus declares that the kingdom of God that was anticipated in the Old Testament, it's fulfilled in his coming. So there is a present reality to the kingdom of God because Jesus, the king, has come near. And he's come near with authority to call people to follow him. And people respond because they recognize he really is the Messiah. But it doesn't just have a present reality. There's also a future aspect to the kingdom. In Matthew chapter seven, which I think is the next one up there, if I am right. Matthew chapter seven, verse 21 to 23, we're reminded that the kingdom has a future element. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, future day, Lord, Lord, do we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform any miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you.

Away from me, you evildoers. So Jesus has fulfilled the kingdom and all its promises, but there is also a day when that kingdom will be finally established. And we live in this gap, the already and the not yet.

But this time is a time when we see in Jesus that the kingdom comes full of power and full of authority. We see it in all of his miracles. Matthew chapter 12, we read it last week. Jesus speaks about driving out demons by the spirit of God as a sign that the kingdom of God has come. Every

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time Jesus calls someone and they respond in faith, we are seeing the power of the kingdom at work in lives. So the church, well, there are people who are called by Jesus the King to live as this contrast community, to live as this colony of heaven, to have a different set of loyalties, a different identity, a different set of shared experiences and practices that mark us out as different from the world.
And if you know anything of church history, you'll know in those early centuries, that's how the church lived and that's how the church grew, boldly living and willing to die as people who became known as Christians. You know, that was a nickname that was put on them by the world. They were so full of Jesus that they became known as Christians and because they so boldly proclaimed in the face of the empire that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. And in the way that they worshiped and in the way that they lived, as they were a called out people, well, they drew others in and the gospel spread.
[17:11] So as Jesus, as God works to build his church, we begin with Jesus calling his people. But let's move secondly to this idea of Jesus gathering his people. We already read Matthew chapter 22, but we have a chance here to read a section from John chapter 10, a very famous section where Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd.

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. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold.
I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. You put that together with the Matthew 22 chapter and we discover two key images for the kingdom work of Jesus. He has come as a shepherd. And part of his shepherding work is gathering his flock from far and wide.
And Jesus tells us how he will gather his flock. He will gather his flock, first of all, by laying down his life for them, dealing with the sin that separates, making sure that the way back to God is wide open.
And Jesus continues as the good shepherd, protecting and guiding and giving life. So Jesus is the good shepherd. He gathers people to himself, but he's also the host who invites people to feast at his table, reminding us that our God is a God of joy. Our God is a God of grace.
[18:58] And in the parable that we heard, we are reminded of a lavish banquet where everything was prepared, where no expense was spared. And the invitation went out. Some people received it, but many people didn't.

And we think about how that looked in the life of Jesus. God the Father spared no expense in order to invite us to the feast of salvation.
His own Son had to come and live a perfect life and then die as our substitute, as a sacrifice to make atonement. Then he had to rise again so that God the Father and the Son could send us the Spirit and give us new life so that we could be gathered into God's joy, to experience God's love and to receive God's hospitality.
And what becomes clear, as Jesus gathers his people and as he issues that call and that invitation, it demands a response. And some reject, some rejected.
But his people will be gathered in. Jesus' sheep will hear his voice. And so Jesus works to gather a people to himself, a church made up of Christians, and now restored to life with God. He tells us that we have this distinct purpose that together, well, the church is to become like Old Testament Jerusalem. You know those images of you are the light of the world and a city on a hill. But his first listeners, they're thinking, well, that sounds a lot like Jerusalem. And what did Jerusalem represent? It represented the place where you could come and you could meet with God, where God's glory could be discovered, where God's message of redemption was heard. That's what people come to church for.
[20:56] So our goal is to draw people to salvation, to invite people to experience as we experience the presence of God and the joy of life with him. So Jesus calls and Jesus gathers. And thirdly, Jesus renews his people. And again, this is the same pattern that God works in the Old Testament.

But God is in the business through his son, Jesus, of renewing his people. It has been well said, I think, that in the UK, we love restoration shows.
Think about it. Old houses, cars, antiques, you name it, they can all get the proper care and attention on screen from an expert. And so that by the end of a particular episode, that car or that

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house will be back to working order and once again, fit for purpose.
Old Testament Israel, as we read their story, had become unfit for purpose. They were supposed to be a mirror reflecting the glory of God to the world, but they had turned away in unbelief and they turned to other political alliances and to follow idols. And so they were unfit for purpose. But there was the promise made to the prophets that one day there would be a great renewal, that when the Messiah came, when the King came, there would be this renewal and restoration. And so that's why Jesus comes. Jesus comes to restore the people of God to life with God and back to the work of God that we were always supposed to do.
And so think about how in the Gospels, Jesus speaks about his renewing and restoring work. So in John chapter 1, and this ties in with what we were thinking about this morning, John chapter 1 verses 10 to 14.
[22:55] He, that is Jesus, he was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, nor a husband's will, but born of God. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son who came from the father, full of grace and truth. Jesus has come to renew our relationship with God the father.
It's the picture of adoption that we find throughout the New Testament. That God places his name on us, his people, so we get a new name. And with that new name comes a new status, children of God. We have this new privilege, we have this spiritual inheritance, and we also have a new family lifestyle. When God's spirit comes to take up residence, he begins that great renewing, restoring work. John 13, Jesus begins to explain further to his disciples what that renewed lifestyle will look like. John 13 and verses 34 and 35, after Jesus has washed his disciples' feet, a new command I give. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. So part of the renewing that Jesus works in his people, and that includes us, his church, is taking us from our native selfishness and replacing that with a desire for sacrificial love. As we receive God's love, as it flows into us, then it flows out from us. That instead of our natural pride, Jesus works in us by his spirit to promote humble service. Perhaps instead of patterns of grumbling, Jesus wants to instill joy in us. Instead of division and competition, Jesus wants to promote peace. In other words, this renewal that Jesus has come to work in his people is supposed to be making a really positive difference to us so that we'd be a contrast community in the best possible way.
that people could come in here and they would know, they would be safe, and they would get a welcome, and they would hear good news, and they'd hear an invitation from God to life with God, and they'd see something of God's love in the people of God. Jesus renews his people. And of course, central to Jesus' renewing work will be his death on the cross.
There, when Jesus dies on the cross, he is achieving a victory over the forces of Satan and sin and death, as well as giving to us individually forgiveness and a new heart and a new life.
[26:25] In Jesus' victory there at the cross, he is beginning the renewal of the whole cosmos, as he squares up to evil and wins the great victory, and at the same time, he renews each of his people.

When Jesus wins that victory on the cross, he grants release from the vice-like grip of sin and darkness. Every time Jesus gives a miracle, he's given a preview of that greater miracle, freeing us from our bondage to sin and addiction and idolatry, so that in God's hands and by God's grace, the church, we become a renewed people, so that we serve as a preview, a trailer of the new creation that's coming.
That the way that we live should give us and others a foretaste of what heaven will be like. So Jesus calls, Jesus gathers, Jesus renews, and then Jesus sends.
And that takes us to the end of the Gospels, and we can turn to Matthew 28 for very familiar words of the Great Commission. Let me read them for us. Matthew 28, verse 16.
Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

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[28:16] And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. So that's the very end of Jesus' ministry. We began at the beginning when Jesus called his first disciples who were fishermen.

So let's think about that fishing image that Jesus used with his disciples. He said, Go and make disciples. Go and be fishers of men. One fishing practice that might be helpful for us to think about. You know when sport fishermen go out for their catch, they're not looking for dinner. They're just looking for a good weighty fish. So they have a catch and release approach to fishing.
And that's exactly the approach that Jesus has. That Jesus is with his disciples. He calls them to himself. He gathers them into that group of 12.
And he spends three years teaching them and sharing life with them. He shows them his glory. They hear his teaching. They see his miracles. They can ask him questions.
[29:14] They eat and drink with him. They go through joys and sorrows together. So there's the catch. But then, well there's different points during Jesus' life on earth where he will send them out on mission.

And then here as Jesus is about to return to heaven, he tells them that their whole life will now be going on mission. That Jesus is going to send the Spirit and then they will be released into the world to make Jesus known.
So that for Jesus, when he thinks about the church, he thinks about the church as a community with a mission. We worship and we go to make other worshipers.
And our direction of travel, well it's different from what it was in the Old Testament. The Old Testament, remember the people of God living in the promised land, following the Ten Commandments, worshiping as God instructed, and the way that they lived was a way to say to people, come and see.
Come and join us. But that changes in the New Testament. There is that, but there's also the go and tell, the go and make disciples.
[30:25] So that when we gather, we have the invitation to make Jesus known. And as we scatter, it is the same because Jesus sends his people on mission.

And so Jesus leaves us with a picture of his goal, his vision that the church would continue his work. participating in his mission, filled with the same spirit that empowered Jesus.
Isn't that remarkable? For those times when we feel our own weakness, remember the same spirit that was in Jesus is the same spirit in us. And we have a message to proclaim.
We proclaim that Jesus is Lord. We proclaim that people need to repent and to believe the good news. And we also picture in our lives and in our life together the difference that God's power makes.
Jesus always intended that faith would make a difference and that difference would be visible. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another or let your light shine so that men might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.
[31:33] And that will happen as we practice kingdom life. As we live day by day, like Abraham back in Genesis, I am loyal to God.

I'm going to follow where he commands and I'm going to obey. So for us as a church here, we gather and then we go to represent Jesus in the world wherever we happen to be.
So just to draw this together, when we think about the church, we recognize that God works in remarkable ways to establish the church, therefore we work.
So if we were to ask Jesus, the church would never be optional. It would never be just one choice among many in a Sunday afternoon. The church was precious in Jesus' eyes.
It's a people that he has called into the kingdom of God and he's revealed his grace and glory to us. And he's working in us to renew us by his spirit to make us more like himself.
[32:36] And he's given us all a shared mission to put Jesus on display for the world. And when we think about what's going on in church, maybe it changes how we think about beating the traffic in fringe season or dragging ourselves off the sofa or choosing to give up comfort so that we can gather together.

That's why we bother with church because God is working remarkable things in and through us. So let me just leave you with a few things to keep reflecting on.
To think about our worship, we come so that we can hear and we can retell the story of God and his salvation.

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to hear of God's mighty acts, to gain our power from the good news of the Lord Jesus and to find our place and our identity and our destiny in his great salvation story.
Our worship matters. We're going to think about that next week. Secondly, think about prayer and we touched on this a little bit this morning. You know, prayer really is oxygen to the Christian and it's oxygen to the Christian mission because our mission is never our own.
[33:53] It's actually God's. We belong to the Lord and so we depend on him by prayer, including as we pray together. It was very much the pattern in the Old Testament, very much the pattern in the book of Acts.

Think about our fellowship. Think about our participation in fellowship. You know, God calls us to live differently and the New Testament gives us 57 one another's that we are to practice.
Well, we need a people to practice those one another's with, to forgive others, to bear the burdens of others, to seek the good of others.
And it's in these ways, in our life together, that the world is going to see that we're different. We have a different kind of love, a different capacity to forgive.
There should be a different measure of patience and a certain hope, even in the face of troubling circumstances, that is evident in the Christian church.
[34:59] And it has implications for evangelism as well. When we see that we are part of God's bigger story and that God's story really takes in the whole world and the whole cosmos, that he is seeking to renew everything and he's also seeking to renew and to call people to himself.

And when we see Jesus as the center of all of that, then maybe more and more we begin to connect all of life to Jesus. Maybe it becomes more natural to talk about him in our family and then perhaps even in our Christian circles so then when we go out, maybe it becomes more natural to us to see that Jesus really does meet our deep longings so he can meet the deep longings of others that we care about.
So as we begin asking the question, why bother with church? The first significant answer is because of the work of God in and through us and in Jesus.
Let's pray together. Our God and our Father, we thank you for the way you have put the Bible together to show that grand story of redemption with Jesus right at the center but with the church so integral to that story.
We thank you that we have the privilege as well as the responsibility of representing Jesus and making him known in the world. And we thank you that you haven't left us alone in that, that you've given us your spirit to empower us but you've also given us brothers and sisters in Christ so that together we seek to live as a different kind of people set apart for your glory.
[36:41] people captured by the beauty of Jesus and wanting to share that beauty with others. And we pray that you'd help us here locally to be able to do that for the sake of the people that live in and around this area and around our city.

Lord, that you would show your glory, that you would continue to work in your world. And we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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