

Sharers together

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[0:00] ...through not dying. Well, to the point, I suppose. Of course, for most of us, even achieving a hundred years of fame or remembrance seems an unlikely dream.

There are, after all, some nine billion of us or so on this planet. Who's going to remember all those names? And yet to be remembered, and perhaps in particular to be remembered as part of human culture, as part of something greater than our individual selves, is a basic desire.

It seems to be something that humans have, which none of the other creatures on this planet seem to share. We have this 21st century cult of celebrity, don't we?

We're interested in celebrities, and if we can't be famous for anything else, we'll be famous for being famous. And if we can't even achieve that, we'll live vicariously reading the lives of the rich and famous.

That fear of being forgotten is something that dogs us. The teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes put it very well. He said, So at this point in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul actually digresses, or almost interrupts himself from the main argument.

[2:12] He's about to start his prayer, but then he realizes there's something important to be said, that he's, as it were, needs to say first.

Why do I say he's about to start his prayer? Well, if you compare verse 1 to verse 14, you'll see he picks it up again in verse 14. But Paul realizes that he needs to say a bit more about what he's just been talking about.

And I think we need to note this. If Paul thought it was worth interrupting the flow of his argument for, then it's certainly worth us listening to what he had to say.

And there's a bit of a contrast in this passage, which, by contrast with the intensely personal appeal of the first part of the letter, this seems a bit sort of philosophical and impersonal.

But as I say, Paul thought this was an essential thing to be said, so we need to take heed to it. So what exactly is this little digression about? Paul has already explained that the Gentiles are being included in God's household, as Aaron, well, I wasn't here last week, but I'm sure Aaron was reminding her of that last week.

[3:33] And so Paul is not just repeating that thought. He wouldn't have interrupted himself just to repeat what he'd already said. Most of Ephesians, as I said, is very personal and individual.

Paul is explaining how each believer should live in the household of God. But in order to do that, he cedes the need to fit his argument into a kind of global and historical perspective.

He's already alluded to this briefly in the first chapter in verse 10, but now he feels the need to explain himself and expand on that. So just before we dive in, it's worth noting that the Greek word here, which is translated Gentiles, which isn't a Greek word, it's neither a Greek word nor an English word really, it's a Latin word.

Basically it means non-Jews. But actually the Greek word there is rather more specific. The word is *ethnos*, from which we get our English word *ethnic*.

And the basic meaning of *ethnos* is a nation. But it refers not to much as a nation in political terms, as in terms of its culture and its values and the kind of community that the nation is.

[4:55] And that's what Paul is talking about here when he talks about Gentiles, when he talks about the nations. And at this point, Paul makes three quite remarkable linked claims.

And I say they're remarkable, they seem almost outlandish at first sight, they seem very strange. But he makes these three claims.

First of all, he claims that the gospel for the nations is a new revelation. It seems like in verse 5.

Secondly, he claims that he himself is the administrator of it, in verse 8.

And thirdly, he claims that this is important because it gives the gospel not just a local or even a global, but an entirely universal perspective.

He says that in verse 10 and 11. And each of these claims is worth examining in detail because, as I said, they all seem quite controversial at first sight. What is it that Paul is really getting at here?

[6:05] Now again, we need to just think about another Greek word as well. Paul uses that Greek word *mysterion* and this is rather inadequately translated into the English word *mystery*.

Unfortunately, this is one case where thinking about the sort of English word we get from it really doesn't quite help because a mystery in English is a puzzle to be unraveled, a puzzle to be solved. But a mystery in Greek, *mysterion*, refers much more to a secret to be revealed. A mystery in Greek, and Paul wants to make it clear that this gospel mystery is now publicly revealed in verse 5. There were in Paul's day, and there still are today, religions in which you start on a whole long process and you're aiming towards enlightenment.

It might be slow progress, but you hope in the end to achieve enlightenment, to have revealed to you the secret of the universe. There were several religions of that type in Paul's day that were called mystery religions, and there are similar religions around today where the aim is to achieve enlightenment.

[7:28] But Christianity doesn't work that way at all. In fact, Paul wants to make it clear that Christianity starts with enlightenment. You can't start on the gospel journey, on the path as it were, to heaven until you're enlightened.

That's precisely what Paul is saying in chapter 1, verse 9, and again in chapter 1, verse 18. You start with enlightenment. You do certainly seek more light as you go along, but you start with the secret.

The secret is a public one, one that has been publicly revealed. So let's look at these three claims that Paul makes, and in case you start shaking your watch by the time I finish the first one, I should say I'm going to spend most of the time on the first one.

The second, we will talk briefly about the second and the third. And the first one is that this gospel for the nations is a new revelation. And yet, actually, it seems rather a strange thing to say.

Because usually, if you're familiar with Paul's writings, you know that he actually goes to great length to ensure his readers that this gospel is essentially the same message that was proclaimed to Abraham and the same message that was explained by Moses.

[8:56] And it's certainly the case that the blessings of the nations is not a new idea in itself, is it? Right back in Genesis, Abraham is told, through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me.

And if you're familiar with the Old Testament at all, you'll, I'm sure, be familiar with the fact that most of the prophets, particularly the later ones, explain that the Messianic blessing will be extended to the Gentiles.

We've been going through Isaiah with Philip and a lot of this, of course, is exactly on that subject, how the Jews have broken the covenant but eventually when the covenant is restored it will be extended to the Gentiles as well.

Excuse me. So why is Paul claiming that this is a new revelation? What exactly is new about it? So I think to see what is new about it, we need to look actually at one of these Old Testament prophecies.

We can't go through all of them or we'll be here for a week. But let's look at one well-known one.

This one actually not from Isaiah but from Haggai. Haggai chapter 2 verse 6 to 9 says, This is what the Lord Almighty says, In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.

[10:31] I will shake all nations and the desire of all nations will come and I will fill this house with glory says the Lord Almighty. The silver is mine and the gold is mine declares the Lord Almighty.

The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house says the Lord Almighty. And in this place I will grant peace declares the Lord Almighty.

So this is obviously a prophecy about the coming promised Messiah and the Messiah here is described as the desire of all nations.

And yet on the face of it if you read Haggai's prophecy you would think he's presented as the desire of the Jews. It's a talk about rebuilding of a temple that's greater than Solomon's temple.

It's about the establishment of a Jewish peace. In this place I will grant peace. So what is Paul getting at when he says this is a new revelation a new understanding?

[11:40] How can the Messiah be described as the desire of all nations? and even more to the point how can the nations be described as God's inheritance?

And this I think is the secret that Paul says has now been revealed. The temple that the Messiah is going to build is not just a reconstruction of Solomon's house.

In fact it's an entirely new concept of a temple made of disciples made up of the church which of course is exactly what Paul had said in those verses at the end of chapter 2.

And what is the peace that the Messiah brings? It's not the military one of a Jewish hegemony but it's a heart peace between God and men and between the nations together.

And what is it that shakes the nations? It's not war it's not a natural disaster instead what shakes the nations is a radical new message the message of Jesus Christ.

[13:04] So that is the secret revealed the secret that the nations as the nations will be God's inheritance. In the Old Testament the Jewish nation is described as God's inheritance.

But here having talked a lot about God's inheritance and what we inherit Paul is making the point that it is the nations as the nations that are God's inheritance and he says that in case you've missed the point he says it quite explicitly in chapter 3 verse 6.

Those races that are far off from Jerusalem separated by space or by time or by cultural barriers will be included in the covenant.

There are hints of this in the Old Testament. Isaiah talks about Egypt and Assyria talking together about the things of the Lord but it is very mysterious in the Old Testament.

But now says Paul it's publicly revealed that the nations as the nations are God's inheritance all the nations and that they all can be included as I say in the covenant.

[14:24] After all what is new the Pharisees didn't object to Gentiles becoming Jewish converts and contrary Jesus said they'd compass land and sea sometimes to make a single convert but the point was that if they wanted to become converts they had to become Jews.

Jesus has a much wider ambition than that. What is the title he's given? It's the title of King of Kings isn't it? And the title King of Kings is the title of an emperor one who rules not just over a single nation but over many nations.

Paul says therefore that Paul aims to take every thought captive for Christ and by doing it not to destroy it but to transform it into something greater.

So let me remind you of those words the Corinthians that he wrote 2 Corinthians 10 verse 5 says we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Note that we don't destroy peoples we don't destroy cultures we don't destroy arguments we don't lock up people we lock up rebellious thoughts instead and transform them into obedience.

[15:56] So we believe that every other religion is idolatry and yet we also believe in the political principle of freedom of religion because as George Fox put it you can't kill the devil with a gun or a sword.

We want to make every thought obedient to Christ. And so John of course would write of the holy city the new Jerusalem the real Jerusalem in Revelation he writes the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

Nothing impure will ever enter it nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful but only those names those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

How can the glory and honor of the nations be brought into it if nothing impure will enter it? Surely they are impure but no they are transformed and made captive to Christ and then the glory and

honor of the nations can be brought into the city.

And Paul emphasizes this point here I think because it is an essential feature of Christian unity. Christianity is in favor of multiculturalism unity in Christ is a unity in diversity we know that's true in the church as different gifts are given to the church but it's also true globally unity in Christ is a unity of cultural diversity and the best missionaries like Hudson Taylor understood this but too often missionaries and evangelists and pastors have forgotten it and so instead of talking genuinely against worldliness they replace it by some mere cultural conformity to live like a respectable western gentleman as it were it's always easier isn't it to focus on externals but the

[18:13] Bible doesn't actually anywhere say don't drink don't smoke don't dance and don't go to the cinema of course it does say don't get drunk it does say your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit it does warn us to flee lust and it does tell us to judge all things that isn't quite the same thing as those external things so again Paul writes in Colossians since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world why as though you still belong to it do you submit to its rules do not handle do not taste do not touch these are all destined to perish with use because they are based on human commands and teachings!

straining sensual indulgence If we're to put our finger on worldliness we need a more subtle basis for judgment let me give you an example you can agree with me or not on this particular example that's almost the point that you should make your own judgment but here's a judgment that I would suggest one might make Quentin Tarantino is a brilliant director and his films are very funny but I have to say that having watched Pulp Fiction I will no longer go to a Quentin Tarantino movie why is that?

the reason is because there is a scene in which a man has his brains blown out in a car and the point is that this Tarantino makes this funny you laugh at it do I want to be made to laugh at something that is horrific I'm not sure that I do no and so for that reason I will not go and watch a Tarantino film now but as I say you need to make up your own mind on on the other hand one might think about another violent film Kubrick's Clockwork Orange I was a student when this first came out and there was mass moral panic among evangelicals but actually this film doesn't glorify violence it certainly doesn't make us laugh at it in fact its purpose is to display the horror of a society in which law is despised and corrupted and which violence becomes a norm so personally my judgment at the time was that it was worth watching but even then one has to say that it was not as simple as that because

Kubrick actually withdrew the film himself for a while because the film did give rise to some copycat violence so one needs to be careful one needs to be subtle in one's judgments but as Paul says the spiritual mind judges everything but we might if we're going to talk about worldliness we need to make sure that we hit the nail on the head and don't turn it into some cultural conformity I'll say a bit more about this a bit later but let's move on first of all to the second and this claim is that it is Paul himself who is the administrator of this new revelation claims that in verse 8 and again that seems an equally outrageous claim first of all because he describes himself as the least of God's people in verse 8 a more accurate translation as some commentators point out would be the least of God's people because it isn't actually a proper Greek word there's a double superlative there so we might translate it as the least least or something like that doesn't really work in English and it doesn't really work in Greek either but that's the word that Paul used he describes himself as that as the least of God's people and yet he claims this special privilege to administer this revelation and preach it to the nations so once again we need to examine this claim a bit because it does seem rather outrageous after all when Jesus had told the apostles to go and make disciples of all nations which he had told them Paul hadn't even been there and when Stephen had stood up and accused the Pharisees of disobeying the law and breaking the covenant and got himself condemned to death for his pains

[23:22] Paul had been one of those who was supporting that death sentence and he had gone on and persecuted the disciples read about that in Acts 8 and Paul certainly wasn't the first to preach to the Gentiles it seems likely that it was Philip the deacon and other anonymous disciples who first spoke the gospel to Samaritans and non-Jews as they moved up the coast towards the Roman colony of Caesarea and we know certainly that the

first apostle to preach to a Gentile was Peter when he went to the house of Cornelius we read that in Acts 10 and a real culture shock it was for him as well he had to have a vision before he would go in the house and yet it is true that it was Paul who would be the great missionary to the nations and Paul mentions this here perhaps because he himself perhaps illustrates this multicultural principle

Moses was the right man wasn't he to lead the Israelites out of Egypt well why well because one reason because he lived in and understood the Egyptian political system God had prepared the right leader like Moses Paul was a man with a foot in both camps the Jews at the time liked to pretend that they were united but of course they weren't they were divided into all sorts of sects which we read about in the scriptures others of which we read about from secular history and there were two basic divisions of the Jews what were called the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews the Hellenistic Jews didn't live in Judea largely and their first language was often Greek rather than Hebrew and they were much more immersed in the culture of the Roman Empire but Paul was the man with a foot in both camps he had been a Pharisee he studied with Gamaliel as the best of the Jewish teachers and yet he was also a Hellenistic Jew he was born not in Judea but in Tarsus he was fluent in the Greek language and indeed he seems to have been fluent in the Greek culture as well he was a Roman citizen he was a man in fact with an international perspective and while Paul reminds us that of course in the last analysis this is grace part of that grace was including and preparing Paul to be the right man for the job this Pharisee would preach to the nations the unsearchable riches of Christ verse 8 and we see a good example of it when Paul preached in Athens didn't we he certainly didn't stand up by decrying all of

Greek culture in fact he starts by quoting it he respected it to some extent and his argument in fact in Athens is based not on Jewish revelation but on Greek philosophy if you examine it closely and yet at the same time Paul describes this as ignorance he says the times of ignorance God overlooked he wants to take those thoughts captive and to make them captive for Christ he says it's ignorance until it's illuminated by Christ until his enlightenment comes in this secret that is revealed of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ you need he says really that even to make sense of Greek philosophy you need to know that because then the thoughts are taken captive to Christ and the third claim he makes is that this gives the gospel not just a local or even global but a universal perspective we read that in verses 10 and 11 and of course the commentators have a field day arguing about whether the rulers and authorities here mean the political leaders of the Roman Empire or whether they mean spiritual powers the former the political leaders of the Roman Empire might seem to make more sense in the context but if he means that why does he describe them as powers in the heavenly the heavenly the word realm isn't in the Greek it just describes them as powers in heavenly so I'm not sure we can give a definitive answer to that question but perhaps it doesn't really matter too much anyway because perhaps in a sense both are meant what [28:37] Paul is actually saying is that any power whether a power of this world or power in heaven needs to acknowledge that God's purpose is carried out through the church and is accomplished in Christ Jesus you see Satan probably thought well in fact he more or less said so to Jesus that God may have the Jews but the rest of the nations are mine but Jesus disputes that claim Jesus said no all the nations are mine Jesus claims all authority in heaven and on earth and this is important about how we live we seek treasure in heaven we set our affections on things above but that doesn't deny the importance of the things of the world and all the practical advice in

Ephesians is about how you live in this world not how you live ultimately in the world to come why is that well I think it's because of that vision that the wealth of nations will be taken into the holy city in fact it is the heavenly perspective that gives earthly things their real meaning as Woody Allen understands too well death cancels everything in the end doesn't it death makes everything meaningless things I mean he's right in what he says if you really want to achieve immortality you have to not die but unfortunately he rejects the gospel that makes that possible but then we might raise the question does this really matter isn't Christianity after all about individual salvation and discipleship why care about the things of this world if the things of the next world is more real but

the answer to that is that it is the things of the next world that make these things of this world real make them matter and

God's inheritance is the church and that is a church made up of every tribe and nation there are individual saints but there is one book of life there's not a separate book for each cultural division the electoral register here is divided up by cities but there is only one register of the citizens of heaven it's called the Lamb's Book of Life and whatever culture or tribe or time or nation they come from you're either in that book or you're not and the church is after all the holy city into which the nations the glory of the nations is brought so finally let's think about two practical implications of this first of all we need to remember that Christian unity includes and transcends cultural diversity a few years back some of you may remember then we had a missionary family who stayed for us for a few months the husband was a

Mongolian and his wife was Swiss Oddbier and Sauer were their names and interestingly they'd come to England because to be an a week missionary you have to speak English which seems slightly odd in itself but apparently you do so they'd come to learn English and they pointed out one of these cultural problems cultural issues in Swiss culture Christians generally will drink wine will do it socially with their meal giving thanks to God and it is a cultural thing that Christians will take wine together with their meal in Mongolia!

Christians generally do not drink alcohol at all why? because in the Mongolian culture you don't drink socially with your meal if you drink you drink to get drunk that's the cultural norm there and so they say that Oddbier and Sarah tell us that when they're in Switzerland they will drink wine when they're in Mongolia they won't that's not hypocrisy it's cultural sensitivity it's a respect for cultural differences neither should condemn the other when in Switzerland live as a Swiss I have lived in Switzerland for a year if you go to Mongolia I've never been to Mongolia but if I did go I trust that I would live in harmony with the culture of the Mongolian

[33:58] Christians the principle is the same of course that drunkenness should be avoided that's what the scripture commands that's the thought that must be taken captive to Christ neither culture can't dare acknowledge that drunkenness is a good idea if they do then you're certainly in disobedience to the scriptures but how you do that how you carry out that command may be different in different cultures and the second point I'd like to make is that this tells us that heaven isn't going to be boring Christians have so often presented eternal life as if it's a state in which nothing interesting happens you may have seen that far side cartoon I haven't put it up on the screen for copyright reasons but that you can get a mug and this mug has a cartoon on it and it's a cartoon of a man with angel wings sitting on a cloud and he's sitting there looking boring and he's saying I wish I thought to bring a magazine to represent heaven like that a place that's going to be so boring that we wish we bought a magazine we can sometimes make it look like that can't we but this isn't the

Christian vision revelation presents us with a vision of the new Jerusalem as a beautiful city what is a city a city is a complex thing isn't it a city has culture and structure has a social contract it has interactions the city is a people we're gathered together to do stuff that's true of even our cities today but the trouble with our cities today is that what people do is not always good so there may be somebody in this city painting a great picture and yet down the road there is somebody selling drugs and leading people into degradation or there's somebody mugging a tourist now there won't be that going on in the holy city because nothing unclean will ever enter it but that which is good as Paul says that which is of good report that will be taken into the holy city there will be art in the city and the art will be more beautiful than the art of our cities here and it will be beautiful why because the deliberate ugliness of much modern art will be absent much modern art is ugly for a reason because they say well the world is an ugly place and if we're going to represent it we have to be ugly in the way we represent it but that won't be true of the art of the holy city because there will be no ugliness there for the artist to reflect and so there will be a greater beauty and there will be service there it's not a place for doing nothing there will be service in the city there will be interactions but it will be a service where Eden's curse does not hold there will be work but there will be no drudgery there may be status I don't know there may be ranks I don't know but there will be

no slavery each man each woman will be free in service to Jesus Christ that service will receive moreover the reward that is due and if there's knowledge and science in our cities today that's going to be but a poor reflection of the knowledge and science of the city as our intellect is freed from the debilitating and clouding effects of sin it may be that the moment we are confused science sometimes seems to not chime with what we read in the Bible and well that will be clear that's the point of our woolly thinking either science has not read the signs of the world properly or possibly we've misunderstood something in the scripture but it will all be clear when we reach the heavenly city then we will know fully as Paul says even as I am fully known that there will still be knowledge there will still be science there will still be understanding in the holy city and above all there will be relationships the relationship the relationship between man and God but also relationships within the church as these cultural barriers that in a sense do divide the church in some ways will come down because the wealth of all the nations will be brought into that one city the city is described as the bride isn't it it's difficult to paint a picture of that the city comes down from heaven dressed as a bride not quite sure how a city is dressed as a bride but we get the point that is being made don't we the holy city is the bride what's the point about a wedding it's the end of courtship isn't it I mean there was a kind of relationship before that but the bride the wedding is the end of the marriage supper of the lamb is the end of courtship and the start of a fuller and deeper and more satisfying relationship so what will be forgotten that which finds itself tossed into the lake of fire as revelation tells us in the end there are only two places left the holy city which I presumably therefore is described as a thousand stadia on each side but in fact presumably actually encompasses the whole of the universe or the lake of fire and only that which is forgotten is that which is thrown into the lake of fire that which does not acknowledge the lordship of Christ so it's not our job to go around destroying cultures and making everybody look like a western gentleman as I say the church glories in that the glory of all the nations will be brought into it that the glory of all the nations is God's inheritance but what our job is is to take every thought captive to Jesus Christ so we're going to finish with that hymn and then where's Ben gone do you want to come up and close after a Thank you.