

The church of Jesus Christ - Who?

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[0:00] Does anybody know what this is? Just store it in your head.

! An hour and it orbits the Earth every 95 minutes.

Okay, you're any closer to knowing what this might be? So if I give you that clue on the right-hand side, know what that is?

Anybody ever had one of those things on the right-hand side? Look through it. Okay. So it's, amazingly, it's a telescope.

And the picture on the left-hand side is of the Hubble telescope. The Hubble telescope was launched in 1990 with a service life which was anticipated to be in the region of 20 years plus, but it's still going strong.

[1:23] They don't really know whether it's going to come out of commission. And here's an amazing fact. It's got two solar panels and it operates on the basis of a range of 2.2 kilowatts, which is pretty similar to your kitchen kettle.

Every week it sends 120 gigabytes of information to NASA. And 120 gigabytes of information to NASA is equivalent to having about one kilometer length of a bookshelf filled with books.

One kilometer of books. This comes back from the Hubble spacecraft every week. And that information is actually in photographic and digital terms, which can be put together to create these amazing pictures of the universe.

Because Hubble was sent up there for a very specific reason that we should be able to see deeper and wider and bigger than ever seen before.

And so there are some amazing pictures. And I can't tell you what any of these relate to, but they're just sort of stunning. Out there are pictures.

[2:55] There are realities out there that we could barely imagine. Galaxies that we now know. There are billions of galaxies.

Hubble has enabled us to see things which we never saw before. It's helped us to see widely, more deeply, more clearly. It has changed our ideas about the universe. Why would you ever use a telescope again?

Why would you ever use a telescope again? It's completely transformed everything. I use this kind of like an example.

It's a picture language. To say this morning that the Bible is God's telescope, almost God's Hubble telescope. It's the Bible that tells us exactly what we need to know about the past, about the present, and about the future.

The Bible does not tell us things that we do not need to know. That's an interesting point, isn't it? It's the Bible, God's word, that corrects our wrong thoughts.

[4:12] And it reveals to us the God who made and sustains everything. So, you might say there are some similarities with the Hubble telescope.

But of course there are some massive differences. But unlike Hubble, the Bible tells us exactly what we need to know, not just stuff.

The Hubble telescope is pointed in a certain direction and it will just give everything that it sees.

God's word is more precise than that. It doesn't give us random. It gives us pointed knowledge that we need to know.

Hubble can go back and look at what appears to be the beginning of the universe. But it's conjecture.

[5:14] And it can't go beyond that time. But here's an amazing thing. The Bible actually tells us things about a time before the world was made.

And of course it tells us about the present. Because it's full of stories of the present. In every generation. But it can also tell us about the future. Which Hubble cannot do. God perfectly knows the future. Of that bit of the future that he wishes he has revealed to us. In his word, the Bible. It does not tell us things that we do not need to know. So you can be confident that when you pick up your Bible.

[6:18] You're not going to have to wade through stuff which is just irrelevant. And he corrects our wrong thoughts about everything that matters. It gives us a different perspective completely.

And fundamentally does something that no Hubble telescope, even multiplied by a hundred times ability, could ever do. It reveals to us the God who made and sustains everything. It costs billions of pounds to send Hubble up. But we have the word of God in our hands. It makes us an extraordinarily privileged people, doesn't it? God has loved us so much as to reveal himself to us in his own word.

And we might take many subject matters to apply God's telescope. But this morning I would like us to think of the church of Jesus Christ through the medium of God's telescope, the Bible.

[7:35] And I do so because as David has reminded us, and as we have looked at in the past, there are so many really inadequate toy telescope ideas about the church.

So here's a very typical English church. There are thousands of them in this country. Outside and in. And if you just go around with a sort of vox pox, vox pop approach and say to anybody in the street out in Brighton today, you know, tell me what comes to your mind when I say the word church.

Of course they'll say that. They'll think of that. They'll probably think of St. Peter's. Well, they're all scaffolding around it and so forth. Church, St. Peter's. Right. Or they may remember the thing still go on in churches, which we still have marriages in churches.

And this time it's very popular for people to go to hear chorister singing, King's College Chapel, Cambridge. I could just carry on this.

[8:56] filling the screen with all kinds of ideas about what the church is. You might say, well, it's all a bit sort of tired.

I know about this stuff. But actually, we need to be so careful because our own thinking can be so sort of swamped and conditioned by that. But we want to look at the church of Jesus Christ through God's telescope, the Bible.

That was the purpose this morning. That's what I said. And the Bible is a very interesting book in this. It encourages us to ask questions. You know, there's a style of teaching and information provision, which is a bit sort of encyclopedic.

You know, you just turn up something and there's the answer. Got a word? Get up. There's the answer. The Bible doesn't operate in that kind of way. It's very interesting to see the way in which Jesus, in his three years of teaching history, how he actually operated.

Although he did say things in a didactic way, in other words, he said things which were actual truth, so often what he does is he asks a question.

[10:21] He asks a question of people. And that's deliberate. Questions elicit answers.

Make you think. So often Jesus will say something and he just leaves the question. He doesn't answer the question. He just leaves the question with that person. This may be how God is speaking to you today in your life.

He just puts questions into your life. You may come here today, you just have questions and not answers. But God has his reasons for doing it that way.

He puts the question so that something would start to happen within you. So that our spiritual laziness would be replaced by some spiritual energy.

We begin to reach out, begin to respond to the questions. And I say to you that the Bible is rather like that.

[11:30] In all the different genres that are in the Bible, there's always an encouragement for us, not only to receive the questions that come from the Bible, but to ask questions of it.

I've put down four questions here that we would, should apply to the question of the Church of Jesus Christ. Who, when, where, why? We're just going to look at the first one this morning. And we'll look at the next three next week. Who, who, who is the Church? That's a good question, just in itself.

Who is the Church? I think most people would like to have the question, what is the Church? What is the Church?

Okay, so the visual images. Things that can be measured. Things that can be formulated. Things that I can define in that way.

[12:34] The Bible doesn't deal with the Church in that fashion. It says, who, who. It personalizes the issue all the time. We're going to look at six passages of God's Word this morning.

And I want to just pause at this moment. Make sure, have you got a Bible? If you haven't got a Bible, Matt at the back will make sure you can have one. Or use your app or whatever it is you operate with.

Very important that you should read these passages. We should read these passages together. What's helpful about each of these passages as well is that they have a context.

There's stuff before and there's stuff after. And your eye will maybe be drawn to the material as well. So what we're going to do is just to look at what the Bible says and the questions that it poses. And chase those questions through the passages that we're considering. Six passages. So here's the first. Ephesians 5, 22 to 33.

[13:50] It looks on the surface. This is the passage we read, remember? It looks on the surface as if this is just about how wives and husbands should be to each other.

And it is about that. Because what goes before, what goes after is about Christian behavior.

The ethics of Christian behavior as a result of us being Christians. How workers should relate to their employers. How children should relate to their parents.

How husbands should relate to their wives and wives to their husbands. So this is teaching on that subject matter. And no doubt as we go through the series in Ephesians.

That's exactly the sort of application that we will be making about that. But here and interestingly. Not in any other kind of context.

[14:50] There is a reference made. Husbands, wives, think church. Now interesting. Interesting. When he talks about employers and employees, he doesn't talk about the church.

When he talks about children and parents, he doesn't talk about the church. But he sees a reference here.

It's not just Paul's idea. Of course, we know the Holy Spirit has inspired him to put it in this way. He sees a very, very close connection between the picture of a husband and a wife and the relationship of Jesus Christ and the church.

So we read. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is their wife as Christ is the head of the church.

His body of which he is the savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to bring her to himself.

[16:09] As a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives and loves his wife, loves himself.

After all, no one ever hated his own body but he feeds and cares for it just as Christ does the church. For we are members of his body. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.

This is a profound mystery. But I'm talking about Christ and the church. So, there's a sense in which this passage relates to husbands and wives and their behavior together.

Very passage, by the way. But, actually, the apostle says here, there is a profound mystery that you see visibly being played out in this world, in the relationship between a husband and a wife.

But that profound mystery is actually talking profounder mystery. And the profounder mystery is Christ and the church.

[17:32] So, in this single passage, there is a great way for us to be able to learn about the way in which God sees the church.

And, in particular, the relationship of Jesus Christ and his church. Marriage is a flawed but helpful picture of the relationship between Jesus Christ and his church.

You get that? Marriage is a flawed but helpful picture of the relationship between Jesus Christ and his church. The pure, rock-solid reality is Jesus and the church.

The flawed picture is earthly marriage. However great and wonderful you think marriage is, in an earthly sense, it is even wonderful, richer, deeper in the relationship of Jesus Christ and his people, the church.

But, perhaps, you noticed, as we read that passage, that as much as there were things that you could relate to an earthly marriage, there were things here that you couldn't relate to an earthly marriage.

[19:11] A somewhat puzzling thing. So, let me draw your attention, for instance, to verse 26, where it says that Christ loved the church, gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.

How could you relate any of that to an earthly marriage? And then it goes on to talk about, presented to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.

And I draw you back to verse 23. Husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the church. His body of which he is the saviour.

I think it would be a pretty ridiculous kind of way for any husband to present himself to his wife in such a way that he was suggesting that he was her saviour.

That's not the relationship, is it? So, the picture that is emerging out of this particular passage is on the one hand of something absolutely loving and close and intimate with a beautiful outcome.

[20:52] Joyous. Tremendous. Radiant. Without spot or blemish. Expectation. Glorious. But on the other hand, it starts off in a place of need.

Not equality, but of need. This bride that Christ has set his love upon is a bride who needs to be saved.

Not just to be loved, but to be saved. Needs to be washed. Needs to be made holy. Needs to be made holy.

Let's turn to another passage. Romans 5, verses 6 to 8. Romans 5, verses 6 to 8.

We're just chasing this thought of need. How much of a need does this bride of Christ need? You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

[22:26] Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man, someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Now here, the subject matter is becoming very serious, isn't it? Feels like a romance in Ephesians 5. A marriage made in heaven.

But here's something very, very dark and very poignant has been introduced. because we're still talking about Christ and his bride.

Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And we have to understand that the picture of the church of Jesus Christ being a marriage is beautiful.

But that picture is not complete. The church has to be understood in the context of also of Romans 5, 6 to 8 to see that the people whom Christ has loved are the people for whom he has died upon the cross.

[23:53] The people who have needed his death because they are in rebellion against God and they stand under God's judgment and they need someone to take that judgment for them.

and that Jesus Christ found us in that condition and when he died upon the cross we were still in that condition.

Jesus Christ did not love the church because she was actually the complete opposite. this marriage becomes rather strange at this point doesn't it?

To think of someone going to the altar to get married to someone who in their eyes was not beautiful but actually was the complete opposite.

So let's chase this thought into something that you will find possibly rather shocking Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 4 to 6 this is a passage in the Old Testament this is written many hundreds of years before Jesus Christ came on earth and it is the indictment and the demonstration and statement of God about the situation concerning his own people.

[26:03] On the day you were born verse 4 chapter Ezekiel 16 on the day you were born your cord was not cut nor were you washed with water to make you clean nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths no one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you rather you were thrown out into the open field for on the day you were born you were despised then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood and as you lay there in your blood I said to you live it's an extraordinary graphic picture isn't it it's an abandoned baby sometimes children who've been abandoned at birth normally there's some pathetic story behind it a mother has not been able to cope would have loved to have cared for the child but not able to do so this isn't the picture the picture here is of a child that from the moment of birth is actually in a rejected and a despised state that's the language here isn't it on the day you were born you were despised unwanted nobody wanted you this is written about

God's people he says in verse six and I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood as you lay there in your blood I said to you despised rejected unwashed and filthy abandoned I said live sin's a very slippery word the word sinner in Romans chapter five is a very slippery word the words in Ezekiel they're not slippery at all are they they're very graphic the picture that's been painted have you ever considered yourself in this kind of way have you ever considered that as you've come into the world in a very sense as far as

God is concerned you're a despised and abandoned person friendless nobody wants you nobody wants you let's go to Isaiah chapter 53 verses 1 to 6 this message is so astonishing and so unbelievable as the prophet says and introduces it by saying this who has believed our message who has believed our message to whom has the arm of the

Lord been revealed he grew up before him like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him nothing in his appearance that we should desire him he was despised and rejected by men a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows yet we considered him stricken by God smitten by him and afflicted but he was pierced for our transgressions he was crushed for our iniquities the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we're healed we're all like sheep of Ghana stray each of us has turned to his own way and the

Lord has laid on him the iniquity of the Lord it seems like that abandoned baby in the field lying in blood unwashed unloved despised has been replaced by another who has also been despised and rejected who bled on the cross who suffered who was rejected by men friendless perhaps we're going a little bit ahead of ourselves this is a prophecy of one who would be despised rejected and suffer instead of us let's look at Mark 8 verse 31 this passage comes immediately after the first person that we know on earth to understand the identity of Jesus

[32:27] Jesus asked a question in verse 29 what about you who do you say I am Peter answered you are the Christ you are the promised one the prophesied one the one the prophet spoke about Ezekiel Isaiah Jeremiah and he then began to tell them that the son of man which is a phrase identifying himself must suffer many things and be rejected and be rejected by the elders chief priests and teachers of the law and that he must be killed and after three days rise again he spoke plainly about this so shocking was it that Peter who had got it right three verses earlier gets it wrong at this point surely this should not be surely this should not be ah but

Jesus is the Lord Jesus hundreds of years after that prophecy he's identifying himself with the fulfillment of it what you've read you're seeing before you in flesh and blood Jesus Christ came to fulfill the prophecy he came to be the despised one he came to be rejected he came to lie in blood as it were and even to say upon the cross my God my God why have you forsaken me and this is the strange and wonderful message that the early church spoke starting on the day of Pentecost and then again and again and again through the book of Acts and so our final passage is Acts 20 verse 21 Paul is making a farewell statement to the elders from the church of Ephesus and the surrounding district he says in verse 20 you know that I've not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house and what is the essence of this message church does he just tell the truth and leave no you never find preaching in the book of Acts in that kind of way you should never find preaching in the church of Jesus

Christ in that way either what he says is this I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus that this message demands a response that this idea that we who are sinners and under God's judgment we who are despised and abandoned that God has provided one who will stand in our place and took all that rejection and shame and abandonment and die upon a cross and be abandoned as it appears by his own father that this message of great substitution absolutely demands a response and the response is that we should turn from our wicked ways which is repentance and turn toward

God and have faith in Jesus Christ as the only savior and that was the message 2000 years ago is exactly the same message today for all of us today and the evidence of Jesus Christ saving work in us is repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ and this is how the church of Jesus Christ developed through the centuries how it was on the day of Pentecost how it was through the early years how it is through every generation and why the church of Jesus Christ is so amazing when you ask the question who why it's so pathetic to talk about the church as just a gathering of people who happen to be coming together for Christian purposes why it's so inadequate to say you're there as long as you've been baptized the word of God does not allow us to have such pathetically small pictures of the church of Jesus

[38:51] Christ if you are a member of his body as Ephesians describes it if you are part of the bride of Christ you are someone who has been loved so intensely that despite your complete unloveliness Jesus Christ has loved you to the extent of giving his life for you dying in your place and receiving the judgment that you deserve and the church of Jesus Christ comprises all who have received and accepted that message and repentance and faith and it excludes all who have not received and responded to that message and repentance and faith although the invitation goes out again today come be washed be clean be reconciled it's an invitation that's made to all of us today so I give you a lengthy definition of the church of

Jesus Christ is it that body of people of which Christ is the head because of his undeserved and loving saving work for them by his life death resurrection and intercession they show that they belong to Jesus Christ by lives which have turned from God opposition to God obedience trusting Jesus as their only saviour and lord they are changed by and in cooperation with God's grace day by day into people who are holy a radiant bride fit for and delighted in her husband Jesus Christ forever and that's Paul's stumbling language but but but I hope you can see even there just how majestic and magnificent and wonderful is this work that Jesus Christ has done what an amazing privilege it is for us so I have a comment a warning and a challenge what an astonishing wonderful thing God has done and is doing you almost need to close your eyes at this point and just say to yourself oh thank

God for what you've done in my life if you're in that place today oh thank God what you've done in my life you have been so privileged just to receive this mighty work there's nothing like it in the rest of the world there's nothing of equivalence to what this has been described don't be sidetracked and blinded by the world's non-Bible ideas of church please don't get yourself into that category what we are about today is not just about getting together it's not just about singing songs it's not just about having a happy time it is something far more profound it's got immense history dynamic purpose incredible momentum certain outcome it's a glorious thing and we are caught up in that

glory by God's grace to be participants in the most wonderful thing that God has ever designed and is ever fulfilling don't be sidetracked and blinded by lesser ideas may your ambition about church be as rich as the Bible's message and here's the challenge even one of these people will praise but if not the invitation is made today come I can't think of any language that we've used this morning that could be more down in the mud and the mire than as described in either Romans or Ezekiel what could be lower what could be more discouraging more upsetting more distressing!

and a picture of that abandoned bloody baby with nothing going for it at all and God brings a word to that one child and says live live live and that's the offer that's made to you today that's exactly I'm saying it on Christ's behalf live why will you die why line your blood when there's one who shed his blood for you why be abandoned when God wants to welcome you into his family why stand far off when he wants you to be near why choose death rather than life come today come and be with him come and receive him amen