God’s Great Plan

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[0:00] I like that translation of Ephesians 1.10 we heard talked about God's purpose. Another rendering of that word is in the ESV.

And it translated it like this. A plan, purpose, a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him in Christ.
Things in heaven and things on earth. Shortly after we were married, I thought it good to take my wife to Ireland, Northern Ireland, so she had some idea where this wild man that she let into her life had come from.
Meet some of my relatives. I chose some of the less wild ones. It was difficult. So my Aunt Kathleen and my Uncle Stanley met us at the airport and drove us 80 miles to their home.
Our journey took us through the little town of Antrim. I don't know if any of you know the province. And as we drove down the main street, Sue, my wife, noting the red, white and blue bunting, the union flags fluttering from shops and homes, and the fact that somebody had painted the curb stones red, white and blue, asked if the town was still celebrating the Jubilee.
[1:45] I'm afraid there was sniggering from the paddies. So when she asked why, we told her that no, the colours and the flags were there to, as it were, underline the tribal identity of the population of the town.

A few miles down the road, over the Glenchain Pass, we came into the nationalist town of Dungiven. Different colours there.
Different flags. The green and white and saffron of the flag of the Irish Republic. So in that small patch of land, beautiful as it is, people who look exactly the same, speak the same accent, share much of the same history, adhere to actually very slightly different branches of the same Christian faith.
people who look at the same, were stressing, as I'm afraid they still stress, the things that divide them, that make them diverse from one another, rather than what unites them.
Is it just my personal history that makes me raise my eyebrows when people say, as if it were totally self-evident, diversity is good?
[3:33] Up to a point, Lord Copper. When Paul wrote Ephesians, and by the way, I am of course aware of the arguments that he didn't write it, but the disciple did, I just don't agree with them.

When Paul wrote Ephesians, there was a lot of diversity, religious, cultural, and social, around him. The Romans had brought together people from very different backgrounds into their great empire. And by and large, you see, Rome was pretty good at managing all this.
A mixture of tolerance, sort of saying, well, your god Sulla, that they worship in Bath, is just the same as our god Minerva, same goddess, just, you know, different name, the whole thing they did. And, stamping down hard, very hard, if diversity threatened the Roman peace.
[4:44] So, Greeks, and Gauls, Numidians, and Nabataeans, all rubbed along together fairly well, as long as everybody knew who was in charge.

Yeah. Burn a bit of incense to Caesar in your temple. Do what they tell you. It'll all work out. However, in Paul's time, there was one particular diverse group in the empire, which, yeah, made for big problems.
The group Paul himself had been born into. The Jewish people. There were a lot of them, perhaps one in ten of the entire population of the empire.
They were found everywhere in it, only in Judea, around Jerusalem, and in Galilee, the majority. But, they formed big minorities elsewhere.
I mean, for instance, in Alexandria, which was the biggest city in the empire, apart from Rome itself, they were one in three of the population were Jewish. There were a lot of them, and both what they

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believed and what they did was so different from the rest of the empire, it was difficult for them to be sort of assimilated.
[6:22] It wasn't just that they only believed in one God, a God who you couldn't make an idol of, and they sort of rather looked down on the people who had lots of gods and worshipped them in idols and thought, actually, that they were all sinful.

It wasn't just that, it's the stuff they did. You know, they had a different calendar. You know, we're so used to a week and a day of rest at the end of it, we don't realise how unusual that was in the ancient world.
And then there were the foods they wouldn't eat. Bacon, for instance. Yeah? And then, of course, it was common knowledge that their menfolk were mutilated in a certain way as babies.
It seemed very odd. So, problems. problems. And the Jews were marching to a different beat from everybody else and march they did.
For instance, when a Roman official tried to put up statues of the emperor in the synagogues in Alexandria, a violent revolt ensued and the whole city was convulsed and in flames for months.
[7:50] And, of course, shortly after Paul's death in AD 66, a great revolt broke out in Judea. Four years it took the Romans to bring it under control.

And it ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and its great temple. Well, you may say, this is all very helpful for the pub quiz, Peter.
Thank you very much for the history lecture. What's it got to do with Ephesians? To answer that, we've got to get inside Paul's head as almost certainly towards the end of his life ministry in prison in Rome, he decides to send out this letter.
Almost certainly not just to the Ephesians, actually. There are some manuscripts of the letter which don't say Ephesus. No, it was almost certainly a circular letter he sent out to all the churches he knew.
And in it he sets out, as I said, at the end of his life, thinking it all through, what has God been showing me about Jesus and then what the gospel is all about?
[9:21] Ephesians is Paul's big reveal. That's why it's so wonderful that you're exploring it. You know, the other letters, like to Rome and Corinth and Galatia, he writes to address particular issues and then the deep stuff comes with that.

But here he just wants to say, this is what it's all about. And what is it? This big theme? Well, it's spelled out in that last verse.
God's purpose, his plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.
A big word, purpose, plan and unity. God has a plan, a great plan, staggering, breathtaking in its scope and reach.
What is it? To unite all things in Christ. To bring together and restore everything and everyone that has been divided, pushed apart by sin.
[10:55] And this plan to unite all things and all people had been a complete surprise to Paul when many years ago he first began to get his head around it.

He calls it in verse nine a secret. He actually uses the Greek word mysterion which is our word mystery isn't it? It's a mystery, a secret. You see as Paul tells us in another letter to the Philippians he had been before he met the risen Lord Jesus the most Jewish Jew you could imagine circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel of the tribe of Benjamin a Hebrew of the Hebrews if Paul had been a stick of rock you get at the seaside he'd been kosher all the way through and as a proud Jew Paul had regarded non-Jews in his own words as sinners who he says in
Galatians Gentile sinners strangers to God's promises from this very letter later on before Gentiles met Christ they are strangers they are apart they are different from God's people they have no part in his promises until they meet Christ but that's also true of the Jews ones like himself who at that time had rejected Christ before they accept Christ so the idea that God in Christ could now reach out to those same sinful idolatrous Gentiles and unite them with the faithful among his people the ones who had recognized Jesus as God's anointed the saviour of the world and its Lord and had done so mark you without requiring the
Gentiles to keep Sabbath to eat kosher to have their male children circumcised just as they are just as they are they can come as long as they accept Jesus as Lord that would have seemed madness

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to Paul before he met Jesus but now at the end of his life having come to believe that Jesus is the anointed Lord the Christ of God he writes to churches which are in fact already now overwhelmingly Gentile the churches he'd founded and pastored and known were all overwhelmingly non-Jews he can't get over what has happened that the blood of
Christ has brought these diverse antagonistic groups together people who hated one another and condemned one another are now together in one fellowship wow what a surprise what a mystery and this astonishing thing is a small part and a sign of a much greater work of God to unite all things everything that's been blown apart by sin in Christ you know it's often an accusation
[15:18] I've heard hurled at Christians by Jews and others well Jesus is the Messiah how come there's still so much fighting and conflict in the world why hasn't he brought peace which I answer by saying he has but he in his mercy is doing it slowly and mercifully but when I look at Christian communities which are united even though they have so many different people from different racial groups different backgrounds but all united I see already a sign of the great peace that is coming at the end of the age and fascinatingly in our passage this morning elsewhere in the letter

Paul suggests that this unity does not mean that we have to merge what makes us different our histories our past the good stuff in our heritage into one sort of melting pot which produces a big tasteless stew no we can keep our identity the stuff that God planned for us to have each of us different men and women slaves and free Jews and none do all have rich important histories that don't need to be lost in fact when they come together and work together they make for a far deeper richer unity than if we had to give everything up and have some bland common denominator which is why of course later in the letter
Paul holds out the picture of a marriage between a man and a woman as a picture of the unity between Christ and his church because as I know rather well actually after 45 years of marriage men and women are different you may not notice this but yeah you know and Paul says vive la difference you know because actually when a man and woman come together and they become one flesh their unity transcends enriches and deepens their union than if they had just been the same because they're different because their weaknesses and strengths complement each other and that's what he says about the church our differences can be in God's mercy sources for a richer and deeper unity than if we were all the same cast from the same mold so what does that mean for us today well if you take nothing else from this what I've said let's try and get our heads round how big is God's plan yes yes of course it includes our own personal salvation and restoration but it's far bigger even than that he's making all things new uniting all things and when the end comes all the stuff that makes us weep about our world the wars and the conflict the ruthless exploitation of nature by humans all that will end and all things will work together for good that's how big it is all things that's his plan and he wants you and me to be part of it to work with him where in our lives in our homes and communities and our nation and our world is God's great plan momentarily delayed and thwarted you know look I've read the bible
I know how it ends okay but we know evil is still powerful and sin and the devil in our world trying to thwart the plan let's get on board let's work with him promote unity wherever we can I've mentioned my uncle Stanley let me tell you a bit more about what he did he was headmaster of the grammar school in Limavady and in the early 1960s before the violence began he went to see the new Catholic priest Stanley himself was a faithful member of the Church of Ireland an Anglican if you want and he said to the priest look we've got a sixth form in the grammar school which of course you know the province was at that point 100%
Protestant we have a sixth form you've not got a sixth form in the Catholic secondary school so your sixth form must have to get on the bus and go 15 miles there and back to Derry that's silly isn't it if I promise to you that nothing will be done in the grammar school to offend the Catholic students and you can come in and teach them Catholic religious instruction can they come to us so they did very unusual almost unheard of at the time and it's still the case I'm still in touch with people in Limavadi and still Catholics go to the grammar school in the sixth form Limavadi was just the sort of little town which there could have been a lot of violence in the
[22:20] Troubles there wasn't how can you shoot a policeman in the back when you've been in the same rugby team as him how can you throw a bomb into a Catholic pub when you you might kill or injure Seamus who was your best mate in the grammar school well it's an example the sort of stuff I'm talking about and the church you know the church has got to be a sign of unity and I rejoice that here you know originally two traditions separated came together Anglican and Methodist I

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guess by now it's all so long ago that many of you that's all ancient history

I don't know but that's such a great sign I cannot commend you more strongly for that to have happened and also you know there are things that divide Christians which unfortunately you can't just gloss over I mean I'm sorry I've got to say it but when there are deep divisions over matters like the authority of scripture the role of preaching then it's very hard actually to live with contradictory opinions really is I'm minded of Elijah on Mount Carmel why limp ye between two opinions sometimes actually we've got to hammer it out decide what we believe and be united around what we see as the truth and that may mean division actually but come on we all know most of the divisions in churches aren't about that are they it's about petty stuff isn't it or much less important stuff

I mean I know Germany very well live there worshipped mostly actually in Catholic churches you know and I was reminded when you said stand up and then it was the prayers well actually if you go to a Catholic church in Germany you stand to sing and sit or kneel to pray just like we do you go to the Protestant churches just to catch the Catholics out they sit to sing and stand to pray okay spot the visitor you know from the other lot and that's why Lutheran hymns by the way are all so low you know you have to growl them out because they're seated that's just petty isn't it but you know how people get worked up don't they I remember when I was a pastor of a church in the Midlands and the worship wars were in full swing on the one hand the traditional organist and the choir on the other the music group hymns or spiritual songs which should we sing now there was an uneasy compromise so every fourth Sunday the music group got to lead and most of the people who were traditionally inclined didn't bother to come but then something amazing happened the organist went on an alpha course and his walk with Jesus grew much closer and one Sunday when the worship group was leading they were belting out you know our God's the king of the giants or something and David began softly to play the organ in perfect harmony he was a consummate musician with them it was the beginning actually in that church of a wonderful process of transformation when God the Holy Spirit worked deeply in people's hearts everybody's hearts actually because there was no right or wrong side there was there and finally all things includes you and me each one of us needs to be united in Christ for without his headship that's what the word used in the Greek gestures towards it's literally all things are going to be re-headed in Christ given a new head a new mind you know sometimes my body doesn't obey me increasingly I find my knees gone my legs gone to sleep [28:14] I've only sat down for ten minutes but there are far more disobedient things going on in our bodies and our hearts aren't there you know Paul really nails it in Romans 7 when he talks about the divided heart the thing that I so much want to do I don't do I do the thing I hate you know that's that's us without Christ's headship divided torn unbearably diverse and that's so many people in our society now are in that situation they are torn apart by different desires and urges they can't control they know what's right they know what they want and yearn for but they can't do it they do the thing they hate they're not just talking about addicts but they're talking about them certainly there are many things we can be addicted to so much stuff in our society now and we can be re-headed in Christ we can have the mind of Christ be united in him in our inner selves and all the anger fear and fear and the hatred and the despair that we know sometimes our inner selves can be re-headed united in him if you've experienced that you know what I'm talking about if you haven't it's on offer for you this morning we can be part of God's great plan to unite all things in Christ heaven and earth enemies divided churches divided people it's on offer by God's grace by the riches of his grace it's not a secret any longer it's been made known on the cross of

Christ and his blood on the cross he united all things and it's here for us this morning for our nation our world our church and each one of us and if you don't know what I'm talking about come and talk to me or someone else you know in this congregation afterwards and let us by his grace and only by his grace find it together I'm sure there'll be prayer ministry afterwards perhaps there's things I've said in this service go and pray pray pray for this world pray for this nation pray for this church and pray for yourself and your loved ones that you and we and me can be part of this great plan which is going to succeed I've read the Bible
I know how it ends thanks

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