

God and His Church

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 September 2023

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Let's turn again to Ephesians chapter 3, verses 14 through 21. There is overheads for this, Jonathan, God and his church.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Many of us here love walking up Scotland's majestic mountains. There's nothing better than after a hard climb, reaching the top, looking out over a breathtaking view of our country.

I remember being on top of Benet in the Torridon Range, looking across to other mountains on one side and looking across to the sea lochs of Westeros on the other.

For those few minutes, the views were so stunning that all I could do was praise God for the wonder of his creation.

[1 : 07] Well, in Ephesians 3, verses 14 through 21, after climbing up the hill of God's amazing work of salvation in the previous chapters, the Apostle Paul has reached the very peak, and he's looking out over the hill country and the breathtaking view of God's heavenly love for his church.

Thankfully, he wasn't as speechless as I was. Rather, in view of all God has done and will do for his church, he prays.

He's climbed the heights of God's eternal love for us, God's infinite grace toward us, and God's unchangeable purposes for us. And now he's at the very top, the very summit, and he prays.

And what a prayer. It's glorious and high. His prayer, as was his life, is concentrated on the good of God's church.

For it's in and through the church, the glory of the love of God is crowned. The church is God's new society, redeemed by Christ, empowered by his Holy Spirit.

[2 : 25] Well, here we are in our passage, and we're standing on that mountaintop with Paul, and we want to see two things, just as I saw on one side, the other mountains of the Torridon Range, and on the other, the great sea lochs of Wester Ross.

We want to see two things. First of all, from verse 14 to 19, prayer for the church, prayer for the church, and second from verse 20 to 21, praise from the church, praise from the church.

So join me on top of this mountain, as together we both pray and we praise, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. First of all then, from verse 14 through 19, we have prayer for the church, prayer for the church.

Even though Paul was an individual, he was not an individualist. He always put the needs of the church first. His prayers were always dominated by the theme of God's new society.

That's why he bows his knees in verse 14, the desperate need of the church in Ephesus to experience for themselves the good things God has for them in the gospel.

[3 : 45] Notice to whom he prays, the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. The Father.

It's a Father's joy to delight to give good gifts to his children. And God our Father is the best of all fathers. He delights in lavishly pouring out the gifts of his grace upon the church.

Notice also, for whom Paul is praying, every family in heaven and on earth. He's referring here to the family of nations.

He's talking about the church being made up of people from every nation, Jew and Gentile, black and white. There are no special gifts of grace God has for the rich.

He does not have for the poor. Paul, therefore, is praying to a generous, loving Father for his international church.

[4 : 46] And it's as if he's saying, Father, I want them to know and experience what I've come to know and experience in my life. I want them to stand on the mountaintop of your glory and look out

over the stunning horizons of your life in them and your love for them.

I want them to know the good things that you've got for them. Well, what are these good things which Paul prays that we would know and experience, not just as individual Christians, but more importantly, as a church?

Well, in our verses here, Paul presents us with two things that our generous, loving Father delights to give us and wants to give us. The life of Christ in the church and the love of Christ for the church. The love of Christ, the life of Christ in the church and the love of Christ for the church. the life of Christ in the church. God wants us to experience that.

The church is quite unlike any other group of people on the face of planet Earth. We are all here from different backgrounds and outside the church, let's face it, we all have different interests.

[6 : 08] But that's true of my running group in Canvas Lang. What makes us quite unlike any other group of people on planet Earth is that the living Christ lives in us.

To use the words of verse 17, Christ dwells in our hearts. With the exception of his heavenly throne, God is here today in a way he is nowhere else on planet Earth.

In Isaiah 6, the angels of heaven worship the Christ enthroned in glory, high and lifted up. And in Revelation chapter 1, the blessed apostle John falls down in worship before the risen and exalted Christ.

And it's this Christ, the Christ of Isaiah 6 and Revelation 1, who lives within your heart today. The kiss of the sun for pardon, the birds of the air for mirth.

One is closer to God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on Earth. So wrote the Victorian poet Dorothy Gurney. She couldn't be more wrong.

[7 : 34] One is closer God's heart in church than anywhere else because it's us Christians indwelt by the living Christ as we gather together to worship him, he is present in all his glorious fullness.

Some people don't bother coming to church because they think they can get closer to God on top of a mountain than here. No doubt there's something spiritual about being on top of a hill, but again, they could not be more wrong.

According to Paul, it's here as Christ-filled Christians gather to worship him, God delights to touch us with his grace.

Now, from a natural point of view, I hope I'm not offending anyone here when I say this, none of us are special. We're just like everybody else in Glasgow.

We get up, we feed the kids, we go to work, we pick them up from school, we get the children ready for bed, and if we get any personal time, we do the housework, and then we try and catch up with work emails we didn't get round to answering in the day.

[8 : 50] Then we go to bed, and we wake up, and we feed the kids, and we go to work, you get the idea, right? We repeat the same routine day after day after day after day.

But to go back to verse 17, from a spiritual point of view, we are very special indeed, because through faith in Christ, according to the riches of the glory of God, he has strengthened us with his power, through his spirit, in our inner beings, so that Jesus Christ lives in our hearts.

We face the same struggles as does everybody else in our city, and yet God has done an amazing thing in us. We can look at ourselves in the mirror in the morning, and say to our reflection, the risen, living, exalted Christ lives in you.

Perhaps today we're going through tough times. Perhaps we're struggling with grief, loneliness, homesickness, mental illness.

Perhaps we have an unhealthy, low self-esteem. And we wonder to ourselves, am I worth anything to anyone?

[10 : 13] It's not the whole answer, but let's remember that whatever the nature of our struggles, God has done an amazing thing in our hearts. He has lavished upon us his grace and love.

The living Christ lives in me. The same Christ who fed those 5,000 with just five loaves and two fish. The good shepherd of Psalm 23.

The same Christ who wept at the graveside of his friend Lazarus and then raised him from the dead. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53. The same Christ who was moved with compassion when he saw the plight of the unclean leper.

The lion of the tribe of Judah in Revelation 5. The same Christ who sat on a Galilean hillside and taught his disciples to love their enemies.

The king of kings in Psalm 2. This Christ dwells in your hearts today through faith. This gift God gives us, this ultimate blessing of his grace isn't a thing or an idea.

[11:29] He gives us his son to dwell in our hearts through faith. What the Jewish temple represented in the Old Testament, the earthly presence of God, the Christian church is in the New Testament.

Now surely this most precious of truths must affect the way we look and think about each other as Christians. When tempted to look down on another Christian as being less important than us, when tempted to ignore the needs of other Christians who are struggling, let's remember the same Christ who lives in me lives in them.

And in loving and serving them we are loving and serving the Christ in them. If we do not love those in whom Christ dwells, how can we say that we love Christ at all?

Of course, they may make it difficult for us to love them, but the Christ in them is easy to love, for he loved us first and he gave himself as the sacrifice for our sins upon the cross.

Let's see each other with new eyes. Let's love the Christ who lives in each other with new hearts and let's find solid ways to express that love even at the end of this service if it consists in saying to the person sitting next to you, may God be with you this week.

[13:07] Well, God wants us to experience that and that's for what Paul prays. Second, he wants us to experience the love of Christ for the church, the love of Christ for the church.

the second section of Paul's prayer from verse 18 onwards is dominated by the theme of love, not our love for God but his love for us. It's his love which grounds us in him so that we may experience for ourselves the incalculable magnitude of the love of Christ, a love that surpasses knowledge.

Do you ever see that LGBT rainbow slogan that says all love is love? What a lot of rubbish. Really? Sounds nice but it's wrong. Think of the implications that all love is love. Does it therefore legitimize rather the erotic love between an adult and a child or between a human and an animal but from a biblical point of view most serious of all is that it takes the love of God down to our level and it makes the love of God no more special than any other kind of love.

Think of what Paul's saying here. The love of God surpasses human knowledge. For all we think we know how much Christ loves us, we're merely paddling in the breakwaters of the ocean of his love.

[14:46] It always goes deeper. We live in a world of three dimensions but Paul gives us four when it comes to Christ's love. Breadth, length, height, and depth.

His point is that it's beyond anything we can fully know. Though we may have the most loving parents it's possible to have, though we may have the most loving relationships with our spouse it's possible to have, though we may love our children with all our hearts and we do, yet it falls far short of how much Christ loves us.

Take all these closest of human loves, tie them in a bundle, multiply it all by a million, million, and we're still so far short of how much Jesus loves us. The deepest point on earth is the Marianas Trench in the Pacific Ocean.

The highest point on earth is the top of Mount Everest in the Himalayas. The longest river on earth is the Nile in Africa. The broadest desert on earth is Antarctica.

Measure their sizes, multiply them by infinity, and we still fall far short of Christ's measureless love for us. No computer can calculate, no algorithm can measure, no scientific instrument can assess just how much Jesus loves you.

[16:13] No matter how far we progress as Christians, we can never cease to be amazed at how much Christ loves us. Here we have the profoundest truth in the whole Bible.

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. He loves Jew and Gentile. He loves rich and poor. He loves male and female.

He loves black and white. Think again of those Christ loves. Not the lovable, but the sinner.

He loves those who do not love him. He loves those who were born naturally with sinful dispositions, as we read in Ephesians 2 verse 1, who walk according to the principles of this age, who carry out the desires of their bodies and minds.

We were anti-God, but he loved us and he loves us now even though the best of us are riddled with sinful selfishness. He loves us with all the immeasurable, incalculable, and limited passion of his divine nature.

[17:23] So when you're asking yourself the question, am I really worth anything to anybody? Would the world notice if I was gone? perhaps we think that no one loves us.

And perhaps we don't love ourselves in the healthy way we should. In fact, when we look in the mirror, everything we see is everything we hate. But we must never doubt this.

Jesus Christ loves that reflection in the mirror. Jesus Christ loves us in a way that we dare not love ourselves. How do we know he loves us in this way?

If it wasn't just that the Bible tells us so, it's because 2,000 years ago on a small hill outside Jerusalem, he allowed himself to be nailed to a Roman cross and put to death for us.

He sacrificed himself for his enemies because he loved them so much. He wanted to save us from our sins and give us new life in him.

[18 : 30] When we're struggling as Christians, don't we know it? It's all too easy to question whether God loves us at all. And at times like these, God invites us to look back to that cross.

For there we see the immeasurable love Christ has for us. Now you'll notice that Paul is not praying here for Christ to love us.

Because he already does. He's praying here that by the Spirit we need to experience that love for ourselves. He's praying that that love of Christ would not be a mere intellectual theory, an idea, but an experienced reality.

That at all times, especially at times of failure, especially at times of failure, we'd be able to fall back, rest, and experience the embrace of Christ's arms, and listen to his voice in our ears saying, no matter what you've done, no matter what the world says about you, and no matter what you say about yourself, I've always loved you, and I'll love you today, and I'll always love you.

Before we move on from this, look at verse 18 with me. The love of Christ is to be experienced in community.

[20 : 20] Community. Paul says, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints. The love of Christ can only be truly experienced in community with other Christians.

The love of Christ is like a rainbow with a million colors, and each color corresponds to the way in which he loves an individual Christian. You put them all together in Christ, and the whole rainbow shines brightly over the world, displaying his love.

A churchless Christian who denies community and says, I don't need other Christians, denies Christ his unique color.

He is withholding from our Lord the unique color of his love. The fullness of God to which Paul refers at the end of verse 19, Christian is expressed only in the church, not as discreet individuals who want to stay apart from everyone else.

This is surely the high mountain peak in the Christian life, that not only would we experience in the church the indwelling presence of Christ, Christ, but that together we would experience the incalculable vastness of his love for us.

[21 : 53] And what Paul's praying for here is in essence this. Come up here. Stand with me on the top of God's gracious mountain.

Gaze and wonder at all God's got for you in the gospel. prayer for the church. Well, second and more briefly, from verse 20 to 21, we have praise from the church, praise from the church, now to him who is able to do far more abundantly and so on.

These verses don't just close off Paul's prayer, but the whole first three chapters of the letter to the Ephesians. In these chapters, as I've said, God is detailing for us the incredible truth of Christian salvation.

From the eternal purposes of God for the church, expressed in the blood of Jesus Christ, from the glory of the name of God in his church, to his grace expressed in the love of Christ for us, more could not be imagined or dreamed.

We can never say of God, not one of us, you haven't done enough to deserve my service, my worship, and my love.

[23 : 19] What then is the response of the church to God's infinite, eternal, and unchangeable goodness to sinners like us? Praise.

Praise, it has to be praise. Praise first from a church strengthened by God, God, and then second, praise from a church focused on God. Praise from a church strengthened by God, first of all.

When I was a child, and Christmas was approaching, I'd go to my mother, and I'd ask her for a few pennies, so I could go and buy her and my dad a Christmas present.

And on Christmas morning, they'd unwrap presents which their own money had bought for all that we do as Christians for God, everything, isn't done on our own strength, it's all done in the strength

he gives us.

It's as if we give him presents which his own money has bought, the voices that we use to praise him so sweetly, those thankful hearts which we use to worship him, they're all coming from him, in the previous section we've seen that God's got gifts for us all, the gift of the indwelling presence of Christ with us, the gift of the experience of Christ's immeasurable love, now he has another gift for us, the strength, the motive, and the grace we need to give him praise with our lives, he also gives us that, and that power, according to Paul, is at work within us, what a power it is, it's far more abundant than any of us can ever ask or even imagine, this is the power that transforms us from being creatures of wrath into sons of God, from being dead in our sin to being alive with

[25 : 15] Christ, he gives us strength to get to the top of that mountain, he gives us eyes so we can see the beauty of the glorious horizon of his grace, he gives us hearts to praise him, this Christ in whom we hope he is able to do far more abundantly than we can ever ask or even think, for that we praise him and we do so in the strength that he alone provides, the whole teaching of Ephesians chapters 1 through 3 is summed up in this one sentence, salvation is all of God and his grace, salvation is all of God and his grace, the church, his new society, it's all God's work, not ours, salvation is all of God and his grace, the cross and resurrection, it's all of him, the fullness of his presence among us, it's all of him, the glorious future of the church, it's all in him, and even those voices with which we praise him, and those hands with which we worship him, and those minds with which we think for him, and those thankful hearts with which we worship him, but all gifts of his grace, our daily prayer then is that in thought and word and deed,

God will give us the strength to live for him, so that when others see our good deeds, they'll give praise to our Father who is in heaven. Praise from a church strengthened by God, and then last in verse 21, praise from a church focused on God, praise from a church focused on God.

Ephesians 1 through 3 reach their climax in these last few words of this section, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever, amen.

What is this all about anyway? What's our life about? What's the Christian church all about? What? It is all about God and his glory, that we by breath and by word, by thought and by action, should live for the praise and worship of the God of all grace.

We have a greater purpose in life than ourselves. Our aim and goal in life is to bring praise to the name of God through his Son, Jesus Christ.

[27 : 52] Christ. Here's our praise song as a church. Here's our doxology. Glory be to God the Father. Glory be to God the Son. Glory be to God the Spirit.

Praise to God the three in one. And so we ask of every word we speak and every thought we think and every action we act, how does this bring glory to God by the church and in Christ Jesus?

us. And if by my living or dying I can stand on top of that mountain with the apostle Paul and I can survey the beauty of Christ's grace toward us in the church and if I can be indwelt by the presence of the living Christ and if I can experience the love of Christ coursing through my veins, that will be my sheer joy and that is to the great glory of God the Father.

And if, if, in God's grace, by our proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, we can take others who are currently dead in sin with us to the top of that mountain also, how much greater the glory still.

Let me close by reemphasizing to us, what every Christian here, as if we needed to be reminded, there is a great horizon waiting for us on the mountain top of the salvation glory of God.

[29 : 30] And that view makes all we struggle for and sweat for here well and truly worth it. all that self-denial from sin, all that sweat in the work of the Lord, it makes it worth it.

And far more beside, let's keep going, let's never give up working for God and experiencing His life in us and His love for us. Let's make it our life's goal that all our ambitions and all our dreams, all our relationships and all our careers, everything would be lived to the glory and the praise of the God who loves us more than we can ever imagine and whose one and only beloved Son died on the cross to give us eternal life.

To this Christ be glory in us and in the church throughout all generations forever and ever. Amen.