

Mission assured

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[0 : 0 0] Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through, and there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich, and he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.

So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, he has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold. And Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this very, very great privilege that we have this morning of hearing your word read and then explained and preached. We rejoice that you are a God who speaks and we pray you'd help us to hear your voice loud and clear this morning and to be transformed by it in our inner beings. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

[2 : 5 0] Amen. Some things get bigger, don't they, the closer you get to them. So a building like the Shard, for example, you can see it from miles away, you can see it from our house, it's clearly very impressive, but it's only, isn't it, really when you get right up to it, when you're standing at the very base of it, and you look up at this enormous building towering above you, that you really appreciate how enormous it is.

Surprisingly, it's the same with the church. From a distance, of course, our secular world thinks the church is a very, very small thing indeed.

Stuck in the past, weak and irrelevant. And yet, when we read Ephesians, as we've been doing so through the autumn as a church, when we get up close to God's church, we realize how very big it is, not just numerically speaking, as people who throughout history and throughout the world come and put their trust in Jesus, but actually how very big it is in God's purposes.

I wonder if we remember chapter 1, verse 10, and God's master plan for his world. Just flick back to Ephesians chapter 1, verse 10. Here is God's master plan for his world, his plan for all history.

It's described as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, that's in the Lord Jesus Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. A new creation, united under the rule of King Jesus.

[4 : 34] To which, of course, the skeptic says, well, that is just pie in the sky. After all, as we drove or walked or cycled here this morning, did it look to us, as we looked around the place, does it look as if Jesus Christ is Lord?

Well, of course not. But you see, that is because we are looking in the wrong place. We've seen in Ephesians that it's the church that is God's showcase for the new creation.

As all sorts of different people from different backgrounds, different shapes, different sizes, different cultures, and so on, are united in Jesus and brought together under his rule.

In other words, the church is the showcase for what one day will be true of the whole universe. And therefore, far from being a relic from the past, as it is so often assumed, the church is in fact a signpost to the future, a visible demonstration that God's purposes are on track.

Which means, of course, that the kind of church we are is vital. Hence this prayer in the next part of Ephesians, Ephesians 3, verses 14 to 21.

[5 : 53] It's the second of two big prayers in Ephesians. The first was in chapter 1, where the Apostle Paul prayed that we'd understand the plan of God. And then this second prayer in chapter 3 is a prayer that we'd be the kind of church that God wants us to be.

A prayer, verse 21, where God would be glorified. That God would be glorified in his church. There's an outline on the back of the service sheet.

It is a prayer, first of all, that we'd be transformed by the presence of Christ. Secondly, that we'd be transformed by the love of Christ. First of all, transformed by the presence of Christ.

Have a look at verses 14 and 15. The Apostle Paul says, For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being.

Paul prays this prayer to a powerful and loving Heavenly Father. The normal posture for prayer in the first century was to stand. So he kneels. This is a prayer of deep emotion.

[7 : 06] It's a prayer of great earnestness. Because if we are to be a church that glorifies God, we need to be a church that is transformed by Jesus' presence.

Transformation, later, is on the inside. Not simply on the outside, but on the inside. Notice verse 16. In your inner being. That is echoed, verse 17.

In your hearts. Many of us, I guess, spend significant amounts of time and money on our physical health and well-being.

Yet another flyer came through our letterbox this week, advertising the services of a personal fitness trainer. But are we equally keen for the transformation of our inner beings?

Not the outer shell of our physical body, which, however much time and money we spend on it, will fade away. But our inner core.

[8 : 07] Because so often, we simply pray, don't we, for our circumstances. If you're a praying person, just think about what you prayed for this morning, if you prayed this morning.

Or over the last few days. So often we pray for our circumstances. You know, that work would be less stressful, or that we'd recover from an illness, or we'd get a project finished. Or for those of us with children, that they'd be happy and healthy, and so on, and do well at school.

But if that is all we pray for, then actually we have a very, very narrow perspective on what is really important in life.

Because it's not our outward circumstances which determine our ability to glorify God, but the inner state of our hearts. It's why two people facing redundancy, for example, can respond very differently.

One is full of anxiety, the other is quietly trusting. Why? Well, it's not because their circumstances are different, it's because their hearts are different. It's why two people facing the frustrations of old age, one can be bad-tempered, the other can be thankful.

[9 : 18] Again, not because their external circumstances are any different, but because their hearts, their inner beings, are different. So let's read the prayer again.

Verse 16. That according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

But you say, doesn't Christ dwell in the hearts of those who belong to him already? Yes, he does. It's why the word in verse 17, that word dwell, doesn't so much mean, refer to Jesus moving into our hearts, so to speak, but rather to his continued presence.

In other words, this is a prayer that Jesus would be the central character, the central person, if you like, around whom the whole of our lives, our hearts would revolve, such that his powerful presence would transform us.

Imagine if I went to a young couple buying a house, and although the heating system is archaic, and the kitchen needs replacing, and the roof leaks, and you go into the garden, what there is of a garden, it's a complete wilderness.

[10 : 35] Nonetheless, they are pleased to be living there. But of course, as time goes by, they gradually fix things. So they patch up the roof, they refit the kitchen, they replace the boiler, and they start to clear and plant things in the garden.

And over time, the whole place begins to reflect their character. You know, the furnishings, the color palette, the curtains, the pictures, and so on. Well, that is what this prayer is about.

And it begs the question, when did you last pray a prayer like this, that we would be transformed by the presence of Christ? That his character would transform us?

It's a great prayer, isn't it, to pray for Andy and Alice. It's a great prayer for them to be praying for James. It's a prayer for all of us to pray that our inner beings, the very center of our personalities, would increasingly reflect the character of Jesus.

It is a prayer for spiritual growth. And of course, because it's a prayer, it means this kind of thing doesn't happen automatically simply because we put our trust in Jesus. No, it takes a miracle.

[11 : 48] It takes the empowering of God's Holy Spirit to make it happen. And when it does, why, to see a person who is transformed by Jesus, that, of course, is a wonderful, is a wonderful thing.

Perhaps you can think of a friend who has been completely transformed like this by the Lord Jesus. And now they are keen, they're wholehearted, they're clear on the gospel, they're strong in their faith, their priorities have shifted, their kingdom prioritized, they are solid as Christians, they are serious, they are substantial.

That is a very wonderful thing indeed. Perhaps there's someone here this morning and although you've invited Jesus Christ into your life, actually you've never really wanted this personal transformation such that the stamp of his character begins to shape every area of your life.

And actually, if you're honest with yourself, that's not really something you want. It's too threatening. And yet, of course, as the second half of Ephesians shows us, you cannot claim to be a Christian unless you are living with Jesus as Lord.

It's why in the second half of Ephesians we'll see there's such an emphasis on our walk. Because if we're to glorify Jesus in our lives, then our lives need to reflect his character. Just notice it, chapter 4, verse 1.

[13 : 24] I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called. Chapter 4, verse 17. Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds.

Chapter 5, verse 2. And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Chapter 5, verse 15. Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise.

In other words, the second half of Ephesians, when we come to that after Christmas, is going to show us what this life transformed by the presence of Jesus looks like. And wonderfully, as our lives do that, then they demonstrate that Jesus is Lord.

And of course, they point to that future day when everyone will see and have to acknowledge that he is indeed Lord. When God's master plan will be complete.

What do you say? How does that happen? Well, just one very obvious example which we'll come to at the end of Ephesians is work. You see, what happens as the power of Christ transforms our hearts in relation to our work, in relation to tomorrow morning?

[14 : 45] When we begin to do our work, not simply when the eye of our boss is on us, not simply when we know we've got a review, a performance review coming up, but actually when we do it for Jesus, because we know that he is Lord and we know that he is the one to whom we are accountable for the way in which we do our work.

Well, you see, to work like that, that is a very powerful sign, isn't it, of the future. As we demonstrate by the way in which we do our work that Jesus is Lord now and that one day everyone will have to bow the knee to him.

So firstly, transformed by the presence of Christ. Secondly, transformed by the love of Christ. Have a look at the second part of the prayer halfway through verse 17.

That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Notice, really, we're to be transformed by being rooted and grounded in Christ. It is, it's horticultural language. We have a tree in our God which we planted several years ago.

[16 : 13] Let me tell you, you're probably not interested in our tree but let me tell you, it's doing really well and the reason it's doing really well is because it stayed in the same place.

So, you know, we haven't thought, well, you know, actually, we don't really like it where it is at the moment. We'll just kind of move it around this year. We'll move it over there and next year we'll move it somewhere else and so on. No, the reason it's doing really well is because it stayed in the same place.

It's put its roots down. In the same way, Christian transformation happens not by discovering new blessings, that Jesus has for us. After all, Ephesians, you'll remember, begins by saying we have already been blessed in Christ in every way, with every spiritual blessings, blessings we receive the moment we put our trust in Jesus.

So not new blessings, but rather transformation happens as we appreciate more deeply and more fully the blessings that are already ours if we belong to Jesus such that we are rooted and grounded in his love for us.

Strikingly, the love of God is one of the hallmarks of this letter and supremely, the love of God as demonstrated in the death of Jesus on the cross.

[17 : 32] the death of Jesus so we can be forgiven our sins, so we can be at peace with God both in this world and the next.

Perhaps there's someone here this morning and you're uncertain about the love of God. Perhaps either from things in your own life or other things. Perhaps you're asking the question, can we be sure God is a God of love?

How can we know God is a God of love? Well, look to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Look to the cross, you see, at the breadth of God's love.

We've seen that throughout Ephesians, I take it. It's wide enough to encompass all sorts of people, Jew and Gentile, heading for the day of chapter 1, verse 10, and the new creation when people from all nations will be united under Christ.

Because you see, whoever you are this morning, God's love is wide enough for you if you'll put your trust in him. But not just the breadth of God's love, look to the cross and you see the length of God's love as long that stretches into eternity.

[18 : 44] Do you remember how at the beginning of Ephesians, Ephesians chapter 1, verse 4, we saw, didn't we, that God's master plan stretches right from before the beginning of the world and it continues in its fullness to the end of time.

Look to the cross and you see the height of God's love, the love that lifts us up to heaven, which chapter 2, verse 6, has raised Christians up with Christ already and seated us with him in their heavenly places.

And look to the cross and you see the depth of God's love because Christ has raised his people up from the depths, chapter 2, verse 3, from facing the wrath of God, reach down into the very deepest pit and lifted us up from the depths, the breadth, length, height, depth of the love of God.

Perhaps you're someone here this morning and you are losing heart as a Christian. The world looks big, the world looks powerful, Jesus looks small, being a Christian looks small and weak and unimpressive and you're barely standing as a Christian let alone standing firm as a Christian.

Will you consider the very great love of Jesus Christ, rescued from the depths without hope and without God in the world, raised up to the heights, seated with Christ now in the heavenly places.

[20 : 20] Will you pray this, pray this prayer that you'd have strength to comprehend the love of Christ? Or perhaps actually you're looking in on the Christian faith and you're asking a very different kind of question.

If I began the Christian life, how would I keep going? How would my life ever be transformed such that I would live for Jesus? Well it's by grasping his very great love for us.

After all, just think of the Gospels and how the love of Jesus transforms people time and time again. Think of the prostitute who comes to Jesus and she hears those words, your sins are forgiven.

And she cannot help herself. She buys an expensive jar of perfume, she pours it over Jesus' feet, full of tears, overwhelmed by his love for her.

Think of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who we heard about earlier from Luke chapter 19, how Jesus explains to him how he is the son of man, how he has come to seek and save the lost.

[21 : 38] And how we're told Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, behold, half my goods I give to the poor, and if I've defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.

see how understanding the love of Jesus transforms us? It transforms our attitude to Jesus, it transforms our attitude to others.

So you see, this is a prayer not only that we experience Jesus' love for ourselves, but actually it is a prayer that as we experience the love of Christ, it would completely transform our relationships as a church with each other, and shape us as a church, a church in other words that brings glory to God in the way we relate to him, a church which demonstrates that God has indeed not only reconciled us to himself if we put our trust in Jesus, but actually we are reconciled to one another.

And again the second half of Ephesians will show us what that looks like. Have a look at Ephesians chapter 4 verse 2 as we act with all humility and gentleness with patience bearing with one another in love.

Or chapter 4 verse 15 in our speech rather speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ. In chapter 5 verse 2 it's the mark of the way we relate to each other generally walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[23 : 14] And then in chapter 5 verse 25 at the end of the page it's a deep grasp of the love of Christ that will enable husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

And very strikingly it's precisely how the letter finishes chapter 6 verse 24 grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.

love is the hallmark of Christian relationships. It is to be the hallmark of the way which we relate to each other as a local church.

But notice what I think is a surprising thing back in our prayer in Ephesians chapter 3 in verse 18 notice really that love isn't a kind of tingly thing not primarily a kind of feelings kind of thing or at least not first of all it is rather something which needs to be comprehended and understood.

Notice verse 19 it is knowing the love of Christ that Paul prays for. I think for some of us perhaps the temptation is to think well you're either a kind of knowing sort of knowledge understanding kind of person or you're sort of loving feeling kind of person.

[24 : 34] But actually the Bible will not allow us to think like that. It's why at Grace Church we think it's important actually to know things and understand things not in a sort of geeky intellectual way but actually in a way that's truly powerful and is truly transformative of us of love of God.

We sometimes need to hear things which actually we may not want to hear. For example about the reality of judgment and the love of God because it's only when we realize that God is serious about the judgment that we comprehend his great love for us in the death of Jesus on the cross.

just as it's only when we understand and comprehend that actually we contribute nothing to our salvation. We have nothing to offer. Again it's only then that we see God's very great love for us.

Transformed by the presence of Christ and transformed by the love of Christ. Let me finish by asking two questions. Firstly have you prayed this prayer for yourself as an individual?

Many of us are busy and yet I guess many of us would be the very first to acknowledge that we're not always busy doing the right things. We waste time on our phones and our screens.

[26 : 13] We rush around all over the place. Many of us over work. And then of course we're surprised when actually the Christian life feels rather stale and dutiful and task orientated.

It's because of course we are living without really relating to God at least not in any meaningful way. And then perhaps when we do pray all we pray for is the externals.

Lord get me through today. Take away this problem. Make my life more comfortable. Instead will we pray this kind of prayer for personal inner heart transformation.

It's the beginning of a month. Why not pray this prayer Ephesians 3 14 to 21 every day through December. Wouldn't that be a great thing to do?

Who knows how the Lord may answer. Verse 20 is a great encouragement to pray this prayer isn't it? Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think according to the power at work within us.

[27 : 26] Have you prayed this prayer for yourself? Have you prayed this prayer corporately for us as a church? Because remember Ephesians is all about the church God showcased the new creation.

This is a prayer verse to be glorified in the church. As the watching world looks on and sees a church that is made up of all kinds of different people, all sorts of different backgrounds, all kinds of different personalities, people who perhaps wouldn't naturally speaking have much to do with each other and yet actually are committed despite our human differences to loving each other.

And as the world looks on at a church like that, why it sees a signpost to the future, the day when everyone will recognize that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In other words, a church which is not a relic of the past, small and irrelevant, but a church that is a glorious signpost to the future.

Let's have a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.

[28 : 52] Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed that Jesus Christ is Lord. Thank you for the very great privilege that we have in him, those of us trusting in him, of knowing him, of being on the right side of history, being able to look forward to the day when everyone will recognize that he is Lord.

And we long, Heavenly Father, for this transformation, both individually in our own lives and corporately for us as a church, longing to be transformed by the presence of Christ, longing to be transformed by the love of Christ.

And we pray, therefore, please would you help us to be those who pray this prayer, and we pray that you would very, graciously answer this prayer, and do far more for us in answering it than we might think or ask.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.