

God's Gospel-Centred Plan

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Well, friends, please join me in prayer. Father, we do pray that you would speak to us through your word this morning.

You'd help us understand it. And that as we understand it, you'd help us to live rightly in response to it. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, please sit down. Now, this sermon, this Bible talk this morning comes with a little warning.

I'm going to work you hard this morning. So if you think I've worked you hard the last two or three sermons, this one works you even harder. So I need to warn you about that before we start. And you might find it very helpful to find this little insert in your newsletters, because we're going to work our way through most of Ephesians chapters 1 to 4.

Now, friends, I want to start by getting you to recall a story from, well, it's from Mark chapter 7, and I'll just tell you briefly what it says. There's a story about a woman who comes to Jesus.

Now, she is a woman that we're told in the text is a Greek, a Syrophoenician by birth. And she has a daughter who is demon-possessed.

[1 : 12] And as she has this daughter, she says, look, you know, it says to Jesus, will you heal her? And he says these words. Allow the children to be satisfied first, because it isn't right to take children's bread and throw it to dogs.

But she replied, Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. And then he said to her, because of this reply, you may go.

The demon has gone out of your daughter. Now, friends, I don't know about you, but when I read that text, you probably react as I do. The story, when you hear it, and when you hear the words that Jesus says, seems to be violent, doesn't it?

It seems to be somewhat racist. And we react to the thought that Jesus could talk of a group of people as being dogs, while another is talked about as being children.

Friends, I think one of our problems with this story is that we, one of the reasons we don't really understand it, is that we don't live in the world of the first century. We do not know and recognize the great rift that was present in the first century.

[2 : 30] You see, people who wrote the Bible were Jews. These Jews knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were God's special people. They were called by God.

They were chosen by God. And they knew that everyone else were Gentiles, excluded from God, alienated from God. There was an idea in their minds of us, insiders, them, outsiders.

And that undergirded much of their life. It undergirded their theology. It undergirded their thinking. For them, if they were Jews, the whole world was full of us and them.

Now, because we're not Jews, we don't actually think that way any longer. And in fact, we find that way of thinking deeply offensive. Because of this, though, we miss some things in the Bible.

We don't understand some things that are there in the Bible. And the book of Ephesians is, in my view, a case in point. So today, I want you to come with me as we do some hard work in the book of Ephesians.

[3 : 31] And it has some magnificent things to say about God and about his way of working in his world. And if you understand this first point, you will understand much more of Ephesians than I think you've understood before.

So please open that sheet of paper or your Bibles, whichever you're happy with. And we're going to take a lightning tour of four chapters of Ephesians. And we will find some incredible truths about God and about the Gospel.

So let's get started. And Paul introduces himself. Now, he's Paul the Apostle. Now, those of us who know the New Testament know that there are some other things that we should know about Paul.

For example, we know about Paul, that he was a Roman citizen. We know that he was a Jew by birth. We know that he had been a religious Pharisee by conviction and training.

So he was of an elite group, an elite group of zealous Jews. Then this Paul the Jew, the Pharisee, became a Christian.

[4 : 28] There go my notes. It's all right. They're not the ones I need. Then this man with Jewish blood had been converted to Christian faith. And now this God-appointed apostle was being sent by Gentiles to speak about Jesus.

So this is Paul. And after he introduces himself, he launches into one long sentence in Greek. It runs from verse 3 to verse 14. And in Greek, like I said, there's no full stops in it.

It's just one full sentence. And so our English translators can't handle that. So they put the full stops in for us. But they weren't there in the original. Let's see what we can make of it. First thing I want you to notice is the pronouns that Paul uses.

Just skim through and you'll see them there. There are pronouns such as the pronoun us all the way through the passages. And they're in 3, they're in 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

It just runs through the chapter. It runs through the whole book. Now I want you to ask yourself, who do you think he's referring to when he talks about us?

[5 : 33] Now about half of my Christian life, I thought he was referring to me. That is, all Christians. I thought that's what he meant. I thought when he said God has chosen us, he meant me.

He was saying God had blessed me in the heavenly realms. He'd chosen me before the creation of the world. He had predestined us Christians to be adopted. However, I want to tell you that I've begun to think otherwise.

Let me show you what's changed my mind. So in your Bibles there, look at verses 11 to 13. Look at what Paul says. Let me read it to you. Now I want you to notice what verse 12 says.

It says, we who had already put our hope in the Messiah. That is, he's talking about Jews like him who had put their faith in Christ.

And then he switches pronouns and he talks about you. The you here are clearly Ephesian Christians, most of whom were Gentiles. But they too had believed in Christ.

[6 : 55] They too were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. Friends, I wonder if you can see what I'm saying. In these two verses, we have two groups of people being talked about.

First, we have Jewish Christians like Paul. They are referred to as we or us. Second, we have Gentile converts like the Ephesians.

They are referred to as you. Now with that in mind, a whole new possibility opens up for us in reading verses 3 to 14.

Now I'm not saying that these verses have to be read this way. But I think you'll find there's something incredibly entrancing about reading it this way. And it works for the whole of the book.

Let me show you. Imagine that verses 1 to 14, that in verses 1 to 14, wherever the word us appears, or at least in most of its occasions, it refers to Jews who have become Christians.

[7 : 58] Let's ask what Paul says about this us group of people. Look at verse 3, for example. Have a look at it. Paul talks about Jewish Christians like himself being blessed in Christ.

Now the language here is language of Genesis. Paul is saying that in Jesus, Jews have finally received the blessings promised to Abraham in Genesis 12 verses 1 to 3. And then in verse 4, he goes on to talk about Jews having been chosen in Christ.

This is the language of Deuteronomy 7, where Jews are said to be chosen by God. Then Paul talks about them being holy. This is the language of Exodus 19 verse 6, where Jews are said to be a holy nation.

Then in Ephesians 1 verse 4, they're said to be blameless. This echoes the language of Genesis 17, where Abraham is told to walk before God and be blameless.

Friends, I could go through the passage, show you the rich allusions to the Old Testament. This passage is just packed with them. And in using them, Paul is making the point that in Jewish Christians, Jewish Christians are the first fruit, as it were, of the great harvest to come.

[9 : 21] Jewish Christians are God's way of fulfilling his purposes, spoken about in the Old Testament. But then I want you to notice what is said about God's plan. Look at verse 4. Paul tells us that God had a plan that began before the creation of the world, and it is a plan in which Jews are special.

Verse 10 tells us that it is a plan that extends to the very end of time. Verses 12 and 13 tell us that it's a plan that involves not just Jewish Christians, but Gentile ones as well.

So with that framework in mind, now have a look at Ephesians 2, because now you'll understand it even more. Turn to Ephesians 2, and Paul resumes his talk of you and us.

And in verse 1, he talks about you. Now my suspicion is that you in verse 1 refers to the same people as it did in chapter 1, that is Gentile Christians. Then he switches in verse 3, and he talks of we to all.

Can you see it there? And then he notes that there is a common bond between all Christians, whether they had previously been Jews or previously been Gentiles.

[10 : 29] And that common bond is a bond of sin and slavery. It does not matter whether you were a Jew or a Gentile before you were joined to Christ.

There was a common bond between all of you. All were sinful. All were dead. All were captive to the devil. All lived in their fleshly desires.

All were under God's wrath. But now, because of Jesus, all have been saved by grace. There is no distinction. It does not matter whether you're a Jew or a Gentile.

All are saved and are saved by grace. Now let's move from Ephesians 2 to verse 11.

Paul tells us, returns to his us and you language, and he says this. Remember, remember that you Gentiles were uncircumcised. You were without a Messiah.

[11 : 32] You were excluded from the citizenship of Israel. You were foreigners to the covenants of promise. You were without hope. You were without God in the world. And in verse 13, he says, Before Christ came, you Gentiles were far away.

Far away from Israel. Far away from God. Far away from blessing. Before Christ came, the situation was that Jews were very much in.

It was God and us. And Gentiles were very much out. There was no God for them.

They were the dogs, as it were. Verse 15 tells us what made the separation. The separation was made by a barrier around God's people and a wall of hostility that kept them in and others out.

Verse 15 describes this wall of hostility. It was the law with its commandments and regulations. But, then says Paul in verse 13, But now, but now these Gentiles who were far off have now been brought near.

[12:43] The wall has gone. The hostility has vanished. Gentiles can be and have been brought in. And how is this great act accomplished?

Verse 13 tells us, Through the blood of the Messiah. In other words, it is accomplished through the death of Christ. Christ's death has obliterated the wall between God's people and the rest.

Between the us and the them. Between the insiders and the outsiders. Between those who are clean and, as it were, the dogs. There is a new situation.

Friends, it is so hard for us to understand that I'm going to try and, we'll turn on the radio mic and I'll try and give you an illustration of it. Is that working?

Thanks Gary. That's alright isn't it? You've got some sound. I want you to imagine for a moment that this side of that barrier, this is the Old Testament or even the temple in first century Palestine.

[13:49] Okay now, actually it doesn't really work very well because you've got to have a whole series of steps that go up to it. And as you go up to it, right up at the top was the temple itself.

And the temple had various precincts that various groups of people could go into. And one of those, all Jews could go into. One only certain men could go into. And then only priests could go in and so on.

And you progressed until right in the most inner one, only one priest could go once a year. Okay, that's how the temple functioned. Now all the way up to it, you had these series of steps.

And you know, so it's sort of, you got closer and closer to God as it were as you went. Now only figuratively speaking, because of course God is throughout all the world. But figuratively speaking, in a sort of diagrammatic way, the temple was saying, access to God is restricted.

Now I want you to imagine for a moment that here's Andrew Reid, the Scot, you know, the Gentile. And somehow he's been transported back to first century Palestine.

[14:52] And he wants to go up and see God. So he walks forward and he encounters the first set of stairs. And there's a fence there.

And the fence has a sign on it. We know it has a sign because we've dug up this sign. And I'm going to paraphrase what it says. The sign says, any Gentile who goes past this point is responsible for his own death.

So Andrew the Scot has got absolutely no hope of getting to God. Because he's a Gentile. He cannot get there. There is a dividing wall between him and God.

Separation. And those people up the top there, they can get to him. But I cannot. I'm a dog. An outsider, as it were.

Does that make sense? Can you see what's happened in the cross? In the cross, God says, that dividing wall of hostility has gone. It is demolished. You Gentiles have equal access to God.

[15:55] Friends, this is the most incredible thing that has happened in the history of the world. That we Gentiles should be able to cross there through the blood of Christ.

And have access to God the Father. It is the most astounding event. And that is what Paul has been building up to. Till this point. He has said, this has happened.

This is astounding. There is a whole new state of affairs going on. You see, friends, once there was hostility. But not any longer.

Now there is peace. Once there was distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Now there are now no distinctions. Once there was us and them.

Not now. Once there were two groups of people. Now there is just one new humanity. One new man. Where only one group had access to God.

[16:51] There is now unhindered access by all people to the God of all. Where only one group were citizens of God's kingdom. And everyone was outsiders.

Now all have been brought near to God in Christ. Where God only dwelt with. Where God only appeared to only dwell with one Jewish group of people.

Now all are citizens. Take a closer look at verses 19 to 22 of chapter 2. And hear it, friends. If you've not heard it this way before, hear it again.

So then. So then. You are no longer foreigners and strangers. But fellow citizens with the saints.

Members of God's household. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. With Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. And the whole building.

[17:48] Being built together by him. Grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord. You also. You also. Are being built together.

For God's dwelling in the spirit. Can you hear what's being said? He's saying that temple. It's gone. And the temple is now you. And Jew and Gentile together are there.

Being built to be God's dwelling in the spirit. It's not buildings any longer. It's people. And it is us.

Notice what Paul has done. He has covered such an enormous amount of ground. And if I'm right about Ephesians 1. Then Paul has summarized the whole of the Old Testament. And the New Testament.

And he said the Old Testament is a story of creation. The fall and promise. It's the story how God began the world. With the world. But then chose one nation from all the world.

[18:42] The children of Abraham. The Jews. To be blessing to the whole world. And for century after century. Though it looked as though God was only concerned about Jews. But then. God did what he had always intended.

Sent Jesus into this world. And Jesus died. And through his death. The law that had separated and protected the people of God. The Gentiles. The Jews.

And the Gentiles. From the Gentiles was removed. Separation was removed. And what God had always intended. Happened. And the door was open for Gentiles to come in.

And they had the same access to God. And they could become part of the people of God. And this is the story of the New Testament. And friends. This is the revolution that Christianity is. It is not a sectarian religion.

But a world religion. Because it has brought Jew and Gentile. That is the whole world together. In one dwelling of God in the spirit. And with that behind him.

[19:42] Paul launches off into Ephesians 3. And he describes how his ministry fits into this. He says. You've heard haven't you. You've heard haven't you. About the administration of God's grace.

That is you've heard haven't you. About the administration of God's grace. Given to me for you. You've heard haven't you. About the administration of God's grace. Given to me for you.

Even you Gentiles. This is God's mystery. God's mystery is that through the gospel. Gentiles are heirs together with Israel.

Look at verse 6. Chapter 3 verse 6. Gentiles are co-heirs. Members of the same body. Partakers in the promises made to Abraham.

The great blessings alluded to in Ephesians 1. Actually are for them as well. So they were true for them all along. They are predestined. They are called.

[20 : 37] They are chosen. They have been through all of history. The great blessings that God alluded to are for them also. And this incredible event is accomplished by God. And it happened in Christ Jesus.

In Messiah Jesus. Through the gospel. Let me repeat that. The great common salvation of Jew and Gentile has happened. In Christ Jesus.

Through the gospel. The gospel. And with this said. Paul now turns away from what God has done. And he turns to what God is doing now.

Have a look at it. In verses 7 following. He turns to God's ongoing purpose. And he says that in this present world. God's ongoing purpose is twofold. Can you see it there? To proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles.

Verse 8. And to make known God's multifaceted wisdom to the spiritual rulers and authorities. Verse 10. Let me tell you what I think that means. That second statement.

[21 : 34] Because it seems a bit strange. Doesn't it? What I think Paul is saying is. That the spiritual powers will see and recognize.

That two things have happened. Not only has harmony been restored between God and human beings by the gospel. But more than that. The church which is the united Jew and Gentile Christians together.

Witnesses to the fact. That harmony can also exist between the greatest divided people groups on earth. Friends can you see what he's saying? He's saying those spiritual powers.

They look. And they see when they see the church. God's restored people. Back in union with him. And God's restored people.

Back in harmony with each other. And they tremble. It is the witness to heaven itself. And to the demonic forces themselves.

[22 : 35] That God has done it. You can see what's being said can't you? Paul is saying that God has this great purpose for the whole created world. That purpose is that they come to know his son and worship him.

The means for accomplishing this is purely and simply his gathered people. God's means for bringing the world into submission before the feet of his son is.

His church. His church. The church of God is God's means for accomplishing God's purpose in God's world.

If that is so. Then what do you reckon needs to happen for God's people to be ready and prepared to do this job? Well I think Paul thinks three things are necessary. See if you can follow them with me and see his logic.

The first thing that's necessary is a very deep work of God. And that is what Paul prays for. He prays that God will do this work. Have a look at there in chapter 3 verses 14 to 21.

[23 : 33] And see if you've ever read this prayer this way. Paul prays that God's people will fully grasp what it is that he's been saying. In chapters 1 to 3. That is that they'll grasp that God has done this incredible thing.

He prays that God will not only will God's people grasp this. But that God will strengthen his people for the task. That it will be necessary for them. Because he knows it's absolutely necessary.

And he knows it'll be necessary for God to strengthen them. The second thing that'll be necessary is that the people of God commit themselves to this task. That is what I think Ephesians 4, 1 to 6 is about.

See if you can follow the logic. You see God's united people must make an effort. And their effort must be directed toward living up to the calling God has given them.

And if this is to happen they must assert their unity. They must downplay their own agendas. Instead of arrogance there must be humility and gentleness. Instead of impatience, patience. These people of God must bear with one another in love.

[24 : 38] Without becoming passive they must make an effort he says. To keep the unity you have in Christ. You are already one body. Already share one spirit. You've already been called to one hope.

You already have one Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father of all. That is all Jew and Gentile. And so you must try to show this oneness in relationship with each other.

But there's one other necessary thing. That is you need God's appointed spokespeople. And that is you need the speaking gifts which Christ gave to his church.

Can you see it there? Do you see that list of gifts? It's around about verse 9, 10 and 11. Do you see it there? Apostles, prophets, evangelists. And I think the last two gifts are actually one gift.

Pastor, teacher. So can you see those gifts? Apostleship, prophecy, evangelism, pastor, teaching. What do you think is common about those four gifts? Each of them is a speaking gift.

[25 : 40] And you see the church of God is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. It's the words of the apostles and prophets that need to be explained and taught.

And as they are explained and taught, God's people will be prepared, as the passage goes on to say, for works of ministry. The body of Christ will be built up and God's people will be built into a unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.

They'll no longer be tossed here and there by every wind of teaching. That's why we teach the Bible here every week. So that we won't be tossed here and there, but we'll be built up into the knowledge and love of the Lord Jesus.

We'll become mature and attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, speaking the truth of Christ in love and growing up into love, living as the people of God rather than as the pagans do.

Friends, I don't know about you, but I am so blown away by Ephesians 1-4. This is an astounding book. And I used to read it as being all about me.

[26 : 40] And now when I read it, I can see it's about me in part. But it's first and foremost about God, isn't it?

It is about God. It is a survey of God's cosmic history, of God's massive plan and purpose for his world, that he has had in mind before the world began.

Paul began with creation and election and surveyed history to the very end of time. He's given us this grand picture of what God is about in Christ.

He is about summing up all things under the headship of Jesus. And Paul's doing it in his letter. He's explaining what it means. Paul is about preaching the excellencies of Christ to all human beings and even to the heavenly spiritual powers.

And that's what he's saying God is about. And do you know what? He has chosen his instrument to do this, to preach this gospel in all the world. And guess who it is?

[27 : 54] It's us. It's us, his people. Please understand what I'm saying. When we come together each Sunday, there's a great tendency, isn't there, for us to think, this is for me.

And we think about our world, our person, our purposes, our gifts, our church. But what Ephesians says is, oh, you've got such a small view, if that is what you're thinking.

Think as God thinks. Think cosmically. That's how he thinks. Think beyond your personal private lives and your personal private faith. Think past your little church here at Holy Trinity Doncaster.

Think past your neighbour, beyond your local community, out to the ends of the world and think even to the gates of heaven and hell. Well, friends, this is the third Bible talk I've given on this series.

And it's about the gospel, isn't it? That's what we've been doing. And I'm deliberately setting out in this series of talks to give us a theological undergirding for our church. And Paul has told us here that our life together is a life that has been forged by God from all eternity.

[29 : 11] It has been forged in Christ Jesus. It has been forged through the gospel of his Son. The purposes of God will reach to the very ends of the world.

It'll go to every nation. It'll reach to heavenly places. And it challenges the demonic forces that capture and captivate our world. Notice what Paul has done.

In the light of Jesus Christ and the gospel, Paul has thought cosmically. And friends, I want us to be a church that thinks cosmically. I want us to think beyond our local community and to think as Paul thinks because then we'll get our local community in perspective.

Think as God thinks. Think about the whole world. You see, friends, our suburb and this country is full of people dedicated to pursuing their own interests.

It is a suburb and a country full of people who are dead in their trespasses and sins. It is full of people who are walking according to the ways of this world and who are under the spell of the evil one, the ruler of this world and who are gratifying their fleshly desires and who think in ways opposed to God.

[30 : 32] The people of our country and our world stand under the anger of a holy God as we heard two or three weeks ago. And friends, we have the answer. We know that God is rich in mercy.

We know that God has loved us in Jesus and we in this church have so many resources. We have money. We have a rich heritage of strong Bible teaching. We have people with great gifts.

We have numerous great contacts with people in the world outside the church. We have been richly blessed by God for all that is needed to have an impact for God. What I'm saying today is that I want us to decide together that we will do something with what God has given us.

We'll look outside ourselves. We'll forget about ourselves in the pursuit of God's great goal and God's great purpose. And I want us to be united in our decision to be God's people.

Remember the term we've used God's gospel-centered people. That is to hold God's purposes in Christ outlined in the gospel as paramount for everything that we do.

[31:42] To commit ourselves to using all that God has given us to do what we can for Him and for His purpose of making Christ known in the world. To be committed for example to evangelism as God has committed to it.

To be evangelists as God is an evangelist and I want us to start with ourselves. I want each one of us to determine to be a person committed to this gospel about God's Son.

Committed to evangelism. Committed to making Christ known. Committed to being those things and promoting that in our church. And then I want you to be gospel-centered people here together and corporately.

Friends, we all have diverse backgrounds and interests but if we are Christians what Paul has said is we have a common bond and that bond is that we have shared our common bond of being sinful for a common bond of being in Christ together.

Bound together no longer following the ruler of this world but together following the Lord Jesus Christ. We have been brought to God through Christ in the gospel.

[33:05] Let this mark everything that we do. We are gospel-centered people. Let's work together like that. Let's determine that all our life, all our decisions will be as gospel-centered people.

And with that in mind I'm going to pray and then I'm going to give you God's answer to our prayer. So, let's pray. And this prayer is based on Ephesians chapter 2.

Almighty God, you are our Father. From you every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. You know our hearts and you know our innermost desires.

We come before you today as your people and we pray for us together. We pray that out of your glorious riches you might strengthen us with power through your spirit in our inner beings.

May Christ dwell in our hearts through faith. May we be rooted and established in love. May we have power together with all your people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

[34:26] May we know this love that goes beyond all knowing. And may we be filled with all the measure of the fullness of God. And we pray this in the name of Christ.

Amen. Now friends we've prayed this prayer and having prayed it let me give you confidence in God's answer by assuring you of what it says here in Ephesians.

It says in verse 20 now to him who's able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think that is above and beyond what we've just asked or thought according to the power that works in us to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever.

Amen.