

A Ministry of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of February 2001. The preacher is Danny Saunders.

His sermon is entitled A Ministry of the Gospel and is from Ephesians chapter 3 verses 1 to 13. You might like to leave your Bibles open to page 950, Ephesians chapter 3, as we look at that together tonight. Before we do though, let's just pray.

Dear Lord Jesus, I just pray that you would really help us tonight to see how amazing your Gospel is and what the results of that are, Lord, in your church. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

As you know, I'm here tonight to talk to you about this passage in Ephesians. If I decided to tell you how I came to be here tonight, you might say that I was getting sidetracked.

[1 : 06] I might let you know that Paul rang me up and said, look, I'm having trouble getting someone for the night shift. It's going to be 36 degrees and I don't want to preach. Of course, I'd be going off on a tangent. I might take another angle and say, look, I like this passage, but I think Romans, we need some study on Romans.

I'm going to look at Romans tonight. Again, of course, I'd be going off on a tangent. Well, this passage is something like that. Paul goes off on a tangent to remind the Ephesians of his commission to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles and what the result of that preaching would be.

So Paul is basically reminding us that the Gospel is the cause, the result is the church, and Jesus Christ is the agent of both. So hopefully this is what will become clear to you tonight, that the Gospel is the cause, that the church is the result, and Jesus Christ is the agent of both.

When Paul introduces himself at the beginning of this passage, he's reminding the Ephesians about his commission and basically how he came to be doing what he was doing. He says this in verses 1 and 2.

This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles. And now the tangent, for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you.

[2 : 30] Well, just to fill in some of the background here, prior to his conversion, Paul, then known as Saul, went around killing Christians. He had just approved the killing of Stephen and he was on his way to Damascus to round up more Christians when he had an encounter with the living Christ.

Paul's commission was given to him after his conversion and this is recorded in the book of Acts. His commission was that he would be God's instrument chosen to bring God's name to the Gentiles.

Now this is unusual. Not only is Paul a Jew and so was separate to the Gentiles by race divisions, but he was also just rounding up and killing Christians and then God commands him to go and spread the good news to the Gentiles.

So you can see this must have been an amazing transformation that had taken place in Paul's life. So here now we have Paul in a Roman jail awaiting trial before Nero.

But he shows right from verse 1 that his point of view is not that he's a prisoner of Rome, but that he is a prisoner for Christ Jesus. He was not a victim of men, but he was a champion of Christ.

[3 : 38] His view is firmly fixed on Christ and on the things above, not on the things of the world or his own predicament. So Paul's commission was given to him for the sake of the Gentiles.

Paul goes off on this tangent to remind us that he's fully qualified for this mission from God because he has personally experienced the life-transforming power of Christ in his own life and his sights are firmly fixed on Christ.

Well, this makes you wonder, why was it so necessary for God to appoint a special envoy to the Gentiles? Well, Paul tells us the reason the Gentiles needed a special messenger back in chapter 2

verse 12 that Paul read out tonight.

Turn with me to that passage in chapter 2 verse 12. So God sends Paul as a special messenger to the Gentiles for their sake because they are without Christ.

They are aliens and strangers to Israel and the covenants of God. They have no God and they have no hope. They are truly lost. Well, what are these promises that he talks about?

[5 : 03] The covenants or promises are the ones that were given to Abraham right back in Genesis chapter 12, that he would be a great nation, that his name would be great and that the whole earth would be blessed through him.

These promises were passed on through Abraham's descendants who became the people of Israel. Access to God was given to the nation of Israel and they were God's people.

Well, this could be like the situation in Australia. Many illegal immigrants, or boat people as they accord, come here and try to seek asylum or citizenship. But our government says, no, you cannot come into Australia.

You're without a valid passport. You are aliens to the Commonwealth of Australia and strangers to our land. Well, let's now apply that to ourselves.

It's important for us to recognise that at one time or another, before we became Christians, we were all in this position. As far as God was concerned, we were all illegal immigrants, like the Gentiles in the Ephesian church.

[6 : 05] We were without God and without hope in the world. We were lost. But the mystery that has been revealed to Paul in this passage is that there is now a solution to this problem.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul says that this mystery was made known to him by revelation, so Paul didn't discover it. It was revealed to him. He has already written about it above, and this must be chapters 1 and 2 because we're only up to chapter 3 in Ephesians.

It is called the mystery of Christ and in verse 5, it was formally hidden to humans that now it has been revealed by the Holy Spirit to the apostles and prophets. So thankfully, Paul doesn't just leave us clues about the mystery.

He goes on to tell us what the mystery is in chapter 3, verse 6. The mystery is that the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promises in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

So those that were formally outside of fellowship with God have now been allowed in. Those that were once lost have now been found. Well, to the ancient world that lived with this very real distinction between Jew and Gentile, this is an amazing thing to be saying.

[7 : 23] All Jewish and Gentile hostility broken down. Not just broken down, but all distinctions are destroyed and they become one group under Christ. You see, although there was a promise of the whole world being blessed through Abraham, the Jews did not perceive that this meant that the Gentiles would also share in the promises of being God's people, or that their promised Messiah would be also for the Gentiles.

This was an unbelievable idea. The Jews regarded the Gentiles as barbarians and each group was full of racial and national contempt for the other. The idea that God was for everyone was unheard of.

This is why Paul calls this a mystery, because this was God's plan all along. But it is only now revealed in the work of Jesus on the cross. And this is great news.

So to illustrate just how amazing this is, think of what it would be like if John Howard and the Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddick, suddenly decided that for some reason all divisions and hostilities can be broken down with our illegal immigrants, so that they are no longer strangers or aliens, but citizens with all Australians and members of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Or something equally amazing might be the Palestinians and the Arab world and the Israelis of today simply putting down their guns and saying, let's be one in Christ.

[8 : 48] You see, in Christ, all the divisions that once existed are broken down and all people can be reconciled to God and reconciled to each other. For us, then, the great news is that we can share in this solution.

We do not have to be lost or strangers to God and we are no longer illegal immigrants without hope in the world. We can be brought into God's kingdom as legitimate citizens. We can be part of God's plan, which is this mystery that allows us to be reconciled to God and to each other.

Well, however, it's important to note that Paul is quite clear that this mystery has only been made possible in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. So it is the Gospel that is being described as the hidden mystery of God.

If we read this again from verse 6, the mystery is that the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. Well, Paul explains the Gospel in various ways in the first two chapters of Ephesians. In chapter 1, verse 7, he says that in Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to grace.

[10:05] In chapter 1, verse 13, Paul calls it the gospel of salvation, or the word of truth that we must hear and believe. We're then told in Ephesians 2, verses 1 to 9, that we were once dead in our sins, in our rebellion against God, and that we were children of wrath.

And in chapter 2, verse 13, Paul says, But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

The Gospel then is about us being saved from God's judgment that God will bring on those that are far off, or that are living away from God in open or passive rebellion against him.

Once we were lost, now we are found. This redemption or salvation is only made possible by the payment, which is Christ's blood, that was shed for us when he died on the cross.

This act has brought our forgiveness. We do not pay this price. It's paid for us. And so it's done by God's grace or mercy. So the Gospel is about accepting the one and only gift by which we can have reconciliation with God and be accepted as his children.

[11:23] The Gospel is about accepting the one and only gift by which we can have reconciliation with God and be accepted as his children. Well, that gift is the death of his son Jesus on the cross and he's rising again.

When Jesus died in our place, he took and defeated our sins and our punishment. Jesus did this so that when we accept this gift, we will not be lost or suffer death.

Instead, we are made right with God. We can have access to God in confidence and enter eternal life. There is no other Gospel by which we can be saved. So the Gospel then is about accepting the one and only gift by which we can have reconciliation with God and be accepted as his children.

That gift is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Not only did Jesus take on our sins at the cross, but he also defeated the punishment for that sin which is death when he rose again.

So now in Jesus we have no fear of judgment for our sin and no fear of death. There is no other Gospel by which we can be saved. Therefore, as I have said, the Gospel is about being saved.

[12:35] It is the Gospel of salvation. We must get this right. This is something that allows us to become children of God, heirs, members of God's people, sharers in the promises.

It is of extreme importance that we get this right. If the Gospel is preached that does not insist on being the only way by which a person can be saved from sin and become a child of God, then it is a false Gospel and no Gospel at all.

The Gospel is about how we as sinners can be forgiven by the blood of Christ so that our relationship with God can be restored. We can be rescued and enter God's family. There is no such thing as a moral Gospel or a social justice Gospel or a healing Gospel.

The only true Gospel is the Gospel of salvation because anything else falls short of proclaiming a means by which you, who were once lost and left behind, can now be found, brought near and live with God and his people.

Ajit Fernando told a story on VCYC about a dying woman and a Liberal minister who went to visit her. It goes something like this, I don't know the exact story.

[13:50] So, the minister wasn't quite sure about the Gospel and didn't really know what he believed. So, instead, he talked about morals and the need to be a good person and lead a good life.

The dying woman said, Minister, that's of no worth to me. I've had my life. It's too late for that. So, the minister remembered way back to his early training and said, well, there is this other bit about Jesus dying on the cross for you so that you can have forgiveness and receive eternal life.

And the woman said, oh, that makes much more sense. That's what I need. And so, she gave her life to Jesus and they both became Christians that night. So, just as Paul is quite sure about the Gospel and its effect on his life and on the lives of the Ephesians, we also must be quite sure about what the Gospel is and what we are attempting to share with people.

Otherwise, we would just be wasting our time and theirs. Well, then, Paul then says that it is this Gospel of salvation to which he has become a servant.

In verse 7, of this Gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Well, as I've already said, not only is the Gospel the only means of our salvation, but it is also a free gift.

[15:16] A free gift of God's grace. Looking back on the immigration metaphor, you can be sure that if there was a price by which that person could enter Australia, they would do all that they could to pay that price.

But here, Paul tells us that God's rescue is not like that. It's not something to be bought by us. The cost has already been paid by the blood of Jesus. This is purely a gift of God's grace that we receive through faith and the working of God's power.

In other words, this is God's act. See, Paul was an enemy of Christ. He went around killing Christians. Paul, if anyone, deserved to be punished.

Yet God had other plans to use Paul to preach the Gospels to the Gentiles and God's plans are sovereign. So Paul was transformed by the grace and power of God and this is an amazing thing. Any time someone becomes a Christian, this is an amazing and mighty work of God. Therefore, the power is in the Gospel, not in Paul.

[16:24] And so Paul is a servant of the Gospel through the grace and power of God. Well, Paul calls himself the very least of all the saints. Yet verse 11 tells us that his commission and the results of his commission were in accordance with God's eternal purposes and plans that God carried out in Christ Jesus.

Well, in verses 8-10 then, Paul restates his commission and goes on to tell us the results of that commission. He tells us firstly in verse 8, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches in Christ.

So Paul firstly had to tell the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches in Christ. Well, these riches are of course salvation and eternal life, but there's also so much more than this.

The boundless riches in Christ include everything that flows from a life that is totally surrendered to Jesus. Once you were dead in your sins, but now you are made alive in God.

The victory of Jesus at the cross gives us freedom from slavery to sin, freedom from addictions, freedom from worries of the world and freedom from our fears of death.

[17:38] The Holy Spirit is received at conversion and over time brings its fruit of love, joy and peace and other wonders into our lives which allow us to live as the people of God. Well, Paul was convinced that Christ enriches our lives in all ways possible and this is why he describes it as the boundless riches in Christ.

Well, secondly, Paul then reveals the greater purpose to his commission in verse 9 which was to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. Through the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles everyone now would see the plan or the effect of the mystery. Well, this is more fully explained in the second part of Ephesians chapter 2, chapter 3 verse 6 and the rest of Ephesians but it's basically the creating of a new and reconciled humanity called the church.

People in union with each other and with God through Jesus Christ. So having told us all about the mystery which was Christ and the gospel, Paul now wants to tell us the purpose or the plan of the mystery and this is that through the preaching of the gospel the church would form this is God's mystery hidden for all ages that has now been revealed at God's appointed time.

So Paul is saying that the gospel is the cause the result is the church and Jesus Christ is the agent of both. The gospel is the cause the result is the church and Jesus Christ is the agent of both.

[19:11] So the riches of Christ is not only that he died and rose again to save sinners but also to create a new humanity not just to redeem from sin but also to adopt into God's family not only to reconcile us with God but also to reconcile us with each other.

And thirdly a further cosmic outcome of preaching the gospel is stated in verse 10 that through the church the wisdom of God may be made known to the cosmic powers the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Well these cosmic powers are the demons and angels in the spiritual realm the powers and principalities that Paul will talk about later in Ephesians as the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Well God's plan and purpose is not revealed directly to them but is somehow revealed through the church. So through the church God's wisdom is revealed to the whole entire universe.

Well what this means for us is that our salvation has a purpose. Well your salvation is an individual matter between you and God once you are saved you're not saved to be a lone ranger Christian.

[20 : 22] If you are truly saved then you'll want to meet with other people who as Paul says are also members of the same body or sharers in the promise or members of the household of God.

We find these fellow people in the church and this is the plan of God that saved people would come together to form the church and be the body of Christ. The plan of God is that saved people would come together to form the church and be the body of Christ.

So the church then is central to the purposes and plans of God. Well imagine a big bonfire and each individual piece of coal or a branch is in the bonfire of course.

Well what would happen to an individual coal or branch if it's removed from the fire and left alone by itself? Well its flame would eventually go out and it would go cold. Well this is the same as people who say yes I'm a Christian but I don't have to go to church.

Well their flame will eventually go out and they'll eventually go cold. We can do nothing without the fire and the support and the prayer and the encouragement of each other which we find at church and in our church community.

[21 : 35] Well the church obviously is not perfect but we need to be careful that we do not despise the church of God and so be blind to God's work in history. God has not abandoned the church and so we cannot abandon it either.

In this it has a central place in God's plan. So what this means for us is that we also have a commission from God. Our commission is to be actively involved in God's church.

We must seek to become responsible church members and we should be active in a local church where the gospel of salvation is central. In this way we will also be servants of the gospel.

Well if the church as a community of believers is central to God's purposes it should also be central to our lives. Paul's great vision here is one of God's new community, a community that is his family, his dwelling place, his body and his instrument in the world.

We must have this same vision of the church. Only then will we be willing to pray for the church, to work for the church and if necessary to suffer in order to turn this vision into a reality.

[22 : 45] Let's remember that Paul is writing this letter from prison and he sees this suffering for the church and for the Ephesians as their glory, as the church's glory. Not only that but Paul sees this as a great privilege.

It's a great privilege for him to be a servant of God. He calls himself the very least, yet God gives him all the grace and power that is needed for him to fulfil his commission.

Likewise, God will give us what we need to be his people. Paul reminds us of this in verse 12 when he says that in Christ Jesus our Lord we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

So this access to Christ and God is the resource that we need to fulfil our commission. This is the access to God in boldness and confidence that we need to live as the people of God here at Holy Trinity Doncaster.

Paul knows that if we remember that we have this direct access to God then we will not be discouraged when things go wrong in the church or church traditions and structures fail us or whatever it might be.

[23 : 52] And so in the same way he says to the Ephesians in verse 13, don't lose heart over my sufferings in jail for you. Don't lose heart. Paul is fulfilling his commission to take Jesus to the Gentiles.

He hopes that the Christians at Ephesus will follow his example to stand firm in their faith and commitment to their status as children of God and the body of Christ whatever the circumstances. We also must have boldness and confidence in our own commission to be part of this church and to be part of the mission of the entire church which is to proclaim the gospel of salvation to our friends, to our family and to our community, whatever suffering for the gospel we might endure.

We have the gospel of salvation. We have riches in Christ and his spirit. We are part of a new people of God in the church and this church throughout the world is central to God's eternal purposes and plans.

And we also have direct access to God in boldness and confidence. Well, what are we waiting for? What more do we need?

[25 : 03] Let's pray. Dear Father God, thank you that in Christ Jesus our Lord, you have given us all the riches, grace and the power that we need to fulfil the mission of your church, to be your witness in the world and to go out and proclaim the glorious gospel of salvation to our friends and the community around us.

Please help us to approach you with boldness and confidence and to rely on your strength and your resources to enable us to complete the tasks that you have planned for each one of us and for your church at Holy Trinity Doncaster.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.