

God's Plan Revealed

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[0 : 01] Okay, lights. Pretty grand plan, wasn't it? All the girls are going, oh, and all the guys are going, way too much effort. But the letter of Ephesians is all about God's grand cosmic plan, to unite people, not in marriage, of course, but in Christ, to unite them in Him and under His Lordship. And today we're looking at chapter 3, which I think is the key chapter of the letter, because it speaks the most about God's grand plan and our place in it.

That's why I've called the series, and Mark's been having to run with it, Our Place in God's Plan. But you'll notice that Paul begins in verse 1 of chapter 3, so it'd be great if you had your Bibles open at Ephesians chapter 3. We're working our way through it.

So chapter 3, Paul begins with these words, for this reason I, Paul, dot, dot, dot. Do you see that there in verse 1? Now, what reason is he talking about? Well, he's talking about what he just mentioned in chapter 2, just beforehand. We looked at that over the last couple of weeks. You see, in chapter 2, we saw that we who were once dead to God are now made alive in Christ. That's chapter 2, the first half, 1 to 10. In other words, we have gone from being spiritually dead and poor to being spiritually alive and rich. And in the second half of chapter 2, our rags to riches story, as it were, continues. Because as we heard last week, whether we realised it or not, we Gentiles, that is a person who's not a Jew, we Gentiles were far from God.

But now, we have been brought near. We Gentiles, who were once excluded from being part of God's people, have now been included as God's people. And this is all through the blood of Christ. So, have a look back at chapter 2, verse 11, for example. He says, Therefore, remember that formerly, you, who are Gentiles by birth, and called uncircumcision by those who call themselves the circumcision, that is the Jews, which is done in the body by human hands, remember that you Gentiles at one time were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope, and without God in the world.

That is dismal. Verse 13, You see what he's saying?

[3 : 00] By Jesus' blood shed on the cross, we have been brought near to God, even though we have no right to be part of his people. But this is not just true for us, it's actually ended up being true for the Jews as well, because even they couldn't cut it.

But we can actually come closer to God than the Jews ever could. In fact, God brings us even closer than as his people. So, have a look at chapter 2, verse 18 to 22, the bit just before chapter 3.

Paul summarises by saying, You see that?

No longer foreigners and strangers, but part of God's people. More than that, part of God's household, part of his family. But we get even closer. Verse 21, You see, once we had nothing that mattered, but because of Jesus' blood, we have everything that matters.

This is what God has been doing in the world, bringing us who once excluded and foreigners close to him, included his own precious children. More than that, his temple by which he lives.

[4 : 40] This is what God is doing in the world. This is his grand plan, as we saw in chapter 1, to unite people together in Christ. People who were once poor and far away, and to make them incredibly rich and near.

It's a bit like one of our girls' favourite movies. On the next slide, I don't know if you've seen this movie, Annie. Yeah, I think some people remember Annie.

It's one of our girls' favourite movies. For those who don't know, it's about a little girl called, you guessed it, Annie. And she grows up in an orphanage, ruled by an unloving governess called Miss Hannigan.

And at one point, they sing a song called, It's a Hard Knock Life for Us, because they have to scrub the floors and clean the toilets and so on. By the way, now whenever we ask our girls to put their school bag away, they start singing, It's a Hard Knock Life.

They have no idea. But in the musical, Annie had it tough. Until, that is, she was adopted by a billionaire called Mr Warbucks. And then she's part of the family.

[5 : 44] She becomes part of the family and inherits all the blessings, all the riches, all the privileges that go with that. It's one of the classic rags to riches stories. Well, if you believe in Jesus, like our friends do who are being baptised tonight, then we have an even greater rags to riches story.

For you were once dead to God. Dead, but now alive. You once had nothing that mattered in eternity, but now have everything that matters.

We who were once spiritually and relationally poor have been now made spiritually and relationally rich, because we have every spiritual blessing in Christ.

And we are now nearer to God relationally than anyone ever was before. Do you realise how rich you are? Well, it's for this reason that Paul wants to pray for his readers, that they and we might have power to grasp how rich we are, that we might grasp how deep Christ's love is for us, so that we might live out our place in God's grand plan.

How? Well, by reflecting the character of the God who dwells in us. But before Paul prays this, he pauses. Do you see verse 3, chapter 3, verse 1?

[7 : 03] There's a dash at the end of the verse. Do you see it there? Paul doesn't finish his prayer. He breaks off to talk about God's plan being revealed. He doesn't pick up his prayer again until verse 14.

Have a look across the page at verse 14. Notice how it begins the same way for this reason. You see, verse 14 is where he resumes his prayer. But the question is then, why does he pause his prayer back in verse number 1?

Well, because he, the apostle of God's grand plan, is in prison. And that doesn't seem so grand, does it? What's more, he is in prison for the sake of you Gentiles, which perhaps made them feel bad or discouraged, as verse 13 suggests.

And so Paul pauses his prayer to explain why he is in prison for them and to encourage them not to stress about it. And so he firstly explains how God's mystery or plan was revealed to him.

Verse 2, he writes, Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, he says.

[8 : 11] You see, Paul wants to make sure that they know about the special responsibility, the job that God has given him. And that job was to administer God's grace.

In other words, God saved Paul and gave Paul the job of preaching God's grace to the Gentiles. That's what was unique about Paul. He more than any other was to administer riches of God's grace to them.

His job was to preach a message for them. And this message was once a mystery, but now God has revealed it. See verse 3? He says, That is, The mystery made known to me by revelation, as I've already written briefly.

In reading this, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations, as it now has been revealed by the Spirit to God, to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Now, I need to say that the word mystery just means secret, okay? But it's a secret that no one could discover unless someone revealed it to them. For example, one year I had a secret plan to celebrate our wedding anniversary with my wife, Michelle.

[9 : 25] No one knew what my plan was. It was a mystery. And Michelle thought we'd be doing nothing because that's my usual style. But this year I had a mystery, a secret plan, which not even Michelle knew about until I revealed it to her.

Now, you're all wondering what my secret plan for Michelle is, aren't you? Well, it was to take... No, I wasn't taking her to McDonald's, as some of you are thinking. I thought of that, sadly. It would be too obvious.

No, no, I bought her... I bought her a season pass to the ballet at the Sydney Opera House because she loves the ballet. Unfortunately, I made it to the first one because I fell asleep during it.

She had to take a friend for the rest. But the point is, that's what the word mystery means. It's a secret. And in this case, a secret plan that no one could guess unless God revealed it to them.

And in verse 3, we're told that God revealed his secret plan to Paul. Probably when Jesus confronted Paul on the road to Damascus and during Paul's time in Damascus with Ananias, if you remember that account.

[10 : 32] What's more, Paul has already written about this mystery or secret plan in his letter in chapters 1 and 2. So his readers will be able to understand that he does have insight. He knows what he's talking about.

He's already written about it. But what exactly is this mystery? What is this secret plan? Well, verse number 6, have a look in your Bibles, verse number 6. This mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promises in Christ Jesus.

You see the mystery? The mystery is that Gentiles are heirs together with God's original people. But didn't the Israelites always know that the Gentiles were part of God's plan? I mean, we had Genesis chapter 12 read out before, where through Abraham all nations would be blessed.

So how is this a secret plan? Well, the part that was secret was that through the blood of Jesus, the Gentiles would be on the same level as the Israelites. You see, never in a million years would the Jews have thought the Gentiles would have the same status they had.

That the Gentiles would be God's treasured people too. They thought they'd be on the peripheral, you know, maybe as servants, but never on the inside as part of the family.

[11 : 52] They never thought we'd be equally part of God's privileged people. But the secret is that through the gospel, we are equal with them, part of God's treasured family.

You see, when we come to Jesus, we come to each other. We are united together because of Jesus and given equal footing. Now, I want to try and experiment.

I have no idea how this is going to go, but I need someone to be Jesus. Drew Chan, you're the man.

That's why he pays to sit in the middle. I want you to stand on the pew and the wardens, just please excuse me. Stand on the pew. Okay.

Now, everyone's going to have to move. Drew is Jesus. I want everyone to stand up and take a few steps towards Jesus. You're going to Jesus. Everyone stand up. Go to Jesus.

[12 : 50] Go to Jesus. Start walking. You're a bit scared of Jesus, some of you.

Okay. Now, the pews are distorting this a little bit, but notice what happened to the edges of the church. They've emptied out and as you've come to Jesus, what's happened to each other?

Have you gotten further apart or closer together? Closer together. Yeah. You see, as we come to Christ, we actually come to each, you cannot come to Jesus without coming to each other.

It goes hand in hand. And notice, apart from Jesus, you're all on an equal footing. That's what Paul's talking about here. Come and sit down. Come and sit down. Well done. Well done. Well done. This is for our kinesthetic learners.

Now, you've got to realise that this, this is extraordinary. We need to realise that we were once pagan Gentiles, dogs in the Jews' eyes, excluded, separate, without hope, without God.

[14 : 13] We had no right to be part of God's family, but through Christ, we've been given all the rights of firstborn sons. We've come together with God's people and have inherited all their rights and privileges and blessings.

Do you see how many times the word together is used in verse 6? Three times in one verse. Do you think Paul was trying to emphasise something there? We are heirs together with Israel so that the faithful Israelites stood, whatever the faithful Israelites stood to inherit, we also inherit.

We are members together of one body, no longer separate, no longer on the outer, but full members of the family and we are sharers together of the promise in Christ, that is the promised Holy Spirit by whom we get to call God Father and by whom God dwells in us as his temple.

This is extraordinary. And it ought to astound us as it would have astounded the Jews. I remember baptising a child, it was one of my first times.

I didn't know the couple well because I was new to the church. When their extended family came before the service there was lots of laughter, lots of hugs and sort of thing, it seemed like a really nice family, close-knit Christian group.

[15 : 29] And after the baptism I kind of stepped back and let the family do their photo op kind of thing. But then they called for me to join them in the family photo. I was astounded.

They didn't really know me. I suppose I was the minister so out of obligation I guess. So I stood next to the dad you know, just a bit away from him not right in because I'm not really part of the family. You know what he did?

Arm out. Click. I was amazed. I had no right to be part of the family yet he pulled me in to take the photo as me part of the family.

That's what God has done for us. In Christ he has pulled us in and treats us as one of the family even though we have no right to be there. It really is extraordinary. But this is God's mystery. This is his secret plan that has now been revealed to Paul.

But it's also the astounding mystery that is to be proclaimed by Paul. So we're at point 2 verse 7. He says, Notice that Paul sees his job of proclaiming this mystery as a great privilege doesn't he?

[16 : 51] Twice he says his job is given to him by God's grace. And when he says in verse 8 that he's less than the least of God's people he's not being a drama queen.

He's not kind of trying to belittle himself so people feel sorry for him. He simply understands how extraordinary it is that God would choose him, the persecutor of the church to proclaim this mystery to the Gentiles that through Jesus they too can be included as God's special people.

And it is an incredible privilege because look at how he describes the message he preaches in verse 8. In verse 8 again he says, This grace was given to me to preach to the Gentiles what is it?

The boundless riches of Christ. It's not just the riches of Christ it's the boundless riches of Christ. You see, if we think we've understood how great it is to be Christian and it is then we've only scratched the surface.

He's saying you can spend your life exploring the greatness of these riches and you'll never find the edges. It's boundless. It's like being plunged into the depths of an ocean and no matter how far down you swim you never hit the bottom.

[18 : 03] So also with Christ's riches no matter how deeply we reflect on them we'll never reach the bottom of their greatness. It's kind of like that old cartoon Scrooge McDuck I think I've got a slide on the next slide.

Does anyone remember Scrooge McDuck his swimming pool of money and he dives in and enjoys his riches only here with Christ you can't hit the sides it just goes on and on.

There's always more to understand always more to appreciate and although the riches of Christ are so great so boundless that we cannot fully comprehend them in Christ we do fully have them and we will fully experience them in the life to come and this is also extraordinary.

But Paul's job was not just to preach to the Gentiles but he was also to preach to all people so verse 9 verse 9 he says and he was to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery which for ages past was kept hidden in God who created all things and what does Paul mean here well the word mystery refers to the Gentiles being brought together as part of God's family and the word administration refers to how that mystery is administered or accomplished in other words refers to Paul preaching the gospel that's what it's talking about because it is through the gospel that the Gentiles come into God's family together with the Jews it is through the gospel that Gentiles can share in the riches of Christ and it is this gospel that Paul is to make plain not just to Gentiles but to everyone why because that's God's grand plan to bring all people together in and under

Christ and that happens as the gospel of Jesus is preached and people trust in him and his death and resurrection for them but God's plan isn't just to unite us to Christ it's also to bring glory to himself so look at verse 10 he says his intent was that now through the church the manifold the many faceted if you like wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord in him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence he says you see God creates us the church to show his wisdom to the rulers and authorities and in so doing bring him glory but you also see the extraordinary place we have in God's plan here we are God's masterpiece if you like the rulers and authorities including Satan himself did not understand what God was doing when he sent

[21 : 03] Jesus otherwise Satan would not have tempted Judas to betray Jesus but now all can look at the church and see what God is doing they can look at the church that is us and see God's great wisdom as though God takes them through the gallery of his great works the mountains he created the seas the skies and so on and then he comes to the church and says ah this is my masterpiece my Michael Angelo my Mona Lisa my church for we as God's church display God's wisdom you see I realise that we don't look all that impressive as we look around the room though Mark's shorts are pretty impressive but when these spiritual beings look at us and see us loving one another when they see us serving Christ together even though we come from such diverse backgrounds

I don't know a word of Iranian Salom is that right yes learnt it three minutes ago or something yeah it's diverse backgrounds but when people look at us and see us from diverse backgrounds coming together serving each other in love serving Christ together freely approaching God of the universe in prayer and us all being able to call him father then they are amazed at what God has done they see God's wisdom in sending Jesus to accomplish all this you see they see an amazing work done by God and so God is glorified indeed this was his purpose from the start to bring all people united under Christ so that he might be glorified we only have to look at chapter 1 which we don't have time to do now to see that it repeats that phrase to the praise of his glory three times see God has done all this so that he might be glorified through us his church and rightly so for he is God and he's given us such great riches at such a great cost the blood of his son and this is why

Paul is not worried about being in prison because he understands God's grand plan to unite people together in Christ is worth it he understands God's grand plan that we might experience the boundless riches of Christ is worth being in prison for so he's more than happy to be there he says in verse 13 so I ask you therefore not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you which are for your glory see what he's saying don't stress if I'm in prison it's worth it after all it's for your good and glory as well as God's glory now Paul has spoken in grand terms of God's plan and our place in it as a united family who show forth God's wisdom and bring in glory and so he prays that God would give us power to live out who we are which is our final point in verse 14 he says picks up his prayer again he says for this reason I kneel before the father from whom every family in heaven and earth derives its name

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith and I pray that you being rooted and established in love may have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge so that you might be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God that's his prayer and it's three main parts the first is that out of God's great riches he would give them power or strengthen them by his spirit strengthen them how well verse 17 explains it is a power to strengthen or enable Christ to dwell in our hearts do you see that in verse 17 but hang on a second doesn't Christ already dwell in our hearts yes he does but the word dwell here implies not just an initial coming to sleep over your place kind of thing but making the whole house his home it's a prayer not just to dwell in us for the first time but to dwell in and through and transform us so that we might look more like him we live next door to the church

I shouldn't tell you that in case you do something but anyway we do and other ministers have lived there before us but we have made some changes to our home in fact my wife Michelle at the moment is getting together some family photos to put up around the place I was hoping for just one or two she has 15 she wants to put up as you can see we're still in negotiations now assuming Michelle gets her way which is likely this house next door that others have lived in will definitely be our house in other words it will be unmistakable that the prices live here well Paul prays for God's power that by the spirit he would transform our lives so that it would be unmistakable that Christ lives here that's what he's saying and the second part of the prayer is for power to know Christ's love more deeply see the rest of verse 17 he says and so that you might grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of

[26 : 28] Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge he says verse 17 tells us that they already know Christ's love they are already rooted and established in it and so this prayer is not to know Christ's love initially but to know it more deeply because this love is huge like the unsearchable boundless riches of Christ this love of Christ is unknowable it says now it might seem that trying to know something that is unknowable is pointless but it's not it simply reminds us that God is God I mean if we could fully comprehend God and Christ's love then God wouldn't be all that amazing would he he wouldn't be God in fact a person once said the God who is comprehended is an idol what's more it's not a pointless exercise because it helps us to live rightly for starters it would help the Jews understand how God could possibly include Gentiles in his plan as equal heirs with them for

Christ's love is big enough to do that but it also motivates us to grow more fully like Christ you see verse 19 again he wants us to understand these things of verse 19 so that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God you see the goal of Paul's prayer is that we might be filled with the fullness of God that we might reflect his character more fully that we might live out his likeness not not do you know make thunderstorms and calm storm that sort of thing but live out his character of love and purity and holiness and so for example on the next slide Paul will go on to say in chapter 5 therefore be imitators of God as beloved children and walk in love as Christ loved us you see we have to be filled with these things to reflect fully these characteristics of God because when we do we will bring God glory one of the things that causes fights among our kids is when the younger child wants to do everything the older child does you know copy the kid and the older one says stop copying me

I don't know if you've ever done that yourself no you've been the one that everyone else has copied that's right yeah but we try and explain to them that it's actually a great compliment to want to be like them and when we are like God and reflect his character then it gives him great praise and glory you see but we need help to do this don't we we sometimes find it hard to love others as God loves them we find it hard sometimes to be holy and pure in what we think in what we watch or how we speak or how we act this is why Paul prays that God might do the work in us so that we would live in light of our place in his plan that we might bring him glory by being like him and so Paul prays that God might strengthen us with power so that Christ might dwell in us more thoroughly that we might grasp Christ's love more deeply and in the end that we might reflect God's likeness more fully it's a big prayer but it's a big God who you praise it to you see the end of the passage verse 20 now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us to him be glory in the church and in Christ

Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever amen see God can change us because he's a big God he can help us to reflect his character more and more and so bring him glory I don't know what it is you pray for yourselves during the week but this would be a great prayer to pray pray it for yourselves pray it for your church pray it for these people being baptized tonight that God would work in them that Christ would dwell in them more thoroughly and that they might reflect God's character more fully and so bring him praise let's pray heavenly father we do thank you for your grand plan to unite people in Christ and that in doing so you bring us Gentiles who have no right to be part of your family into your family with extraordinary blessings and riches and father in light of this grand plan we pray that you would help us to reflect your character more fully and so bring you glory as you planned in the first place we ask these things in Jesus name amen

I think we're going to sing you gerne and you want to to see you