

God's Plan

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads for prayer. Father, you have kept us safe while we were apart from each other. Now you've gathered us together again in your presence to learn to praise you.

We ask as our good shepherd that you would make us lie down and restore us in the green pasture and that you would reveal to us that your loving kindness is better than life itself.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now if you would open your Bibles at Ephesians chapter 1, page 180.

And also if you take your bulletin, I've printed out the couple of verses in chapter 1, verses 7 to 10, from the New International Version. All modern versions are wonderful.

But the NIV is just a little bit better on this section. For those of you who came to coffee between the services, you will by now be on a sugar high.

[1 : 08] Mehran and Sherry brought baklava and I had one piece. That's all I could have. But because you've eaten more baklava, we are going to flip around the Bible and we are going to flip between the Bible and the bulletin so as to burn off the excess sugar.

Is that right? And if I'm going too long, Dan, just walk over and gently pull me down from the pulpit. Now we began Ephesians last week, this brilliant book, and we dove right in at the deep end, didn't we?

In chapter 1, 3, if you just look down at the verse, Paul begins with this prayer of praise. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with 43% of spiritual blessings in the heavenly places.

Doesn't say that, does it? Every spiritual blessing, which is very important for us, isn't it? If you've trusted Jesus Christ, God has given you every spiritual blessing, all of them, they're all in Jesus Christ.

So you see, you need to be aware of the person who comes to you and says, yes, you've become a Christian, that's fine, but you need this experience or you need what I'm giving you to receive more blessing.

[2 : 30] You know what we say to those people? We say, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing. Last week in verses 4 to 6, which was all we had time for, we looked at the deepest fundamental blessing, the blessing on which grace is anchored itself.

And that is that in eternity past, before the creation of the world, before you and I had a chance to do anything good or bad, God chose us so that we would be adopted as his children and come to share his family likeness.

And we looked at a couple of the favourite ways we have today of fudging this doctrine of election. And a number of you repented to me afterwards for fudging that doctrine. We shouldn't fudge it because even though we can't systematise it and can't really understand it, remember we looked at the fact that if we trust God in it, it's full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort and assurance because it simply means that salvation has nothing to do with what's in me, but what's in God. Now, why does the Apostle do this? Why does he lay this out, these deep blessings? And there's this anchor, number one last week, and we're going to look at the second one this week. One reason is in chapter 6, if you just turn over to chapter 6, verse 10, quickly.

Finally, just listen for the strength words. You're feeling weak? You're feeling like you need encouragement? I hope you do. Verse 10, Be strong in the Lord, the strength of his might.

[4 : 16] Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to. Stand against the wiles of the devil. We're not contending against flesh and blood, against principalities, powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Therefore, take the whole armour of God that you may be able to. Withstand in the evil day. And having done all, to stand. Verse 14, Stand therefore.

It's pretty clear, isn't it? Paul wants them to stand. He wants them to be strengthened to stand.

Why? It's because Ephesus, the place they lived, was a deeply occult, spiritual place.

It was a place of witchcraft, spells and magic. And before we go any further in Ephesians, we're going to have to do some detective work. So let's work off some sugar, turn back to Acts 19.

This requires both hands. Acts chapter 19. Church is a terrible place because you can't hold hands with your neighbour if you've got your Bible open.

[5 : 27] Acts chapter 19. Here is the Apostle Paul in Ephesus. He spent more time in Ephesus than he spent in any other place in his ministry. And what a ministry it was.

Look at chapter 19, verse 18. This is the result. Many also of those who are now believers came, this is Acts 19, 18, confessing and divulging their practices.

A number of those who practised magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all and they counted the value of them and found it came to countless thousands, literally, of silver.

So the word of the Lord grew and mightily prevailed. Now it took a lot of courage to openly identify yourself as a Christian in Ephesus as I think it does today, as I think it probably does in every culture.

The whole city was built around a culture of occult, a religious way of doing things. Most families would have had their own book of spells.

[6 : 35] They had their own family curses and blessings. And earlier on in the chapter we find a group of roaming Jewish exorcists who are plying their trade.

They hear about Jesus. They think they'll try this new name and they end up being beaten up by the guy they're trying to exorcise. And on the hill behind the city of Ephesus is one of the seven wonders of the world, the temple of the great goddess Diana Artemis of the Ephesians.

And the cult ran the city. The worship of Diana, well, it offered new religious experiences every time you went to church. It's what's called a mystery cult, a mystery religion, which means what goes on in the temple stays in the temple.

You don't talk about it. Usually, temple prostitution. In fact, if you had a daughter, every daughter in Ephesus, when she reached the age of puberty, had to go and serve in the temple for six months. And there was a massive industry in idols. The Ephesian board of trade agenda was dominated by Diana speakers and Diana events.

[7 : 49] Constant trade. And the spells and charms, of course, were very, very useful. If you want to get a job, you put a curse on your enemy. You want to fall in love, put a spell on the woman who you want to fall in love with.

And I discovered this week that there is a Canadian coven that has been formed to dedicate themselves to the worship of Diana.

And my research is only internet deep, so it's probably, it's suspicious, but they say on their website that they will not do any spell begging.

And what that means is that they will not, they won't publicly write and say any curses for you against your enemy. But they do have love potions and spells for seeking jobs.

They even have love potion number nine on their website. I promise you this is what I saw. You see, when you become a Christian in Ephesus, it puts you so far out of the mainstream of the culture, it means turning your back on the worship of Diana, renouncing all your magic practices.

[9 : 03] But don't you think that the Christians in Ephesus would have been smart to have done this quietly, you know, just given away or sold their charm books second hand? Would have made a good, made quite a lot of money out of that, but they don't.

They do something very public and very brave. They bring all their charms and amulets and spells and books and they throw them into a bonfire worth millions.

And it's a massive statement and it's saying these things that we are burning will not be a temptation to us and they are not going to bring any harm to anyone else and above all, we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, is greater than all these spells and charms and we are going to trust him.

We're not going to trust them anymore. It's an amazing statement and I think that's why in the book of Ephesians more than any other book in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul keeps referring to

the heavenly places, the heavenlies, the spiritual beings.

It is because these people need spiritual encouragement because they've come out of this slavery, they live in a city that's absolutely dedicated to that slavery and the Ephesian board of trade doesn't take happily to this newfound faith.

[10:18] Look down at 19, chapter 19, verse 23. I'll read a few verses here. About that time there arose no little stir concerning the way.

This is the Christian faith. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together with the workmen of like occupation.

He said, Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but almost throughout all Asia this Paul, this Paul, has persuaded and turned away a considerable company of people saying, here is the heresy, that gods made with hands are not gods.

You can hear the gasp. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may count for nothing, that she may even be deposed of her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.

Imagine. And when they heard this they were enraged and cried out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Great is Artemis. So the city was filled with confusion and they rushed together into the theatre dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who are Paul's companions in travel.

[11:37] And if you want to know how the story ends you'll have to read it later. Sorry about that. My point is this. Why does Paul begin Ephesians in this way?

He wants to assert the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ over everything. Over every power, over everything in heaven and on earth. Because he wants all believers to know that if we are in Jesus Christ we stand secure and that means we can be the body of Christ and fill the world and our city with Christ.

So let's turn back to chapter 1 verses 7 to 10 on the bulletin. You might turn back to Ephesians as well particularly if your sugar level is high as mine is still.

Well now last week we looked at the first blessing and do you remember it was God's purpose from eternity past and this week we come to the second great blessing and it is God's purpose for eternity in the future.

If the first blessing is election the second blessing is the majestic mystery and I want to ask two questions firstly what is the mystery and secondly what does it mean for us today?

[13:03] First what is this majestic mystery? Look down at verses 9 and 10 on your bulletin. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times have reached their fulfillment here it is to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head even Christ.

Now in my marriage there is a strong disagreement about how to read books. One of us and I'm not going to say which one believes that you should read the last page first thus entirely ruining the mystery.

Now in the Greco-Roman world there were mystery religions as I said secret keeping secrets. When the New Testament uses the word mystery it means something different. It means something that we could not we could not have known except God has revealed to us and now that he has revealed to us it is made known and should be made known to everyone.

The mystery of the gospel is not some spooky secret thing that you can't really understand. That's not the emphasis. It is it was God's purpose hidden for eternity past but has now been made known and there is essentially one mystery which is that in the person of Jesus Christ all that God is doing for the universe has come to fulfillment.

fulfillment. Jesus himself used the word once to describe the mystery of the kingdom of God and what he meant by that is that the rule of God has come in him and that you cannot grasp that without faith in him.

[15:01] Don't believe in Jesus Christ the gospel is not yours yet. And in Ephesus here when he speaks about the mystery of the gospel he's not saying it's a little message you know come to Jesus and you'll go to heaven.

It's got to do with the whole sweep of redemption from eternity past to eternity future. What was hidden in God has now been revealed at the centre of it is the person of Jesus Christ. He is the key to everything. He is the cornerstone of the universe. He is the one to whom we belong. He is the source of our life. He is the goal of our life. That's the mystery of the gospel. Or as Paul says it here that God will bring all things, things in heaven and things on earth under one head even Christ. It means the universe that we're in is not just drifting aimlessly into a nothingness but it is moving definitely towards the rule of Jesus Christ where God is bringing all things under his feet.

Things that are seen, things that are unseen, spiritual, physical, everything under the absolute supremacy of Christ whether they want it or not.

[16:10] every person, the people around you today, the people driving past today, the people you work with, the people you like, the people you don't like, all will be brought under the rule of Jesus Christ.

This is the way God has always intended it. It's why he created the world. It's why he set Adam and Eve in the garden. It's why he chose Abraham for himself. It's why he created a nation.

It's why he rescued the nation from slavery. It's why he promised Jesus Christ through the prophets because God's purpose since the beginning has been to bring everything under Jesus Christ and to give him a name which is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven, on earth, under the earth and every tongue confess him as Lord.

And in the resurrection you begin to see something of the power, the sheer power and purpose that this is what God is doing, bringing both physical, spiritual, everything under Jesus Christ.

Look at the end of chapter one. You're going to have to look at the Bible for this. In chapter one, verse 20, we come in halfway through a long and complicated sentence.

[17:28] verse 20, we will have to read the book. Oh, God has accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places again, far above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.

And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, we'll come to this in a few weeks, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Why did he raise him from the dead? It's not the end of something, it's the beginning of something. It's so that Jesus Christ, it's so that God will be a ruler over all things and God is going to bring all the fragmented pieces of his universe under Jesus Christ.

This is the highest overarching purpose for creation. But that is not the way the world sees it, is it? Last week's Maclean's magazine, the cover photo was a painting of Jesus and the question was does Jesus have an identity crisis?

This is the way, it's the right way to sell magazines at Easter time, isn't it? And of course, every view that's expressed in Maclean's, you have every view except God's. One of the founders of Greenpeace has written a new book called The Jesus Sayings, the quest for his authentic message.

[19:07] Yesterday I went to my porch and there was the Vancouver Courier that gave a three-page spread to this book. And what is the real message of Jesus? I quote, We have worshipped all the wrong things like some future in the sky.

We have failed to worship the one thing that can sustain us, the earth itself. We need to refocus our devotion on the living earth and that is what Jesus taught.

The real meaning Jesus has become lost. Jesus' real message was about self-awareness to find the light inside. Now you may know that's based on the Gospel of Thomas which is a specious document written about a hundred years after the New Testament was closed in Egypt and the Christians who were alive at the time regarded it as what it is, an inauthentic document.

But if you've been a Christian for any length of time you'll be familiar with this way of discrediting Jesus. What we do is we take the eyewitness accounts and we discount them and we find some specious or spurious document and then we build something of our view of Jesus and in the end Jesus emerges looking something like me.

He's not a Jesus who can heal you or save you. He's not the Jesus who's going to be head over anything. He's not the Jesus who can raise you from the dead. But he's a great teacher who happens to teach what we want to hear.

[20 : 36] One of the interesting things in this article was that there was some honesty from a woman named Greta Vosper. Vosper is the pastor of West Hill Church United Church in Toronto.

She's written a book called *With or Without God* which has a recommendation on the cover from Bishop John Shelby Spong. Vosper says and I appreciate her honesty that being a Christian for her means taking what is valuable from her faith tradition and removing everything that's toxic.

And her honesty is she's not just removing the miraculous, Jesus rose from the dead or the miracles. But she's going through Jesus teaching and saying well that thing offends me, that I don't like so she's removing that as well.

She says and I quote, when it all comes down to it, what Jesus said has little power. Why do we need a revolutionary voice from two millennia ago to guide us?

We have fabulous ideas of our own that are constantly weakened by having to tie them back to Jesus and scripture. I think that's honest. What does Paul say in verse 9?

[21 : 48] God has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ. Paul keeps insisting that God has made known to him, known to us, what he is going to do to bring everything under the feet of Jesus Christ.

And don't you find at Christmas and Easter, and don't you find among your friends as well, that the one thing they share in common in the media is that God has not made his will known about Jesus. And all we want to do is strip away what God is saying about Jesus and just end up with what we want. God has not done. And I think the honesty of someone like Vosper is that when you take his message without his kingly rule, in the end his message is baffling, contradictory and toxic.

Because you can't separate it from what he said from who he is. And the only way to invent a Jesus of your own is to say no to what God has revealed. And then we end up with a Jesus who won't challenge us or save us.

He won't unite anything, let alone in heaven. And he's certainly not worth living for or dying for. Now, why am I telling you all this? I tell you this because we don't live in Ephesus, we live in Vancouver.

[23 : 14] And the spiritual forces, the principalities and powers, no longer work through the temple of Diana, but they work through lies about Jesus, popular, easy lies, often by people who claim to represent Jesus.

But they do not accept the majestic mystery of the gospel, that one day God will bring all things under the feet of Jesus Christ himself.

So that is the mystery. And secondly, and very briefly, what does this mean for us now? What does it mean now? Let's turn back to the sheet, verses 7 and a little bit of 8.

What does this majestic mystery mean now? Well, in him, Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished upon us.

Now, were you expecting something greater than that? Are you a bit disappointed by that? You know, if the big plan is to bring everything under the feet of Jesus, surely what that means for us now is we'll have a bit more power or a bit more world beating something or other.

[24 : 25] But you see, the way the evil powers exercise their rule over us is that they enslave us to common, ordinary, garden variety sins.

And the word redemption, we met it in Exodus, is a slavery word. And what God is doing is he's releasing us and liberating us from what keeps us in slavery through the blood, the violent death of his son, which is sin.

How does Jesus exercise his headship over us? It's through his death and by forgiveness. It's because forgiveness is the essence of freedom.

If I'm forgiven for the sins that I've committed, they have no hold on me. I have no guilt. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And if you ask the question, what does that look like? I want to turn you to chapter 5 for just a moment. This is the last turn. I'm sorry, it's chapter 4.

[25 : 31] In the first service, we thought we were going to go into the marriage issue, but we were delivered. Chapter 4, verse 25. This is how the headship of Jesus.

This is how the great salvation and redemption works itself out. Listen to how practical this is. Verse 25. Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

[26 : 40] If God is bringing all things under the Lord Jesus Christ, it's going to affect how I act, how I speak, what I think, what my motivation is, and we've got to hold these two things together.

If you take chapter 5 by itself, without the great gospel, it just becomes moralism. But if God is placing all things under the feet of Jesus Christ, it's not that I beaver away quietly here in my corner while I wait for the great thing to happen out there.

It's as I tell the truth, it's as I forgive others, it's as I live a life before God, that God places all things under the feet of Jesus Christ.

He brings the future into our lives now. Because salvation isn't the escape of the soul from the world, it's about the whole of life.

It's bringing all that I know under the rule of Jesus Christ. It's turning me outwards to think about the rule of Jesus Christ in my life, in my family, in my work.

[27 : 47] If you've placed your faith in Jesus, if you're in Jesus Christ, you and I are caught up in something that is very, very big. It changes the way you and I think. I need to tell you, I don't actually work for you.

If the trustees could put their hands over their ears, I don't work for the trustees. In my best moments and in your best moments, we work for the Lord Jesus Christ. We know that he's forgiven us.

We know where the world is going and as we serve him, we bring what he is doing into our lives and into the lives of others. So tomorrow when you go back to work or go back to school or get in your car and drive 3,000 kilometres for your kids or whatever you are doing, you're serving Christ. You are representing the one whom God is placing as head over all things, whom God is bringing everything together under. And I think sometimes we need to take our noses off the deck to see where the ship is going.

When I stop myself from stealing, it's not so that I'll be an honest person, it's so that I'll be generous because Jesus Christ is Lord of all. God has revealed to us the mystery of the gospel so that we might have hope.

[29 : 05] We often from this pulpit talk about the perspective of eternity. I say it again, eternity doesn't start when this world ends. Eternity has been brought into the world through the resurrection and we live in that age now.

And why has God done this? It's purely because of the riches of his grace which he has lavished upon us. So let us bow before our great and glorious God.

Let's ask him to open our hearts to his loving kindness, to know it's better than life itself. To free us from those sins that bind us down, through which the powers continue to try and trip us up.

And put all our hope in his glory and all our hope in him so that we might live for him and fill the world with him under whom God is placing all things in heaven and earth.

Amen.