

The Church and It's Secret Life

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[0 : 00] Folks, we're in week three of a series called The Church That Jesus Builds, and so far we've talked about the church being at the very centre of God's plan for the world, because God has always been about gathering a people, a people that he can share his life with.

And last week we heard Paul and Philippians talk about being a unified church, a church that is unified and contending for the gospel, and that how self-interest, individualism can harm that goal, but if we bring that self-interest to the cross, beholding Christ, Christ who was infinitely rich, who became infinitely poor for us, if we bring our self-interest to the cross, beholding Christ's example, that would change our hearts.

Now this week, our passage in Colossians takes us deeper into that idea, because we don't get the full picture from last week, because it's not just thinking about Jesus that changes our hearts, it's the fact that we are actually united with Christ.

We are united with Christ, and that is a mysterious thing, but we're going to have a crack at it. So the sermons week is called The Church and Its Secret Life.

Okay, that is the preamble. Now there's a prologue. There's quite a bit to get before we get to the actual passage itself. All right, context, because we're jumping into the middle of a thing here, a book we haven't looked at before.

[1 : 27] All right, so Paul is writing to some churches in Colossae. These churches were started by a guy called Epaphras, who heard about Jesus from Paul, went back to his hometown, started some churches, great result.

Guy catches up with Paul later on and says, there's some dodgy teaching going on in my churches. And given where they lived and what we know about, reading into the letter here a bit, it's likely what happened is that some sort of like a shaman-y type kind of spiritual guru came into the church and sort of set himself up as a bit of a spiritual guide, claiming to have special spiritual insight, advising the local Christians to practice certain rites, adhere to taboos or whatever, and sort of saying, it would seem saying things like, you know, Jesus is great, but you need to do more stuff. And that was the heresy. So Paul is writing in response to that. We have four short verses. Four short verses. And in the book, they come at this, they're like a really meaty point of pivot in the book.

So I need to explain that pivot point a little bit here. So Paul, before our meaty bit right here, has just finished railing against the false teachers.

Oh, terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible. You're united with Christ. That's our piece. And then he goes on to encourage Christians to live godly lives. So terrible false teachers, our section, live godly lives.

[3 : 06] Now how does that all fit together? Well, let's have a quick look at some of the detail, some of the passages before our part.

All right, reading from chapter 2. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world.

Let no one disqualify you insisting on asceticism and the worship of angels, going on in detail about visions. So here we go. Someone in this church is inviting people into some freaky mystical life that will give you access to freaky stuff.

They probably said it better like that, a bit better than that. But it would have been, do this extra stuff, and you'll know God in an extra special way, perhaps.

And there is an attraction to this, because spirituality always appears more impressive when it's visible and practical.

[4 : 10] There is an attraction to that, of course. When our spirituality is on display. It's kind of, we're attracted to that, I think. Paul, anyway, he slams this idea, slams it.

Terrible, terrible, he says. Here's what he says. This is his kind of smackdown of this idea in verse 20. He says, So great stuff from Paul.

He's going, these new practices they're promoting in your church, they're taking your attention away from Christ, and they don't even help people live better. They don't even work.

And living a godly life is really important. And that takes us to the stuff immediately after what we're looking at. Some verses immediately after what we're looking at.

Verse 5. Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness. Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

[5 : 34] So our passage is squeezed between these two ideas. Don't listen to these guys over here promoting the actual rituals. They don't actually work. Our stuff, live godly lives.

How's it all kind of connected? Well, the connections is at least twofold. I'll give you two anyway. Firstly, guys in the church, members here, members there, are really wanting to be connected to the divine.

You know? And Paul is saying, you've already got it. You're already there. You're trying to do stuff. Put on the special hats and the whatever.

I don't know what they did. But you know, like doing... Paul's saying, you're already there. You are so connected to Jesus. You don't even know how connected to Jesus you are. Let me tell you how connected you are to Jesus.

Q verses 1 to 4. You died with him. You were raised with him. You will appear with him in glory. That's how our section relates to what is happening previously.

[6 : 40] How it relates going forward to the stuff coming after. This group obviously wanted to live godly lives. They were doing pretty, you know, pretty crazy stuff.

And it's, you know, it's good. You want to live godly lives. Great. And Paul is saying, look, spiritual growth and holiness is not going to come from you trying really hard to be good. It comes when Christ is at the center of all you do when you understand that you are actually united with Christ. And these are actually really important ideas. You could be thinking, oh, Kala Sai, so stupid. You know. If only they'd been in a good St. John's Bible study, they would have...

No, there is an attraction to this stuff I've already said. When things are tough for you, right? When you feel tough for you spiritually, when you feel distant from God, you're caught in a pattern of sinful behavior perhaps.

The temptation to be extra spiritual, to do stuff which is visible and tangible and practical. It's very tempting, isn't it?

[7 : 47] Because it feels like you're making progress. But Paul is saying, church! Church of Kala Sai! Focus yourself on what is hidden.

This very real, rock-solid unity you already have with Jesus. Did I say that? That felt a bit awkward as I said that.

When things are tough, let me say it like this. When things are tough, it's easy to get focused on what is practical and visible in our faith because it impresses our hearts, I think. And Paul is saying, you know the most precious thing you have is actually hidden.

It's unity with Christ. That's what this is about. That's what these four verses are about. So let's have a closer look at it. Okay, let me read it to you one more time. It's so short, I can read the whole thing.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

[8 : 48] For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Now what do you see immediately there?

These amazing lines, right? You have been raised with Christ. You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ. You will appear with him in glory when he returns. Do you hear the tenses there?

This is past, present, future. This is our past, present, and future experience as Christians. The death and resurrection of Christ. This is our past experience. The present, hidden life with Christ. I'll explain that more soon. The return of Jesus, future. Now in some sublime way, we are wrapped up on all of those things. United with Jesus in a way which is tough for our hearts and our heads to get around.

Now you might read this and look at it and go, yeah, absolutely. You know, I agree with this. This is great. I've been raised with Christ. I mean, metaphorically. I'm metaphorically here. Folks, it is so much more than a metaphor.

[9 : 57] In a very real way, we partake in the virtue and the power and the benefits of all of these events.

For example, the death and resurrection of Jesus in verses 1 and 3. Let's talk about those. It is saying, as Christ has died, we have died to a life of self-service.

As Christ rose, we rose to a new life of serving God. And this is what this is about. This is baptism. This is what we're kind of talking about when we do baptism.

And Paul talks about this, you know, not much before our verses here. Verse 12 of chapter 2.

Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead.

And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh. God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all of our trespasses by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

[11 : 05] This he set aside and nailing it to the cross. Wonderful, right? It's true. It's true. It's true. But it's mysterious. It's hard. And Paul doesn't try to explain it.

He just proclaims it. He says, this is the truth. And that's kind of as good as I can do tonight. I'm just going to proclaim what it's saying. We are united with Christ.

And it uses a very interesting word here. It says our life that is united with Christ. It says it's hidden. What does that mean? It's an unusual choice of words, right?

A hidden life with Christ. Christ, I think, from that word hidden, I think it means three things. Firstly, it means that it is a life that is not immediately visible.

If you ask the average person on the street about the church, tell us about the church, just the general kind of church, what do you reckon? Is it pretty good? You get a variety of answers, of course.

[12 : 13] But there would be a lot of people who would say, you know, it's kind of, it's dying. It's irrelevant. It's anti-intellectual. It's just a bit silly.

It's for weak people, perhaps. People who need something to prop them up emotionally, perhaps. That would be a very superficial and inaccurate assessment. Because the true life of the church is invisible.

What people don't see is the reality that we have a shared, we have shared in the life and death of Jesus, and we have this new life. It's difficult to measure and describe, but it's very real.

Ephesians 2 says it like this. It says, God raised us up with him and seated us. It's talking about a congregation. And seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ.

First, our present reality, hidden, is that we are with Christ in the heavenlies. Again, I can't explain that.

[13 : 17] I'm just going to proclaim what the Bible teaches about this. Secondly, what else does this idea of being hidden mean? Well, one scholar said this. He said, the world knows neither Christ nor Christians, and not even Christians themselves.

The hidden life is actually hidden from us sometimes, too, I think. Which is why I think we can feel distant from God and not connected to God sometimes.

And it's in those times, that hidden reality, you know, we can feel kind of terrible and like a poor Christian or a lame Christian. And those feelings are genuine feelings, you know, but they don't equate to the reality of the situation, which is that you are united with Christ.

And nothing can break that. I think the third implication of this word hidden is it means concealed, you know, but it also means secure and safe, stored up like it's in a vault.

The Greek word is crypto, K-R-Y-P-T-O, where we get the word crypt from. So it's saying that this hidden reality, this connection with Jesus, this unity with Jesus is unbreakable.

[14 : 33] It is as secure as Christ is alive. Do you ever doubt your salvation? Stop it. That is a lie.

That is a lie from the devil. And in Matthew 17, that was two weeks ago, that was our first sermon on the series of the church.

And there's a wonderful line. It says that Christ says, I'm going to build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. It's a similar idea here. You are so unified with Christ that not even death can separate you from that unity, that connection with Jesus.

Now most of what I've talked about so far has been about our present reality with Christ. What about our future reality? Because it talks about that as well. In verse 4, when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

When Christ appears in the future, we will also. Christians, the church, will be revealed for what it really is. The people of God. What is hidden will be revealed.

[15:39] So given these realities, the past, the present, future realities, the passage has two exhortations. It says, seek the things that are above where Christ is and set your minds on things that are above.

They're essentially saying the same thing. But basically what it's saying is that given that you're united with Christ, let's shape our lives around that reality. Orient your life around that invisible reality.

Which is not saying neglect your daily existence, your job, your family. It's saying you have a treasure that people can't see. And it's a treasure that will direct your behavior.

Let it direct your goals. Your basic aims in life. As an example, would it be helpful if I tell you how I met my wife? That'd be good.

Interesting, I'm looking out, all the guys are like completely indifferent. And the girls are like, yeah, that would be it. Yeah, yes please. Let me tell you how I met my wife. So, I'm back in New Zealand.

[16:46] My wife is American. She's from the south. She's not currently in the service, is she? Oh, sweet, okay. Alright.

So, I'm thinking about, this is an illustration for what I'm talking about here. This is not just like, look how I did very well. An example of how if you have an accent, you can marry somebody far prettier than you deserve.

So, I'm living back in New Zealand, I guess this is 2004. And I'm thinking about coming to Regent College. And a friend of mine attended Regent.

So, her name was Suze, Susan Hurst. So, she goes, come out of my house, I'll talk about Regent, I'll show you some photos. So, I'm looking through her photo album, and there's a picture of Amy in the photo album.

Turns out she roomed with Amy. And I said, ooh, she looks nice. What's her name? And Suze said to me, funny you should say that. She lives in Vancouver.

[17:46] She's still there. When you get to Vancouver, you should look her up. And I said, come on, mate. This was during the George W. Bush era.

And I thought, preemptive strike. And so, I said, give me her email address. Just give it to me, and I'll send her an email.

Like, I'm a year out from going to Regent. I'll just start warming the whole situation up. So, I sent her this email saying, hi, I'm Aaron. I'm a friend of Suze Hurst's. I'm thinking about coming to Regent. She said we have similar interests. Can you tell me about Regent? I can't remember what I said. She emailed me back. And we just started emailing each other. And we basically fell in love, like, through these letters.

And started talking to each other on the phone. So, before we'd met, we basically sort of fell in love with each other. And so, we had this long-distance thing going for, like, you know, like, I don't know, 10 months maybe.

[18:44] And I got here and stitched the whole thing up pretty quick. Great result. Great result. Now, here I'm arriving at a point. Before I got here, though, I was living in New Zealand.

But my heart and my mind were on the other side of the world. They were in Vancouver. And, of course, that was hidden to most people.

But I wasn't a useless Kiwi citizen. In fact, you know, my goal of getting to Canada made me live better in New Zealand. I was better with my money.

I was trying to save up. I wasn't trying to chat up every girl I met, you know. I had some direction in my life. I had a joy, you know. I had a joy that no one could take away from me.

And it was a treasure. It was a beautiful treasure. And it directed my heart. And this is what this passage is talking about when it says, Seek what is above.

[19:48] Let that treasure in your heart, which is this being unified with Christ, let it direct your life. Let it be your ambition. Let everything come under that.

In summary, The church is a gathering of God's people. Jesus is the founder. He is the guardian. And the truth is, you know, from the outside, the church can sometimes look unimpressive.

But be encouraged, people. Because it doesn't matter how lame the church looks or how out of touch people think we are. The world will never see the true life of the church, which is right now with Jesus in heaven.

And so we share in this wonderful life, a life together, hidden with Christ. And what a treasure that is. And let that treasure direct your hearts.

Let it direct your lives. Amen. Amen.