

The Unsearchable Riches of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as you turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 3, first half of Ephesians 3, Junsey read to us a moment ago, I want to say thank you for your warm congratulations on being here for 25 years.

I'm not sure I should get the congratulations or you deserve it more than I do. However, this is a very personal passage from the Apostle Paul, and I want to speak a little personally as well along the way.

Brahman and I came to Canada for two years, and I was appointed rector of St. John's, and we agreed to stay for seven to ten, and we had no idea what the Lord had in store for us.

And it's probably very wise of him not to have told us. But my strongest sense really is the enormous sense of privilege that it is to serve Christ among you.

And the Apostle Paul has this deep sense of privilege, and look at how personal he is at the first and last verse. Verse 1, Now I think you'll agree he's very cheerful for someone who's in prison.

[1 : 3 1] I mean, I think I would be tempted to say, Dear Ephesians, get me out of here. I'm only in here because of you guys.

You owe it to me. Do something. Get me out. But he does just the opposite. He's very concerned for them that they don't lose heart as they watch him suffer. Because it's very difficult for congregations to watch their ministers suffer.

Not so hard for congregations to make their ministers suffer. But hard to watch them suffer. And he doesn't even ask them to pray for him. He doesn't ask them for anything.

Because he says, I'm really a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Yes, the chains I'm wearing are courtesy of the Roman Empire, he says. But my real captivity is not external.

It's internal. It's the delight of the chains that bind me to Christ Jesus. And you can see in verse 1, he's about to launch into prayer. And he doesn't get to that prayer until verse 14.

[2 : 3 1] See, for this reason, for this, oh yeah, I was about to pray. For this reason, verse 14. It's like a preacher in full flight. And then he thinks, I've left out something very important. And he wants to explain why he is so strangely happy.

And it has to do with the importance of the church in the plan of God. And here is the apostle writing to the one church he spent more time with than any other.

And he is captivated by the fact that the church is not a temporary arrangement for a little while, then we all go to heaven. That the church is the eternal purpose of God. It's not just the agent of God working in the world.

It's actually the goal of God working in the world. The church is at the heart of God's purposes. And it's very important for us as we begin 2017.

We live increasingly small lives with increasingly small dreams. Dreams that can be satisfied with, you know, a bit of travel and entertainment.

[3 : 32] It's hard to imagine that God's got something very large for us in the ordinary. It's hard for us to imagine that God can say anything genuinely new to us through the gospel.

But the apostle says basically two things about the church in this first half of chapter 3. The first is the place of the church in the gospel. And the second is the place of the church in the cosmos.

So first, the place of the church in the gospel. And the apostle writes, without any exaggeration, and we ought to be thinking, do I think this way?

That the most important and wonderful thing in the world and central to the purposes of God is the church, the Christian church, every local church. Watch how Paul does it.

It's quite a dense passage. Four times in this passage, Paul refers to the gospel as the mystery of Christ. Verse 2, assuming you've heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery has been made known to me by revelation as I've written briefly, and how grateful we are that he wrote briefly so that we have this revelation.

[4 : 51] Verse 4, when you read this, you'll perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, not made known to the sons of man and other generations. Now we use this word all the time, don't we? We have mystery theater and mystery novels and murder mysteries.

And they're a puzzle that you have to figure out. And if you're watching it on television, you have to figure it out in 48 minutes, or else you'll miss out on it. When the apostle uses the word mystery, he uses it in a different way.

The mystery of Christ simply means something that human beings could never figure out on their own. It's something that needed the revelation of God.

With all our insight, with all our cleverness, and with all our wisdom, God has finally made it known in Jesus Christ to the holy apostles and prophets, not for some select group of Christians, but for every living person.

And here's the thing. What is the mystery of Christ? Verse 6, it is the church. Verse 6, this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.

[6 : 07] Now, you might have been hoping for something with a bit more fizz. What was the mystery of Christ? You know, you might have hoped for something, perhaps it might not seem such a great miracle to you, particularly if you were from a non-Jewish background.

But the apostle is talking about the fact that God has begun the creation of a new humanity inside the old humanity.

Not just combining people of different races and ethnicities and languages, not just overcoming centuries of war and hostility, but God has done in the person of Jesus, specifically in the body of Jesus Christ, what the United Nations will never, ever be able to do.

It's created one new humanity, one new creation, and Paul says, this is the gospel. This is the mystery of Christ.

It is the church. It's amazing, isn't it? And the emphasis in verse 6 are three little words, all with a very strong prefix, together with, together with, together with heirs, together with body, one word, together with partakers.

[7 : 24] And the most striking, I think, is the middle one. It's literally in the Greek, *sosoma*. It's a together with body, because since Christ Jesus has died, there is now a living, organic reality in the world, which is a new creation with a new humanity.

It has begun. So, you see, God had two stages of dealing with humanity, before and after Christ. Before Christ, God chose one man, and made a family out of him, and then a nation out of him, and then redeemed that nation, and he gave to that family, and to that nation, all his promises, and all his, the law.

And when a child is born in Israel, that child bore very heavy promises, of hopes of salvation, of Messiah coming. That's why there are so many genealogies, in the Old Testament.

You ever notice that? Try reading 1 Chronicles. The first 10 chapters, all genealogies, very interesting genealogies. But in the New Testament, after Christ, we don't get any genealogies.

Because in those days, the way you joined the people of God, was becoming an Israelite, taking on the law, taking on the observances. But all that has changed, because of Jesus Christ. Now, every single person, Jew, non-Jew, we all come to God, by being members, of the body of Christ, the church of God.

[8 : 50] Look back at chapter 2. He's been sort of, he's been rejoicing in this, for a few verses. So in verse 14, of chapter 2, just above there, he says, Jesus himself is our peace, made us both one, broke down the dividing wall, of hostilities, in his flesh, by abolishing the law of commandments, expressed in the ordinances, that he might, here we go, he might, create in himself, one new man, one new humanity, in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us, both to God, how?

In one body, through the cross. So this is how God does it. When we place our faith, in Jesus Christ, God, by a sovereign, divine act of creation, places us, into, the body of Jesus Christ.

In the body of Christ, we have, a union with him, and communion with the Father, and unity and fellowship, with one another.

Listen to Martin Luther. So this year, I mean it might have been 20 years, 25 years for us, with me as rector, but it's 500 years this year, since the reformation. So we're going to get lots and lots of quotes, from Luther.

I know some of you are going to love that. Others of you want to know, who Luther is. This is how Luther says it. By faith, you are so cemented to Christ, that he and you are as one person, which cannot be separated, but remain attached to him forever, and declares, I am Christ.

[10 : 35] I am Christ. Isn't that great? And here's the point. What is true for us as individuals, is true for us as a church. Paul is just amazed, that the church is part of the gospel.

And in verse 7, that God had given him this ministry, to proclaim this gospel. And God gives to every member of his body, a ministry.

For Paul, it was the proclamation, and unveiling of the gospel. And here's the thing, one of the things I've learned over 25 years, that the deeper one's sense of God's grace and privilege, at the same time, the deeper one's sense of personal unworthiness.

Look at verse 8. To me, he says, though I am the very least, in the Greek it's leister, of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Those two realities in one verse, the unsearchable riches of Christ. And I am the least, of all Christians. And you may think, he's just, that's a bit of false humility, it's a sort of a poetic license.

[11 : 52] It's not. Don't you find one of the marks, of true Christian character, someone who's really actively serving God, is this contradictory sense, at the one time, of the great glory, of belonging to Jesus Christ, and my personal unworthiness.

And when you put them together, what it means is, that the growing sense, of my personal unworthiness, is absolutely irrelevant. I tell you, after 25 years as your pastor, we just have to get used to the fact, you're not worthy.

You're not, I'm not. And I can't tell you, how deeply I feel this, and how increasingly irrelevant, I think it is. You know, we can't, I can't make any spiritual change, and you, you, you, you and I can't, open eyes, or give sight to the blind.

We can't give to each other, a sense of the reality, of the face of God. And yet, we have this astonishing privilege, and I, can't tell you, what a privilege it is, to open the gospel, open the word of God, and to see people come to faith in Christ, to see eyes open, to see people suffer, with, with their eyes on Jesus Christ.

And finally, have that joyful business, of accompanying people, into the presence of God, at the end of their lives, knowing, that they continue in the body of Christ.

[13 : 18] This is why the church, the place of the church, is part of the gospel. But secondly, there's more. Secondly, the place of the church, in the cosmos.

Now, most Christians, go to churches, where the gatherings, are repetitive, and a little boring. Where the leaders, are dysfunctional.

I'm talking about other churches, okay? And where the music, is dreadful. There's a guy, called John Kessler, who came to faith, late in life, and he's written a book, and he says this, most of the Christians, I know, are disappointed, with their church, finding it to be, either too traditional, or too modern.

The sermon, is either too theological, or not theological enough. The people, are either too cold, or too cliquish. In the end, the root problem, is always the same, it's the people.

Well, how does God look at this? Look at verse 10. What is the plan, of the mystery of God, hidden for ages? Verse 10, so that, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God, might now be made known, to the rulers, and authorities, in the heavenly places.

[14 : 35] So God's, deliberate intention, in creating local congregations, is that in the ordinary, angular, community life, of the congregation, he displays, his astonishing wisdom, to the spiritual powers.

His wisdom, manifold, doesn't quite catch it, it's many colored, it's kaleidoscopic, which doesn't just mean, there are people, from every nation, even though that is true, it means that, the body of Jesus Christ, in every place, is made up of people, who are living, by the wisdom of God.

The multicolored wisdom of God, is living by the wisdom, of the cross. That's what God displays. It's the contrary wisdom, of the cross, where the son of God, gives his life, to death, so that we might have life.

Where God loves the unlovable. Where God takes those, who are unrighteous sinners, and makes us righteous, by making his righteous son, sinful. And that forms, in the Christian life, as the way of the cross.

Where his power, is made perfect in weakness, and the glory of God, is seen in our shame. Church looks very unimpressive, and insignificant, in some ways.

[15 : 58] But Paul would say, well it depends on your audience. And here he says, the audience, are the rulers, and authorities, in the heavenly places. It's not the political, or social structures, in society.

It's spiritual beings, both demons, and angels. And they look at the church, and they are astonished. And they look at St John's, and they are amazed.

To Paul's saying, the demons, hate the church of Jesus Christ. They don't care, about dead churches. They work very hard, to divide, and to deceive, and to distract, and even to destroy, living churches.

And they look at the church, and any time, one Christian, in the body of Jesus Christ, does something, sacrificial, for no other reason, except because, it's for Jesus Christ.

They shake their heads, in frustration, and they learn more, of the wisdom of God. Anytime we share the gospel, anytime we pray, for each other, anytime we, put Jesus Christ, before our own needs, or invest ourselves, in relationships, in the church, it defies, it defies the demons.

[17:10] And they see, the multicolored wisdom, they don't like it. They see the multicolored, wisdom of God. And the angels, look at the church, and they see, and they know, that the church, is simply the most wonderful thing, in all the world.

It is the supreme, demonstration, of the wisdom of God. And you might be sitting there, thinking, no, no, Jesus Christ, is the supreme, demonstration, of the wisdom of God. That's not what Paul says here.

Think about the angels, for a moment. These are beings, they know God is wise. You know, they've been in his presence, ever since they were made. But they look at the church, and they learn, and they are educated, in the wisdom of God, because they've never, experienced salvation.

Later on in the Bible, in 1 Peter, the old apostle says, that the angels, long to look into salvation. And the word there is, that they stoop down, because they, they desire to see into salvation.

They just, they can't understand, how God would entrust, his reputation, to such an unreliable bunch. They can't understand, why God would rescue us, when we were so dead, in our sin.

[18:27] They can't understand, why we can continue, and grow, against all the conventional, wisdom around us. Against all the pressures, and cares of this world. Where every voice says, you know, put all your eggs, in this basket, live for yourself.

And they stand back, and they say, they see the wisdom of God, on display. When I was at high school, in physics, and we studied light, the school had 30, little glass prisms.

They are about, they're a shape of, a pyramid. I don't know whether this happened, in the Canadian, high school system. Yes it did. Thank you. I had a long explanation, about this.

Okay. Well they used to disappear, of course. We liked them, so we'd take them home. I never did. I wanted to, I just wasn't brave enough. And the idea is, you hold it up to white light, a white light goes in, and then out the other side, it's the full spectrum, of colour that you can see.

What the angels see, in the presence of God, is the white light, of God's wisdom, as one commentator says, it's pure, and bright, and clear. And when the wisdom of God, hits the church, the angels see, the wisdom of God, in its full spectrum, of colours.

[19:36] You can't understand history, apart from the Christian church. History is the place, where God is making, a new humanity, creating his church, by the preaching of the gospel, and demonstrating his wisdom.

God is working all things, for the sake of his church. Which is the same thing, as saying he's working all things, for his body. So you see, I know some of you are historians, history is not ultimately, the great class struggle, for means of production.

It's not the history, of great characters, or great ideas, or some sort of zeitgeist, struggling to evolve itself, and exercise its force, on all of us.

These are important. But ultimately, is the story of God, creating a new humanity, through the church. The plan, of the mystery of God, which is centred on Jesus Christ.

And we testify, to this wisdom, brothers and sisters, by our very existence, as a Christian church, as do other Christian churches. And every time, the gospel is preached, and believed, we testify, to the wisdom of God.

[20 : 44] Every time, we receive the sacraments, faithfully. Every cross-like act, every act of thanksgiving, every act of worship, every prayer, extends the victory of God, to the great devastation, of the evil forces, and to the praise, of God among the angels.

That's why it's just so important, for us to give ourselves, to the life, of the local church. Even when we feel grumpy, or even when we feel like, we have nothing to give.

In fact, I would say, attending church, when you don't feel like it, displays the wisdom of God, more brightly, than when you do. And that's why the marks, of the church, are the gathering, of God's people, around the preaching, of the pure word of God, and the sacraments.

And that's why the test, the test of a faithful minister, is not the number of people, who follow, or the grand success, or, it's the ongoing preaching, of the gospel, or as the apostle Paul says, the preaching, of the unsearchable, riches of Christ.

That's the great privilege. It's preaching, the unsearchable, riches of Christ. Every true preacher, knows that privilege. They know that, everyone who hears, and believes the gospel, and who places their trust, in Jesus Christ, are never made poorer, but infinitely, and immeasurably, and eternally richer.

[22 : 16] Not in terms of money maybe, but in terms of what really counts, life and love, and fellowship with God. That's our task. The task of the minister, the task for us as a congregation, is constantly proclaiming, all the blessings of God, are in Christ.

That in Christ Jesus, we have access to the Father, forgiveness of sins, we have the deposit, of the Holy Spirit, a foretaste of what is to come. I'm not pretending, that the church is perfect.

We have lots of issues. But I think, the challenge for us is, do our actions demonstrate, that we take the same view, as the church, as God does?

Do we see the church, as central to the gospel, and as crucial to the cosmos? You can't, you can't have the mind of Christ, and take the church lightly. You can't treat the church, as a kind of a, an optional resource, for your individualistic, Christian faith.

The church should occupy, a central place in your heart. I wonder if you see the church, as God does. And I asked the staff this week, what would that look like?

[23 : 27] And they gave me two illustrations. They said, when you move house, and some of us are forced to, because of economic circumstances, or job, the church that you go to, ought not to be an afterthought.

It ought to be among the first things, that you care about. It's far more important, than the school your children go to. It's far more important, than the location of the house, that you buy. Do you see it that way?

Or when you plan your calendar. Do the things to do, with the Christian community, are they there, somewhere in the first priorities, you know, with holidays and family, or not?

I mean, I think it's very possible, for us at St John's, to be comfortable, and then become isolated, from each other, to come and go, and not really deal with things. It is possible, to go through the motions, and not really engage.

And it's hard, I think, if you've been hurt. It's hard not to become bitter. I think some of us feel like, we want to be asked, to do something, and we need permission.

[24 : 34] This officially, is permission. You don't need to be asked, to do anything. But I think, if this is right, if the church is really central, to God's plans, it's impossible, to sit on your hands.

And I think, that sense of belonging, will come increasingly, as you see, that you really are, part of the body of Christ. Christ. And I want to finish, by saying, it is such a privilege, to be a minister, of the gospel, amongst you, here at St. John's.

St. John's is not my church, it doesn't belong to me, it doesn't belong to you, it belongs to Christ. You've been very kind, to us, and very kind to me, particularly.

I mean, I, you're a congregation, that love the word of God. You love each other. I mean, we've got problems. Lots of problems.

You're a generous congregation, you demonstrate the fruit, of the spirit increasingly. You've shown great courage, and faithfulness, in a very difficult crisis, with the diocese, making a costly decision, for the gospel, above our comfort.

[25 : 44] But I want to publicly, say thank you, to you, and thank you to God, for his kindness, to me. But you know what, even if, you were, ungracious, and ungenerous, and unkind, and stingy, and difficult, the great privilege, remains.

Because the privilege, is not so much, of serving you, but of preaching, the unsearchable riches of Christ. Christ. So let's pray.

Let's bow our heads, and pray. And Mel's going to come, and lead us in just a moment. But before he does, I want to pray, the prayer that Paul prays next, for our congregation. So let's bow our heads, or kneel, for prayer.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.