

Ephesians 3:1-13

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[0 : 00] Well this morning we're actually in, we're continuing our series in Ephesians.! So we're in Ephesians chapter 3.!

To speak to us and to speak to your people and we thank you that it is, there is an immeasurable amount and abundance of you speaking here. And so we pray for our hearts now as we look at this passage for us as a body but for us as individuals too that you'd encourage us and teach us what it means to live for your glory. We ask for this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

So this is God's word. For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles, surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you.

That is, the mystery made known to me by revelation as I have already written briefly. In reading this then, you'll be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold 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.

I ask you therefore not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. Amen.

[2 : 49] Now, one subject that I've never been particularly good at is art. I think my drawings are still, even still, mainly stick people, which to the kind of, which my children find hilarious that they can draw better than me. It's the only lesson that I got kicked out of at school.

I think that's because I like to make a mess, and we had a tidy art teacher. To my defence, I think that's where she got it wrong, because I thought art is kind of a messy subject, isn't it? You make the mess, so in order to make something good. If you look at any artist's studio, it is not a tidy place. It's far from tidy. There's normally paint everywhere. The artist's clothes are covered in paint, and there are half-finished canvases littered around the room. And as you know, artists take years and months and years to finish their artwork. Maybe it can stay in the studio for months and maybe even years until it's finished. That's different, isn't it, to an art gallery.

Maybe my art teacher wanted it to be like an art gallery, because you contrast an artist's studio with an art gallery, and what do you see? You see finished artwork displaying the glory of the artist. It's a far cry from the studio. Every piece in an exhibition is, you know, they've spent time setting in its exact place, the right framing, the right lighting, the placement, to accentuate what the artist wants to communicate. The living God is a creator, he's an artist. And we've said he created the world, but there's something that he wants to display on a special canvas. The canvas of the church.

[4 : 53] Secretly, I think that we would prefer that the church looked like the kind of gallery artwork. Impressive, everything perfect, hung with the right lighting. We don't want church to be a messy work in progress and studio-like, but a finished masterpiece, hung in a gallery that people pay to admire. I think the reason we think like that is because it's actually to do with kind of how we're taught in the world to just what we value, you know, rather than kind of what the living God values.

And I think naturally, you know, we prefer things that are finished, that are, you know, beautiful. And when the church looks kind of messy sometimes and half finished, we fear that perhaps reflects on us.

But I think when this, what we see in this passage is actually a bit of a game changer for, was for me this week with how we view the church. I think it's the reality that flips everything around that God's beauty, that God's glorious wisdom on display, it can't be reduced down to, it can't be reduced to a particular thing, it can't be reduced to a particular angle, it can't be reduced to a metric or a stat. But actually, his wisdom is displayed on multiple levels.

And it's wisdom in who God chooses to be part of the church. It's wisdom how he builds, not through something, not through perfection, but through weakness. And it's wisdom that why he does it this way. When people pay to stare at what the, what's the most famous painting in the world, the Mona Lisa, they just get a glance, don't they? They don't see the hours that went in to painting that famous artwork. And what do they look at it at? 20 minutes? I mean, I think that's a long time, but 20 minutes? The church is a masterpiece that shines with God's wisdom, but from whatever angle you look at it. And the glory is in how it comes about. It's the, and when we see it that way, when we see the wisdom of God displayed in this way through God's people, we get a new understanding, a new knowing, and a new comprehending of what wisdom actually is and how it's displayed. That wisdom is seen in the unseen, messy work that God is doing through his people. Before we get there, that's where we're headed. Before we get there, we're going to start to think about, just a little bit deeper on why we think, well, why we think sometimes the church doesn't look wise, why it looks messy. There is nothing messier and more unwise looking than what Paul writes in verse 1. Look with me. For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, for the sake of you Gentiles. I mean, you imagine not only hearing that, it would have been well known.

[8 : 22] Imagine getting the news back as the church in that day that one of the leaders of the church, you know, he's the one being given to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, that he's in prison for being a Christian. It's a bombshell. Imagine everything here that God is doing, you know, that everything that God has done. As we've been going through Ephesians, Paul has written about everything that God does in his people, in the church. He's saving them, taking them from death to life, giving them grace through faith as a gift. And when we read all that God is doing, taking Jews and Gentiles and fusing them together to be one, you get to the, you think, oh, this is, it's going somewhere. You expect by, it's just going to keep building. By chapter 3, you kind of expect a little more triumphant success. But no, Paul is in the dirt. He's in prison.

Isn't that kind of sometimes what we expect from church? Maybe from our lives, we think that if God is truly at work, shouldn't it look a little bit more like winning?

The temptation from the Ephesian church, what would it be? I think it'd be to ditch Paul. Just see Paul in prison. Let's just ditch him. And let's blame him for where the church is at and for their current lives. It would be to lose heart in what this is all, what this Christian faith is all about. If he's in, and to think, you know, you can imagine what they're thinking. If he's in prison, what does that mean for us?

There's suffering and it's causing chaos. You know, that's actually the real problem here. When they see Paul in prison, the real problem is that there's a reality check that suffering and chaos, it would cause God's people to lose heart.

It would cause them to lose heart that God's wisdom, or you might say God's way of doing things, is not actually wise at all. Because it's not the world's wisdom.

[10 : 38] We want the church to look sorted, to look impressive. That includes its leaders. And when they don't, or the church itself doesn't, we'd be tempted to take matters as they would have been into their own hands. God's wisdom doesn't seem very wise at all. We better sort this out ourselves.

Perhaps they might get jealous. Perhaps, you know, sometimes we might. Wouldn't that be what would be pressing on the Ephesian church? We should, like I said, we should, we need to be more like that famous temple, the pagan one in the middle of Ephesus, the temple of Artemis. Let's see what they do well, and you know, how they're drawing everyone in, and we'll just kind of assimilate. We'll show everyone that we're, we're not so different. Try to fix things. Let's try and make it look more attractive to the culture so we don't look like losers.

When we lose hope in the way God works, we start believing the lie of the world. This is the lie of the world. This is the lie of the world. And you know, we all know this, that that the ends justify the

means. If the, this is, if the end goal is good, then any way of getting there is justified. If we acted like that, even as a church, if we acted like that, it would be contrary to the gospel. If the end justified the means, this is where the Ephesians would cut Paul off, isn't it? We'd say, you know, this is not doing any good for us getting towards where we want to be.

We should, we have, Paul, we have nothing to do with him, he's just a liability. He's always in prison, getting us into trouble. Nobody likes us because of this guy. Let's just cut him on. It'd be better for the church if we just distance ourselves from him. The honest question for our own hearts today, as we sit here as a small church plant, what would we think our end goal is as a church? Is it a hundred people on a Sunday? I don't know, maybe you've got, what do you think our goal is? Now we'll answer that differently. Whatever we believe the goal is, we'll normally respond in two ways.

[13:17] If we drift from what the word says. Either we'll place our hope in the world's ideas, and adapt and just do what, you know, in order to draw people in, or the alternatives that will blame the world. It's their fault. Let me see what that might look like. We might not cut off Paul today, but we could do exactly the same thing if we were to place our hope not in the God of the gospel, but in the world's alternative methods and ideas. Now it's good to draw ideas from the world and, you know, have context of what things look like. But if we were to start making changes, you know, oh no, I think what we need to do is, you know, this whole idea of recorded music. Like, we just, we just need to fix that because that's, that's the reason that we're not growing.

Or, you know, there's that amazing church down the road that are drawing in hundreds. We need to be more like that church. Now don't make me wrong, there's might be things that are helpful, but if we put our hope in those things to save us from, to save us or to grow, to reach the goal, if the ends justify the means, we will be disappointed when it doesn't, when the thing doesn't work.

The opposite is that you just lose hope and give up entirely. And when that normally leads to is blaming the people that you serve, the community. We need to get back to how things used to be 50 years ago when the pews were full. You know, people just used to come in back then. It's the culture's fault. They just don't want to know. Both of these reactions, either not changing, changing at all, or just trying to do everything like the world. They actually come from the same root. It's the pain of not reaching your goal causes you to lose heart and doubt God's wisdom.

What's the solution then? What's the principle? Well, we have a problem. And what's really striking about this is that we also have, as well as the problem within that, Paul describes this unique mystery. You'd expect they might be panicking, feeling the fragility of the future of their church, given the position of the leader. But look at Paul, he's exactly the opposite. He's sitting in a prison cell, but he's not panicking at all. Because he's got something magnificent to share with them. So it's really the whole point of what Paul is conveying. The church in all its mess, because of its mess, is God's mystery revealed and his wisdom displayed. Look with me.

[16:09] Verse 4. In reading this, then you'll be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it's now been revealed, by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and shares together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

You can see how this gets messy. Last week we looked at that particular mess, the exact mystery, how God takes distinct stones, Jews and Gentiles, normally sworn enemies, kept separate and builds one new humanity. It's beautiful, but taking people with differences is a recipe for a conflict. But God brings them together. Now when we read this here, Paul isn't just repeating himself, he's pulling the camera back to show the cosmic reason why God is using such a messy, weak-looking method to build his church. Go down to verse 10, we get the why.

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. This is the real mystery. Not only does God bring people together who would never normally be in the same room, but that is just one facet of God's people that he puts his wisdom on display. It is a manifold. That word manifold is like multifaceted. It is wisdom from every angle. It is a staggering reality that we might be tempted to impress people with what the world values. We might want to be like that church down the road. But the living God says our mixture of people, who we are and how he's brought us together, is exactly the display of his glorious wisdom that tells the cosmos, that tells the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, the angels, the demons and everything else in between, even the evil one himself, what

true wisdom, godly wisdom looks like. God's wisdom is displayed in who he calls, it's displayed in how he brings them together and it's displayed in what he does through them and how he works through weakness.

[18 : 38] It is the manifold, the multifaceted wisdom on display. We've seen what God does and why he does it. We have to look at the how. And I think the how comes that he doesn't use impressive people, but weak, broken ones. Look with me in verse 8.

This is Paul writing to them. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, less than the least, this grace was given to me to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.

The building of this cosmic display of God's wisdom, his people, the church, is indeed a mystery with what he does, why he does and how he does it. But the mystery reels something and points to something.

Nothing in the world could do this. Only the living God could go about it this way. Normally, a man in chains would lead to a movement dying.

But here, it leads to the church growing. Why? Because ultimately, Paul's life mirrors that of his saviour.

[20 : 02] To paraphrase famous Christian Francis Schaeffer, he said this, he used this phrase, he said, we can't do Jesus' work in non-Jesus ways.

We can't do Jesus' work in non-Jesus ways. What does he mean? Well, what we see is, Paul does the Lord's work, but what happens is, Jesus' suffering comes upon him.

Paul does the Lord's work in the Lord's ways. Now, I just want to stop and be clear. Paul's suffering is almost like an example to be followed.

He suffers because of the message he needs to deliver. We need to be careful. Jesus' suffering is different to that. It is more than just an example. That's not the point here.

Paul doesn't suffer to save us. Paul suffers as a minister of the gospel to deliver it. To deliver the message of the cross to a dying world, and that's the reason he's put in prison.

[21 : 03] Jesus suffers not as a minister, but as our substitute. He suffers to deliver us from sin. He takes the penalty of our sin, and sin included our temptations, and sometimes our sins, of wanting to look like that gallery church instead of him.

That is the heart of it. That when we look to the wisdom of the world, when we're tempted to do that, when we want to build our own brand of church so we can take the glory, Jesus comes to pay for that.

He becomes nothing so that he can lift us up. The cross, the cross is the ultimate proof that the ends don't justify the means.

Because God saves the world not in spite of the mess, but because of it. He saves through the mess, the weakness, and the ugliness of crucifixion that lets face it is repulsive.

Let's remind ourselves the symbol of our faith is a method of execution. And so Jesus' life is, the end of his life is ugly, but it's not just a tragic waste.

[22 : 21] It's the very moment that actually saves us, and the foundation, the rock, upon which the church is built. What we see in Paul is therefore what we expect to see in the church and his people looking weak, looking like, looking sometimes like a damage to the brand.

Suffering, because that is the way of the cross. The reason we're really tempted to lose hope is because instead of using the cross to measure, we use the world's measuring stick to measure things.

Weakness and suffering doesn't look like the means that we need to get to the end goal. But Jesus says different. Gospel hope looks at Jesus, looks at his ways, and sees a secure future.

It's because his heart stopped beating. And then because he's raised to new life, that the church has a glorious future. And the whole creation stands in awe. This, us, here, sat today, we are a display of God's wisdom.

We are wisdom. God's wisdom in its purest form. And so how do we respond to this? How do we respond to the cross?

[23 : 37] Well, the response is don't lose heart. this frees us to not lose hope. To not lose hope when either we suffer as Christians or when we see others suffer.

And some Christians in other parts of the world, tremendous suffering. But when we see that, the temptation is to think that it, how can God use that?

But actually, that is the means by which Jesus is building his church. I'm not saying that doesn't mean it's hard. And I'm not saying you should go searching for it.

But it's an encouragement to keep going. Verse 12. In him and through faith in him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

we're not the church that you'd hang in a gallery. We're better than that. We're God's messy art studio. And I wonder how that might transform how we approach church.

[24 : 46] Here's just a few suggestions. There's probably more that you could say. Maybe the next time that church attendance is lower than we think, don't despair.

Maybe the next time we run Christianity Explored, you don't need to think that we have to make it flashy and like the world to draw people in. But we don't lose hope and give up.

If you have a conversation with your neighbour about why you're a Christian, it doesn't go how you expect. If you invite them and they don't come, don't give up. Because the message and the hope you carry is the wisest thing in the world to the wisest gathering of people in the world who are connected to the wisest person in the world, Jesus Christ.

And we display his wisdom. As we draw coming for landing, what does this mean as we conclude? Well, because the church is God's messy studio, what it also means is that you don't have to walk into church with everything together. If you feel broken today, if you feel at your wit's end, if life is hard, if you're tired, well, join the club.

[26 : 07] You're in the right place. And Jesus' offer of grace is here for you today. Whatever's going on in life, rest in his wisdom, rest in being part of the message studio where the master artist is painting on his canvas to produce a masterpiece.

This is what the God is doing in and through his people. And so we can rest in that this morning. Let me pray. Almighty God, we just thank you that you are, we thank you for your wisdom, the wisdom of the cross.

We thank you for the wisdom in making a people for yourself that the church is the display of God's multifaceted, manifold wisdom to the whole cosmos.

And you know our hearts, you know it doesn't feel like that. Maybe even our lives don't feel like that and we're tempted to lose heart and to, in suffering or in anything that's going on, we're tempted to lose hope and we're tempted to look for, look to the world and we're tempted to blame others.

Forgive us, Lord. And I do thank you that when things don't go as they seem, I thank you, I pray that we could be encouraged by this today that actually you're building your church through weakness.

[27 : 31] You're building your church in ways that point to you being full of power because only you could do it this way. I do thank you that you've made too, that you've drawn all different types of people to be one body.

We're different and distinct and have many gifts and I pray that you'd use all of these things to build one another up, to be edifying to one another. And I thank you for Jesus that he's the, this example, the primary example of suffering, not as a minister of the gospel but as a substitute who exchanged places with us so that we could be made into the wisdom of God.

We ask for this in Jesus' name. Amen.