

The Manifold Wisdom of God

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[0:00] Okay, good morning everyone. Lovely to see you. My name is Graeme, I'm the pastor here. Great to see folks again. Strange, half of our church family is here and half is up in that place that I begin with F. We can vote on that later.

But we are going to think about the same theme that we've been thinking about as a church at the weekend. So if you want to go to Ephesians chapter 3, we're going to be in verses 1 to 13. Right, we're going to read them in five minutes time. There's a lovely graphic to get you going. I enjoyed making that on Friday afternoon.

So, our third daughter Eve, her favourite thing to do at school, the thing that she gets most excited about when she realises it's time for this at school, is the day when it's time for show and tell.

Remember this at school? Show and tell.

So, this day where you got to take something into your class, something that you loved, something that was the most precious thing in the world to you, and you had the platform, you had the airtime to tell anyone who'd listen, why it was the most precious thing to you in the world and why. Do you remember that at school? Show and tell. Keep that in your head because it's going to be really useful for going through this passage.

Ephesians 3, if I could put an alternative heading on God's marvellous plan for the Gentiles, which is what your Bibles, if you have it there, will say at the top of chapter 3.

[1:28] Alternative heading would read this. Here is God's show and tell. Uninspired, give you that. No one has clearly gone for that over the generations, Bible translators, but I'm going for that today.

This is God's glorious show and tell, which begs the question, what is? What is God's most treasured possession?

What is the apple of his eye? What is the thing that he holds out to the world and says, this, this is the thing that displays my wisdom to the seen and the unseen world?

What is the thing that makes angels stop and go, wow? Friends, here's what I want you to do.

I want you to stop for a moment. I want you to look at the people on your right. I realise everyone looks right. Somebody's looking at the wall, but you get me, okay? And then I want you to look to your left.

[2:40] And here's the thing as we get into this passage today. The answer to that question is a lot closer to home than you and I probably think it is. And we've got to let God through his words shape our minds this morning as he tells us what his manifold wisdom is.

Now, this is not just come as a boat out of the blue. Here's what we need to do if we're going to get this. We need to do a bit of a run up to the book of Ephesians. You with me? So here is Paul writing to this church, living for the glory of Jesus in the first century city of Ephesus.

Now, two quick things that you need to know about Ephesus and the book of Ephesians as Paul writes it. Two things about the city. Here's number one. You need to know about the thing that dominates the skyline.

Ephesus has something that dominates the skyline. You cannot miss it. Edinburgh's got the castle, right? Paris has the Eiffel Tower.

Ephesus in the first century has the temple of the goddess Artemis. And fun fact of the day, if you're interested in this, if this ever comes up as a pub quiz question, this temple is so spectacular that it's considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

[4:02] So that means that people flock from all over to come and see, and not just see, but come and worship at the temple of Artemis.

Her temple is the pride and the joy of the city, right? You got that? Number one, what dominates the skyline? You cannot miss this.

The temple of Artemis. Here's the second thing you need to know about what's going on in Ephesus, is that when Paul goes there in Acts 19, the gospel is Paul brings it into this city, the news about Jesus, his birth, his life, his death on the cross, his glorious resurrection, his ascension, one day his return.

As Paul brings this message to the city of Ephesus, it makes a seismic impact. That means that people are becoming believers from all sorts of different backgrounds.

And it's true in this room, isn't it, friends? If we were to give our stories about how we came to know Jesus for ourselves, how many different stories would be in this room? Because how many different backgrounds are represented in this room?

[5 : 12] All sorts of people become believers in Ephesus. You've got people from commercial backgrounds, occultic backgrounds, spiritual backgrounds, religious backgrounds.

When the gospel explodes in Ephesus, it's raw and it's real. It's exciting and it's daunting. And Ephesus evangelical church is birthed with a buzz.

But the thing is, see by the time Paul writes Ephesians, this letter, and it gets to Ephesus. A lot of time has passed. One thing has changed since then.

Chapter 4, verse 1. Just scan your eye to it there, you'll see it. The thrill of revival in Ephesus has died down. And verse 1 of chapter 4, the guy who planted this church in Ephesus, Paul, the founding apostle, is in prison.

You see it? So that's changed. But I tell you what, there's one thing might have changed. There's one thing that definitely hasn't changed.

[6 : 25] Do you know who's still going really strong? Do you know who's still doing a roaring trade in Ephesus? Do you know who's still dominating the skyline?

Do you know who's still attracting visitors and tourists and worshippers from all over the regions round about to come and pay homage? What's gone nowhere in that whole time?

The goddess Artemis, her temple, she ain't gone nowhere. So here's what I want you to do. I want you to imagine that you're a person in Ephesus Evangelical Church.

Try and get in the mind space, right? And you're meeting, your usual meeting, on a Sunday. You remember Jesus. This is why we're meeting on a Sunday, not Saturday. On a Sunday, because this is the day that we remember that Jesus rose from the dead.

Okay? So you're meeting there. And someone's passing around the stale quiche, right?

Somebody's offering you another glass of shloher. Somebody's trying to get everyone to sing along to kumbaya and out of tune the guitar.

[7 : 29] And you think, oh my days, this is so unimpressive. And yet you look out your curtain window and what do you see on the skyline?

You see the temple of Artemis. And you think to yourself, goodness, tell you what, we look really unimpressive and unspectacular, but see her and her temple and the people that flock from all around to come and worship, goodness me, that is something special.

And then you get your mind back in the room, this small group of believers gathering together to worship the risen Jesus. And again, trying to get into the scriptures together, and you think, goodness me, what is this all about?

What are you thinking about your little church gathering? You're thinking, I'd imagine, that you're nothing special. Right?

I tell you who we might think is something special is the goddess Artemis, but somebody who's not very special is us. Friends, have you ever felt like that?

[8 : 39] Ever feel like that on a Sunday morning? Ever feel like that when you go to the Zoom prayer meeting?

Ever feel like that when you tell your colleague at work on a Monday morning that you went to church at the weekend, and you can tell they're trying to be polite, but you can also tell that they couldn't care less? The church, we are nothing special.

Well, do you know what Paul is doing in this letter? He's saying to this church at Ephesus, see if you think you're nothing special, think again. Think again.

For do you know what? The local church is God's glorious show intention. Shall we read these verses together?

Come and see how this works. And then we've got a couple of things to say. This is us in verse one of chapter three. And see if you can pick up these tones. So Paul writes this, For this reason I, Paul,

the prisoner of Christ Jesus, for the sake of you Gentiles, surely you've heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you.

[9:56] That is, the mystery made known to me by revelation as I have already written briefly. In reading this then, 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 has now been revealed by the Spirit of God 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 to 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.

[11:38] Amen. And God will bless the reading of his word to us this morning. Friends, we're going to think about two big things that this passage teaches us. And then we're going to think about two big ways that we need to respond.

You with me? Here's the formation really simply of the sermon, two, two. Right. Here is big teaching point number one. This is verses one to six. Here it is.

Friends, the gospel is answering a mystery. That's what he's saying here. And this is where we learn that God has no interest in ever becoming a magician.

And here's what I mean by that. What do they always say a magician, a good magician never reveals? Come on, a bit of audience participation here. Go on. Secrets.

Okay. Or they're mysteries. Well, these verses tell us that it thrills God's heart not to conceal, but to reveal his.

[12:38] Do you see it? That's what the word mystery, and if you notice in those verses, it's used three times there. That's what that word means. It was something that was once hidden, but now it's out in the open.

And remember that Paul's writing as a man who's schooled in Judaism, right? He knows his, if you like, his Old Testament, like the back of his hand.

And he knows the promises. He knows the pictures. And he knows the unresolved tensions that the Old Testament story serves up.

Right? I'll give you a few of them. How is God going to bless the nations of the world? Like he promised Abraham. How is he going to do that? How is God going to be real in terms of his holiness?

He said he's, and of course he wouldn't be God if he didn't do this, if he compromised on this. He's going to deal with sin. How is God going to transform the people's hearts, as well as be true to dealing with sin?

[13:50] And I think that's what he means, verse 5, when he says previous generations, it wasn't revealed to them how this was going to resolve itself.

But verse 2, God's opened Paul's eyes to see the answer to the mystery. And he considers that the most humbling of privileges.

Because in a former life, remember, this was the guy who wanted to stamp out the church. That God has revealed to him that Christ is the answer that's now out in the open.

Christ is the answer to the mystery. The perfectly obedient life that Jesus lived on our place, the sin-bearing death of Jesus in our place, the glorious resurrection of Jesus, whereby God declared to the world that the cross worked, proceeding from the Father and the Son, the giving of the Spirit to take the message of Jesus and apply it to the hearts of people who were dead in their sins and now by the Spirit are made alive.

By the Spirit, all of that meaning that anyone, absolutely anyone, through faith in Christ Jesus, can be made right with God and look forward to knowing him now and into eternity.

[15 : 15] Anybody. And what has happened as a result, verse 6, the Gentiles, you see that, and that word just means that the non-Jewish peoples of the world, are now fellow heirs along with the believing Jew.

Now, don't underestimate just how much of a first century mic drop moment that is. Because these two groups of people, historically, you're Jew and you're Gentile, these two groups of people did not mix.

They are like oil and water. They just do, you cannot get them to mix. Jewish rabbis prayed every day, Lord, thank you that you did not make me a Gentile.

In fact, there was a big sign in the temple designed to keep the Gentiles out with a sign that read, do not enter here, and if you do so, you will die. And the Gentiles repaid the compliment as they mocked the Jews for worshipping a God who they could not see.

And yet God had always promised that there would be a day when the Gentiles would be grafted into and be part of his united, global, diverse, one people of faith.

[16 : 23] And the mystery, verse six, is that the Gentiles through the gospel are now members of the same body and are sharing in the same inheritance.

Now, we were thinking about this yesterday, the wonderful fact that Jesus came looking for us. Us Gentiles, I'm assuming that we're all Gentiles in this room.

We were not born and raised Jewish people. And yet, that truth means that we had no clue to the promises of God. And yet Jesus came looking for us.

The gospel means that Gentiles can be brought into God's family of faith. And you can imagine into a city like Ephesus. That is incredible. We'll develop it a bit more.

The gospel is answering a mystery, which takes us to teaching point number two. Friends, the church is telling a story. For just notice what language Paul uses there to describe what he preaches at verse eight.

[17 : 30] And we so often just skim over this, we miss what he says. Verse eight, the unsearchable riches of Christ. Do you see that phrase? Now, we often talk about in our culture, bottomless coffee, do you know what I mean?

Remember going to Mug and Bean in South Africa years ago, coming across this concept of bottomless coffee. You just mean I could sit here and drink and drink and drink and it doesn't end? Well, yeah. Friends, we have, if you look at his language here, we have a bottomless Christ. Right? Meaning that when it comes to what we can worshipfully comprehend of his glories, there's never coming a day when we can say to ourselves, completed it.

You know, they always have that phrase, friends down in London, they always joke about it, bored of London, bored of life, as if there's a place on this planet that can only satisfy the human longings and hearts.

And all you need to do is spend 10 minutes on the tube down in London and you soon realize that I don't think that's the case. But truly, there's never coming a day where we will get bored of Jesus.

[18 : 46] When we're bored with Jesus, friends, if that's the season that we're in, we do so well to remember that the problem's never with Jesus. That's the Jesus that Paul preaches to the Gentiles.

There's always new angles, new aspects, new dimensions of the glory of God for us to savor and feast our souls upon. We're never getting to the bottom of it, the unsearchable riches of Christ. And so Paul begins to think about this people who Jesus has called out of the darkness into his marvelous light for himself, aka the church. This multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-generational people who God has called to himself in Christ.

And Paul's big point here is when it comes to the church, do you and I see what God sees? And so think back to your show and tell.

Where do you look if you want to see the wisdom of God on full display? And you might expect the answer to that question to be in creation.

[20 : 00] Yeah? The Niagara Falls, the full moon, how excited did we get a couple of months ago? Maybe not in Scotland, but everyone else in the world, about that eclipse. The beauties of God shown in creation, a gorgeous sunset, on and on we could go.

But that's not the answer in the text. Do you see it? Where do we look to see God's wisdom? Verse 10, and if you want a phrase that stays, which ironically is a phrase that stays, if you want a phrase that stays from this message, here it is.

Just take three words with you from this. Through the church. Do you see it in the text? Through the church. So these people whom God through his son and then dwelt by his spirit has made one. And to who, just notice in passing, has God made this wisdom known to? Not just to the watching world, but to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

And we do well just to slow down at this point and remember that according to a biblical worldview, friends, there's more going on in life than simply what you and I can see. The spiritual realm Paul is talking about here is massive in Ephesians, right?

[21:21] Angels, light, devil and his messengers, darkness. The principalities in the heavenly places. The unseen realm.

Paul is saying that it's to us and to them that God is showing his wisdom. In other words, friends, the rulers and powers look on at the local church.

Look on at us as we gather today and conclude. As they look around and they see barriers that should exist between us being smashed down in Christ and they see a love between us that doesn't comprehend human logic.

As the rulers and powers in the heavenly places look on at us, they say, how on earth has God done that? Mind-blowing emoji.

And so Paul is saying, dear Ephesians, you might look at yourselves and conclude that you're nothing special. There's nothing to see here. But let me tell you that as far as God is concerned, there's everything to see here.

[22:31] And so friends, let's move from two big things that this passage teaches us to think about two big ways that we need to respond as we think about the local church, the big C church, but as it finds its expression in local churches as they gather.

Two big things I think we need to pray that God would help us grow in. Here's number one and it's just our appreciation of the church. These verses, if you like, are the lenses that God wants us to put on when it comes to how we walk into any gathering of our local church.

Remember that old thing that the, what's that thing you used to do with your hands? Oh, I forgot it here. The church is the steeple. Look inside and it's all the people. We get that, right? The church is not the building.

It's the people. Of course, buildings are important, but it really is all about the people. When we gather together, do we see what God sees? Do you see not just how precious the church is to us, but do you see how infinitely precious the church is to Jesus?

But do we see how our very existence, friends, is a much bigger deal than we often stop to think that it is? The very fact that we've gathered here today is declaring a story just like a Batman signal pinging it to the sky about the manifold wisdom of God.

[24:00] Every time we gather pray and sing, read and respond, hug and cry, listen and speak, love and challenge, and see as we do that together, yet loving each other as different people united together under the lordship of Jesus, we are declaring a story to both the seen and the unseen world.

Let me just take it a bit further. That means that as far as God is concerned, the most exciting thing happening in Bruntsfield right now is what's happening in this building.

And across local churches as they meet across this city, there is no more exciting thing going on according to God than what he is doing in his local churches. It's almost as if God's inviting us to drape a banner above that door frame as we came in this morning, saying in the words of the song that goes with the film, this is the greatest show.

You know, it's a bit like, sorry, and what else the local church is is a bit like a miniature model of a new housing estate before it's built.

You ever seen one of these? Or if you go into the National Museum of Scotland, you'll see that they've built a kind of Lego miniature version of the National Museum. It's really cool. But that's what the local church is.

[25:26] Here is a preview of what the whole thing will look like when it's finished. Friends, the local church is the show home of the people of the new creation.

You know, it's really popular today to hear people say, does the church have a future? Well, do you know what this passage tells us? It tells us that the church is the future.

And so, in response, dear friends, would we pray, Lord, forgive us for grossly undervaluing the very thing that you tell us declares your wisdom to the watching world?

And that takes us to big prayer number two. First, we pray that, Lord, would you help us grow in our appreciation of the church?

Secondly, Lord, would you help us grow in our affection for the church? And here's the honest truth at this point. I can honestly say, friends, that my life is so much better so much richer because of the church.

[26:45] And I think about Chloe and Grace sitting there. Didn't know they were going to be in this morning. But I think about some of their friends who I've got to know in a little bit at school and who is, as far as I can tell, outwith their families.

They probably know a number of adults that you can count on both hands, right? Maybe neighbors, teacher, something like that. One digit.

You see, for these guys, because of the church, that's not one digit in terms of the number of adults that they know. It's three digits. Like, so, so many people they know because of the local church who have, so many of them, poured themselves meaningfully into their lives.

Their lives are better, richer, because of the local church. Isn't that an amazing thing, the privilege that we have to gather together as people who, to be honest, if we were just living our lives in the world, we would never cross paths, let alone be a family.

And yet, through the gospel, friends, do you see how wonderful a thing is the local church? Nothing like this in the market.

[27:59] Nothing like this. And so, friends, if you're here, and let me just say, if you're here, and I get, just because of this time of year, this is always my pitch, I haven't done this for a number of years now, if you're here today, and let me just say, if you're flirting with church, if you're here and you're doing this church search thing and you're kind of sitting on the fringes not sure if you'll commit, I just want you to know that in love, the longer that you leave it, the more you're depriving yourself of that blessing.

I just know how enriched my life has been because of God's grace to me, because of all the wisdom and love and patience and grace that I've received from different people who I've got to know in the various local churches that I've been in over the years.

And as we've been in this one now, Alex and I for well over 14, the amount of people who have come through our lives and blessed us, how? Because we are united in Jesus.

My life is better because of the local church and do you know what else, friends? Our witness is stronger because of the local church. In our world that seems to be becoming increasingly polarized and aggressively so, don't underestimate how powerful and apologetic it is when we simply gather together and love one another under the lordship of Jesus.

The question that this passage asks us if we take it and run with it is how can we press into knowing each other better? Can I just give you one area in particular?

[29:43] We could apply this in so many different ways. Can I just give you one area in particular as we think about our culture that I think is just a massive opportunity for us just now?

You might not have seen this one coming but let me give you it. It's the generational gap. Isn't it true right now that you have a younger generation bear with me who are critical perhaps of an older generation?

You're clogging the housing market. You aren't being authentic. And in turn you also have an older generation suspicious of a younger generation. You're not as committed as we once were.

You've got an entitlement mentality. No, it's a bit awkward. Does it not sound familiar as we live our lives in this world? A few nods. But do you see how God if we've got this picture of the local church do you see how he calls us to do this generational thing radically differently?

And to lovingly enter each other's worlds? And can I just ping you with some challenges that I was thinking about this week to both generations? To an older generation first of all.

[30:54] Friends, do you pray for and are you willing to invest in the younger generation who by the way are the church leaders of tomorrow in a way that communicates to them that we don't just want you to keep up the momentum of what we started.

We actually long for and pray that you guys would see so much more fruit for the glory of God than we ever did in our lifetime. Do you appreciate that a younger generation are facing things that you probably never had to face in your life let alone think about?

Mounting student debt? Gender critical and sex saturated places of work that these guys find themselves in? Mental health worries? And on and on you could go.

Older generation here what would it look like for you to enter the world of someone in our younger generation in our church family and help them? Let me flip it around though to a younger generation who I imagine are a few more in this room.

Do you think to yourself deep down because you've been brought up in this world and so much of it like osmosis has just made its way into our systems. Do you think that you've got nothing to learn from an older generation deep down?

[32:11] Do you see that they have so much Christian life experience to share with you? Do you appreciate that there's people in this room and in this church family who might not be here today but will be here next week who have been married for longer than you've been alive?

They know what it is to suffer bereavement and to lose a spouse to get to 90 and to have all your friends die and think goodness life feels really lonely.

To know how scary unemployment and redundancy is who know how tiring it is to be a parent who know what it is to run a business and to do that with Christian integrity who know what it is to be a missionary living in a foreign country and yet know what it is to do those things and will testify to the goodness of God throughout that.

Why not ask them younger generation why not go and find someone in an older generation and ask them what was the most exciting thing that you saw God do in your lifetime?

Isn't that amazing? Some of us in this room will have lived through when Billy Graham came to Scotland way back beginning of the 19th century. I read a stat recently that apparently was that 76% of Glaswegians went to at least one of his meetings.

[33:37] Can you imagine that? Imagine living through something like that. Up in the Hebrides the revivals that happened. Friends, do you see that there's so much wisdom in this room when it comes to how God has been at work and so much Christian wisdom in terms of what it means to live faithfully for Jesus throughout it all.

Friends, do you see how God has put us together as one church family? The Bible is such a generational passing book. One generation commends your work to the next and we're called to help each other figure out what faithfulness to Jesus looks like in our different life stages and bring that together.

All that means that our local church community should be one massive puzzling question mark to the watching world. How has God done that?

Why And all that takes me just as I close to a story I once read a guy called Michael Otts who's an evangelist down south tell about a local church community in Bristol and I took an interest in this because for a couple of years you might not know this I lived in Bristol used to work down there and lovely city loved living there really rough and ready an estate agent when I was asking what area should I live in she described the area that I settled in as bohemian and earthy and all of a sudden I got down there and I thought oh she just means rough and ready loved it right grew up in Glasgow this was my world loved it I specifically remember where I ended up living was in a place called St Paul's have you know anything about the history of Bristol's there was riots in St Paul's back in the day and when I got there I kind of understood why because it is so multicultural and so multi-generational so to give you an example where I lived at the junction at the bottom of our street you had a Somali community over there you had a Nigerian community over there you had a Jamaican community over there and in amongst an English community that lived all about and all of a sudden

I was the token Scot in the mix I loved it so diverse so many tensions that were going on but Michael Ots tells the story of a time when a local councillor walked into one of the local churches in Bristol can't remember where it was but somewhere in the city local councillor walks into this church and he looks around and he sees what's going on all sorts of different people kind of getting on and seeming to love each other and they're singing laughing crying eating praying they're just doing church life together again thinking to themselves there's nothing to see here and this local councillor was so amazed that when he left apparently he commented to the minister there on the door he said this he said you know what each year I spend millions of pounds of my budget trying to get people from this area to get on with people from that area and I walk in here on a Sunday and I see that you do it for free is that not exactly what this passage is saying how how how has God done that answer through the gospel through his son the church friends is the manifold wisdom of God it is his glorious show and tell so let's embrace it let's love it and let's do it all for his glory let me pray and father God we worship you today for your manifold wisdom wisdom you are your ways are so

far above the things of our ways your your thoughts are so much higher than our thoughts father you're so much greater than us lord thank you for the pages of scripture that we can read here about the way that you've shown your manifold wisdom to the world in this people that Jesus has saved for himself the worshippers that he's created the people that he's united together to declare his praises oh father all praise to you and father we thank you so much for the gift of our local church thank you that even in this room even though it feels like half of our church family is away just now thank you that even in this room as we think about the diversity and we think about the unity as we think about the love as we think about the worship as we think about the way that we do church together father convince our mind that sometimes we often we think that there's nothing special going on but lord help us where they put on the [38:52] Ephesians three glasses to see the church as you see it and to conclude that there's everything going on well father raise our vision of the church and that will only happen if you raise our vision of the!

Amen