

Living in God's Household

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[0 : 0 0] Well, again, good morning, everyone, and thank you very much for the invitation to be here. It's some years since I was last on this platform, and I must say you're looking really good.

Lovely to see so many of you, young and old, and thank you very much for the chance to be back. Margaret and I live in Oxford, as we've mentioned, but my sister-in-law, Margaret's sister, and her husband live in Collington, just down the road.

So we're often north of the border, and it's a great pleasure to be back in Edinburgh. You'll see that we're looking this morning at living in God's household from the verses which we had read to us.

So let's turn to those verses again, chapter 3 of 1 Timothy, verses 14 to 16. And a warm welcome to those of you who are listening online as well. We are glad to have you as part of our fellowship and worship this morning.

Well, one book which has captured a lot of attention in the last few months is this book you'll see on screen, *The Lonely Church* by Noreen Noreen Hertz.

[1 : 0 1] And it's a book which, as the title implies, demonstrates that loneliness and isolation have become something of a disease of our time.

In fact, she mentions the many issues which have led to this sense of isolation for many people. A larger percentage of people are living on their own, for one thing. Then there is this kind of fracture that occurs when you live in a city sometimes.

She mentions some of the social and economic policies, of course, but also at the very basic level of living. We now carry out what is called contactless commerce.

So you do your shopping online. You know, you don't chat to people in the shop. You don't chat to the checkout person. Everything's done remotely. She talks about the general feeling of isolation and the lack of community and support.

And this seems to be affecting people of all ages, young and old. In the book, it quotes people in the age group 16 to 24. 40% of them say that they feel lonely often or always.

[2 : 0 5] And at the other end of the spectrum, pensioners, again, the same percentage, 40% of pensioners say that their primary companion is the television set or a pet.

In fact, even in Japan, apparently, there's a group of older women who now go out and carry out crimes which are sufficiently serious to put them into prison.

Because that is a place of community and care and support that they don't get if they're living on their own in their flats in Tokyo. Astonishingly, this challenge of loneliness can also affect our health.

There is a greater incidence of heart disease and dementia for people who experience this extended loneliness. It can also impact your immune system.

You have a 30% greater chance of dying prematurely if you have this long-term experience of isolation. Well, it's no wonder if that is the fact, this lonely century in which we're living.

[3 : 0 7] It's no wonder that people who are encouraging our churches to engage in mission underline that there is one dominant theme that we especially need to emphasize, and that is the Christian theme of community.

If we were to live, as the New Testament describes Christians living together as a household, as a family, as a community, then this would be radically counter-cultural.

And indeed, it would be deeply attractive in this world of social isolation and this century of loneliness. Well, in this series that we have here at Brunfield in 1 Timothy, that may already have emerged, that Paul is trying to give instructions and guidance on how Christians should live together.

And you'll see he explains his purpose in verse 15 right at the beginning, so that you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household.

And that's really what this whole letter is about. And in just a couple of verses that we're now going to look at, he develops that with some phrases which are incredibly pregnant with important truth.

[4 : 13] In fact, there are three things we're just going to concentrate on in the next few minutes. And these are God's family, God's truth, and God's gospel. Here's the first.

It is belonging to God's family. We've already read verse 15, and you'll see how Paul describes the church. He says it is God's household.

It's a word which can sometimes mean a physical building, a house. But here, and throughout chapter 3, actually, it's referring to the people who are in the house. It is the family of God.

So wherever God's people meet together, whether it's in a grand cathedral in some western city, or whether it's meeting on a hill in an African village, all such believers belong to the one father.

They have brothers and sisters. They are part of God's one family. And the church in Ephesus, which Timothy was looking after, probably wasn't any kind of mega church.

[5 : 16] It was relatively small, maybe smaller than we are here at Brunsfield. It was just an ordinary, small, young congregation. And yet, can you imagine the encouragement when they hear this letter being read?

You are God's own family. You belong to him. You belong to one another. That is your identity.

Now, as I've implied, and in fact, Lorena Hertz says in her book, the idea of belonging is something we find a little bit more demanding in the western culture like ours.

In other words, to look at my life in relation to the church family is not necessarily my first instinct. I remember a little illustration which Paula Gooda gave a while back in one of her books, where she is a lovely family illustration, where one of her young daughters was going to a playgroup or a nursery, and she was asked to draw a picture of herself.

And she was working away, and she took much longer than all the other children to draw this picture of herself. And in fact, on the sheet of paper, she drew her mother, Paula, and her father, and her sister, and herself.

So Paula said to her, well, you drew us all. That's nice. But you only needed to draw you. And her daughter replied, well, this is me, me and my family.

[6 : 35] And Paula Gooda says she saw herself almost entirely in terms of her family. So instead of being the isolated self, she, at that stage, was already thinking, I am part of this community, this family.

And that is exactly how Paul, when he's writing to these believers or writing to Timothy, underlines the point. You'll get to chapter five in a week or two. And that's where Paul says to Timothy, you know, the older men, they're fathers.

The older women in the church, they're mothers. Young men, young women, your brothers and sisters. In other words, don't just treat them as family. Treat them as close family. God's household.

Sometimes, I think, in the evangelical world in which many of us live, we have slightly overemphasized the nuclear family. You know, 2.5 children and a Labrador.

The idea that this is the unit that really matters. Of course, that does. We need to nurture and care for nuclear families. But whether you're a nuclear family or whether you're a married couple or whether you're single, you're part of this wider family.

[7 : 47] And there's a lot of wisdom, a lot of stuff being written about the importance of our families having porous boundaries so that we welcome in others. We demonstrate the kind of community that a household ought to demonstrate.

We share one another's lives. We provide the support and the community we so much need. And Margaret and I, when we had our three daughters at home when they were small, we were so thankful in the church of which we were a part that several older people really became part of our family, one in particular.

And not only was that great support and encouragement to us, but our children had another model, other models of Christian living. They engaged with a wider cross-section of people.

It hugely strengthened us and our families in our Christian lives and service. I remember Margaret coming home after she had cancer surgery, and she was interviewed by their follow-up staff as to whether she was part of any kind of support network.

And Margaret said, yes, we're members of a church. And the nurse, interestingly, said, well, we always find that when people are members of a church, they're well cared for. Now, it's simple, isn't it? It's nice to hear that from a secular institution, but it also demonstrates how significant it is that we live in the church family.

[9 : 04] Remember, Paul's writing to the local church in the ways which strengthen this idea of household and family and belonging when we're living in a world with increasing levels of fracture and isolation.

Here's something which Curtis de Young wrote in a very penetrating book. Sorry, I should have put this up earlier. In the household of faith, our relationship with God takes priority over our relatedness to family, race, culture, nation, gender, or any other group we belong to.

This reordering also transforms how we relate to each other. The concept of family was reconstrued in the household of God. The terms sister, brother, mother, father, friend, and neighbor were all reinterpreted and redefined by Jesus.

Peoples of all cultures, races, languages, nations, tribes, and clans reside in the household of faith. That's a very expansive description of what it means to belong to God's family, and so it should be often in our congregations.

I'm sure it expresses itself in many ways here at Brunfield. Then there's another little phrase that goes on in verse 15. Here it is. The church of the living God.

[10 : 21] God's household, which is the church of the living God. So we are a family, as he's established, united across all kinds of barriers because it is God's church.

So Paul's writing to Timothy. Timothy, this is not your church. This is not my church, Paul's church. This isn't a Baptist church or a Brethren church or an Episcopalian church.

This is God's church, he deliberately emphasizes. And more than that, of course, that means it's God's home. And Paul has already written to the Ephesians to say this.

Do you remember how he wrote in Ephesians 2? In him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by his spirit. So for Timothy's congregation, it was really important that they got this message.

This is the dwelling place. You are the dwelling place of God. You're not only God's family. You're his dwelling place. You're his residence. Because a lot of the Christians, some of the Christians, at least, in Ephesus would have come from a Jewish background.

[11 : 24] And they would always have thought, of course, the dwelling place of God is in Jerusalem, in the temple. And Paul has to say to them, not only in 1 Timothy, but in Ephesians, no, no, no, no, no.

It's not in the temple. It's you. You're God's dwelling place. Probably the majority of Christians in Ephesus actually were from a Gentile background. And I think in your series already, it was being mentioned that down the road from the local church was this massive temple to Artemis.

And again, Paul would be saying, where does God live? And they think, what, is he down in that huge temple? No, he's certainly not in that massive temple. God lives in you.

You are the dwelling place. You are the real temple of the living God, not some dumb idol. Calvin makes the point in a lot of his writing.

There are good reasons why God should call the church his house. For not only has he received us as his sons and daughters by the grace of adoption, but he himself dwells in the midst of us.

[12 : 29] So the local church is his home. Hard to believe sometimes. But it's true. And it's important we recognize it. The local church is God's family and God's residence.

And I think we can say that being part of a local church means that that can often be the focal point for our experience of God himself. This is, after all, where he's living.

The church is the place where we have the special opportunity to know God's presence, to hear his word, to enjoy being part of his family.

There's quite a lot of discussion around the world at the moment, as you know, and also in our country, in the UK and in Scotland too, I know, which relates to how the church should be operating in these days.

I think we can be hugely thankful for the technology which has allowed us to sustain all kinds of ministry during the last year or two. And those of you online, we're so glad you're part of what's happening with us this morning.

[13 : 33] What's developing from that is that sometimes people are developing hybrid models where they can sustain some online presence for people who can never get to church for a variety of reasons.

Or people who are in countries where they have to keep their heads down in terms of safety and security and can often tap into church community in that way. But by and large, I think we want to work hard around the world to find ways of bringing the family back together again, as you are here. Now, small groups are very often the way in which that's done. In other words, we don't want to remain just a cyber church. I've quoted from Lonely Century, which talks about contactless commerce.

It's difficult to have contactless fellowship, isn't it? And contactless worship. So we should pray and think carefully about how we can engage as we come out of the pandemic. God's people, as his family, learn together, pray together, suffer and rejoice together, break bread together.

Hebrews reminds us, the book of Hebrews, don't give up meeting together, especially since the Lord's coming. And one final quote, and that is from Martin Luther. At home, in my house, there is no warmth or vigor in me.

[14 : 48] But in the church, when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through. Belonging to God's family is a really, really significant thing, especially in a culture like ours.

But that's how God has designed us to live. Second thing that we're going to look at is upholding God's truth. Because verse 15 carries on like this.

God's household, the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. The local church as the foundation of truth, using the NIV translation.

Now, is that right? When you first read it, you think, hasn't Paul got it slightly the wrong way around? Because actually, again, he wrote to the Ephesians in Ephesians chapter 2, that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, by which he means on what they taught.

We are founded on the teaching of apostles and prophets. And that is exactly right. But as he writes to Timothy and is writing about the local church, he also underlines that the job of our churches is to preserve and to propagate the truth.

[16 : 02] Our responsibility is to support, to bolster, to safeguard the truth. There are different translations of this verse.

Some say the support and bulwark of the church, the pillar and support, the backbone and support, the pillar and buttress. All of those phrases are trying to say that the local church is responsible now to defend the truth, uphold the truth, proclaim the truth.

Of course, he's already mentioned in 1 Timothy. You've probably, if you've been here for the series, noticed it already and there's more of it coming up in the next chapter or two.

He's spoken about the false teachers. Early on in chapter one, he's really worried that the local church in Ephesus could be in big trouble because of those who are teaching false truth.

And so he says they've abandoned the truth. So it's really important that in our responsibility in the church, we uphold it and we keep it safe. And this is important not just for our own well-being as a local church, but also for what we proclaim out there in Edinburgh and beyond.

[17 : 15] And I wonder if you've heard the story of, it's a true story, I think, of a multi-story building in the city. And cracks appeared on the 42nd floor of this relatively new building.

And so the managing director called the architect and said, we need to meet because there's a problem on the 42nd floor. So he arrived at the managing director, arrived at this huge block and went out, took the lift up to the 42nd floor, but couldn't find the architect anywhere.

So he waited around and eventually he found the architect down in the basement. And he said to the architect, the problem's on the 42nd floor.

And the architect said, well, there may be a problem up there, but the real problem is not on the 42nd floor. It's here in the basement. And they discovered that a caretaker was building a garage at home.

And so he was chiseling out a brick every other day, putting it in his bag and walking off out of the, this is from the basement, and walking off.

[18 : 19] And so every several years, of course, as you do that, taking a brick at a time, it's no wonder at all that cracks appeared on the 42nd floor. The point that Paul is making, of course, is

that the health of the church, the health of the whole building, depends on maintaining the foundation of truth, which we've been given from the apostles and the prophets, making sure that we're guarding and upholding God's word.

And if we don't do that in churches, it can have catastrophic results. It is in our country, I'm afraid. The situation in the UK is not encouraging in terms of the number of churches which are giving up on the truth of God's word.

So it's vital for our health, but it's also vital for our proclamation, what we are saying to the world around. And here's a picture we took just a couple of weeks ago. We were down in Exeter, where we used to live.

And that's Exeter Cathedral. It's fantastic architecture, wonderful pillars. And then in addition to that, there's the fan vaulting, which you can just see at the top there, that's holding the roof together. And I thought of this because here's something that John Stott wrote about the verse that we're looking at. The purpose of pillars is not only to hold the roof firm, but to thrust it high so that it can be clearly seen even from a distance.

[19 : 43] Just so the church holds the truth aloft so that it is to be seen and admired by the world. Indeed, as pillars lift a building high while remaining themselves unseen, so the church's function is not to advertise itself, but to advertise and display the truth.

So that's the second theme. Not only belong to God's family, but also, and vitally important, upholding God's truth. And like the church in Ephesus, the situation for us is exactly the same. There are plenty of false teachers in the churches in our country and around the world. But also, we're living in a culture which is increasingly post-truth, as it's called. Increasingly cynical about the idea of any big story which we talk about in terms of the truth of the Christian faith.

And that's why, as God's household, we are called to be the pillar and the foundation of truth. I recently read a speech by the incoming Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance. And he was speaking about the biggest threats which our churches face all around the world, the evangelical community. I don't know what you think it might be. This is what he said. The biggest crisis is the growing lack of biblical literacy worldwide.

[21 : 05] Beyond all theological differences, financial problems, and political questions, he said, our biggest problem is that Bible knowledge is fading away. And it's serious.

It's not only in the countries I've mentioned when Alistair was talking to me, in Africa, Asia, Latin America. There's great growth, but very often limited Bible knowledge and Bible teaching. And that's being addressed through various agencies. But also, in our part of the world, in the West, it's not so much to do with resources. So plenty of Bibles and plenty of access to Bible teaching. But it's attitude which matters. The Bible Society and the Evangelical Alliance carried out a survey some years ago called Taking the Pulse. And they discovered that 70% of Christians did not read the Bible outside of a church service.

That's a large majority of Christians who are not becoming familiar with what the Word of God says. And a neglect of the Bible is deadly serious for our health, just as isolation is deadly serious.

[22 : 11] Do you remember how Paul underlined his mission, his vision? He gave all his energies, he says, teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we represent everyone mature in Christ.

To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. So let's keep committed to God's Word.

It's great that you, in this church, you have a lovely team of Bible teachers. We need to encourage them and pray for them, as well as give thanks to God for them. We are really needing to uphold the truth, allowing that to become part of us as well as God's people.

Belonging to God's family, upholding God's truth, and finally, living and proclaiming God's gospel. Here we come to verse 16.

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great. Well, first of all, when Paul used the idea of the mystery, very often in the New Testament, this is simply a way of explaining something about God's purposes and work of salvation, something previously hidden, which has now been revealed and now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

[23 : 27] And in this instance, it's the mystery of the gospel that he's talking about. But he says here, the mystery from which true godliness springs, or many translations say the mystery of godliness.

In other words, what Paul is now going to say implies this is how you should live a godly life. This is how you should be a disciple. And I must confess that when I was reading this and thinking about how best to explain it this morning, I thought, well, what you'd expect if he said this is the mystery of godliness is, you know, here are the top 10 tips for being a successful Christian, a successful disciple.

You know, the mystery of godliness, here it comes, like the books you can buy. You know, the six top tips. Well, that doesn't happen. And instead, what does he write?

He begins with he. There it is, beautiful little poem. He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up into glory.

So the mystery of godliness, how you become like the Lord Jesus, is Jesus himself, he is saying. And we know this is true.

[24 : 41] I mean, how do you live a godly life? How do you live as God calls you to live? How do you live to avoid self-centeredness or to defeat sin or to live for God in a broken world?

How can we do it? Well, it's only because of Jesus. It's only because of what Jesus has done. It's only because of the gospel, which has changed us and is changing us.

So Paul introduces it as great is the mystery of godliness. And some people think there's a little echo here of the story in Acts 19. I don't know if you remember that story.

Paul was there in Ephesus. And there was a huge amount of disorder because he was challenging some of the local beliefs, not least those who believed in the temple at Artemis, Diana and all of the godlets that were there in Ephesus.

And when their religion was challenged by Paul, do you remember what they said? Here it is on the screen. They were furious and began shouting, great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

[25 : 45] So now Paul is saying, well, you think that's an impressive temple? You think that Artemis is special, special goddess? Well, listen to this.

Great is the mystery of godliness, which he now declares in Jesus, the Lord of glory. He's probably quoting from a hymn or a well-known creed or confession.

It's quite short. It's only six lines, so it may not be a complete confession of faith. But it's a very succinct summary of Jesus. It's rather like the hymn in Philippians 2, which talks about Jesus from before he came into the world, all the way through his life to when he then was brought into glory.

There have been all kinds of attempts to explain how this song goes together. And I won't bore you with that. You can find it in almost all of the commentaries. But what's really clear about this is how Christocentric this is.

It's all about Jesus. It's entirely focused on him. And Paul is quoting this song to underline that what really matters in the household of God, what really matters if we're going to become like Jesus, is the gospel itself.

[26 : 58] We can see this in the lines of the song. I'm just going to bang them up as quick bullet points. Incarnation. He appeared in the flesh, in the body. Jesus became human without ceasing to be God.

And this is part of the amazing mystery that's now revealed to us that God has stepped into our world in the person of Jesus, the one mediator between God and man. It's really important.

And we're going to have the chance to talk more about it as Christmas comes, of course. That when we're talking about the Christian faith to friends at work or in our family or whatever, we don't simply say Jesus lives in my heart, although that's really important, our subjective experience of the Lord. But we also give witness to this objective reality that God in Jesus Christ came to this world. He reveals to us what God is like.

He is the one who provided salvation for us, appearing in the flesh fully man, fully God. And then vindication. Paul goes on in the song, or at least he quotes the song, because of Jesus saving death, he was vindicated by the spirit, Paul tells us in Romans, through the resurrection.

[28 : 11] And then there's observation, we might say. He was seen by the angels, he says. And you remember the gospel accounts, the angels saw Jesus when he was born.

They saw him when he was tempted. They saw him when he was raised from death to life. They saw when he returned to heaven. And then there's proclamation. He was preached among the nations.

I mean, that was already true in Paul's day as the gospel began to ripple out among the nations. And that, of course, is what's happening all around the world today, as I implied earlier on this morning.

And so as we uphold the truth, as we proclaim the gospel, this is happening more and more. Jesus is being preached to the nations. That leads to affirmation.

He was believed on in the world. And the message to Abraham right back in Genesis, that you'll be the father of many nations. Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

[29 : 09] That's what's been happening. And as the gospel ripples around the world, we are seeing people from every tribe, nation and language surrendering their lives to this Lord Jesus, putting their trust in him.

And finally, exaltation. He was taken up into glory. The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now. A royal diadem adorns the mighty victor's brow.

He's the Lord. He's the king. He's the one to whom every knee will bow. This is the mystery of godliness, he says. And this is what we have to uphold and proclaim.

This is what we have to live the gospel as well as proclaim it. And without Jesus, you can have a religious organization. You can have a social club.

You can have an ethical system. But you do not have a church. There is no Christianity without Jesus being at the center. We need to keep underlining it.

[30 : 09] That's what Paul's done in this little passage. That to be a Christian is to be in Christ. To be a local church is to be a community with Jesus Christ at the center.

It was very nice being at the breaking of bread just before this service. Where our final hymn was one I haven't sung for many years. And actually, as I was preparing, I thought, well, this is a really nice song.

Because it has the same kind of rhythm as the song that Paul's quoting. One day when heaven was filled with his praises. One day when sin was as black as could be. Jesus came down to be born of a virgin.

Dwelt among men. My example is he. And here's the chorus. And it's very, very similar to the words that Paul's writing. Living, he loved me.

Dying, he saved me. Buried, he carried my sins far away. Rising, he justified freely forever. One day, he's coming. Oh, glorious day.

[31 : 07] So Paul is giving a little gospel in a nutshell as he finishes off this third chapter. And it's a reminder that we need to live and proclaim God's gospel.

Well, there are the three big things, brothers and sisters. All in those two or three verses. First, we belong to God's family. So we want to express true community in every way that we can in this lonely century in which we are living.

Second, we want to uphold God's truth. It's really important that we remain committed to God's word, that we understand it, we read it, we memorize it. It becomes part of us.

And thirdly, we live and proclaim the gospel so that as we do that, Jesus will be preached among the nations and believed on in the world.

Amen.