

What is the Answer to Mankind's Divisions?

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Luca, and folks, wonderful to see you here today, and welcome to those who are joining us online as well. It's wonderful to have you with us. Let me encourage you to have those verses in Ephesians chapter 2 open in front of you, your own Bibles if you have it there, or if you need to use your phone, use your phone.

And let me just enthuse us for this passage today, because it is absolutely magnificent once we get to the heart of it. Let me just try and get us straight there. By telling you a question I was constantly asked when I was growing up, growing up in and around Glasgow, a question people always asked the first time they met you was, are you blue or are you green?

Are you blue or are you green? And the thing that you soon realised, you soon clocked on to the more you were asked this question is that people were asking you way more than what football team you support.

Actually what they were asking you deep down is, are you Protestant or are you Catholic? Is what they were asking us when we were growing up.

And it's so revealing, that question, I remember being asked it all the time when I was young, so revealing of a deep, historic and at times really ugly divide that exists in that city.

[1 : 19] And if you think about it, it's just one example of many issues that we know so often divide the peoples of this world, right?

Economic, slash financial, social, slash class, political. And what we've seen playing out right now in the US, in South Africa, didn't mean in the 90s, what do we see now playing out in the US? Racial divisions everywhere.

So here's the question we're going to think about today. So think about the divisions in the world is, what is the answer to mankind's divisions? Right? What is the answer to mankind's divisions?

Where is peace to be found? I remember when we were young, we used to mimic, right? Miss America. I don't know if you used to watch that kind of stuff when you were, I didn't watch it, but we kind of knew what went on. These kind of contests, and they would interview the winner, and they would say, well, what is it you want?

What's the one thing that you'd want more than anything else? And the person would apply it with her crown on, I simply want world peace. Right? We all used to laugh at it in the playground.

[2 : 27] Right? Because it was a bit cliché, it was a bit cheesy. But more so, I think, because we thought, you dreamer. Right? You dreamer. Because we've realized the world in which we're living. You dreamer.

You think it's going to be peace? Friends, what will bring peace to the peoples of our world? Here's what we try. We try education. We try money.

And we try law. Right? Agreed? Three very good things. Good things that when we use them in really constructive ways can certainly help the situations. But here's the limitations of those, the limitation of those three things.

Why they will not work. And is it those things cannot change the human heart? Isn't it so often the case that actually those three things bring out sometimes the worst in the human heart as we look over history?

Cannot change the human heart. Which, if you track the Bible story, shows us that that is the very source of the problem. In other words, before the problem is out there, the problem exists in here.

[3 : 33] The shockwaves of sin ever since Genesis 3 enters the human equation as it causes havoc to humanity. I mean, you read from Genesis 3 onwards in the Bible story, you start to get words like shame.

That didn't exist in Genesis 1 and 2. You start getting anger. You get murder. You get envy. And all these things coming in. And they're representative of a hostility that exists in two directions. Okay? A hostility between us and our Creator. And flowing from that, a hostility that goes out of the way. Vertically. Sorry, vertically.

To the peoples of our world. Broken relationships everywhere you look. Right? I mean, how painful is it, friends? We know this in our lives. How painful is it when you've fallen out with somebody? Right? In your family. We know these things. Strained relationships. What is it they always told us growing up? Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never harm you.

[4 : 36] Nonsense. I know my own life. We were thinking about this last week. How is it that so often the people that we love most are the ones that we seem to have the ability to hurt most?

So, friends, what is the answer to mankind's divisions? This is the question of this passage. In Ephesians chapter 2, God makes his play. Okay? God makes his play. And he lays out his plan to bring unity to his people.

Because there's a massive division that forms the backdrop of this passage today. If you've got it there, look at verse 14. Paul talks about the divide that exists between the Jews and the Gentiles. Right? So, you've got on one hand, you've got Jews, the historic people of God. On the other hand, you've got the Gentiles, the peoples of the pagan nations who exist outside of Israel.

And this divide is ingrained in your mind if you're a Jew, that these people are different to us. Right? Jewish rabbis used to pray every day, Lord, thank you that you did not create me a Gentile.

[5 : 40] And the Gentiles used to repay the compliment as they mocked the Jews because they worshipped a God who you can't see. How foolish is that? In fact, there's a big sign in the temple in Jerusalem designed to keep the Gentiles out.

The big sign that read, do not enter here if you're a Gentile. Because if you do, you will die. I mean, this is the equivalent of, this is the religious version, if you like, of social distancing.

We keep away from them. And yet God has always promised, always promised, that there would be a day when the Gentiles would be grafted in and would be part of his united people.

It's a glorious promise as you trace it through the Old Testament story. And the very fact that there's a church in Ephesus is proof of that. Right?

A church where the majority of people in this church are from a Gentile background. But I'm assuming because we read that there's a synagogue in Acts 19. There may well be some Jewish people with a Jewish background in here as well.

[6 : 43] Right? You can understand that there's potential tensions that exist in this church. But Paul's big point here is this. That God, in Christ Jesus, has made you one.

And here's the claim that God's word would make today. That the gospel has the power to smash to smithereens every single barrier that divides the people of the world.

Okay? And so as we respond to this today, let me just ask us three quick questions to get us thinking along these lines as a church family. Okay?

You ready for these? Here's the first question. Friends, are we humbled by our history? Okay? Are we humbled by our history? So there's a story told of a husband and wife in their 80s.

They've been married for a very long time. One evening the wife comes in and says to the husband, my dearest, I just looked in the mirror and I didn't like what I saw. Right? My teeth are going yellow. My hair is going gray. There's wrinkles under my eyes.

[7 : 48] And the husband turns around and says, well, sweetheart, look on the bright side. At least your eyesight seems to be in good condition. Paul's saying the same thing here.

Right? As he speaks to the Gentiles, which, by the way, is us. He's saying, do you see yourself clearly? Do you understand what you were?

Right? Spiritually speaking. He says, remember at verse 11. Now, see that word? That is key because it is the only imperative in the whole first half of this letter, chapters 1, 2, and 3.

He says, remember. Remember that as far as having any chance of knowing this magnificent God goes. Right? You had no chance.

It wasn't as if you kind of ran for the bus and were banging on the door thinking, open up. And the bus went away thinking, oh, I was so close. He's saying you didn't have any hope of knowing this God. Right? Remember my grandpa used to say growing up.

[8 : 46] Right? You didn't have a Scooby. Right? Scooby-doo clue. Right? You didn't have a clue about this God. Not even the slightest notion of who he is, of what he'd done, of what he'd

promised.

I mean, look at the words that he uses there. Verse 12. Remember, he says, remember what? What were you? Separated from Christ. Alienated from God's people. And strangers to his promises.

And having no hope. And without God in the world. And friends, right here is what we were before God. God involved in our life. And you say, well, why go to town on this?

At this point. Well, I'm assuming it's because the key to unity is humility. You want to see more humility in your life?

I know I do. How underrated a virtue in our world is gentleness and patience and humility.

[9:51] Paul's saying humility is the key to your unity. Friends, let me just ask you. And here's what I was thinking about this week. Right? Does it amaze us that by God's sheer grace that we've even heard about Jesus?

Right? Does that? We think on that. The pursuing love of God for us. Right? That went after us. That hunted us. That sought us out.

The pursuing love of God. As seen in the person of Jesus. Does it amaze us that we've even heard about Jesus? Right? It's a wonderful thing. The privilege I have of studying church history over the years.

Right? You learn about people that God has used down the ages to get the message of Jesus. The gospel to these shores. Right? I'm thinking of William Tyndale this week. Great desire he had of translating the Bible from Latin into English so that the everyday people could understand it. Because when it was in Latin, it was simply the priest that controlled what was being said to the people. And his famous phrase, he said, If God spare my life before very long, I shall cause that the plow boy knows the scriptures better than you do.

[11:03] Talking to the priest. Right? The people that God has used to get the gospel here. And I think of the people that God has used to bring into my life over the years, the message of Jesus.

Right? And each time that happens, it is if Jesus is standing there making his plea to me through them. It always amazes me.

Right? So I'm on a school run each morning. And I'm speaking to parents. Right? And telling them what I do. Telling them about the church. What we do. Telling them about faith. And it amazes me just how many don't have the foggiest idea who Jesus is.

There's no notion of what is going on. How often we just assume that the people that we rub shoulders with each and every day have heard about Jesus, but they've just said, nah, it's not for me.

You know, the truth of the reality today is pretty much the opposite. The vast majority of people just haven't even heard. I always love the strapline of UCCF.

[12:10] One of our mission partners as well. Why do they exist on university campuses? And it's simply to give every student in Britain the opportunity to hear about Jesus. Friends, are we humbled by our history?

And then secondly, are we thankful for our unity? Right? Because look what God has done. Verse 13. Just follow the language here. What has he done? He's brought us near. We were over there. We didn't have a clue. We were alone. He brought us near. Right? Sawed us out. Hunted us down. Brought us near. It's kind of like, I was trying to think of, it was like fishing this week. Remember doing that when I was growing up?

Putting out the line. Getting a catch. Line out. Bring it home. Right? Bringing it near. This is what God's done through Jesus. And the power of the Spirit. And verse 14.

Right? He has smashed down the dividing wall of hostility that exists between the Jews and the Gentiles. And he's made them one. Now that is stunning. Right? Brought you near.

[13:10] Smashed it down. Made you one. And this is what God has done. Right? Brought you near. Smashed it down. Made you one. And how has he done it? Verse 14. And if you enter into memory verses.

Here's your memory verse for the week. Okay? Verse 14. Echoing the words of Isaiah 53. Isaiah talking about God speaking to Isaiah.

Talking about the suffering servant who will accomplish his purposes in the world. Here's the phrase. Get it in your mind. He himself is our peace.

Remember one thing from this. He himself is our peace. In other words, Paul wants them to see that peace is not a thing. It's a person. Okay? Remember I used to study with this guy called Suraj. Who's now planting churches in Nepal. Back in his homeland. In his previous life. And I'll maybe share it later on Facebook or something like that. Testimony he gave recently. Previous life.

[14:07] Into drugs. Into gangs. Into frequent run-ins with the police. Repeatedly in and out of jail. Inside he was just saying that he was angry all the time. Right? Just angry at everybody in life.

He was about Jesus. Right? About his sin. He's undone. And about the God who loves him. About the God who sought him out.

And he said for the first time in his life. When he understood those things. He said, I had peace. Peace. Right? Why? Because he's been arrested, if you like.

By the Prince of Peace. Right? I love it. The first words that Jesus gives after he's risen. As he encounters his disciples in that room. What does he say? One of the first words out of his mouth. Peace I give to you.

Peace. Right? How did Jesus bring peace? Verse 16. He did it by the cross. See? Because the cross is the place where the Prince of Peace.

[15:09] Peace wins our peace. Where the hostility between us and God and us and others is blown out of the water. Right? Because, and I think this is what's going on here. Paul is saying that the way to God now is the same.

Okay? There are not different ways to God. This is not you take the high road, I'll take the low road, and I'll be a Christian before you. Right? There is one way to God, and it's the same. And it's not by our efforts.

It's not by our ethnicity. It's not about Gentiles becoming Jews or even Jews becoming Gentiles. It is by sheer grace. Through the one who called himself the gate for the sheep.

It's by faith in Jesus and in him. And him alone becoming, verse 15, this one new man. One new man.

What does that mean? It means that as Christ's people across the world, down ages, we have access and share the same heavenly Father. And he has made us family.

[16:12] Family. Not just friends. Not just mates. Not just plain happy families. He's made us family. He's made us one. And I would just say, we're thankful for our unity. It's one of the most powerful apologetics that we can offer for the truth of Jesus to the watching world.

You know, I remember, I've told you a story before, but I love this story, so I'm going to tell it again. Right? Preachers, prerogative, and all that. Michael Otts tells his story. He's an evangelist. Travels around.

There's a lot of work with UCCF and all over the world. Traveling around, just telling people about the Lord Jesus. Right? And he tells his story about a little community, church community down in Bristol. Bristol is a very multicultural diversity.

Remember when we lived there? Alex and I, I lived there for just under two years. And I used to live on the border of this area called St. Paul's. Right? Just to give you an example of this. And distinctly remember at the bottom of this junction, there was a Jamaican community, a Somalian community, a Nigerian community, an English community.

And there was a token Scot in there as well. It was only after I moved there that I realized that St. Paul's was one of the hubs of the riots in Bristol. Bristol in the 1980s. Right? Never tell you that when you sign your lease.

[17:20] But that's what they do. The riots in Bristol. But this is Bristol. Very multicultural city. Michael Otts tells a story about a local MP. He went and visited one of the churches in this city.

And he looked around and he kind of took it in. And what he saw was different people from all these different groups getting on and singing and laughing and crying and eating and praying.

You know, just doing kind of church together that we so often take it for granted. And he was so amazed. And what he said to the minister there, he said, each year I spend millions of pounds on my budget trying to get people from that area to get on with people from that area.

And I walk in here and I see that you do it for free. There's our unity. What does it say to the watching world about who Jesus is and what he's done?

And, you know, it was J.I. Packer who said that reconciliation is the very heart of the gospel. Of course, later when we come on to this, maybe the beginning of next year, Paul's going to plead with us, chapter 4, to make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit.

[18 : 26] Every effort. Why? Well, because he knows not only is it such a precious thing, but surely it's the one thing that the devil would go after to discredit what Jesus has done in the eyes of the watching world.

Our God has made us one. In him our hearts unite. When we, his children, share his joy, his love, rather, our joy is his delight.

Friends, are we thankful for our unity? And then lastly and thirdly, are we amazed at the reality? Right. Verse 21. Come here. Come with me. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

Now, the temple in the Old Testament story, if you follow it through, is the very place where God himself is said to live. And now, says Paul, in Christ and with the Holy Spirit residing in each of your hearts, you are now the temple of God.

What? But you are now the temple of God. In you, individually, and I think probably more so in the context corporately as a church, you are now the very place where God lives by his spirit.

[19 : 38] So think about these folks in Ephesus that are living in the lives in this city, surrounded, if you remember it in Acts 19, by this massive temple of Artemis. Paul's saying that's not the real temple in the city.

You are the real temple in the city. You are, right? As you meet together, as you grow, as you rejoice, as you weep, as you cry, as you love, as you laugh, as you go through the highs and lows of life together.

You think there's nothing going on there, but let me tell you, there's everything going on there because there's a purpose to it. What's the purpose? Verse 22. And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.

Isn't that incredible? Changes the way you come to the prayer meeting, doesn't it, on a Monday? Changes how you think about that one-to-one when you meet with somebody during the week. Changes the way when you start off the day reading the Bible. Those things. That's what God is doing. You know, one of the programs we love to watch is Grand Designs. Right? Getting to the age where that's what we love.

[20 : 49] The home of the ambitious building project. You know what it's like? Kevin MacLeod goes in and he whacks his lyrical about the project. Right? He meets the family and they've normally bought, what is it, a kind of derelict shed or a shack or a building or a plot of land.

And he goes in and he says, what on earth are you going to do with this one? And so they bring out the architect's plans and they say, here's what we're building. Right? And we're all having a good laugh at home watching it thinking, you're absolute dreamers.

How you build that? At the end of the show, what is it? They go back and there it is. Vroomf. It's the reality. It's there. So that's what Paul is saying.

Here is God's building project. Here's what he's doing. Right? He is building a people. It's a wonderful metaphor, isn't it? To capture this truth, he's building a people.

Christ is the cornerstone. He's the cornerstone. Now whether that's referring to the first brick in the building project or probably the most important one that holds it together. Could be both. Could be either.

[21 : 48] It doesn't really matter. You get the point. He is the cornerstone. Christ. And we are the bricks. And think about that. What does that mean? Have you ever watched a person building a kind of dry stone dike?

That's what's going on, right? Just different shaped bricks. And yet God is chiseling. He's working. He's forming us. He's shaping us. He's building us together. And he's doing that right now.

And this is the vision. Right? And one day, and this reminded me of the kind of John Lewis cranes down there. How long that's been going on for. But the thing is, one day that will be finished. And everyone will see what was going on.

Paul is saying one day the scaffolding will be gone. And we'll see the beautiful thing that God has been building. He's been building his people. Right? And we get that wonderful picture at the end of the Bible story in Revelation.

Of people worshipping God. And who makes up the people? People of every tribe and tongue and nation. And what are they doing?

[22 : 49] They're worshipping the lamb that was slain. Right? It seems to me, friends, that heaven never gets over the glory of the cross. And so neither should we. Because Christ is our life.

And the cross is the power of God unto salvation. And it is the thing that has reconciled us to God. And has reconciled us to one another. Friends, are we amazed at the reality? Are we humbled by our history? I've forgotten the second point. Are we humbled by our history? Are we thankful for our unity?

And, friends, are we amazed at the reality? And let me just, if you're still not with me on this one, right, let me give you one story to close. One story to close. Now, you remember when I started, we told you that question I was always asked when I was growing up, right?

Are you blue or are you green? Are you blue or are you green? We know the history of this great divide. Really, you'll know Glasgow. It's nothing compared to the heights of the problems that happened in Northern Ireland, kind of fought from the 70s onwards over this issue.

[24 : 00] Epitomized at the time between these kind of emergence of two rival enemy groups that were just out to kill one another, right, fighting on each side. You had, I guess, the Irish Republican Army, the IRA on one side, and you had the Ulster Volunteer Force, the UVF on the other side, right?

These two groups, horrific hostility. And it's where you get, I guess, that U2 song. You've heard of it, Sunday, Bloody Sunday. Talks about the trenches that have been dug deep inside of our hearts as a people.

This is kind of what's going on at the height of the troubles. But then let me take you from Northern Ireland in the 1970s, right, to Nidre Community Church last year.

Okay, they're running what they do every year. They run this church planting weekend for people all up in, I guess, in Britain, UK, Ireland, all over the world, actually.

They come, people who are interested in planting churches in some of the roughest areas of our country, right? And so at this weekend, there's two guys having dinner together.

[25 : 01] And they're sitting there. They're having a laugh and talking about what God is doing in their lives. And at some point, they must have both, it was hot, and they must have both taken off their jumpers, right? And they both look at one another, and they both realize that they've got two tattoos eating their forearms, right?

Let me put the picture up. Is that right? Two tattoos in their forearms, but different tattoos. And here's a picture. So one guy, he's got an IRA tattoo. And the other guy has got a UVF tattoo.

And so they take this picture, and they put it on Twitter. And the tweet's up there for you to read. It simply reads, This picture right here is the power of the gospel. Once both enemies, now joined together in fellowship in Jesus Christ.

Hashtag, the gospel has no borders. That's the message of Ephesians 2. The gospel has the power to smash to smithereens every single barrier that divides the people of the world.

Because Jesus Christ is in the business of transforming hearts, of taking out the heart of stone and putting in its place the heart of flesh.

[26 : 14] And friends, remember that verse 14 as we finish. Why? He himself is our peace. Let's pray.

Lord, Father, we just humbled, Lord, as we come to the end of this time together looking at your word.

Father, what an incredible God you are. Father, the God of magnificent love. The God who pursued us when we were far off. The God who sent your son, that he would die on the cross.

That he would pay the price to win us for himself, the price of our sin. And reconcile us to you and to fellow brothers and sisters who believe in Jesus too.

Father, what an incredible God you are. And so, Father, I pray that as we go from here, that you would help us as a local church here to visibly demonstrate that unity that you have won for us to the watching world.

[27 : 21] That they too might come to know Jesus. And so, Father, I pray maybe this morning it's touched on some painful subjects for some people. And so, Lord, I pray that you would just be at work by your spirit just now in the silence, Lord.

As we bring to you maybe those relationships, Lord, that we know are strained. As we bring to you the people in our minds who we would long that they would hear and respond to the message of Jesus. Father, we would just bring that all to you now.

Father, thank you that you care. And so we pray all these things in Jesus' precious name. Amen.