

The Letter Of Paul To The Ephesians

*⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.
(Ephesians 1:7-10. ESV)*

Message 15

To Him Be Glory (In The Christ-Centered Church)

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Ephesians 3:20-21

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Ephesians 3:20. We are at the exact half way point in our walk through Paul's Letter To The Ephesians. There are three chapters of theology and then three chapters of application and today we come to the doxological hinge between those two sections. This is where Paul brings it all together; looking back and looking forward on the basis of who God is and what God is doing. He is standing in what he knows and he is looking forward and praising God for what is coming. Listen now to God's holy, inerrant and inspired word:

²⁰Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21. ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

It is sometimes said by scholars that Ephesians contains the most exalted ecclesiology of any of Paul's letters. Ecclesiology means teaching about the church. Paul, in Ephesians has a very exalted view of the church. Church is not an add on for Paul. He says wildly exalted things about this seemingly weak and humble and conflicted vessel that we call the local church. Think back to chapter 1:22-23:

²²And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (ESV)

That's incredible, Paul basically just said that Jesus Christ is a gift TO THE CHURCH and that the church is His body and the means by which He will fill the whole world with his fullness. That's pretty exalted ecclesiology. The church is not nothing, the church is not optional, the church is not some man-made repository of stuffy traditions and legalism as we so often seem to imply, the church is the focus of God's grace and giving and the place where he displays his beauty and does his work upon the earth! That's huge, that's a whole new way of thinking about the church.

Then in chapter 3 he takes it up another notch. Look at 3:8-10. Paul says:

⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰**so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known** to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 3:8-10. ESV)

He says here that the church is going to be the canvas upon which God tells the story and unveils the mystery of his manifold wisdom and glory. All the powers of heaven will stand up and watch in ever growing wonder as God paints a picture and weaves a narrative through the life, fellowship and witness of the lowly church of Christ. That's exalted ecclesiology. Now at the hinge of this letter we have this statement, this explosion of certainty and praise that God will be glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever amen. Paul is not hoping this will happen, he's not even really asking that this will happen, that's not what a doxology is. A doxology is not a petition, its a grounding in certain fact. Doxologies in the New Testament generally do not have a verb in them, the verb "is" or "belongs" is assumed. What this means is that the realities are certain – they are not moving, they are not in process, they are fixed realities. Doxologies are affirmations, not requests or wishes. They are the ground of petition; they are the reason we can ask for things and expect to receive them. We know this from the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer has six petitions – 6 requests and then it ends with a statement of certainty:

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, amen.

That's not Jesus asking for something, that's Jesus saying: "All of what I told you to ask for can be asked for in confidence BECAUSE God is the King and He has all power and all glory forever and ever amen. That's how Paul is doing it too, he's saying that God will be glorified in the church and he will be glorified in Christ because He's God and He has all power and does more than we can ever ask or imagine or think. This is going to happen friends because God has a plan and that plan has been let loose in the church.

The wording of that phrase "in the church and in Christ Jesus" serves to link those two things definitionally. Paul is saying that God is going to be glorified in the Christ centered church. That certainty is the basis for everything he's told them and prayed for them throughout his ministry among them. The great big cosmic plan of God is at the end of the day, an entirely local phenomenon. It's going to be birthed and its going to grow to marvellous and glorious maturity out of these tiny little, insignificant, massively complicated local churches. Like the River of Life flowing out from the enthroned Christ in the local church into the destroyed and ravaged planet causing all it touches to burst forth in glorious bloom, so is the life giving power of God let loose within the church. And when this picture is fully painted you will see Christ over all and under him, in submission to his Lordship you are going to see the church – the men and women who wilfully and joyfully serve and obey him forever and who in turn exercise lordship and dominion over all creation. That's why the Bible says:

If we endure, we will also reign with him (2 Timothy 2:12. ESV)

The Christ centered church will reign over all creation for all eternity. God will be glorified in the church and in Christ. So how is that happening? Paul says its happening and that the entirety of that happening is certain and sure so we want to ask how that will happen? What will be the ordinary means by which this extraordinary plan will be effected? Now because it comes in the hinge of the Letter, the answer is suggested both by looking at the words of the doxology itself but also by remembering what has come before and anticipating what lies ahead. Let me suggest 5 answers to that question drawn from the wording of the doxology and from the letter as a whole.

How Is God Being Glorified In The Christ Centered Church?

1. By the power at work in us

He says that in verse 20; this is going to happen by the power at work in us! We know what that power is because Paul already told us in chapter 1. Look at 1:19-20:

what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:19-20. ESV)

That's resurrection power. That's the power of life out of death. That's the power that lifts us up out of bondage and hell and seats us in the heavenly places. That's the power of being born again. Listen to me friends, do you know what displays the glory of God more than anything else in this church? Changed lives. Saved souls. Men and women, boys and girls being born again by the power of Almighty God. Do you want to know whether a church is part of the plan of God to be glorified before all the watching heavenly powers? Look for true, born again converts – look for men and women, boys and girls who were once lost but now are found, who were once dead in their sins who now walk in newness of life. Nothing tells the story of God's glory better than a person who has been truly born again.

2. By the preaching of the Gospel from the whole Word of God

We know that simply by remembering how we got to this hinge. Paul packs an entire systematic theology into the first two chapters of this letter. Think about all the ground that he covered in those two chapters. We talked about the Sovereignty of God over all things in chapter 1:

⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:4-6. ESV)

You read those verses and you realize pretty quick that whatever is going on in our lives, whatever is going on in this church it obviously has very little to do with us at the end of the day. God is large and in charge in these verses. He chose us before the foundation of the world. Before we did anything good or bad God chose us. God had a plan that we would be holy and blameless and that we would serve before him forever in love. He predestined us. I know some of you don't like that. Here's a thought: Who cares whether you like it? Its right there! I know

that in the flesh we want a reality where we are a little more important and where we exercise a little more Sovereignty and where this relationship we have with God is a little bit more of a partnership but that's not how it is! God is large and in charge and his ways are higher than our ways! God is Sovereign and before him every knee shall bow. Paul told us that, he didn't skip that or leave it out of his statement of faith because he knew some people wouldn't like it. He said it because its true. He preached the Gospel from the WHOLE WORD OF GOD leaving nothing out.

He told us about guilt in chapter 2 and he didn't pull any punches there either. He said:

¹And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked ... and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:1-3. ESV)

You were dead. Not sick, not sad, not confused – DEAD. You were dead in your trespasses and sins. You had no hope. You weren't a seeker, you weren't on the way, you were nowhere until God in Christ came looking for you. You were by nature a child of wrath – a doer of things warranting wrath from the womb. That's who you were. Until God in Christ did for you what you could not do for yourself.

⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4-5. ESV)

By grace you have been saved. It was a gift. You didn't earn it, you didn't do it. You were dead and God made you alive in Christ. God is a great God and you were a dead sinner. Any message of salvation that does not recognize those two truths is not a Christian Gospel.

You were saved by grace, now live in gratitude. Paul told us that too. He didn't leave that out like so many preachers do today. He didn't forget to tell them that the Gospel has consequences and effects. People who have been changed by grace are characterized by gratitude. Paul modelled that for us in chapter 1:

¹⁵For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you (Ephesians 1:15. ESV)

Having modelled it in chapter 1 he goes on to require it in chapter 4:

¹I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called (Ephesians 4:1. ESV)

Walk worthy! Live in grateful response to the glorious truth that you were dead and God by grace made you alive in Christ. He didn't leave that out. Grace demands gratitude and the Gospel has consequences when rightly apprehended.

He also told them about glory – in fact he's telling them about that now. Paul didn't leave anything out did he? He didn't shade the Gospel, he didn't preach the popular stuff in a cheap attempt to gather a crowd, he didn't cater to so called SEEKERS he told the TRUTH, the whole truth, the GOSPEL TRUTH, in all its glorious fullness. This was his consistent practise among the Ephesians. In Acts 20 when meeting with their elders before his journey to Jerusalem and certain imprisonment he said:

²⁶Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, ²⁷for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:26-27. ESV)

A pastor concerned to participate with the unfolding plan of God to be glorified in the church and in Christ preaches the whole Gospel from the whole counsel of God.

Thirdly, God is being glorified in the Christ centered church:

3. By good works and good living

It wasn't the Apostle Paul who first perceived that God was going to tell a story of his own glory through the life of the Christian church; Jesus said back in Matthew 5:

¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16. ESV)

Paul knew of that and it informed his teaching to the church. He told his church in Galatia:

¹⁰So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10. ESV)

He told his young protégé Titus:

⁷Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, ⁸and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us... so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. (Titus 2:7-10. ESV)

It isn't just good teaching that is commended here, it is also good works. Good works shut the mouth of our enemy and adorn the doctrine of God – they commend the beauty of God's truth. Here in Ephesians Paul spends the better part of 3 chapters showing how good works and good Christian living show forth the transforming power of God.

Let me bring that down to street level. Paul is saying that in essence, transformed Christian living serves the cause of worship and evangelism. You see, some of you think you aren't worshippers because you can't sing or play an instrument. Some of you think you are not involved in Evangelism because you don't witness on a soap box or hand out tracks – now I'm not saying those things are bad I'm just saying that worship and evangelism are bigger than those categories. As you will see as we go through this letter, loving your wife and parenting your kids and being fair to your employees is an absolutely integral part of the church's worship and evangelism. On the flip side, if you call yourself a Christian but are harsh and demeaning to your wife or you act superior and withholding with your staff or your kids run wild because you lack the capacity to discipline and instruct them, you are robbing God of glory and resisting the spread of his Lordship in this city. God is glorified through good works and good living in the church.

Fourthly, God is being glorified in the Christ centered church:

4. By our endurance under trial

In the Bible, Christians are called to mourn different and we are called to suffer different as a part of our testimony to the glory of God in Christ. In 1 Thessalonians Paul says:

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13. ESV)

Now, it doesn't say that we are not supposed to mourn – Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died. It doesn't say you can't mourn, it says you can't mourn like the pagans who have no hope. Christians don't moan and wail and say: "What will I do now? How will I go on living? How

will I pay the bills?” God will provide. We don’t mourn like the pagans because we’ve put our hope in the God who is in charge of all things. We don’t endure trials like the pagans who have no hope. We don’t cash in our faith chips because the marriage isn’t working out like you thought or because your boss is a jerk or because the kids got sick. That’s hard, but that’s life and Jesus didn’t say we wouldn’t have a life. He said: “In this world you will have tribulation” so all of that is par for the course. Christians don’t pretend to be happy, but neither do we wilt and fall under trial. Later in this letter Paul says:

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able **to stand** against the schemes of the devil. ¹²For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, **that you may be able to withstand** in the evil day, and having done all, **to stand firm**. ¹⁴**Stand therefore** (Ephesians 6:10-14. ESV)

Christians do not wilt and fall under trial. We stand and God is glorified in our standing. God is not interested in rescuing you from every trial, he has a great eternity filled with blessings planned for you beyond this life, but in this life he wants you to stand in the midst of all that’s wrong with this world and show people that you have a living hope. That’s what he wants and that’s how he plans to be glorified in the Christ centered church.

And lastly, God is being glorified in the Christ centered church:

5. By continuity and perpetuity

Look again at how Paul ends his doxology:

²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus **throughout all generations, forever and ever**. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21. ESV)

God has a plan to be glorified in the Christ centered church that is going to play out over all generations, forever and ever amen. You see, it isn’t like if we get this right on Thursday that God will be fully glorified and the plan of God entirely realized. God’s plans are always bigger than that. God told Abraham that he was going to be the father of many nations and that his descendants would outnumber the sands on the seashore and that he would inherit a good land and be a blessing to all nations. Almost all of that was unfulfilled when Abraham died. He had some children, yes, but not that many and he had some land, yes, but not even in the place he was

promised. It all lay ahead and it all came to pass over many subsequent generations. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the God of the multi-generational plan!

That's why you can't just look at your church today and know whether you are winning or losing. People ask me from time to time: "What is your church doing? We see your congregation growing, we see people coming to Christ, the parking lot looks really nice, what's the secret sauce? What are you doing?" I rarely even try to answer questions like that. First of all I don't really know and second of all we have no idea yet what this place will look like in the days of our children and grandchildren. We are way too early in the game to talk about whether we are winning or losing as a church. I know that God is winning and I know that THE CHURCH will be built and the gates of hell will not stand against it but whether this church will be around for the celebratory cake or not I have no idea. I know that some churches will. Some churches will work with God to pass on faith from generation to generation, forever and ever amen and in that I know that God will be glorified. He will show the world that his ways are right and lead to life and the wages of sin is death.

You can see that playing out right now in our world if you have eyes to see. In every culture that has rejected the idea of God there is a demographic crisis that very few people are talking about. Do you know that in Japan a country that has almost entirely rejected the Gospel, they expect to lose 2/3 of their population in the next 40 years. That would be like Canada's population shrinking from 30 million to 10 million in a generation. The situation is so bad that the Treasurer of the country recently told the senior citizens to hurry up and die already and he still had his job the next day. The government of Japan is investing in robotic nurses to care for senior citizens because they have so few Japanese young people that there is no one to care for the aged. They sell more adult diapers than baby diapers in Japan and if they don't figure out a way to turn that around the entire civilization will collapse in our lifetime. In Europe things are almost as bad. Many demographers expect Muslims to outnumber Europeans in many countries in Europe in the next 40 years for the simple reason that Muslims have babies and post-Christian secular materialists don't. In North America the crisis is localized. If you dig into the numbers as Jonathan Last has done in his book "What To Expect When No One's Expecting" you discover that in communities that are secular and atheistic, i.e. the east and west coasts, they simply do not breed because the highest value in such communities is self actualization. If you have children you know that children are a tremendous barrier to self actualization. I challenge you parents to

go home after church and to try and self actualize – its very hard to do with toddlers pooping everywhere and teenagers learning to drive your car. Its not going to happen. So the secularists don't have kids with the result, says Jonathan Last, that in the end, the meek really do inherit the earth. If you don't yet believe that just watch the world unfold over the next 40 years and you will see that the wages of sin is death and the ways of God are life abundant and life eternal through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

So do you want to get on board with God's plan to be glorified in the Christ centered church from generation to generation? Then let's be fruitful and multiply, let's teach our kids about the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. Let's teach them the Gospel from the whole word of God. Let's teach them how to adorn the Gospel with good works and with good living. Let's show them – Veronica thank you for showing them - how to endure under trial and loss and tribulation. Let's teach our children that and let's teach their children to do the same. Grandparents and single people, you are not off the hook. The verse doesn't say that God is going to be glorified through the Christ centered family it says the Christ centered church. This is a community project. We need you. You are not retired and you are not sidelined, you are critical to the task ahead.

Let me tell you something friends that I'm not sure many people are saying. I think there are very good days ahead for the Christ centered church. I think God is going to do more than we can ask or imagine or think. I also believe that secularism has reached or will reach its high water mark in our lifetime. I really do because in a self centered, narcissistic world, the babies you don't have and the babies you abort never grow up to agree with you; but on the other hand, the ways of God lead to life abundant and life eternal. I believe great days lie ahead for the Christ centered church. So let's build. Let's grow. Let's stop being afraid, let's stop expecting to be small and insignificant, let's stop waiting to be rescued and let's unfurl our canvas in all its width and fullness and let's watch as God is glorified, according to his Sovereign Will in the church, in Christ from generation to generation, forever and ever amen. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.