

The Most Important Digression in the World ... Ever!

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[0 : 00] where we're going as we look at that together this morning. But let's ask for God's help to speak to us and to enable us to hear him rightly. Let's pray together.

Almighty God and Father of grace and love, we praise you that you are a speaking God and that we can hear you speak to us by your Spirit as we come to your word.

And so we pray that you will open your word to our hearts this morning and open our hearts to your word for your glory. Amen. Increasingly, when you walk around the streets, you see people, don't you, walking along who don't see you because they're gazing at their phone in front of them.

And I used to look at those people and think, oh, they're lost. They're, you know, looking at the maps and maybe you should try and help and offer directions. But these days, there's also a good chance that they're actually playing Pokemon Go, which was one of the fads of this year.

Apparently, its popularity has slightly faded since the summer, although Nintendo are still making a fortune off it. So if you don't understand the craze and you can't tell the difference between a Pikachu and a Bulbasaur. Pokemons are pocket monsters and they're kind of out of Japanese mythology.

[1 : 24] And in Pokemon games, you have to capture these monsters. And when you've captured one, you can take it to a gym and you battle with it against other people's Pokemons that they've captured in a Pokemon gym. And they've been around for years. But what's different this time is the setting of the game.

Because previously, Nintendo would have had Pokemon games set in a fictional world, a fantasy world. But now, Pokemon Go uses the camera on your smartphone so that as your camera looks around at the real world, so the setting of the game becomes the real world and the monsters appear in the streets all about you. That's the idea. Or as Hayley put it on CBBC Newsround, Pokemon just got real.

So it's been ridiculously popular. And even though it's kind of waning a bit since the summer, as people have sort of had a go and they've done it and they've got tired of it, it's really the start of what we'll see over the coming years happening more and more in terms of developing our kind of entertainment and especially our gaming habits, which is this idea of augmented reality.

augmented reality. Taking the real world around us, especially through the phone as you look around at things through your phone lens, and adding things to it so that you play a game in the real world, augmented reality. Now, of course, what most people are doing when they play a game like that is just having a laugh. It's just mindless fun. And even you can join in with friends because you can meet them together and you meet new people through Pokemon Go. But on a deeper level, what does augmented reality say about our culture? It shows us that we long for transcendence.

We long for something that's more than what we can see around us. So instead of just, it's like we're kind of bored of the city. We're bored of what we can see and it makes us apathetic. We're not entertained by life. So to give us some energy and drive in our lives, why not add some Japanese mythology to your life, to your reality, and add some competitive spirit just to kind of get you out of bed in the morning and give you something to entertain you. And I just wonder if sometimes a similar thing could be true of us as Christians, that we get bored of being a Christian. Just let me ask you, how excited do you really feel about being a Christian today? How excited do you feel about being part of St. Silas, your church family? Some of us will be feeling, you know, I'm doing my bit. I'm working hard.

[4 : 14] I'm doing what I can, but it's draining being a Christian. It's like we need a new recharge. We feel discouraged, especially if you're getting sick for being a Christian or for the people, or if you're telling people about Jesus and you're not getting a good response. You encounter not very much fruit.

People are rejecting the message about Jesus and it's draining to feel like that. So it stops feeling exciting. Others of us, if we're being honest with ourselves, might have to admit that we're not doing any of that because we've drifted. We're drifting. Perhaps we could look back at a time in our lives when we were more keen in the Christian life, but now we're spending less time living for Jesus, speaking about Jesus, and we're just not excited by it. Other things in our lives are more exciting and they're taking up our energy and our time and our focus. So what's the answer?

Japanese fictional creatures. No, we don't need augmented reality. What we need is to see the spiritual reality of the church. We actually need to put on God's lenses and see what's really going on in the world and in the church because that will give us new excitement about being a Christian and being a member of the church. And in Ephesians chapters 2 and 3, the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to that over the last few weeks as we've been looking at it. The Holy Spirit speaks to us about what God sees going on in the world through the church and it's there to re-energize us and re-excite us about the Christian life. Paul told us in chapter 2 that the church is central to God's purposes in the world today. It's the place of a new humanity, of God's new family. So with those high purposes in mind, Paul has said all that and he gets on his knees to pray and he starts to pray in chapter 3 for believers and then he gets distracted. I don't know if you noticed that. So just have a look again at verse 1 and see that. For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, for the sake of you

Gentiles. Now what he's going to say there is, I, Paul, pray. But he stops and he won't take up the sentence again until verse 14. If you look down there, you can see him continue with his prayer.

In between then, we've got a digression from Paul, a divinely inspired digression. And it tells us something so amazing about the church. It's, I think it's the most important digression ever written ever by anybody. So let's dive in. The first point is about the church, the revelation of God's great mystery. See, Paul starts to tell us here why he's in prison. Verse 2, surely you've heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you. Now Paul is talking there about the particular role God has given him. That's the administration of God's grace. What is it? Verse 3, that is the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I've already written briefly. I think that's him talking about what he's just described, that God is bringing together a new humanity in the church, in Jesus Christ. Then he goes on, verse 4, if you have a look, in reading this then, you'll be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit of God to God's holy apostles and prophets.

[8 : 02] A mystery. I don't know how you feel about mysteries, but I love a good mystery. Kathy and I watch murder mysteries a lot on the TV, and I love the way that, you know, you're kept guessing all the way through, and then at the end, often all the suspects are gathered around, and you find out who's the one, who did it. And you don't want spoilers when it comes to mysteries. You want to not know as you're watching it, who did it. So you can keep guessing. There's that play, The Mousetrap. It's the longest running play in the world. It's been in Glasgow several times. Over 60 years, it's been going, I've got Christie's Mousetrap. If you've been to see it, at the end, one of the cast members comes out and asks you not to tell anybody who did it, because the reason it's been able to keep going so long is that the secret has been kept by people who've been to see it. That's the kind of thing we think of when we think of a mystery. When Paul uses the word mystery, in fact, when the New Testament uses this word mystery, it means almost the opposite of that, okay? What it means isn't a puzzle or secret that we're left guessing about. It means something that used to be a secret that now has been made clear by God, and it's a truth so wonderful, you would never have guessed it before. That's what the New Testament means by a mystery, something that has now been revealed for us in the New Testament through the apostles and what they were told by Jesus. So there'll be plenty of people walking past St. Silas today, or who you work with, or who you're at school with, who will think, you know, there might be a God, but we just cannot tell anything about what that God would be like and how we could relate to him. It's a mystery. And without Jesus Christ, that would be true. But the Christian knows the mysteries have gone. In Jesus Christ coming, and in the pages of the Bible and what we have from the Lord, we know everything we need to know about God so that we can know him for ourselves and have a future with him forever. The mysteries have gone. Yes, of course, there's still lots about God we couldn't understand, lots that's beyond us about God.

But we know everything we need to thanks to the scriptures. We're not waiting for something new. And there is a finality about the New Testament. We don't, as Christians, sit around thinking, we are short of something. We need God to reveal something more to us. That's not what it's like, because the New Testament reveals everything that we need to know about God to live a life for him.

So, Paul's there. He's been given this mystery, and it's been revealed. And I don't know what you think about that. It's perhaps just worth pausing to think, how would you have felt if you were Paul?

Surely, if you or I had been in that position, you would have been very excited. That would become the main driver for your life. That God has revealed a great mystery, a truth so wonderful, you could never have guessed it. And he's chosen you to be the person who delivers that message to the world. Nothing would distract you from that, would it, if that was true of you? So, what was it, this unguessable, unknowable, previously, truth from God? Well, that's our second point. It is the wonder of God's unbounding grace. Have a look with me at verse 6. 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. In other words, it's that God's grace in Jesus Christ is for everyone.

It's hard for us to understand how shocking that would have been. God had chosen the Jewish people. He'd given them promises, and if you believe those promises and you were ethnically Jewish, you were in the covenant, you were one of God's people. He promised a Jewish Messiah, an anointed rescuing king to come for the Jews. Now, there were signs all the way through the Old Testament that those promises would be for, they would spill over to the nations. So, Abraham, the first kind of father of the Jewish people, was promised, all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. But if you were a Jew, you'd have thought, surely it means people who become Jewish. Surely that's what it means.

[12 : 52] Gentiles could come and believe in the living God, and they could even come to the temple. But there was a barrier. They weren't allowed into the inner bits of the temple. They could only be in the outer courts because they weren't ethnically Jewish. There was separation. And then in the gospel message of who Jesus is and what he's done, God's free grace comes to everyone, and the barrier is destroyed.

Whatever you've done, whoever you've become, put your trust in Jesus, and you become one of God's people. I think we find that less astonishing than we should because we still live under the illusion that deep down, we're just pretty nice people. We believe our own propaganda about ourselves.

So, we think, of course, God would have had that as a plan because we're nice people, aren't we? God would have wanted to know us. And I wonder if that's why Paul, so far in Ephesians, has said some of the really challenging things he said about what we're like before we come to Jesus. He said in chapter 2, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. You were enslaved to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

So, you were just living for yourself. You had no idea the power of the devil over you, and you were just living to serve yourself. You were living to gratify your own selfish desires. You were cut off from the promises of God. You were without hope. You were without God, a spiritual refugee. And because God is a good God, by nature, you deserve from him that he would be very, very angry with you indeed. That was the beginning of chapter 2. That's what we deserve, the holy wrath of God. And astonishingly, instead of destroying you with the judgment that justice would have demanded of you, God reordered history so that you would be born at a time when someone would tell you about Jesus. That was an amazing act of God's kindness that you've heard about Jesus. And then God set his love on you and breathed his spirit into you so that when you heard the news about Jesus, you would respond by believing in him, believing in him.

So that when God called you, you couldn't resist his grace and you turned back to him. And then when you put your trust in Jesus, he adopted you into his family so that you know God as your father. He redeemed you from all your sins so that you're completely forgiven. And he put his spirit in you as a deposit because God says, you're mine. And one day I'm going to grab you as my inheritance and transform you so that I can delight in you forever. That's what God's told us in Ephesians chapter 1 and 2. And that news of God's grace is available, whatever your ethnic background, whatever nation you're from, God's unbounding grace. You see the emphasis in verse 6? Three times we see together, don't we?

[16 : 08] Heirs together waiting to inherit the earth. We're a body together and share us together in the promise of eternal life in Jesus. And it's worth just thinking as well how much that means the church fits in with God's whole plan for the cosmos. If you look back over the page to chapter 1 of Ephesians and verse 10, God told us his plan for the whole universe. Verse 10, God's eternal plan to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment is to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. So one day the cosmos will be completely united, that the whole universe will be at peace with itself and it will be focused on the Lord Jesus Christ. That's where history is going.

And God has planted his church in the world today as a glimpse of that glorious future. A bit like if you go to a motor show and you go to one of the car manufacturers, the car dealers, and they've got their kind of supercar of the future and you sit in it and you're excited because you think, this is what it's going to be like. This is what cars are going to be like one day.

Or a bit like when you go to, if you see a new housing development starting and for a long time, it's just a mess, isn't it? It might even have started as a nice green field. And the JCBs arrive from Barrett Homes or whoever it is. And after a while, all you can see is piles of rubble and mud.

And you, I mean, it's not very attractive as a housing estate. You can't really imagine yourself living there. But before, really, as soon as the developers can, they put up the shore home, don't they? They put up the shore house before they finish the street. So that even though the rest of it's still a mess, you can go into the shore home, you can look around and you can start to have a glimpse of what that street will one day be like so that you can invest. You might look out the window and it still looks like piles of rubble. But in the shore house, you can think, I see now where Barrett Homes are taking us. I can see what this area will be like.

Well, from Ephesians 1, we know God's plan for the whole universe. And it's hard to imagine. But what we see today all across the world are people who outside the church could never get on with each other. And inside the church are united once they become Christians. And that's the revelation of God's great mystery, the wonder of God's abounding grace.

[18 : 56] So why has God chosen to reveal that now in the world? Well, that's our third point. The church is the display of God's manifold wisdom. Paul explains his own commission in verses 7 and 8. At the start of verse 7, I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace. And he talks about going to the nations with it. Have a look at verse 10 to explain why God has called him to do that. Verse 10, God's 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. God makes clear to us in the Bible that just as there is a physical universe that we can see, there's also a spiritual universe. Not just where God is, but where there are spiritual creatures. There are angels of God. There are fallen angels. There's been a fall in the angelic world. And angels have rebelled against God. They're demons led by the devil or Satan. So the devil is not something to joke about. That's why Christians are not into Halloween.

Across Scotland, people making a joke of the demonic last Monday. But we know that the devil is a very real enemy. If you just flick on to the last chapter of Ephesians, let's just read from verse 11 of Ephesians 6.

Let's read that for us. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

It's quite frightening, isn't it, to hear about that struggle when you think about it properly. Just think about, I don't know whether you've watched a frightening film or a frightening kind of TV series recently. But if you think about what makes a show frightening, often the common denominator in something being scary is that the character you relate to can't see the enemy. It goes dark, and they can't see what's going on. Or they hear a noise in the house, or where they are in the woods, and they don't know where it's come from. It's frightening not to be able to see.

Paul says, we as Christians, if you're a Christian here this morning, you're in the heat of a spiritual battle against a force of real evil, and because that force is spiritual, you cannot see it.

[21 : 39] But back in chapter 3, the existence of the church turns the tables on the devil. You see, when the devil sees the church, it's not we who should be afraid, because the devil is very afraid.

As people are saved by God's grace, and they're brought into God's family, the heavenly beings look on, and they marvel at the wisdom of God. That word manifold, manifold wisdom of God, it literally means many-colored. So the angels and demons are stunned as they see God saving people in the world today, bringing them into his church, and they realize God is building a multi-racial, multicultural community united in Christ that are going to be his people forever and ever.

You know, if you've ever been on a tour of a sports stadium, one of the things that you get to see when you look around a sports stadium is the trophy cabinet. You get brought in to see it. And when a club has won lots of clubs and trophies and titles, they have to be selective about what they put in. Sometimes it becomes a trophy room, but eventually, you know, there'll be some trophies they've won that they stop displaying, because they think, well, we don't need to show that we've won that trophy, because we won that trophy, and that shows everybody how glorious we are.

So it's worth just having a think. If you were going to show somebody the wisdom of almighty God, what would you put in his trophy cabinet? If God said, I want you to show everyone how wise I am, pick something, and put it in the trophy cabinet for the world to see, what would you choose?

Maybe you'd go for some of the big things, like the way that God has formed stars, or the birth of the universe. Or you might go for living things, the variety that we see around us. Planet Earth 2 on tonight, as we marvel at the natural world, the living world around us. You might go for numbers, the ways that God has ordered the world, the universe, so that there are natural laws that the universe obeys, so that 2 and 2 is 4, 1 and 1 is 2, so that in base 10, whenever you multiply 9 by anything and add the numbers up, you get 9. That amazes me about the number 9. Or there's numbers like pi, isn't there? That never-ending number that is so important in the fabric of the universe. It's amazing that God has done that, that the way that circles relate to lines is affected by this number that we can't get to the end of.

[24 : 20] Constants like gravity or the speed of light that have to be just right for there to be a universe where there's planets and life. What would you choose? Maybe you choose none of that. Maybe you've got your own ideas about things that fascinate you about the universe, that show the wisdom of God. But Ephesians 3 tells us that what God has chosen to display most effectively his wisdom to the demons and the angels is the church. And I think from that he means two things. The church as it appears in heaven, whenever anybody becomes a Christian across the whole world, they join the invisible church, they're seated in heaven spiritually, and the devil can see that. But also, representatively, he means every local church gathering. St. Silas Church is in the trophy cabinet of God.

We are on display to demonstrate the wisdom of God. That's how much it matters that you are a wholehearted member of your local church. It's also worth thinking, isn't it, if that's what God is doing in the universe today, spiritual and physical, nothing is unseen. And I think that's a great encouragement to us.

Because sometimes I see Christians suffering, and I think, how could there be any good in this? And maybe you're somebody who is showing practical love for somebody, and you don't think anybody is seeing what you're doing. Or maybe you're somebody who is suffering in a way that nobody else knows about, and it's really hard. And it can be tempting if no one else knows about it, to think, how could there be any good in God putting me through this? God letting this happen to me?

But what we're seeing in Ephesians 3 is that as Christians respond in faith and keep hold of God in trust, whatever they're going through, God's wisdom is being displayed on a level that we could never fathom. Angels and demons are looking on and seeing God's wisdom in his people.

So together, we're a trophy of God's grace. And that leads us to our fourth point, the glory of being a suffering servant. See, the implication of what Paul is saying here is that the gospel should be the main thing in our lives. Paul was a prisoner for the gospel. In the first century, that was not a nice thing to be in prison. Five times he was given the 39 lashings. Once he was stoned. Three times he got beaten with rods. Why? All because of the gospel. Because his message was anybody can accept God's grace and be made right with God. But look at how he describes being given that role by God, of being God's messenger. Verse 7, despite the sufferings, verse 7, I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace. Verse 8, although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me. You see, Paul had a commission from God and he would give up anything for it. So I asked us to think a few minutes ago, how would you feel if you were Paul and you've been given that mystery to make known to the world? Surely it would be such a privilege. It would be the main driver for your life.

[28 : 01] Because the extraordinary thing is that God has left us now with that privilege. We are the people God is trusting today with the news about who Jesus is and what he's done so that we share that news with our neighbors, our colleagues, the parents who come to Tots here week by week, the students who live on our patch, friends at school, the city of Glasgow. We are to reveal that astonishing truth that God's grace is for everyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus. And as well as revealing that mystery with our words, our lives have to match that message. After Paul's great prayer in Ephesians 3, we're going to look at next week, this amazing prayer, he then goes on to three chapters, the rest of the letter, that are full of practical love commands for us. Very, very practical. They're going to affect who you choose to sit with at church, who you choose to talk to over coffee after the service, who you invite into your home from your church family. Paul will say things like, be kind, be kind to each other.

Flee sexual immorality. Don't tell lies to each other. Work hard. Don't steal. Don't get drunk. Be thankful. Be a good Christian spouse. And so on. It goes on and on. Very practical.

So the world out there will tell you that there are other things that should drive your life. You should be driven by what would make you more popular. Or you should be driven by trying to do more traveling and see the world. Or you should throw yourself into your career, because that's where the action is. But see the spiritual reality going on. Because of the spiritual reality, invest the gifts God has given you in growing his church. Just think, every time we do something that shows our practical love for each other in church, the devil smells defeat. The demons shudder. They think, oh no, he's won. Here we are trying to disunite and decreate and divide. And look at that. Look at those people getting on with each other.

Do you know what? It's only a matter of time before that's going to be true of the whole universe. So how we treat each other at St. Silas and who we invite to St. Silas is of cosmic importance.

And I'm praying that at St. Silas, that spiritual reality will change us as a church. That you'll all see the church the way God sees it. It's not that we need augmented reality to fire us up and excite us. We just need to see spiritual reality. And even if that means that we're called to great sacrifice as Christians, even if it causes us suffering for being a Christian, let's remember verse 13. Paul says, I ask you therefore not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

[31 : 23] See, in God's economy, glory and suffering go hand in hand. And Paul knew that when he suffered to get the gospel out, others would get the glory of knowing God. It's the same for us today. When we suffer to make Jesus known and the gospel advances, our suffering leads to glory for other people.

It's the most loving thing you can ever do for somebody to share Jesus Christ with them. And we know that by looking at Christ himself. In verse 12, I don't know whether you noticed, Paul says, through faith in Jesus Christ, we can approach God with freedom and confidence.

But for Jesus to earn that for us, he suffered immensely. He had to be shut out of the presence of God so that we could have access. He was rejected and forsaken by his father so that he could earn for us a place in the security of God's family, the church. Let's pray together. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we marvel at the depths of your wisdom and knowledge in creation, in redemption. We are amazed that before the foundation of the world, you would have had this salvation plan, that knowing that people would turn their backs on you, that their hearts would be bent on rejecting you. You set your love on people that you might create a new humanity that crosses all ethnic divides and national divides. We thank you for the immense privilege of being called to be part of that glorious future as we put our trust in Jesus Christ and our members of your church today. We thank you for the immense privilege that you call us to be builders of your church as we share Christ with others and live wholeheartedly for him, even where that involves suffering for us. And so we pray, Father God, that you would enable us to see our church family as you see us, to see Christians through spiritual eyes, to have a greater grasp of what you're doing in the world today, that we might be more effective in service of you and more joyful at the commission you've given us. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to continue in prayer now with our intercessions.