

Elders and Deacons

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Date: 01 May 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, this morning I'd like to go back to this chapter. There's a lot in this chapter, obviously there's a lot we're not going to be able to cover, but hopefully give some kind of overview to this chapter which is good and significant for us.

And I want just to highlight verse 16, the beginning of verse 16 of chapter 3. If you have that, it's on page 992 of the Bibles and do feel free to use the Bibles that we have today in the church.

Where Paul says, after speaking, because as Cori was saying last week and we've mentioned before, really Paul is giving instructions for how the church should be structured, how the church should be put together as it were as a church.

And he says, great indeed we confess is the mystery of godliness. Now I just want to start with this because it's very important I think in the context even of this chapter, because when the New Testament speaks about mystery, it's kind of different from what we think of as mystery or our definition of the word mystery.

For us, a mystery is something that's difficult or impossible to explain, you know, what happens to the single socks in the washing machine.

[1 : 1 3] Now that's a mystery. Nobody knows what happens to them. You always lose one of the socks in the washing machine. Why some people would choose Coca-Cola over iron brew.

That's a mystery. It's a mystery why anyone would do that. We don't know. It seems strange. It's impossible to explain people's tastes.

Why a minister would choose to preach from a chapter by starting at the last verse. That's a mystery. There's no explanation for that, but sometimes it happens.

So you see, that's really our understanding of mystery, something that can't be explained, something that's inexplicably different, difficult to understand. But in the Bible, mystery has a different meaning.

It really means something that can only be known when God reveals it. It's a mystery that has been revealed. It's something that God makes clear to us through revelation, through the person of Christ and through the word of God.

[2 : 1 6] If you look back to Ephesians, it says quite a lot in Ephesians about them, or uses that word quite a lot. Paul uses it in chapter 3. I'm going to read verses 3 to 6 of this chapter in Ephesians where Paul says, How the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men and other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Or in the very, a couple of letters on in our Bible in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 27, Paul speaks about to them, God has made known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of His glory, of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

So you can see that mystery in the Bible is really about what God reveals to us. It denotes something that is really radically different to the broken order of life that we would call normal.

And God reveals a different way. It's something that for us should be amazing and should be awesome. It's not something that's made up. And it's something that we need God's help to understand and to know.

[3 : 53] We need God to open our eyes and open our heart to understand this amazing mystery. And how would you summarize this great mystery? Well, Paul does it here with this doxology or this early hymn, this doctrinal statement that you see is written in poetic form here in our Bibles.

The rest of this chapter, the rest of this verse rather, great is the mystery of godliness. And he gives us this great definition of Jesus, of Jesus.

He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

So the greatest revelation of the mystery of what God wants us to know, what God can only reveal to us, is when we see and understand and know and grasp the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the greatest, most astounding revelation of God, because as he says there, is God manifested in the flesh, God who entered the womb of Mary, God through whom Mary as Corey was talking about last week, Mary becomes the one through whom her seed becomes the Savior.

[5 : 21] And we are saved through her initial childbearing, moving forward to the birth of Jesus. And the Holy Spirit vindicated everything he said and did, empowered him to do amazing miracles and then raised him from the dead on the third day, acknowledging that he was righteous and innocent, having taken our guilt and our judgment, the guilt and judgment of ordinary people on himself.

The angels were told here saw that, they witnessed that, they declared his salvation in his birth and in his death and in his resurrection, and I'm sure they were gobsmacked.

Gobsmacked by what God revealed was his plan of salvation, the silence in heaven wondering who would go. The angels having no word whatsoever to say as we were told in Revelation, then Christ comes and he takes a timid bunch of men, unschooled ordinary men and women.

And he empowers these trembling, fearful people in an upper room with the greatest of good news. And they go and billions of people have been transformed, billions of lives have been turned upside down and redeemed, all sorts of people from every part of the world through the same Spirit of God who raised and saw Christ ascending and that same Christ returning again, taken up in glory and we will follow in his train.

So the mystery of godliness is Christ. You couldn't make it up. You couldn't make that up.

[7 : 23] It's the greatest expression of God's character, of His divine love and of His purpose that involves every single one of us. He's the supreme revelation of God.

The great mystery revealed can't be equalled, can't be surpassed, and today, you know, he can't even be ignored. He can't be ignored.

You can't positively sideline Jesus. He can try, but it is impossible to do so because we will all stand before Him.

And that is a great mystery revealed to us, and God chooses to reveal to us, and we reach out to Him and ask Him to reveal this great mystery to us.

So I ask the question of myself when I'm looking at this, do I see His beauty? Do I see His glory? Do I see the wonder of who Jesus Christ is? And am I willing to share that great mystery revealed to me through Jesus Christ's great work of redemption and salvation as we come to Him in faith and trust?

[8 : 30] Christ Jesus is the pinnacle of the mystery that God reveals. But this chapter unfolds further in the mystery of what is revealed to us in salvation, and it's done so in different ways because we're told that the church, this is God's mystery revealed to us.

We all have our own ideas of what the church is, don't we? We all have our own particular emphasis of what do you think the church is if someone asks you there? What's the church? Well, God says here that the church, in verses 4, and you're right, that is a mystery, I'm going backwards, the church is God's household.

That's how it is described. Verse 14, I hope to see you too soon. But I'm writing these things so that if I delay you might know them and how you ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and buttress of the truth.

So we see a couple of things here that God reveals to us about what He sees the church as, because Paul is here giving instructions about what the church is and how the church should function, isn't it?

We saw that last week and we see it again today. Well, the church is God's family, it's the family of the living God, the household of the living God.

[9 : 48] It's not a club, it's not an institution, it's not a ritual that we belong to. It's a family. And God uses the language of being adopted into His family, into His church, into God being our Father in this family.

So our primary, your primary identity in mind today as Christians is that we are children of the living God and that is there to keep, to humble us, recognizing who we are before the living God.

We are together here, brothers and sisters. They'll be people who are here for the first time today, who we've never met before, who love Jesus Christ. And we're brothers and sisters with them already.

We are by nature of belonging to Jesus Christ and dwelt by the Holy Spirit. Our lives are marked by the transformation of knowing God and coming to know God in Jesus Christ.

Being spiritually alive by the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. So we are to be people who in church, when we gather together are responsive to God's Word and alive to what God is saying that we're learning and that we're growing, that there's a vibrancy about who we are and a vibrancy about how we worship.

[11 : 16] And that we come recognizing we're governed by God's own instructions that He gives in this epistle and in many others about how to function as a church together that we are under His authority together as our heavenly Father.

Now, sometimes that's difficult for us, isn't it? It may be difficult particularly if your idea or your experience of family is really negative.

If you've had an abusive family, then it's very difficult to envisage church as a family without having negative connotations about that.

Or it may be you've got a great family and you've had an amazing family experience and that's a great privilege. But we have to see that as only a shadow of what we're asked to recognize the church family is being.

And it needs to be revealed to us because it's not natural. It's not how we would necessarily want to gather together or how we would want to understand one another or come under His authority to act in love and grace towards one another.

[12 : 31] So the church is the family of the living God. It's also the visit, so He describes it secondly in these verses 14 to 16, as the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth or a pillar and foundation of the truth.

So when we speak about the church, God's mystery revealed to us as the church is the pillar and the foundation of the truth. Now remember this was written to Timothy who was in Ephesus and Ephesus had at its center a really big temple and it was a temple to Diana, the goddess Diana who they worshiped.

And I believe that it had 36 big strong pillars that were 40 feet high. And Antipater of Sidon who is a Greek poet who is ascribed as being the one who first talked about the seven wonders of the world, included the temple of Diana as one of the seven wonders of the world.

And he said, the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels, the six other wonders lost their brilliance. And I said, no, apart from Olympus, the sun never looks on anything so grand.

It's the temple of Diana. Nothing ever looks so great. Great is Diana of Artemis. Great was the cry of people of this goddess that they worshiped.

[13 : 59] And yet Paul is saying the church is the pillar of the truth, the pillar and the foundation. And I think he's using that same illustration that people in Ephesus would have understood when they looked at the great temple of Artemis of Diana.

And he's saying, no, the church is great indeed, he says, is the church because it's the pillar and foundation of the truth, not any idolatrous worship.

The church then, can we say, can I say today, the church is the eighth wonder of the world? Is it the eighth wonder of the world? God's, or is it the first wonder?

Is it the one to eight all subsumed all together? Of course it is because of who Jesus Christ is. And we are called to live and to display an example and spread as a people together, family, the truth of the redeeming God.

We're to display it, we're to live it, we're to fuse that truth by our interactions with one another in our worship. We are to reveal God who is love, worship Him as love, and worship Him by loving one another as we are called to do, loving Him, loving one another, loving even our enemies.

[15 : 23] Now that's a mystery, isn't it? That's a mystery that's revealed. Nobody tells us to do that. Nobody speaks about that. But we're called to love our enemies and to love those who revile us.

And we're called to love within the church. And it's a powerful thing because we're called to be truly great. Great is the mystery of Godliness. So today I suspect, if you're like me, I suspect, and we're all sitting down, I know it's not going to happen, but I suspect we should all fall in our knees and ask for forgiveness.

For having a much lower, a much less revelatory, a much duller view of the church and of each other and of our significant, or the significance of our lives and our worship under God.

Isn't it true that often the church reflects bad society, divided, polarized, abusive, anything but great?

Stabilized, disposable. We are called to be great, not because of ourselves, not because of who we are, but because of what has been done for us and by Jesus Christ in our place.

[16 : 46] There's no such thing as an ordinary Sunday when we gather. There's no such thing as our gathered worship being well down the line of our priorities. There can't be because the mystery of Godliness is that we are called by God to be His family and the pillar and buttress of the truth.

Now, we come towards the climax, or at least the conclusion of the sermon, because in some ways the greatest mystery... Well, now maybe that's not right to say the greatest mystery of all, but the most remarkable one in many ways is the character that is required of the leadership in God's church family.

The pastoral preaching, leading, an ordained role that was given as Corrie preached so powerfully last week to men in this role.

Now, I just have to say at this point that it's not true. I've heard the rumors, but it's just not true that I chose to preach in the most westerly point in the Scottish mainland to avoid preaching that chapter.

It's not true, okay? It was just how things fell, and there was nothing mischievous or wrong in me taking that submissive and sacrificial role of traveling 400 miles and going to Camelotown to preach the gospel there.

[18 : 19] But I would have to say that we need to come back to that chapter, and maybe 1 Corinthians 11 and one or two other chapters, maybe in a Wednesday or a Sunday night and do a series on gender, because I think it was very helpful and very useful so to do.

But Christ here, through Paul, is revealing this great mystery of what true leadership, to ordained leadership of elders and deacons is like in the church.

And you know what's so mysterious about it? It is absolutely the antithesis of what men are like by nature and by inclination, because we're promiscuous, we're out of control, we're self-indulgent, corrupt, drunken, violent, argumentative and greedy.

We often abandon family responsibilities for the pursuit of career, proud and selfish, trying to make ourselves great, often at the expense of our reputation.

That's man by nature, that's men by nature. But God reveals the mystery of godliness in revealing Jesus Christ and in being followers of Jesus Christ.

[19 : 36] He's revealing a specific character and the specific calling of those in leadership, and so doing is revealing in many ways true manliness and also revealing the example and the characteristics of godliness in leadership generally, and I think also for all of us.

Okay, there's heightened requirements, I think, for those who are ordained into pastoral leadership, but it's certainly commanded of us all. It's just one or two things then.

First it's a noble task. I'm going to the second of Paul's five trustworthy sayings, I'm not going to elaborate these sayings any further, but it says, anyone who aspires to the office of it and overseers desires a noble task.

So the task of an elder or deacon in a church, and to desire that is, it's not noble to desire it as much as it's a noble task to take it on board.

It's a beautiful and worthy calling. That's a mystery, isn't it? Because many people despise the authority of the church within the church, let alone from outside.

[20 : 53] And yet it's a calling of the living God commanded and instructed by him. And what is revealed in these descriptions, really from verse one through right to verse 13.

And I'm not going to go into each of the characteristics, you'll be glad to know. It is servant leadership.

That's the picture that we have. And Christ is the great example. Talk about the mystery of Godliness being Christ. Christ is the great example of servant leadership.

He calls himself, Christ calls himself, or Peter calls him an overseer, an elder, a bishop in 1 Peter 2.25. He says, you were like sheep going astray, 1 Peter 2.25.

But now you've returned to the shepherd, an overseer of your souls, the same word that's used here. The overseer, the one who looks intently, the one who keeps an eye on.

[21 : 55] That is who Christ is, and that is what has been spoken of here. And of course Christ himself, speaking about himself, but speaking about the leaders of the church in Luke 22.27, says, who is grayer?

The one who's at the table, or the one who serves? Oh, the world cries out quickly, and they have a chorus, it's the one who's at the table. But Christ says, is it not the one who's at the table?

But I am among you as one who serves. And so there's this, and that's the same word as is used here for the deacon, the servant. So we have this idea of servant leaders, servants and shepherds.

That's the picture of the elder and the deacon. I'm taking them both generally together this morning. I know you could spend lots of time going into great detail. But those who are set apart for leadership are to lead by example.

That is one of the great things, to care, protect, and feed, and serve their people. That is what we're called to do. There's never a place within God's ordained model of church, of family, the family, and the very fact that he uses the term family is so significant, isn't it?

[23 : 13] It's that there's no place for being arrogant, or distant, or abusive, or bullying, or harsh, or authoritarian.

Having in these verses speaks against that, it's having this servant, shepherding role, always being willing to serve, always being willing to take on the most menial tasks.

Servants and shepherds, that's... I'm overlooking the whole thing, servants and shepherds. What's the other thing that we can take from these lists, which we're not really going to go into, is character before gifts.

That's what's important. You know, the world sees the leaders of the world will often say it's all about gifts, it's all about ability. But Christ says, no, it's much, much more important, his character.

Gifting is much less significant, can I say, but still significant. There's really only one gifting mentioned, his ability to teach for the elders.

[24 : 19] And I hope that is self-explanatory, because we're called to the preaching and teaching ministry. But it's character before gifts, and we see it in three areas, don't we?

We don't have time to go into them, but we see it first of all. And really, I don't need to explain these things. You all know exactly what they mean. We all know exactly what we mean. You don't need to go through them in great detail.

We know what they mean, don't we? So you've got heart character. What we're like in our heart, verses 2 to 4, the overseer must be above reproach, husband of want, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

That's easy, isn't it? We know what these characteristics mean. I don't need to spend ages explaining them. Our hearts, and it talks about our family.

The one wife that is the wife of the prospective elder, and if they have a family, that is, I don't think it's in any way a barrier to single men becoming elders.

[25 : 33] In that family, if you have that family, there must be a management in the right and personal way of managing their own household well, because if they can't do that, and it's the parallel, isn't it?

It's the family. If you're in your own family, if there's chaos, then how can they lead in the church family? So there's the parallel between families, small and big, as it were, or functional and spiritual in different ways.

So there's heart, and there's family, and significantly there's also society. There's seven more. Over he must be well thought of by outsiders, so they may not fall into disgrace, into the snare of the devil.

It's just persons to be well thought of in society, in the workplace, in the neighborhood. We've often ignored that, haven't we, in many different ways.

So the heart, the family, and society. Now we were all sitting for the family stuff. Well, the elders and deacons here, and ourselves, and me, and Corey, we would do well to be prostitutes, lying openly on the ground.

[26 : 48] As leaders, we would all do well to reflect, and I suspect if you're like me, repent. Repent for sure, when we look at the characteristics that are here.

But I'm not going to let anyone else off. I'm not going to let other men off, because all of us as men are to show these Christ-like and godly characteristics in our lives.

We're not here to point the finger at one another. We're not here to expose the weaknesses of the ministry, and the eldership, and the deaconate here in St. Columbus, because we all come under God's sovereign word here, don't we?

And indeed, all of us men and women together recognize as one family, all of us are called to reflect Jesus Christ, to look like Him with our own individual and unique characteristics.

And I'm calling on you today to pray for your leaders here, because we need your help. We need your grace. We need your forgiveness.

[27 : 57] We need to recognize the great significance of our calling more clearly. And also, we all need to recognize that the mirror of Scripture holds all of us to account and points all of us to Jesus.

These things are not there to paralyze us. They're not there to beat us with a stick. They're not there to make us feel hopelessly guilty and useless, far from it.

They drive us towards Jesus in all His forgiving love and forgiving power, and enabling power to be the kind of people He wants us to be. And as a church to be the kind of church that He wants us to be, it's a mystery.

It's a mystery of godliness. And when we do so, and when we follow Him and when we come to Him and allow ourselves to be molded by Him, I think we find spiritual strength.

The inverse 13 He says for those deacons, gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that's in Christ Jesus. I think that can be applied broader, that we all find great confidence, great strength when in our weakness we go to the one who is our source.

[29 : 15] And it doesn't paralyze us, and it doesn't make us say, oh, woe is me, I'm hopeless, I can't go on, I'm a rubbish Christian. That's just self-pity. And He doesn't want us to be full of self-pity.

He wants us to be transformed, and His promises are that He will transform us. He doesn't expect the past to be perfect. He doesn't expect us to be always great at everything we do.

But He says, I'll give you back the years the locus of eating. I'll give them all back to you. I'll make today and tomorrow great as you come independence, and we find confidence and strength and a good standing that way.

Isn't that beautiful? Because it's about health and about strength and about wholeness, which is what He does. So my deepest fear for myself, and you may share this as well, I'm sure, is that we're content with ordinary, manageable, grace-deficient substitute in our understanding of our lives and God's hopes for us, for our understanding of the church as being the pillar and foundation of the truth, and of being God's family.

And as men, as leaders, and as leaders of men and women, because we have women in many different aspects of the church leading, that we are called to be an example, and we're called to be an example in our hearts, in our homes, and in our society, in the workplace or the halls of our academia, or whatever we happen to be.

[31 : 04] I'm afraid sometimes that we're content without revelation, and without that mystery of being revealed. But we are called to be great.

Great for Him, for His glory in His strength, for everyone to see as a church and as individuals, let's make Jesus famous.

That's our calling. And all of us can do that by His grace and with His favour on us. And if you don't know Jesus, and if the mystery is a mystery to you, then call out to the one who promises to make known that mystery as you come to Him in repentance and faith.

It's great. It's great good news we share today. Let's pray. Father God, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for this passage.

We are challenged and moved and sensed deep, deep inadequacy as leaders, as elders, as deacons, as people, as Christians, as children of God.

[32 : 16] But we know that You never intend that to paralyze us. We rejoice that You make many promises, and that that great Spirit of God who rose Jesus from the dead, then, is the same power that we are given to have lives that are transformed.

What a picture of character we're given in this early verses of the chapter. What if we were all like this Lord? What an amazing place we would be. So forgive us, we ask.

Give us a high view of the church, of Your authority, of Your ordained leadership structure so despised and rejected today. And may we humbly live out that structure that You give with all grace and with all humility, servants, pastor servants, shepherd servants.

And may we all come under the great grace and word of the overseer of our souls, the Lord Jesus Christ. We ask in His precious name. Amen.