

# A Theatre for God's Glory

Ephesians 3:20-21

*Halifax: 27 January 2008*

## **Introduction:**

So far in Ephesians,

- Paul has been telling us about all the great things that God has done in redeeming the church!
  - The Lord has brought all of us who believe from the most desperate state of helpless, wretched, hopelessly sinful depravity into His very own household!
  - He has pardoned us through the sacrifice of His Son and He has transformed us from death into life by the powerful working of His Spirit.
- Last week, I showed you that in Ephesians 3:14, Paul begins to speak about his prayer for the Church...
  - He prays that God will do the work within them that is necessary to make them all that God's children ought to be:
    - He will strengthen them within through His Spirit,
    - and He will cause them to see how much He loves them.

And now, this week, we come to the last two verses of Paul's prayer.

- There is so much in them that I thought it best to expound them in a separate sermon.
- In these two verses, Paul requests that God would accomplish through the church the great purpose for which all of His work in redeeming us and forming us into a house is done; namely,
  - that God would be glorified!
  - That He would show forth His excellent glory by what He does in us...
    - by the way He loves us and transforms us to make us pure and holy and beautiful...
    - by the way He forms us into a house filled with love—divine love—love such as God has dwelt in for all eternity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There are three things that this conclusion to Paul's prayer ought to encourage in you:

- Prayer that God would be glorified in the church
- Labour that God would be glorified in the church
- and Confidence that God will be glorified in the church

Listen as I exhort you to each of these... First,

## I. Pray, as Paul prays, that God will be glorified in His Church

- Let his prayer inspire you to pray as he does.
- As an apostle who walked closely with God, he knew what ought to make up his prayers.

### A. Look at what he is asking here so that you might follow his example...

1. His basic request is that God's glory would be seen in the church.
  - a. If you look at verses 20 and 21, you can see that this is the essential request...
    - 1) He begins by saying: "Now to Him" in verse 20...
      - And then the rest of verse 20 is a subordinate clause that explains who "Him" is—"Now to Him who is able to do... and so on..."
      - but in verse 21, he goes on and states what he wants to be "given" to God...
        - "now to Him be glory in the church..."
    - 2) We don't often speak this way, "to him be glory"
      - This is a request that glory would be ascribed to God...
        - in other words, that people would see God's greatness and perfection and excellence when they see His work of grace in the church.
        - That is the essence of what he is praying... and that is the reason that God does His gracious work—
          - for the manifestation of His glory.

TRANS> By why God's glory "in the church?"

- Why does Paul focus on the church in particular?
- b. As an apostle, he knows full well that the church is God's theatre in which He displays His glory to the whole universe—even to Himself!
    - 1) The church is that which God has set up, more than anything else, through which and upon which His glory is to be seen.
      - a) Certainly, it is seen in the creation of the universe!
        - How impressed we are the deeper we dig into the mysteries of creation and understand more and more how expansive it is...
      - b) Further, His glory is seen the angels, who gather round His throne to praise Him and who do His work as His attendants...
      - c) But how much greater is the glory that God has purposed to reveal through His redemption of His elect.

- (i) It is all of His design that the human race should fall into sin and misery...
    - and then that He should demonstrate the glory of His justice in punishing some of them
    - and the glory of His mercy and grace in saving some of them.
  - (ii) We have seen this all along in Ephesians...
    - Remember back in chapter 1?
    - Paul couldn't stop reminding us that God has redeemed us "for the praise of own glory."
  - (iii) God has been pleased to show off how gracious and loving He is by taking sinners like us to be His children...
    - even when doing so required Him to offer the Son of His eternal love on the cross to atone for our sins!
    - And to show off His wisdom in the way He worked out His plan through the ages...
    - And to show off His power in making us alive when we completely dead in our trespasses and sins.
- 2) Get it clearly into your head that there is no wrong in God's showing off like this...
- a) We are so used to the wrong in seeing other people boast and show off—because it always involves a lie when they do...
    - As creatures, they have nothing that they did not receive from their creator...
      - Their boasting is offensive because it is a sham—it is a drawing of glory to themselves when that glory belongs to God.

TRANS> But it is altogether different with God.

- b) When God shows off, there is nothing inappropriate about it at all!
  - The only reason we might think that is because we don't see the great difference there is God, the creator, and us, the creature.
  - But we will learn that difference as we go on with the Lord, if we indeed belong to Him,
  - and as we learn it, we will want God to show more and more of His glory.

- In heaven, we will be eternally occupied with gazing on His glory!
- It will be the very core of our happiness to do so.
- We will realise fully that He alone is glorious, and that all other glory in the universe has its glory from Him alone.

TRANS> But to get back to the point...

3) The Church is the place where God has chosen, above all other places, to show forth His glory!

- So Paul is fully in touch with God's eternal purpose when he prays earnestly that God would show forth His glory—not just in general—but in the church!
- Pray for this, brothers and sisters, and your prayers will be in harmony with what God has purposed to do.

c. There are two places from which God's glory in the church is to be recognised...

1) First, it is to be recognised by the church itself.

- God wants more than anything for His own redeemed children to glory in what He has done for them.
- As we say last week, He is working in us to show us how much He loves us, to show us what great things He has done for us!

TRANS> But also,

2) God's glory in the church is to be recognised by those who are outside the church...

a) It is to be the everlasting delight of angels to see it...

- They are like a great audience, looking at God's gracious dealing with us.
- There is an eruption of praise whenever a sinner is redeemed.
- They behold the glory of their God.

b) Further, His glory shown forth to unbelievers and devils...

- As they look on at God's redeeming grace, they cannot help but see how merciful and holy and wise our God is...
- Though they curse Him and hate Him, they cannot but admire Him.

c) And thirdly, I would suggest that God's glory is even seen to Himself.

- We are often told that God delights in His children.
- As a Trinity, the Father delights in the Son who freely gave Himself for us, and in the Spirit who powerfully works...
  - If I may say so in reverence,
    - you almost get the idea that God is having great fun with all this!
    - That He is doing one gracious thing after another and saying, "Watch this."
    - Just a man with a train that he has set up in his attic loves to have children come over gaze with wonder upon his work, so the Lord delights to show forth His glory.

TRANS> O how marvellous are God's ways, showing His glory in the church to the whole universe!

- Let us add our prayers to those of the apostles that it might ever be so...
2. But look also at what Paul adds to this prayer for God's glory in the church—
- a. First, he adds that the glory in the church would be seen "in Christ Jesus.
    - 1) Why does he say that?
      - He says that because it is in Christ alone that the church is blessed.
    - 2) The glory of God is not seen in the church in itself, but the church in Christ.
      - He is all the glory of the church because He is the source of our redemption and the supplier of all that is good in us...
      - When the glory of God is seen in the church, forgiven and sanctified,
        - Christ is seen as the great fountain of all that she is!
        - He is her righteousness, He is her sanctification, He is her life!
          - Without Him, she is nothing, but in Him, she is glorious!
          - It is God's will that He should have the pre-eminence!
  - b. And the second thing that is added is that God would continue to get glory to Himself from the church forever and ever...
    - What are the words?
      - "to all generations forever and ever!"
    - 1) The glory of a redeemed church is not something that the onlooking universe is ever to move on from...

- For all eternity, the church will be theatre for His glory.
    - The cross is supreme revelation of God's mercy and grace for all eternity.
    - Never again will it be repeated.
      - This revelation of God is so full and so rich that we will never exhaust what is shown of God from it.
- 2) Paul's earnest prayer is that this glory in the church in Christ Jesus will be a glory that continues to be more and more appreciated "to all generations forever and ever."
- that there will never be a time when this glory is forgotten
    - that there will never be a time when fresh discoveries of it do not bring delight to all those creatures of God who love God.
    - Amen indeed!
      - May it always be so forever and ever!
      - Let this be your prayer brothers and sisters!

B. Pray all that Paul prays here with boldness my brothers and sisters!

1. It is for you to cry out to God fervently to do His work in His church in such a way that His glory will be seen!
- Is it difficult for you to see the glory now?
    - a. Of course it is—we are not yet what we will be when God finishes with us...
      - He is still in process with us...
      - We are not yet perfected.
      - We are not yet nearly as holy as we will be...
      - We do not yet delight in our Father nearly as much as we will...
      - We are not yet filled with divine love that is to characterise us when God has finally completed His work...

TRANS> And not only that,

- b. But we are also hindered from seeing His glory as we will see it because we do not yet grasp the glory of our redemption...
  - Indeed, God has excited and delighted our hearts,
    - but we are yet dull...
    - That is why Paul keeps praying, as he speaks about all that God has done,

- that the eyes of our understanding would be opened...
  - and that we may be enabled to see the width and length and depth and height of His love.
- c. Perhaps we could learn from Moses here...
- First to pray (as in Psalm 90, that the beauty of the Lord would be seen upon us...
  - and secondly to pray that God would show us His glory, as Moses prayed when he interceded for Israel.

TRANS> Thus you are to pray! Tell God to go on make us impressed!

2. And let me add to this that there is even room for a holy complaining!
- a. When you look at the church and you don't see God's glory—
- When you see the church becoming more and more worldly, changing the truth of God into a lie because she no longer likes the true God...
  - When you look at your family and you see irresponsibility, complaining, a lack of love.
  - When you look at your own life and you see a sour, complaining spirit... habits that cannot be broken, a lack of self-control...
- b. Then, I say, it is time for a holy kind of complaining!
- To call on the Lord and say,
    - "Lord, where is your glory? Where is the power that is supposed to transform the church?"
      - You can even ask Him if He has forgotten to be gracious!
  - It honours Him for you to pray like that if you really mean it!
    - It shows that you care about His glory being hidden—that you want to see it—that you want it to be known.
  - The great reformations in the church have often occurred when there was this spirit of holy complaining—
    - not complaining that our lives are hard and we want it to be easier for us...
      - That is not the right kind of complaining at all...
    - But the kind of complaining that yearns for God to do whatever has to be done make His glory be seen upon us...

- To be so yearning for it that you are willing to suffer and sacrifice and do whatever it takes for His glory to be seen.

TRANS> Let Paul's prayer encourage you to pray earnestly that God's glory would be seen in the church.

- That is the first thing—Paul's prayer here should stir up prayer in you...
  - But that is not all...
- There is no sincerity in your prayer unless you are also willing to add labour to prayer...
  - A man who prays for a job, but does not go out to look for a job, is insincere in His prayer...
  - So it is, that those who pray for God's glory to be seen in the church but who do not seek to glorify Him are not sincere—their prayers are empty.

**Let these words of Paul, then, not only encourage you to pray, but also**

**II. to labour that God will be glorified in His Church.**

- This is brought out, not so much from the prayer itself, but from what follows it immediately in chapter 4...
  - A. In chapter 4, Paul is getting ready to call the church to labour for God's glory.
    1. Up until now, he has been telling us what God has done and has promised to do for His Church in order to get glory to Himself...
      - a. He has told us how the Lord has been pleased to incorporate sinners, who were once dead in trespasses and sins, into His family.
      - b. And He has told us how He has promised to make those sinners holy and without blame...
        - to form them into His own holy dwelling place.
        - to fill them with the fullness of God so that they might once again bear His glorious image and live beautifully as His sons and daughters.
    2. But look at what happens when we get to chapter 4.
      - a. He transition from the declaration of what God has done to an exhortation about what we are to do—
        - He moves from the indicative to the imperative, from things to believe to things to do, from faith to duty.
        - The transition is set forth in the first verse of chapter 4:
          - Eph 4:1: "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,"

- Your calling is to be a holy dwelling place for God, to be His sons and daughters!
  - And now Paul is saying:
    - “Be the sons and daughters of God you are called to be!”
    - “God has made you His children—now learn to live like God’s children!”
    - “Give yourself to become what you have been called to be by the grace of God.”
- b. And you can see where he goes with this—
- into many wonderful exhortations about what it means to be the people of God.
    - 1) In verses 2-6, he calls them to be humble, remembering that they are all one in Christ.
    - 2) In 4:7-16, he calls them to receive the Word from their brethren that they might shape their beliefs and their lives according to the Word...
    - 3) In 4:17-32, he calls them to put off the old man and put on the new man which is renewed according to God’s commandments...
    - 4) In 5:1-7, he calls them to imitate their heavenly Father in purity and holiness.
    - 5) In 5:8-17, he calls them to walk in the light of God’s word that they might do His will...
    - 6) In 5:18 – 6:9, he urges them to be filled with the Spirit...
      - which involves encouraging each other in God’s word...
      - and living according His will in our particular callings as husbands and wives and parents and children and servants and masters.
    - 7) And finally, he calls them to live in prayer dependency upon God (in Ephesians 6:10 and following).

TRANS> All in all, it is a call to live together as God’s family according to God’s directives—to live in holiness and love...

- These exhortations are what we are going to be looking at for some time beginning next week!

B. But what we have at the end of chapter 3 is an encouragement for us to live as the children of God...

1. This is how God is glorified in Christ!

- a. He receives glory in His church when His transforming power is clearly evident in our lives.
  - When His beauty is seen upon us!
  - When we are living in the faith, love, and obedience that He had called us to live in as His people.
  - Jesus said that the Father is glorified when you bear much fruit.
- b. This is how we adorn the gospel—by bearing the fruits of it.
  - I am grieved when I see one of those men I seem to frequently encounter who is keen on doctrine—who can talk that talk but who does not walk the walk!
  - Such a man does not bring glory to God!
  - As Doug Wilson puts it,
    - your theology needs to come through your finger tips...
    - It must translate into action or it is a reproach rather than an honour to God.

TRANS> If you really do care for the glory of God, you will be willing to labour in order that you might bear fruit.

- You show how much you care about the glory of God by how hard you labour.
2. Bearing fruit always requires a lot of effort—hard effort.
- a. Some Christians seem to expect that transformation is supposed to just happen.
    - 1) Well I will tell you that if you think that, you are greatly mistaken!
    - 2) God is the one who gives us fruit, but the way He does it is by first stirring us to labour!
      - If He wants to bless a man with a bountiful crop of corn,
        - He doesn't just suddenly make corn come up in his field on its own!
        - He first stirs that man up to labour hard to plant that corn and to tend his ground...
          - and *then* He blesses that man's labour and gives him success.
          - Since that fall, fruit only comes by the sweat of the brow.
  - b. Brothers and sisters, you will never become beautiful God until you are prepared to exert yourself to become beautiful for God.

- 1) You have to come to see how good fruit is, what a blessing it is to become like your father—
  - to love your children with a holy love instead of selfish love...
  - to spend yourself in service to your neighbour the way Christ spent himself for you...
  - You have to want that and be willing to work at it... to go outside of yourself—to mortify the old man
  
- 2) Don't you hate it the way people with rebellious children who do not bother to discipline their children always act like those who have godly children have those children without any effort?
  - It's not so!
    - The Bible calls you to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.
    - Paul exhorts his disciple Timothy to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness...
      - He tells him to fight the good fight of faith, to lay hold on eternal life to which he has been called!

TRANS> When you hear all that Paul has said about God making His glory known by taking sinful people like us,

- and forming us into a holy dwelling place for Himself—
  - making us holy and without blame before Him, strengthening us and causing us know the love of Christ...
  - does it not make you ready to exert yourself to be that holy family He has called you to be?
    - to put on that new man,
    - to walk in that love,
    - to be an imitator of your heavenly father,
    - to help and encourage your brothers and sisters so that God's glory will be seen upon you?
  
- When Paul, in his prayer, says, "to Him be the glory in the church in Christ Jesus,"
  - does it not make you desire to do all you can to bring glory to Him as His church?
  - Oh I hope it does!
    - If there is no desire like that in you, I fear that you do not really know Him!
    - You are a dead stone in the church rather than a living stone.
      - The living stones are stones that yearn to see the glory of God and make that glory known.

- When Christ makes you alive, you want to be fruitful for God...
  - you want to be filled with the fullness of God...
  - you don't want to go on as you are...
  - you exert yourself for His glory!
- So then, I have shown you how Paul's prayer for God's glory in the church encourages you both to pray and to work...
  - Now, thirdly, I want you to see that Paul's prayer encourages you:

### **III. to be confident that God *will* be glorified in His Church**

A. This encouragement is found in that wonderful subordinate clause in verse 20 where Paul describes our heavenly Father as:

- "Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to power that works in us."

1. I was just talking about the need to labour, and telling you that you cannot expect to bear fruit unless you labour...

a. But if everything was dependant upon your labour, that would be very discouraging

- unless you are a person who completely misunderstand how unable you are to do anything for God...

b. But no my brothers and sisters! Paul does expect the church to glorify God apart from God's working!

- The God who calls you to labour is the God who works in you with all grace and power!

- As Paul told us back at the end of chapter 1,

- The same divine power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us...

- That is the power that raised Him when all our sins that would have sunk is into eternal hell-fire were laid on Him...

- With **that** burden upon Him,

- He came up from that grave with victory!

- That same power is at work in you!

2. The God we serve is the God who...

- called a man with a barren wife to bring forth a child that would bless all the nations of the world after God had cursed them at Babel.

- the same God who called Moses to go before the mightiest king in the earth and tell him to let Israel go that they might serve God when that king was determined to keep them...
- the same God who called Joshua to take Israel into the promised land and conquer all the great fortified cities with their trained armies when Israel was weak and untrained in war...
- the same God who sent Gideon to attack and overcome the Midianites with 300 men when the Midianites were a countless multitude...
- the same God who sent a shepherd boy named David to subdue a mighty warrior named Goliath who defied the armies of the living God...
- the same God sent Elijah to command that the rain not come for three years and have it not come...
- that same God who called Ezekiel to preach to a valley of dry bones and command them to arise...
- the same God who took twelve very ordinary men and commanded them to carry the gospel to the four corners of the earth that the nations might be blessed in Jesus Christ...
  - **That** is the God who is at work in you, both to will and to do according to His good pleasure!

3. My brothers and sisters,

- You can no more bring forth fruit than that old farmer I spoke about before can make his corn grow!
  - He can't make one stalk come up!
  - All he can do is plant and water and pray... it is God who gives the increase.
- Now that farmer is a fool if he trusts in his labour alone and so are you if you trust in your labour alone to become a holy temple of God...
  - You are called to labour and to wrestle, but it is God who will make the change in you.
  - He does it all for His glory, and you can't do it without Him.

B. Paul says that He is able to do "exceedingly, abundantly, above all that you can ask or think.

1. Do you know what that means?

- a. It means that you can never ask God for too much.
  - You can never ask Him for more than He is going to give.
  - You can't even conceive how much He is going to do—it is beyond you!

- b. Now you will say to me, “But how can that be true?”
  - I could pray that God would give me a job that would pay ten times as much, and I don’t think He would do it.
  - I could pray that God would save everybody in the world and even the Devil himself, and I don’t think He would do it.
  - I could pray that God would make me sinless tomorrow, and I don’t think He would do.
  
- c. Yes, I understand that you can ask God for more of something than He will give you...
  - Just as a child could ask his parents for ten pounds of candy...
    - And though it would be possible for his parents to give him a thousand pounds if they were so minded, they do not do it because it is not best.
  - The point here is that God will do what is best for His glory and our good.
    - You will say, “Why doesn’t He save everyone then?”
    - That is what is best in your limited finite wisdom, but God knows what is best for His glory...
      - And He tells us that it is essential for Him to get glory not only from saving some of His enemies, but also from destroying some of them.
  - When we at last see the fullness of God’s glory revealed in both judgement and salvation,
    - then we will understand and we will say that God has done more than we could have ever ask or even imagined!
  
- 2. Come now, hasn’t God already blown away all human expectations?
  - a. I mean, who could have ever dreamed that the God of all power and glory would send His Son to die on the cross for guilty sinners?
    - When the Israel prayed that God would provide the lamb that would take away the sin of the world,
      - they had no idea what God had planned to do!
      - It went far far beyond their wildest dreams!
        - Even the disciples could not fathom it until after the resurrection...
          - even though they had been plainly told that He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...
            - they could not imagine that the Son of God would die for them...

- they couldn't even handle it when He washed their feet!
  - Even though they had been plainly told by Jesus Himself that He would be delivered into the hands of the chief priests, crucified by them, and then that He would rise again...
    - They could not conceive that God would ever do such a thing.
  - And I say that in a certain way, it was right of them to not expect such a thing.
    - It would have been too much to expect!
    - It would have seemed presumptuous to suppose that God would go to such extreme lengths for their salvation!
      - It exceeded the bounds of all proper expectation!
  - b. But after it was all done... after Jesus came forth from the grave announcing the victory...
    - then what had all been confusion and seemed so wrong became absolutely glorious—marvellously so!
    - Then they saw, that God, who seemed to be doing much less with Christ than they expected had done more...
      - far more!
      - far far far more!
3. Now can you not take heart from this?
- a. When the apostle says that God can do exceedingly, abundantly, above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that works in us,
    - **It's true!**
    - **He can!**
    - **and He will!**
  - b. Don't rely on your finite understanding—rely on God and His promise!
    - Based on what God has told us and the promises He has given us, we know that He will truly make us like Christ...into that holy family He has called us to be...
      - but we don't come close to understanding the fullness of what He will do until He does it!
      - As John says, it has not yet appeared what we shall be, but we know that when we see Him we shall be like Him.
    - Get excited brothers and sisters!

- God will blow away all your expectations by exceeding them!
- He is it work in you to do in you what will show off His glory in ways that go beyond your wildest dreams!

C. Paul's words here are quite striking!

1. He loads on words to make his point that is far far greater than we think.

- As William Henderickson explains the progression in Paul's words here:
  - God is able to do all we ask him to do.
  - God is able to do all we think but dare not ask
  - God is able to do more than this.
  - far more
  - very far more.

2. And so my friends,

a. As you look at God's call to become a holy temple for Him...

- And as you look at the church and what it is now and as you look at your own life and you see:
  - the laziness that keeps you from going on and doing what you need to do.
  - the pride that looks with contempt on your neighbour
  - the self-righteousness that, instead of making you humble when you enter into a spat with your spouse, causes you to walk away with feelings of superiority.
  - the envy that keeps you from rejoicing in the success and gifts of others, and makes you secretly rejoice when they are torn down.
  - the same envy that keeps you from helping your neighbour
  - the selfishness that makes you think whatever is happening to you (be it good of bad) is so much more important than what is happening to your neighbour.
  - the covetousness by which you cannot get your mind off of what God has **not** given you so as to be thankful for all that He has given you!
  - the self-reliance that makes your prayers so faint.
  - the unbelief that makes your prayers so faint and your labour so lax...
  - the ingratitude that fills you with complaining
  - the self-pity (which you suppose is Christian humility) that causes you, when you serve, to serve with an attitude; and when you don't serve, to feel perfectly justified.
  - the dullness that makes you blind to the omniscience of our Lord so that you live as if He is not near.
  - the emptiness and shallowness of your relationship with the Lord that makes the Sabbath a burden rather than a blessing—or that reduces it to an exercise of self-righteous rule-keeping and pride instead of a day of hearty spiritual communion.
- As you look at all this, you might be tempted to say, "What's the use?"

- b. And I say to you,
  - Keep looking at yourself and you will give up in despair...
    - But look to the Lord who gets glory by raising up His church and making her holy...
    - Look to the One who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, above all that you can ask or think...
      - And you will have solid grounds for firm and lasting confidence!
- c. I urge you to remember this as we move into chapters 4-6 in the coming weeks!
  - You are going to hear a lot of exhortations to be what God has called you to be...
    - And as you hear them, I want you to always remember who it is that is at work in you...
      - It is Him who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, above all that you can ask or think according to the power that works in you!
      - He is going to bring glory to His name through His transforming work in you...
        - He has the power to make you beautiful—
          - to take you from the depths of sin and bring you to the intimacy of His own heavenly family.
        - He calls you to live in the communion of His family through Jesus Christ, and He will see to it that you do.
          - He will make His church a theatre of His glory for the whole universe to marvel at!
          - Glory be to His name forever and ever!
          - Amen, let it be so!