

A Minister of Grace

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] let us pray God our Father we pray now that your word will take deep root in our lives so that we may be better servants of Jesus Christ for we ask it in his name Amen I wonder how you feel when the boss says to you or leaves you a note saying please come and see me sense of fear and trepidation what have I done wrong what have I forgotten to do am I going to get the sack or is this something good if you've ever had that experience of the boss or somebody saying please come and see me you've probably had that sense of fear and trepidation is this a good thing or is this a bad thing if we were to translate that thinking onto how we might approach God if we got a message from God saying please come and see me I imagine the sense of fear and trepidation might be slightly increased probably should be what is God's response to me if he leaves me a note saying please come and see me how is God going to respond to me is he going to look on me favourably and accept me or is he going to look on me with some displeasure because I failed him in some way well just as when we have a message from the boss so with God there is this uncertainty in most of us I suspect and if we were to think about when we die and we're confronted by God at death is he going to warmly welcome me into heaven or is there an element of fear and trepidation about how God will respond to me when he meets me in this passage in Ephesians 3 in the verse that Sue concentrated on just before verse 12 page 182 we have a little statement of summary of what the Christian faith is about Paul says that in Christ we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in him that's in Jesus Christ Paul is saying that we can have confidence and assurance when we approach God he's not saying self-confidence or self-assurance as though we can walk up to God in God's presence and say God I stand here with confidence before you because in my life I have done all these things I've been to church and I've read the Bible and I've done this and that and the other that's not what Paul's talking about at all he's rather saying that the grounds of our confidence in approaching God are Jesus Christ for Jesus is the great introducer Jesus is the one and the only one who will introduce us to God who will in a sense take us into God's presence if you imagine yourself in a court of a grand king or an emperor somebody might come and take you into the presence of the king or the emperor well with respect to God Jesus is the person the only person who will take us into the presence of God and that's a great thing that's a thing that should give Christians enormous joy and confidence in their Christian life a few weeks ago a couple of months ago I've been living in England until I came here in March and in February I went I was in London for a couple of days before flying back and with a friend we had free tickets to go into Madame Tussauds Waxworks Madame Tussauds is the most popular tourist place in London and it doesn't matter what time of year or day the queues are enormous this was February it was snowing it was bitterly cold and the queues extended around the block of people waiting to go into Madame Tussauds Waxworks a queue of over an hour long but we had free tickets and not only did we have free tickets they meant that we could enter through the VIP gate and jump the queue and it was quite sort of grand to sort of walk past this long queue of tourists waiting to go into

Madame Tussauds with our free VIP tickets all because I'd spent money on my visa card and walk in and present them and go straight in and jump the queue it wasn't because I was a more important person really it was just because I'd been given these free tickets now in a sense what Jesus does for a person who's a Christian is the same sort of thing Jesus is the ticket if you like into the presence of God the VIP entrance no waiting no sense of qualification with Jesus as our ticket we can walk straight in to God that's what it means in this passage in this verse when it says boldness and confidence of access not because I'm particularly great or special but because I've been given the ticket by Jesus to enter into God's very presence so just as I was able to walk straight into Madame Tussauds same with Jesus and though these tickets were free I suppose there was a sense in which I'd paid for them on my visa card by spending lots of money but the thing is about the access that Jesus gives us is that it is totally free we don't pay for it we don't earn it we don't deserve it it's free it's a free gift we don't stand there and say

I'm allowed to enter because I've been a good person because I've been a religious person because I've done this or I've done that it is a free gift that Jesus gives us and it's guaranteed by his death on the cross so that's good news and if you're not a Christian as many of you may not be then this is something to seriously consider for the only way you'll ever meet God and receive his favourable pleasure is through Jesus death Jesus in a sense the ticket for us into God's access the one who introduces us to God no other way but that now you might think that that sounds good news and you'd be right and it is but the irony is that in this passage in Ephesians 3 Saint Paul who lived just around the time of Jesus he was alive at the end of Jesus' life he died in about 64 AD so it's nearly 2,000 years ago Saint Paul is in prison and he's going to be executed he was executed in Rome under the

[6 : 25] Emperor Nero most probably because of that message that message which is a good message of access to God for any person through Jesus Christ was the reason why Paul is in prison when he writes this letter to a church of Christians in a place called Ephesus in modern Turkey a place that you can visit as I did in January and see the ruins of ancient Ephesus one of the great centres of the ancient world why then is he in prison if that was his message because surely anybody would welcome that sort of message Paul writes at the beginning of this chapter at the end of page 181 for this reason I Paul a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles he's about to actually pray for the people there he's told them all about the Christian faith he's summarised it all in the preceding two chapters as we've seen here in this church over the last four weeks he's now about to pray for them for this reason I Paul pray but he doesn't quite get to say pray because he just stops his sentence midway he's probably dictating to somebody who wrote it down and you know when you're talking to somebody you end up digressing you talk about something you're about to tell them something and a word in your mind triggers some other avenue of conversation off you go sometimes we don't even come back to what we were going to say well Paul does we'll see that next week at the second half of this chapter but here he says

Paul a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles and he suddenly thinks why am I a prisoner I need to explain because the Ephesian Christians when they realise and they probably knew already that he was a prisoner could easily have been discouraged they think well what's all this about if Paul's message is so good why is he in prison so Paul goes on to explain it the first paragraph verses 2 to 6 of this chapter in a sense summarises what he said already in chapters 1 and 2 but the key to it is that firstly he's a prisoner because God has given him the message of the Christian faith so we don't work out what the Christian faith is by our intelligence Paul hasn't made it up he hasn't dreamt it he hasn't thought up some new grand philosophy his point in verses 2 to 6 is that God has given him the message of what we call the gospel the good news of the Christian faith so he says in verse 2 assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you he calls it God's grace it's the Christian faith message what we call the gospel grace means a free gift it's God's generosity a gratuitous gift to us that's what he means by grace in the preceding chapter he said that any person who's right with God is saved by grace many of you know the well known hymn amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me when I was young I used to think it was all about somebody being stranded on the ocean who was saved by a woman with a lifeboat service and apparently in

England you see there was this person called Grace darling I think and she went out and saved people and I thought this hymn was actually about that and then I later discovered that the hymn's nothing to do with somebody being in a shipwreck it's actually to do with Jesus Christ that amazing grace is the love the mercy the generosity of God in Jesus Christ that comes to me and saves me and makes me right with God forgives me my sins and establishes me on a right relationship with God so that hymn's all about that it's a great hymn we like to sing it but that's actually what it means and it makes no sense if you're not a Christian to sing that hymn because it says amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me and if we don't know that we've been saved by Jesus Christ then it's really a nonsense to sing that hymn even if we like the music Paul goes on then to explain what he's been given the mystery that was made known to me by revelation Paul you see was actually a person who despised Christians he was not a good man at all in fact he was one of the worst he was a murderer St Paul was a person who was putting to death people who were

Christians because he hated Christians he was a Jew a devout Jew a zealous Jew and he didn't like people who were Christians because they believed that Jesus Christ was God and so Paul was on his business of killing Christian people St Stephen was one of the was the first person probably to be killed for being a Christian and Paul was there at that time Paul was on his way to the place called Damascus the capital of Syria again to persecute Christian people and kill them and on his way he had his grand vision heard a voice from heaven was struck down and his life changed forever God did it God in a sense picked Paul up and turned him around and changed him from being a persecutor of Christian people to being a Christian himself an enormous change and God spoke to him Paul didn't go searching after God Paul didn't try and discover what the Christian faith was about God just invaded his life and turned him around and made him a Christian and that's what Paul means here when he says that the mystery was made known to me by revelation as he's written briefly in the preceding two chapters as you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of

Christ it's not something that was known in ages past it's something recent since Jesus was alive and it's been made known by God to the apostles and prophets and he summarizes it in verse 6 the message that of revelation is this that the Gentiles they are the people who are not Jews and now with the Jews fellow heirs fellow members and fellow partakers they're joined together we saw this in the last chapter in Ephesians chapter 2 that is God in Christ has done something dramatically new the ancient barrier between Jews and non-Jews which is a fierce barrier more fierce than the northern Ireland dispute between Protestants and Catholics more fierce even than the dispute between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East today so great was the divide between Jew and non-Jew in Paul's day and Paul has said and is saying here that in Jesus Christ those who are Christians Jew and non-Jew now actually have harmony together union together but not only was Paul given the message more importantly he became a servant of it he had the job to preach it so he says in verse 7 of this gospel

[12 : 36] I was made a minister really a servanter a lowly servanter a table waiter we might think of ministers sort of touch grandiose in all sorts of elaborate garments and so on but for Paul to be a minister was to be a servant a low servant a humble servant of God's gospel but perhaps he makes it worse than that he says the least of we might say the leastest the very least of all the apostles that was Paul because he was one who persecuted Christians and so we might think well God doesn't want anything to do with a person like that but you see God does there's nothing that we've done that's too bad for God Paul was a murderer of Christian people and God changed him forgave him gave him grace and established him as a Christian and there was nothing in Paul's life at all that warranted that a free gift and Paul is amazed that not only has he become a Christian by God's grace but even more so that he's become a minister by God's grace and though Paul recognizes that in a sense being a minister means that he has a duty and obligation to serve God it is in fact above all an enormous privilege it's both a privilege to be a

Christian and a privilege to be a minister we are not Christians by right we cannot claim before God that we have a right to be his people it is a privilege and the same for Christian ministers it is a privilege to be a minister of God's gospel of grace so Paul goes on to explain what he's been a minister of by explaining the faith of the wisdom of God that's been made known hidden for ages but now revealed in Jesus Christ he says in verse 10 that part of the message is that it's through the church that God's wisdom will be made known many of us might think of the church as rather irrelevant something inconsequential in our life and in our society world some of us will have thought that in the past and some of you may well think that now but indeed Paul says the church is essential in the purposes of God though it may be weak though it may be divided though it may be uncertain the church as the union of the people of God is in fact by very existence a demonstration of the eternal purposes of God the church is an essential part of God's purpose it's an essential part of being a Christian as we saw last week there's no place for being a Christian and not being part of the church and though it's right at one level to say oh you don't have to go to church to be a Christian any

Christian will belong to the church and participate in it and those of you who've made vows this morning as parents and godparents have pledged yourself to belong to the church Sunday by Sunday worshipping God whether it's here or in another church Sunday by Sunday worshipping God and worshipping Jesus Christ that's the extent of the promises that you've made this morning and so we look forward to seeing you in church next week and the week after if you're living in Doncaster because that's the promise that you've made today in the sight of God why then if this is Paul's message is he in prison after Paul had extensively traveled through Greece and Turkey the Middle East he ended up back in Jerusalem he was then arrested on a trumped up charge as we read in another book of the New Testament called Acts of the Apostles for having taken a Gentile a non-Jew into the temple area of Jerusalem where Gentiles were not allowed to go Paul had not in fact done that but the thing was his message was that through Christ

Jew and Gentile had access to God that's why he summarizes his message in verse 12 as having boldness of access because it's that message that led to Paul going to prison he proclaimed that Jew and Gentile together could go into God's very presence through Jesus Christ in the Jerusalem temple as we saw last week Jews were allowed to go near but not too near and Gentiles were not even allowed to go near Paul's message was that in Christ Jew and Gentile that is all of us any person who's ever lived can go freely into the very presence of God through Jesus Christ with boldness and confidence Paul's message was misunderstood by the Jews and they arrested him and ultimately he was murdered were executed for that message of the Christian gospel Paul was prepared to die for that message because it was the most important message that anybody could hear he wasn't prepared to renounce it or change his mind is the most important message of world history that through Jesus death you and I can have access to God in his very presence and Paul was prepared to die for it it's a bit strange here in modern Australia because nobody dies for being a Christian well in fact they do a Baptist minister was shot in Perth a few years ago in Australia for being a

Christian despised by somebody who I think was not a Christian was a Muslim I think and it does happen occasionally in Australia I believe that by the end of my life it will be most disrespectful unrespectable is that right word to be a Christian in this country within the last 20 years it's becoming less and less acceptable to be a Christian in this country now we want people who are politically correct and the trouble is if you're theologically correct you're not politically correct and so more and more Christians will be put onto the altar in modern Australia and I imagine that maybe within my lifetime maybe beyond it Christians may well be killed for being Christians at least if not killed in prison for being Christians in this country but even so if that did not be the case there are more people who are murdered or executed for being Christians in this decade than last decade in the world and there are more this century than all the centuries in the past in world history for in countries like China parts of the Soviet Union still Middle Eastern countries

[18:37] Libya Iraq Sudan Egypt Israel itself Christians are put in prison or executed merely because they are Christians and worship Jesus Christ in your baptism this morning you'll probably go away and say oh what a lovely service isn't it nice and sweet and all looks great in white but there's something very serious in Christian baptism that's gone on today for we are baptized as Christian people into the death of Jesus Christ sounds a bit odd really to be baptized baptized into somebody's death but part of baptism is a stand that we are Christ's we are marked as his very own as was said and that means even to death for Jesus died for us and we must be prepared to die for him and in baptism it's not all nice and cheerful in a way there's actually something very serious underneath for the symbol of baptism is not just of new life it is actually of death that we die to our old self in order to live for

Christ so what's happened today is something that's actually very serious quite somber Jesus died for us he gave up his life for us he let people hang him on a cross for us so that we might live but in living we are called to be prepared to die for Christ we actually enjoy the legacy of those who died for Christ the legacy of St Paul the legacy of other early Christian martyrs but even more recently than that the legacy of an Archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered in 1556 for being a Christian bishops of Worcester and Gloucester who were murdered in 1555 for being Christian they were the ones who established the Anglican Church not because of Henry VIII's divorce but because of the truth of the Christian gospel and they were prepared to die for it and the reason why we're Anglicans today is in part because they were prepared to die for the gospel of the Christian faith so let us not forget that let us not forget that being a Christian is something very serious indeed yes it means enormous access and privilege from God but in our response we are called in a sense to give our lives for him that's why Paul was in prison he concluded this passage by saying do not be discouraged that I'm in prison if

Jesus died for me it is worth my while to be imprisoned even to die for him don't be discouraged he says God's gospel stands despite any opposition it faces let's pray almighty God we give you thanks that people like St. Paul Stephen Archbishop Cranmer and others have died for the Christian gospel and we pray that we also as Christian people will live for Christ and die for him so that we may bring glory to him we thank you for the enormous privilege it is to be Christian people and the enormous privilege it is to have received the glory of the the gospel and to be ministers of the gospel and to be ministers of it and we pray that we may be faithful stewards of your grace given to us through Jesus death for we ask it in his name amen amen