

The Church-A People with Purpose

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[0 : 0 0] In World War II, in the prison of war camps, there was an interesting difference, or an interesting difference was discovered between Christian and non-Christian combatants. The difference was so pronounced that the Japanese, where the POWs, these were English and Australian POWs, the Japanese had to divide the prison of war POW camps between those who were Christian and those who weren't.

The non-Christian POW camp, after a few weeks, they could drop the guards. They hardly needed any guards to guard the non-Christian prisoners of war. And that's because non-Christian prisoners of war, they found, became docile very quickly.

They were broken. They were easily broken and easily beaten. And they didn't have enough reason or strength to want to resist whatever the Japanese were doing, because they did indoctrination and just broke down their spirits.

The Christian prisoners of war, on the other hand, needed twice the guards at their camps. And that's because the Christians never stopped trying to escape. Because they were driven.

They had a purpose. They had a hope. Which meant they never stopped fighting the enemy, no matter how hard it got for them. And this goes to show that Christians have a very different outlook on the world, outlook on life, than the rest of the world.

[1 : 2 2] We are a people with purpose, a people with hope, a people with a destiny. And these are very powerful words, a very powerful concept. So we're going to uncover them in our talk today.

We're going to look at our purpose and our hope and our destiny as the church. And today's passage will help us understand where that purpose and destiny comes from. And we'll look at what happens when a group of people, a community, gets together to make that destiny a reality.

I'm really going to look at two things. And first of all, we're going to look at the church as the center of God's plan to bless the world. The church as the center of God's plan to bless the world.

The book of Acts is, if you've got your Bibles open, just turn with me to Acts chapter 1. It really tells us what the book of Acts is all about.

Luke introduces it. In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach. Just notice that little word, began to do and to teach. So when we look at the book of Acts, the word Acts makes you think of the Acts of what or of who.

[2 : 4 1] There's a big discussion in Christian circles whether it's the Acts of God, God doing stuff. Is it the Acts of Jesus? Is it Jesus doing stuff?

Is it the Acts of the Holy Spirit? Because the Holy Spirit is very prevalent in the book of Acts. Doing stuff. Or is it the Acts of the Apostles? Or, expanding that a bit, the Acts of the Church?

Because they're very active in doing stuff in the book of Acts. And John Stott says, well, they didn't have ink. But really what you want it to be is, it's the Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ through His Holy Spirit, through His Church.

So he wants this long title. But that's what we're going to look at today, is how God acts through the Holy Spirit, through Jesus, but through us, through the Church. Now first things, what is the Church?

Who are we? What exactly is the Church? Now when we say Church, what do most people think of? If you say you're going to Church, people think of where we are right now, this building.

[3 : 45] In the New Testament, there were no Church buildings. You may not know that, but you probably do know that. But they didn't have Church buildings. The Church was the people.

In fact, the very word used in the Bible that is translated as Church means a gathering of people. The Greek word itself is *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia*.

You might have heard of ecclesiastical stuff. That's a direct using of the word, the Greek word *ekklesia*. The word itself means to be called out. *Kaleo* is to call.

Ek is outward, to be called out. Now you think it's a Christian word, but it's not really. Each town in the ancient world had an *ekklesia*. Long before the Christians got there.

That's because the *ekklesia* of a town was essentially the town council. The gathering of the leading citizens who made important decisions, and it was set apart for a specific purpose.

[4 : 41] To make decisions for the well-ordering and the well-being of their town. There's another part of this word, Church, that I want us to consider that gives us an understanding of what it means to be the Church.

And that is, funny enough, the English word Church doesn't come from that Greek word *ekklesia*. Is it up on the screen? Yeah. It doesn't come from the Greek word *ekklesia*. Oh, did you?

That one on that side is meant to look more Greek. We didn't have the right font. Okay, we'll fix that later. Why does he? We get it. It's *ekklesia*. Anyway, the English word Church, funny enough, doesn't come from that word *ekklesia*.

Ekklesia. The English word Church comes from the Greek word for Lord. *Kurios*. Or *kuriakon*. Which means the household of the Lord.

So a Lord would have his servants and the people doing stuff for him, and they'd say, oh, yeah, I'm of the *kuriakon* of John of Patmos. I'm of the household of the Lord of this place.

[5 : 46] It eventually came to mean the place where people served, the place where people who served the Lord met together. But what's important is that the very word Church is linked to serving Jesus as our Lord and King.

So I want to put those two ideas together. The combo of those meanings is significant, because it tells us straight away what it means to be the Church. So first of all, the Church is a collective body of people.

Not a building, and not just individuals. It's as we meet together, as a community, that we become the Church, that we are the Church. Secondly, the Churches are people who are called out of normal everyday life, of the normal everyday sort of lifestyle of the world, for a specific purpose.

There's the world doing their thing, and then there's people who are ecclesiastical, who are Church people, who do something different to the world. Their purpose is to serve Jesus as their Lord and King.

And then when we do that, it leads to the well-being of others. You've got those four points up there? So that makes us the Church. That's exactly what the Church is all about.

[7 : 04] And what's important for us to understand is that God saves people, not to be individualistic Christians on their own, but He saves people to be part of a people.

He saves people to be part of this thing called the Church. Now, the Church doesn't spring up newborn in the New Testament. It's not a New Testament thing, you might be surprised to hear, but let's look at it as a community, and let's expand how the Bible teaches us about God and His people and being in community with each other.

So this idea of God having a people to serve and bless Him starts way back in the Old Testament. The idea of God working through a community of people has been there right from the start of the Bible.

Well, the Church's story starts at the start of time itself. Do you remember the story of creation? The pinnacle of creation wasn't God making Adam only.

It's making Adam and Eve. And what is the first thing He tells them to do? Okay, now you two are in community. Now, you know what? I want more of you to be in more community. Go and multiply. Secondly, they were told to fill the earth and to subdue it.

[8 : 16] In other words, they had to take the rule of God and to extend it over the earth. The purpose for which they were created was to take the blessings of Eden and to fill the earth with it, with those blessings.

So straight away, you can see that this thing of the idea of an ecclesia, of people who are called out for a certain purpose, and when they meet, they order how society works so that society can live better and enjoy blessings and be protected.

That's at the heart of what it means for us to be the community of God. Tragically, Adam and Eve fail in their community. Their little community is torn apart. Adam and Eve don't trust each other.

Their sons, one of the sons kills the other. And right, but God doesn't stop there wanting a community. The story of God having a community that listens to Him, that obeys Him, that loves each other, and then takes God's blessings to the world, continues in Abraham and Sarah and their family, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It culminates with the Israelites meeting with God at Mount Sinai, listening, receiving His word, so that they can be a light to the nations, so that the world will look at them and go, wow, that's how we want to live.

[9 : 31] Part of that is because God says, you know, if you listen to me, I'll pour out my blessings on you. And when that is shown to the world, the world will be like, well, that looks like fun. That looks like a good idea.

We'd like to join them. Of course, Israel, like Adam and Eve, does a really bad job. And they fail as well.

But God isn't finished with His plans to bless the world. The Old Testament is full of promises that one day God would bring that community into existence. Acts, what we're looking at now the last few weeks, is the account of how that happened.

The whole point of Acts is to tell us that the new age, where God's new community would finally be established, has begun. So it's kind of a turning point in history.

God has been saying, look, my community has been failing all these years. We're talking about millennia by the time of the New Testament. You know, for us, it's 2,000 years ago that this thing began. But God had been busy working in the world for over 4,000 years before that, with failure after failure after failure.

[10 : 36] Acts, the New Testament, is the beginning of this new community where people actually listen to God and actually do what He says, actually love Him, actually love each other, and actually pour His blessings out on the world.

This is where we get our purpose and destiny from. We ourselves are caught up in the middle of this great story of redemption and blessing.

By being part of the church, by being a Christian, we get to play a part of God's story of salvation. All this is to say that the church is at the very center of God's plan for the world, in that we are both the goal and the means by which God extends His, the means to reach that goal.

So God has never stopped wanting a people. He's been working at it for 4,000 years, which means He doesn't want the world to not have people that follow Him.

So whatever He's doing in the world, it is for His glory primarily, first of all, but it's also for our good. We're at the center of what He's doing in history, in time and space, through Christ.

[11 : 45] This means that we stand in both a hugely privileged position and a hugely responsible position. We're hugely privileged because we are being saved by God.

For thousands of years, He's busy calling people to serve Him. not deserving it, but just because He wants to save and bless us. And that puts us in a hugely responsible position.

We are the ones that God has called to continue that work of saving and blessing others. Not that we do the saving, but we've got to take that message of salvation out ourselves. God has, in a sense, God can do all of this by Himself.

He can save people without humans, but He's chosen to work through humans. He's chosen to work through the church. You know, I don't know about you, but this is both exciting and scary.

I mean, the big question is, we're only human. What if we fail at this job? Well, let's think about that. If the church is central to God's plan for the world, it can never really fail.

[12 : 57] It can't be defeated. And God gives us every reason to live in hope that evil or opposition will never ultimately triumph. And so the first thing is, the church is at the center of God's plan for the world, and God's plan is to save people and to change them, which makes us the center of transformation in the world.

And the second point is that the church can never ultimately be defeated. The thing about life is it's never good all the time.

It's never all good all the time. Even as Christians, we have all these blessings, forgiveness of sins, power of the Holy Spirit. But even for us, life is full of twists and turns that test our trust in God's abilities.

Here in Acts 4, the church is facing its first real test. And they're faced with the combined might of the Roman Empire and the Jewish leaders gathered against them. They've got Herod, they've got Pilate, they've got the Sanhedrin, and they've got the Gentiles working with the Sanhedrin.

This should be an uneven fight. Rome and Jerusalem against a tiny handful of fishermen from Galilee. They should be squashed like a bug.

[14 : 14] Rome and Jerusalem and the world has got all its power on one hand, and a few handful of people saying, hey, listen, Jesus is alive on the other. So what does this church do?

What do these people do when they encounter this incredibly powerful threat to their existence? They do two things, really, today in our passage.

They gather together, and they meet up, and they pray. That's their response to this huge, powerful threat to their existence.

If you've got your Bibles, just keep it there in Acts 4. Have a look at verse 23. Peter's been released by the Sanhedrin.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all the chief priests and elders had said to them about how they must keep quiet and how they threatened them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.

[15 : 22] Ah, sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. And they go on to speak about how he spoke through David in Psalm 2.

I mean, it's actually a really interesting response. It's not what you would expect. I mean, it seems such an ordinary thing to do. They threatened with overwhelming odds, okay, boys, let's get together.

Let's start praying. Notice, though, that they don't even bother praying for protection or even for revenge. They ask for boldness, to continue to speak about Jesus and for God to continue to act through them to heal and to help others, which we see them doing in our passage by selling their property and giving to all in need.

I mean, it's an incredible response to the evil of the world. Where on earth did they get their source of confidence that they would stick with their purpose, that they've got this destiny, that nothing can shake them?

And how can they live with almost carefree abandon? They've been threatened with their livelihoods. You know what? Let's sell everything and give it to everyone else so they can enjoy it all. Well, two things stick out in their prayer that make them stick with their purpose and their destiny.

[16 : 47] They have an absolute trust in the absolute sovereignty of God and they absolutely trust in the total kingship of Christ.

So just look at those two things for a short bit. The absolute sovereignty of God. When they pray to God in verse 24, many translations have, as they speak to Him, and they call out to the sovereign Lord.

The Greek behind that word is despot. The Greek for sovereign Lord there is despot. A despot, in our day and age, it's a pejorative term.

No one wants to have a despot ruling over them. But in the ancient world, there were many despots. That's because despot was the technical term for the owner of slaves or another term for a lord of a house or an area.

A despot is someone who had absolute rights over his property, used of slave owners and kings. So the lord here, and they say, you, our lord, are the made heaven and the earth and the sea.

[17 : 57] So God is the active one in history. And because He's the one who's made it all, He owns it all, He's its despot. He's its total and absolute ruler.

God is the active agent and the controller in world history. He's able to control even the evil of those who kill Jesus. In those verses, it's Herod and Pilate only did what you predestined them to do.

God is totally able to carry out His own plans through rebellious humans who don't accept His revealed will. So just think how amazing that makes God. You know, I can get things done barely when I tell people what to do and they listen to me.

Think, you know, if you're a boss, you know what I'm talking about. Bosses tell people what to do and if they obey them, stuff gets done. But I can definitely not get anything done when I tell people what to do and they don't listen to me.

They do the exact opposite of what I tell them to do. That's when I get stuck. God is able to get things done through His enemies.

[19 : 14] Just think what He can do with us who obey Him. So they trust the absolute sovereignty of God who's got total control over the evil things that are happening to them.

And then they've got trust in the total kingship of Christ. In our passage today, it quotes from Psalm 2. We read it as the Old Testament passage. You know, Psalm 2 is one of those programmatic Bible passages that define for us what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah.

In Psalm 2, the world is gathered against God and against His king and God's response is to laugh at their stupidity for trying to fight against Him.

And His answer is, you know what, you can try what you like, but I've got my king installed in Zion, my holy hill. His people and his king is safe from their paltry attacks and He's ready to strike out with His scepter and smash them to pieces.

Psalm 2 from verse 8 says this, Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You'll break them with a rod of iron. You'll dash them to pieces like pottery.

[20 : 32] And in the warning, listen, kings of the world. Be wise, be warned. Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate His rule with trembling.

Kiss the Son, meaning the Messiah there, meaning Jesus. Or He will be angry and you'll be led to your destruction because His wrath can flare up in a moment.

But it ends with that just one line of hope. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him. The choice is clear.

You either get with the program or get sidelined to the dustbin of history. This is a king that is ready and willing and able to deal with his enemies and to defend his people so well that they have nothing to fear but to continue to live their lives that He wants them to without shrinking back in fear.

That's the power of Jesus as the Christ, as the Lord. He's got that kind of power at His command. Well, some things that we need to make part of our thinking and that should help us with the practice of being the church.

[21 : 48] Let's look at our definition of church again and work from that. So we said, first of all, the church is a collective body of people. It's not a building and it's not just individuals.

Like the early church, like these guys in Acts chapter 4, we're only strong when we meet together, when we gather. You know, we need to break out of this individualistic Western mindset that says, I can be a Christian on my own.

Especially now with technology, especially with all the stuff we went through with COVID. We can be tempted to think, you know what, I can make it on my own. I don't really need to go to church. I can just watch online. Some people don't even do that.

They just got their own private personal relationship with God. But you know, you'll be missing out on so much if you stay a single individual Christian. God works powerfully when His people meet.

After they finished praying, the place where they were praying was shaken. The Holy Spirit comes on them. And they're unified in heart and mind and then they share their possessions with each other.

[22 : 53] So if you want to experience the sovereignty of God and what He can do to change people, then spending time with God's people, coming to church and spending time with church activities is just a vital way to do that.

In fact, it can't be done. You've got to meet with God's people to experience what it means for God to be your God and for Him to move and to act through us. So the church is a collective body of people.

It's powerful and strong when it meets together. It's called out of normal, everyday lifestyle of the world. Well, that means doing things differently. But the things we do differently from this passage is spending time in prayer, for us, spending time in the Word, going to church, and it all looks very ordinary.

Can this really change the world? But this is really the place where God works powerfully to change not just His people but to change the world. In response to the prayers of the saints, because Pilate is Pilate and there's Herod in this passage.

Pilate is dismissed by the Roman emperor and banished from the empire. He dies in obscurity. No one knows where he dies. Herod dies a horrific death.

[24 : 09] You can read about that in Acts chapter 12. Now they didn't pray for their deaths, they just prayed for God to defend them and for them to continue God's work in the world. But God takes it upon Himself to defend His people.

When we meet to pray, the Creator God of the universe hears us, listens to our prayers and responds to what we need and what we ask for.

We're called to be a church for a specific purpose which is to serve Jesus as our Lord and King and to enjoy His protection. Jesus is the undisputed heavyweight champion of the universe.

and we belong to Him. That means I can speak the truth with boldness. I don't ever have to be ashamed about Him or worried about what will happen if I do.

Things will happen if I do, yeah? But Jesus has it all under His control. No enemy can stand against the church and win. I might be caught in the crossfire, but Jesus is too powerful and too protective over His inheritance, us, to allow evil and evil people to have the last say in what happens to His people and His purposes through us, through the church, to the world.

[25 : 34] And lastly, when we do that, when we meet together, when we be the church, it leads to the well-being of others.

The end result of us meeting together and worshipping Jesus is that other people are helped. Here in Acts, they sell what they have and share with whoever who needs it.

You know, this is a common theme throughout the books and the rest of the New Testament, God's people getting together and giving what they have so others can benefit. I've said that the church is both the goal and, the goal of God's plan and the instrument through which God makes His plan happen in the world.

Both of those things go together. We don't just experience God's salvation for ourselves and then that's it. He saves us for a purpose. He saves us for a goal.

The goal is to take whatever healing and help and blessing He's given to us and do what we can to make sure others experience that as well.

[26 : 37] So, that's how we, so we're looking at transformed, how God changes the world, how we live our new life. The foundation of that was laid for us last week.

We get this transformation power in us through the resurrection of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God and part of being transformed is belonging and being the church, being God's people by being together.

And when we do that, God protects us and works through us to change, to bring blessing to the world, to change the world. One of the ways in which we can share in God's blessings is to share together in the fellowship meal of the Lord's Supper.

You know, it both strengthens us because I'm helped to know that my sins are forgiven and that Christ has indeed died for me, but it also encourages us together when we do it together because we can share what God is doing in other people's lives.

So the Lord's Supper is a fitting way to end our time together. But before we start that, let me close off in prayer quickly. Heavenly Father, thank you for your word that teaches us about your church, Lord, your people that you have died for and that you protect with your life.

[28 : 05] Lord, thank you that when evil comes our way, we can trust in your absolute sovereignty and goodness and love and in the kingship of Christ.

Lord, the things that we do together seem so ordinary, it's almost laughable to change the world by doing nothing but meeting together and praying. and yet, Lord, these are the things that you've designed to change the world.

Lord, strengthen and help us to be the church that you want us to be here at St. Mark's, knowing that you've planned throughout eternity, throughout history, to call us together and to be your people and to change the world.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.