

The Messiah's Gift

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[0 : 00] You're listening to a sermon recorded at Providence Community Church, Truth and Beauty in Community. If you are in the Kansas City area, please consider joining us in person next Sunday.

We meet in Lenexa, Kansas at 10 a.m. every Lord's Day. Until then, we pray that as you open your Bibles, the Lord will open your heart to receive His Word.

Our text for today will be Ephesians 2, verses 17 through 22. Ephesians 2, verses 17 through 22.

But I want to take some time to give you an extended introduction. No hoops. No hoops. That was the message given to the women attending the debut performance of Handel's Messiah on April 13, 1742.

The women were asked not to wear hoops in their dresses so as to make more room in the packed concert hall. The notice said this, The ladies who honor this performance with their presence would be pleased to come without hoops as it will greatly increase the charity by making room for more company.

[1 : 16] I see you ladies got the memo. Don't see any hoops this morning. The debut performance of Handel's Messiah was indeed a fundraiser. Tickets were sold for about \$45 in today's money and adjusted for inflation.

The concert raised approximately \$100,000. The proceeds went to two local hospitals and most significantly towards the debts of many men who were currently in debtor's prison.

Some reports suggest that as many as 142 prisoners were bought out of debtor's prison from the proceeds of this single concert. And that's quite apropos.

The opening line of the Messiah is from Isaiah chapter 40. Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.

Sayeth your God, speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished and that her iniquity is pardoned.

At the time of the performance, debt was on the composer's mind. Handel himself was insignificant debt. He had been considered a childhood prodigy in line with Bach and Beethoven and had various flirtations with greatness.

[2 : 29] But Handel didn't play the patronage game very well. And he was rarely found in the important places that you need to be in order to raise the funds to produce art back then.

For Handel, money was always tight. And as some of you know, having great potential can sort of nag you as you progress into life.

In another movement, Handel, who is at this point in time rather disgraced as an artist, in another movement of the Messiah, he cites from Isaiah 53. He was despised and rejected of men.

A man of sorrows and equated with grief. And during the composition, which occurred in 1741, Handel was experiencing a taste of that. He was a man looking from the outside in.

And then inspiration struck. One of the most edifying and God-glorifying pieces of art that was ever created happened in just 23 days. During that time, Handel hardly ate or slept.

[3 : 31] He was completely engulfed in the creation of this music. He felt that he wasn't alone. When he got to the Hallelujah Chorus, an assistant found him in tears, saying, I think I did see heaven open and the very face of God.

With the piece written, Handel began looking for singers. He was smoking a pipe in a local coffee house and found a man known for music and asked whether there'd be any choir men from the cathedral in Dublin who could sing at sight, who could read music, as he wished to prove his composition by hearing it sung.

A bass, a man who was a craftsman by trade, was introduced to Handel and brought to him immediately to sing some of what Handel had written. His name was Janssen.

And he arose, he was brought to the hotel room of Handel, and Janssen failed miserably to sing the music. After Handel swore at him in five different languages, he said in broken English with a German accent, you scoundrel, did you not tell me that you could sing at sight?

Yes, sir, says the craftsman, and so I can, but not at first sight. As displeased as Handel was with Mr. Janssen, he found the lead soprano whom he believed would please the audience extraordinarily.

[5 : 02] Her name was Miss Susanna Maria Cribber, and like Handel, her personal life was a bit of a mess. She was actually from London and was only in Dublin because she was escaping the shame brought on by a scandalous affair with a married man.

It is said that when she finished singing, when she finished singing the first stanza of the Messiah, a local minister in attendance rose up in the concert and said, my dear woman, all thy sins are forgiven.

One final detail. The music for the Messiah was all Handel, but the lyrics were simply an arrangement of scripture passages done by a man named Mr. Charles Jennings.

A close friend to Handel, Jennings was a member of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. He was a passionate evangelical believer. He believed that if we could put the gospel to music, it would communicate truths of the gospel, not just intellectually, but at a deeper heart level.

And so you have this story from the zealous Jennings to the depressed and indebted Handel to the disgraced soprano. The whole story is a demonstration of truth and beauty in community.

[6 : 15] A group of people brought together by God's wise and perfect providence assembled just so they could together produce a monument of truth and beauty to the glory of God.

That is, I believe, emblematic of God's vision for the church. Technically speaking, that debut performance was not the church. I'm so annoyed when musicians at concerts say, y'all ready to have some church up in here tonight?

I'm like, stop it, stop it, this isn't church. So technically speaking, Handel's Messiah was not church, but it was emblematic of the church. It was symbolic of the church.

A wide variety of people brought together from all sorts of different backgrounds to proclaim the excellencies of him who called them out of darkness and into light.

For the next two weeks, we're going to talk about the church as one of the central goals of Christmas. The church as one of the central goals of Christmas. Specifically, you can think of it this way, the church as a gift from the Father to the Son.

[7 : 27] The church as a gift from the Father to the Son. We saw this a little bit last week in John 17 when Jesus is praying his high priestly prayer. In verse 6, he says, I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world.

Yours they were and you gave them to me and they have kept your word. And this is something clearly foretold all the way back at the beginning of the book of Psalms.

In Psalm chapter 2, verse 8, we see, as for me, Yahweh saying, as for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill. I will tell of the decree.

The Lord said to me, you are my son. Today I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession.

The Lord said to my Lord, Yahweh says to the Son, the Father says to the Son, ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession.

[8 : 33] We know that Jesus did ask for the nations because one of his last words to the apostles found in Matthew 28, 18, he says, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

The mission of Jesus, the central goal of Christmas is the gathering of the church. Christmas is a giving season. The practice is kind of an echo of old Saint Nicholas who avidly defended the incarnation and was a generous man known to give gifts to the desperate poor and of course gift giving with Christmas is also indicative of the wise men bringing gifts to the baby Messiah and of course it's also indicative of God's great gift to us for God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten son but the real program of Christmas is simply this, the Father giving the Son a bride, the Father giving the Son a people.

That's the most fundamental sense of Christmas. That's the deepest tie we have between Christmas and gift giving. The Father giving the Son a people extracted we saw last week in

Revelation extracted from every tongue tribe and time.

They are his excellent ones as we saw this morning in Psalm 16. The Father's gift to the Son is the church and they are his excellent ones.

[10:18] Theologian John Gill writes, the Father has given him as his portion and whom he has made his care and charge as if it were not enough that he should be king of Zion or have the government over his chosen ones among the Jews he commits into his hands the Gentiles also and they are given him as an inheritance and possession and his portion to be enjoyed by him who esteems them as such and reckons them as a goodly heritage and a peculiar treasure his jewels and the apple of his eye.

These words respect the calling of the Gentiles under the gospel dispensation and the amplitude of Christ's kingdom in all the earth which shall be from sea to sea and from the rivers to the ends of the earth.

And so once again this moment in 1742 in April in the city of Dublin in which the debut of this truly pleasing God glorifying piece of art was constructed and performed it's all emblematic of this great vision the father has had and the son has had to gather a people from all sorts of different places from all sorts of different problems and bring them together to contribute together to the production of praise and glory.

So that's the introduction now let's look at Ephesians chapter 2 verse 17 to see all of this program come to pass. Exodus 2 17 and he came and he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near for through him we both have access in one spirit to the father so then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the spirit. Let's just break this text down into two main points and the first one is what we're looking at fundamentally the fundamental glory of the church is this same glory that is extant in the Bible and same glory that's extant in the Trinity and same glory that's extant in the members of the Trinity and what we're talking about here is often described as unity in diversity unity in diversity differences tuned together perfectly like a symphony to produce something they could not produce on their own that's God's program that's who God is in the Trinity that's what the Bible is dozens and dozens of different authors writing over thousands of years communicating a unified message and that's what the church is and that's what God finds glorious about the church is this unity in diversity and in our text I think there's probably two points to be made and the first one is is that we see a diverse distance mentioned but a unified entrance a diverse distance but a unified entrance that's that's in the first verse verse 17 and he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near who are those that are far off and what are they far off from and who are those that are near and what are they near to well in the context

[14:10] Paul is describing the ingathering of the Gentiles the Jews were considered to be near why because they had access close proximity to the promises of God the Gentiles were considered to be far because they did not have the promises they did not have the oracles of God so the Jews were considered near because they had access to the promises of God the Gentiles were far off they knew nothing of the great and many Old Testament promises predicting the coming of the Messiah so that's the original meaning when Paul is talking about near and far but the concept of near and far extends well beyond the issue of race even today we have to say that all people start out in different proximities to the truth all people start out in different proximities to the truth I'm a five point Calvinist happy to have that conversation with you you don't have to be a five point

Calvinist but at some level in order for you to be a faithful Christian you do have to believe in some kind of predestining choice even if that predestining choice is merely this when God brings a human life into the world not every human life has equal access to the promises of God in the same way this is most indicative in the way that we would hope to raise our kids we would hope to raise our kids close to the promises we would hope for our kids to be near while even acknowledging that some of the kids that they play with in the neighborhood would not be kids growing up in a house full of the gospel promises and they would be far cultural Christianity is good by the way it's not Christianity it's cultural Christianity but it is a way of bringing people nearer to the truths that they must one day be transformed by so near and far originally is talking about Jew and Gentile but it even goes beyond that we can see in our own kids how they are growing up in gospel orchards

hopefully our homes are full of the fruit of the spirit and our kids can taste and see that the Lord is good and the truth is that not everybody has that some are nearer to others

I dare say that some are even nearer dispositionally than others I dare say that some of us have personalities that would make us more inclined and some of us have personalities that would make us less inclined I think personality wise I'm less inclined I think personality wise I'm born skeptic I think I'm born cynic, and I think that in just personality, I would be someone who has had to cover more ground to get to the kingdom than others. So there's the diversity, diverse distance, diverse separation from God. Jesus tells one man, you are not far from the kingdom of God. Other people are far from the kingdom of God. It's not really a Jew-Gentile thing fundamentally.

It's deeper than that. So there's a diverse distance, but what we see in this text in verse 17 is not only a diverse distance, but a unified entrance. Look back at this text, verse 17, and he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. Here's the idea. No matter how close someone is to the promises, they still need Jesus to seal the deal.

No matter how close someone is to the promises, they still need Christ to come and preach peace to them, just like those who are far away do. Brooke recently told me, we were talking about an experience she had in summer camp when she was a kiddo. She told me that a counselor was the first one to explicitly tell her that just because her dad was a pastor didn't mean that she was going to heaven. And this struck her as new news. Hopefully one day she does something about it. No, I'm kidding.

[18:19] She's not, she's not here. I've looked. Shots fired. No, I'm kidding. Of course, it wasn't new news. And just as a quick plug for Christian community, this is why we raise our kids in Christian community. Because sometimes another voice saying the same thing registers in a way that it didn't before. But it is true news.

It wasn't new news, but it is true news. No matter how close or far off, we all enter the kingdom through the same door, and that door being Jesus Christ. Because whatever our advantages that we've been given, I can assure you that in and of ourselves, we did not make proper use of them. Look at Ephesians chapter 2 verse 1. And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh.

Note the universal. We all once lived this way in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

So the idea here is that no matter the proximity you have to the gospel promises, you still need Jesus Christ to establish peace between you and the Father. You are still dead in your sins and trespasses unless Jesus has preached peace to you. You are still captive to the flesh to carry out the desires of the mind and body. You may be a great cultural Christian.

You may be exceptionally moral in comparison to others. You may be close, but you will never arrive until you receive the message Jesus Christ came to preach. You by nature, like the rest of mankind, are a child of wrath, and you need the Messiah to come and preach peace to you. No matter what your parents' faith is, no matter how culturally Christian your environment, you are a sinner who in and of yourself provokes the wrath and judgment of God. When Jesus comes to preach peace to a person, he does not come to give them peace so they can handle their own lives.

That's secondary. The first peace that must occur in every single person's life is to be at peace with God. And there's only one way to make peace with God. Your sins must be atoned for. And they have been atoned for in Jesus Christ. So what we have of the Messiah is again emblematic of this dynamic. You've got Charles Jennings, a very sincere member of the Society for the

[21:04] Propagation of the Gospel. You've got Susanna Maria Kribber, disgraced, home-wrecking Sobrano. You've got George Frederick Handel, in debt, depressed, cusser in multiple languages.

All of these people, though diverse in their distance from God, must enter the kingdom through the one door, Jesus Christ. Now look back again at the text, again to verse 17, and we see point number two. We see diverse members in a unified ministry. Diverse members in a unified ministry. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into

a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. So those that were near and those that were far off, both brought through the substitutionary sacrificial door that is Jesus. But we are not built as bricks, we are not formed as bricks to lay scattered all over the place.

We were transformed, we were saved to become a member of a greater ministry. He came to make all the individual Christians in the world and then join them together into a holy temple, the dwelling place of the Lord. And you can see again that debut performance of the Messiah back in 1742. Many individuals walked in to the concert hall, but what happened once the music began was not an individual affair. What happened when the music began was in some ways a function of what human beings were created to do, what human beings were designed to do, to be one member in a larger ministry of praise to the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what the church has been doing for 2,000 years, turning those who are without God and alone in the world, turning those who are rugged individualists, if nothing else, because of their various passions, taking them, cleaning them, saving them, and uniting them together.

1 Peter 2.9 says it this way, Now to continue in the message, I want to stay in 1741 and 2.

[24 : 29] What I want to get in our little imaginary airplane and fly from Dublin across the Atlantic into Enfield, Connecticut. Now we're still in 1741. We're in Enfield, Connecticut, and we see a man named Jonathan Edwards, who is beginning to manage the early eruptions of the first great awakening.

In 1741, Handel is composing the Messiah, and in 1741, across the pond, Edwards is preaching sinners in the hands of an angry God. In 1742, the Messiah is performed, and in that same year, Edwards is writing some thoughts concerning the present revival of religion. I turn to Edwards now because of all the theologians I know, none except perhaps C.S. Lewis, who would hate to be called a theologian, Jonathan Edwards is probably the preeminent theologian of beauty in the entire history of the church.

As a good Puritan, he obviously knew the scriptures very well, but he also meditated long and hard on creation itself. He was a deep imbibor of beauty and was constantly thinking about how these two great books that God has written, general revelation, creation, special revelation, the word, speak of the same God in complementary ways. That even in that diversity, you have a unity of message.

One of the things that Edwards meditated on, upon many, was rainbows. And he sees in the rainbow this message I'm trying to convey. One modern theologian summarized Edwards' thoughts like this, Edwards' thoughts about rainbows. Christ is the sun in Edwards' mind, the light which beams over all creation. The saints, individual believers, are the tiny drops of moisture. Just as the sun's rays catch each drop, however small or insignificant, so does the love of Christ extend to each of his children.

This light beautifies each person, each drop, allowing each the opportunity to participate in the reflection of the Lord's loveliness. From Edwards himself, they, the saints, are God's jewels.

[27 : 00] And as they are all in heaven, each one by its reflection is a little star. And so do more fitly represent the saints than the drops of dew. These drops are all from heaven, as the saints are born from above. So let's start wrapping some of this up. What did the Father give the Son for Christmas?

Hebrews 2.10, through his sufferings, Jesus brought many sons to glory. The saints in all the land, Psalm 16, in these are whom I delight. And then in the perfect wisdom, providential and sovereign skill that only God can have, he organizes these little raindrops into a collective display of his perfect glory. Again from Edwards, the whole rainbow composed of innumerable shining beautiful drops, all united in one, ranged in such excellent order, some parts higher and others lower. The different colors, one above another in exact order. Beautifully represents the church of saints at different degrees, gifts, offices, each with its peculiar proper place, each with its peculiar beauty. Each drop may be beautiful in itself, but the whole, as united together, becomes much more beautiful. What did the

Father give the Son for Christmas? The whole assembly of the saints, from every tribe and tongue and time, ranging over thousands of years, assembled by his perfect sovereign skill to reflect in their each unique way, but also collectively, in unity and diversity, the glories of Jesus Christ, both now and forever more. So what do we do with this beautiful truth? I've got three points of application for you this morning. The first one, make merry. Make merry. Get out there. Rub elbows with the

people of God during this season. It is greatly pleasing to the Lord. G.K. Chesterton said, the only way to shorten winter is to lengthen Christmas. So I'm hereby granting by the powers invested in me a whole month. You do not need to stop gathering with the saints and eating cookies and enjoying fires when December 25th comes around.

You were made for that very thing. You were made to assemble with other believers and reflect the glory of God in unique ways. So application number one, make merry. Application number two, one day, Angela and I, I'm going to talk her into doing this. We're going to sit and talk on a podcast, right?

We're going to sit and talk for hours about all the ways we have seen this one simple truth come into play in our lives. Namely this. If you love the thing God loves the most with your life, God will take care of you. What is the thing God loves the most? The saints in whom are all his delight. [30 : 40] If you dedicate your life, your vocation, your family, your life energy to building up the church of Jesus Christ, I promise you, you will step away from that endeavor saying, oh my goodness, what a wonderful deal that was. And oh my goodness, how God has repaid us far beyond what we've ever given in the service of his saints. Friends, let me say a sharp word to you right now that I think is really meant to help you and bless you. If you are living life overly separated from the saints, there is an existential angst in your heart that forces you to be everything. And you're just a brick. You're just a water droplet.

There's an existential angst deep in your heart that forces you to be omniscient. I've been there, friends. When you assemble with the saints and you join together with them and you participate in this divine symphony that God has ordained before the foundation of the world, you will find your own individual role and it will be enough. It will be sweetly enough. A third point of application, do not despise your droplet. Again, if you're trying to do the Christian life alone, it is going to feel frustrating all the time in myriads of ways because why? You are not enough. When you assemble your little droplet next to thousands of others, not only in this building, but in this city and in this nation and in this world and throughout the last 10,000 years, when you assemble and find your spot among all of the other drops in the rainbow, friends, there's peace there. There's peace there. There's meaning there.

There's purpose there. So three points. Number one, make merry. Number two, lean into the church. And number three, do not despise your droplet. Don't let your own insecurities keep you from enjoying your role in the symphony of God. If you're the triangle, be the triangle and rejoice that you're the triangle. Friends, it is better to be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than to dwell in the tents of the wicked. Don't despise your droplet. Whatever you are, whatever you bring to the table. And friends, let me tell you something. There are people in this room who, through circumstances that are no fault of their own, will fall into a season where their only contribution to the church will be someone to be taken care of. One of us is going to be there. We won't be able to give like we once gave. We won't be able to work like we once worked. We won't be able to contribute like we once contributed. Our only contribution at various moments will be a person other people can love.

Yes and amen. Because this is not a life of me vindicating my own value. My value is fixed. This is a life of reflecting the glory of God. Do not despise your droplet.

Well, to introduce communion, I want to bring you to one of the most curious texts I think exists in the New Testament. And I won't get into all the reasons for its curiosities. But Hebrews 10.5 says this, Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.

[34 : 29] Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me. This comes from the Greek version of the Old Testament. The Hebrew version translates it differently. So the writer of Hebrews is citing a passage in the Greek Old Testament, Isaiah 49 or 46. I sometimes do the...

Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me. The word body turns out to have had two complementary meanings.

The first, it refers to the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He was always fully God, but when he was born a baby in Bethlehem, he also became fully man. One of the meanings of this text is that God prepared a body for Jesus Christ so that he could walk this earth and take our place, ultimately to die on the cross for our sins. But there's a second meaning to this word body. Because not only do we see the truth of the incarnation here, we also see the truth of the community of saints. Because of what Jesus did with his body, God gave him another body. The church, which is the spiritual

body of Christ, comprised, the Bible tells us, of many members, many degrees, many gifts and offices, each with their proper place, each with their peculiar beauty. And so now when we celebrate the table, we celebrate these two meanings of this word body. Number one, this is my body which is given for you for the remission of your sins. Number two, collectively, we walk to this table as the saints, in whom is all his delight.

Taking our eyes off of our own performance, our own capacities, and putting our eyes in the symphony we're called to be a part of. Celebrate that the glory of Jesus shines through the church, has been shining to the church, and will shine to the church forever and ever. I think it's safe to say that on both sides of the Atlantic in 1741 and 1742, the Lord was at work. What was he doing? He's glorifying his son by beautifying his bride. Glorifying his son by beautifying his bride. That's what revival is, friends.

The beautification of the bride. A rapid, sudden beautification of the bride. And so come to the table today, yes, as someone who was far or near, you know the story, but who had to enter just like everybody else here through the one door of Jesus Christ, but come knowing that you are part of something so much bigger and so much more glorious than whatever you've got going on in your little 80-year lifespan, Lord willing. Something much bigger is afoot, and that is that the Father has given the Son the church for Christmas. Come and partake.