

THE FORMATION AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

Taught by Bruce Bickel

Session: June 17, 2011

Heavenly father, we pray that you would just make our souls be still for the next moments as your Holy Spirit is our teacher. We come to you with the anticipation that you would be pleased to put your glory on display by the way that we listen attentively to what you would have us learn from your Holy Spirit. Be our teacher. We pray, Lord, that you would cleanse us of all unrighteousness and all those things that are offensive to your glory, and that you'd be pleased to open our eyes, once again, that we might behold you more clearly for Christ's sake. Amen.

Our theme for this series, of our study over the next several months, is going to be the Formation and Function of the Church. Our primary passage that we're using right now as our introduction is found in Ephesians 1. You'll notice on lesson number three, I have an outline of a powerful little verse. These two verses in Ephesians 1:4-6 for which I'd like to read. You can follow along on your outline, which I've given you lesson number three, because this is what we're looking at. Taking each one of these words as a phrase itself to see how significant this is as it relates to the church itself.

The book of Ephesians, if you want a theme for it, would be the doctrine of the church. Essentially that's what the book of Ephesians is. That's why we're starting our study in this particular chapter. I'm going to read 1-6 of Ephesians 1. Emphasis we'll be looking today, will be verses 4-6, ¹"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are at in Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus." So you see, first of all, to whom he's writing. He's not writing to the world. He's writing to people who are faithful in Christ Jesus. He's writing to people who have a faith in Christ Jesus, and their faithfulness is why he's writing to them.

²"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ." Now he defines that spiritual blessing, ⁴"just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

Now you'll notice outline number three, I've given how this breaks down. We have seen already that the church was started, not a Pentecost. The church was made visible at Pentecost. That was the first visible expression of it. But the church really was formed in the heart of God when he, the eternal covenant between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The formation of the church really began in the heart of God before the foundation of the world. It became expressed at the first time at Pentecost, and then it has been expressed so significantly since then.

We've seen also in our study so far that the method of building the church, the method of creating the church, was that of election. You'll see that in verse 4, "just as He chose us in Him." Now Paul is writing to a group of believers and he's reminding them of how they became involved in the body, the church. Remember, the church is not a building. It's not a place. It's not a location. It is a gathering of God's people. That's why we're looking at this particular passage to help us understand what it is to be part of the gathering, to be part of the assembly. The word "ecclesia" is the Greek word which means gathering or assembly.

When the church get together, it is the gathering of the church; it's not the church itself. That's why when I introduce somebody, when I was pastoring a church, I always said, "Welcome to the gathering of Grace Church." Our church's name was Grace Church, and so I said, "Welcome to the gathering of

Grace Church,” because I didn’t want people to think that Grace Church was a place, that Grace Church was a building, or that Grace Church was a location. Grace Church was a gathering of God’s people who were chosen in home before the foundation of the world. That’s what Paul is telling him. So we see that the creation of the church occurred in eternity past, but the method of gathering God’s people together is the doctrine of election. God choosing us. You’ll see that, as we saw that, in verse 4, “Just as he chose us.”

And then last week, we looked at the object of his choosing was us. Just as he chose us in him. Now we want to move to the third point of this study, and that would be just as he chose us in him, and now the time of the formation of the body was before the foundation of the world, and now the motive of the formation of the body is love. You’ll notice in outline number three, the object of God’s election is us. The time of the formation of the body before the foundation of the world, and now we see the purpose of the formation of the body is to be holy and blameless before him. The motive of the formation of the body is in love. The result of the formation of the body is adoption as sons. And the goal of the formation of the body is to the praise of the glory of his grace.

Now there you see an outline as to the formation of the body—the assembly, the gathering, of God’s people. As we look at it today, we want to take a look at the time of the formation of the body. Just as he chose us, in him, before the foundation of the world.

I want you to notice this. Turn with me to Matthew 25. There were a lot of things going on before the foundation of the world that we’re not advised or to know about. We will discuss that all one of these days in eternity, but we need to understand that there were several things that God was doing in the eternal covenant between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in eternity past, which we could define as before the foundation of the world. But when you go to Matthew 25, look at verse 34...I want you to see also that in addition to the formation of the church before the foundation of the world, also the kingdom was before the foundation of the world. Notice verse 34 of Matthew 25, “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

You see, brothers, not only was the church formed, gathered, planned, in eternity past before the foundation of the world, so was the kingdom. Now that’s part of our being involved in the gathering membership of the church is we’re involved in the kingdom, which was prepared for us before the foundation of the world. We need to understand that the church is involved in something even bigger than just a gathering of us together on a Friday. We’re involved in something that was also prepared before the foundation of the world, and that is the Kingdom of God. You see, we’re involved in something that is really significant, and that is God’s kingdom. That’s all part of what God was pleased to do in eternity past, which we now are deriving the benefit of. That’s why Paul tells us in Ephesians 1, “Blessed be the God and Father who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus.” You see, when we are in Christ Jesus be a part of that gathering. When we are in Christ Jesus, we are part of his kingdom.

Notice also, I want you to see one other thing that was planned before the kingdom, before the foundation of the world. Look at 1 Peter 1:19-20...well, back up to 18 to understand the context. 1 Peter 1 beginning at verse 18, “knowing that you were not redeemed.” Now the word “redeemed” means rescued through the payment of a price. “You were not rescued through the payment of a price with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, ¹⁹but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood* of Christ. ²⁰For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you.”

Now there you also see that Christ Jesus and his ministerial work was planned when? Before the

foundation of the world. There you begin to see the implications of the gathering of God's people. God has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world to be involved with the person and work of Christ and his work of redemption, which was planned before the foundation of the world so that we would be kingdom citizens, which was planned before the foundation of the world. You see, guys, you and I are involved, as the gathering of God's people, we're involved in something that's had an eternal plan behind it.

The strategic plan was this began in eternity past, and you and I are just now participating in something that God has foreordained and planned before eternity. You talk about the significance of the church, the gathering. I'm not talking about the people or the denomination. I'm talking about a group like us. Guys, this is really significant of what we are involved in. We're involved in two things—the plan of redemption, which was planned before the foundation of the world in Christ Jesus. We are not redeemed through perishable things of our own, but by the blood of Christ. When was that planned? In eternity past. You see, you and I are experiencing something that God has designed in eternity past. That's the gathering of his people who have been chosen in him before the foundation of the world to be kingdom citizens. We're involved in something of immense significance. Yes, we get discouraged when we see what's happening in our country, and rightfully so. And we need to stand up against some of that stuff because we're involved in something far more significant, and that is the foreordained kingdom of God operation of the gathering of God's people known as the church. Known as the church. You see, you can't take the church lightly when you understand that this was formed before the foundation of the world. Christ's plan of redemption was formed before the foundation of the world.

***Audience Member:** Are you saying, then, the formation of the church happened at the same time as predestination?*

Yes. Absolutely. That's what it means to be chosen in him means.

***Audience Member:** But the church is also the only thing that God ever had to pay for.*

Say that again.

***Audience Member:** The church is the only thing that God ever had to pay for.*

Explain what you mean.

***Audience Member:** All of creation came about by edict. The Lord said and it happened. He had to pay for the church through the blood of Christ.*

Very good point.

***Audience Member:** Is that true, really?*

Well, I think what he's trying say...he was trying to emphasize the fact... {LAUGHTER} ...he's trying to emphasize the fact that Christ's payment made it possible for us to be the gathering. He's playing off the word "redemption," through the payment through a...but for the blood of Christ. We need to understand that... Did God ever have to pay for anything? Really no. Because God ordained, what God decrees he doesn't have to pay for. It happens because God decrees it. But in one sense, when we understand it humanly, we can't understand there was a payment for our salvation. The payment for our redemption is the person and work of Christ.

***Audience Member:** And because justice demanded that there be some payment.*

Yes.

Audience Member: There had to be a sacrifice.

Look at the word “redemption.” The word redeem literally means rescued through the payment of a price. There was a cost to your salvation. That is the death, burial, resurrection of the person and work of Christ. There’s a cost to that. You and I should never take that lightly because there was a cost. So Tom is suggesting in that sense God paid for it. But the same other sense we need to realize this. God didn’t have to pay for anything because what God decrees it’s going to happen. We need to understand it’s a both/and, so we just need to let that exist and understand it because we do need to understand that redemption means the payment of a price.

Ted: Is Kingdom of God interchangeable with the word church?

We’re going to come to that.

Ted: I’m just wondering.

Yeah, I think so. The question is, is the Kingdom of God interchangeable with the word church. Yes it is, in many sense. It’s also the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven and the church are basically all wrapped together in one concept. That’s why I’m trying to help you understand the origin of the Kingdom of God and the origin of the church have the same root, the same time. What we’re saying is they’re all entwined together.

Audience Member: As to those of us who weren’t previously chosen...

What about it?

Audience Member: And for those people who weren’t previously chosen a kind of date or time to be one of his people...

What about them? Your question is what happens to them?

Audience Member: No, I’m aware, but so because we can’t, you know [UNCLEAR] conversions.

We don’t know who they are. We need to understand this. It’s not our role to be running around pulling up people’s t-shirts to see if they’re got an “E” tattoo on their belly. That’s not it. The question is am I? Quit worrying about everybody else. Worry about yourself. Look at yourself in the mirror and say, “Am I one of the elect? Am I one of the chosen?” If you are, based upon what the Scripture evidence would say, as we saw last week in 1 Peter 1, make your calling and election sure. Are you sure of your own election. What’s the evidence of your saving faith? What’s the evidence of the proof of your salvation. Is there increased righteousness? Is there a desire to serve and love the church because Jesus loves the church? Is there a desire to be in his word and study his word? Is there a desire to worship and be in fellowship. You see, those are the indications of a person who has evidence of their election. Peter says make your calling and election sure. When you’re working on these external character qualities as a result of the desire that’s in your heart to be obedient, then you know that you’re one of the elect.

The real issue is don’t worry about other people. You’ve got to worry about yourself, and say, “Am I?” If you’re not, then what do you do? You repent and believe. And so the real issue is you’ve got to worry about yourself. God will take care of the other people. The reason Jesus has not returned is because all

of God's elect have not come to saving faith yet. He will not come until the last person who was chosen before the foundation of the world comes to saving faith. Now do you and I know who they are? Absolutely not. So what is the command of the church? Go. Go what? Preach the Gospel to all creatures. That's our role in this process of God's predestination. We have a responsibility in him. The church has a responsibility. This isn't a freebie. You're just not chosen then you have a wonderful aesthetic life. You're chosen to be responsible. You and I have a responsibility to be witnesses, to be ambassadors for Christ. As Philippians 1:27 says, "Live in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel." You know what that little word "worthy" means? It means to beautify. It means is your lifestyle beautifying the Gospel of Christ. That's what it means.

You see, in the biblical times, the word "worthy" was tied to something that was beautiful. When you made something beautiful, it's worth was increased. Paul is using a word there in that phrase, "let your manner of life be such that it is worthy of the Gospel," he's saying let your life be such that it is beautifying and making the Gospel of Christ worthy that somebody wants but involved. That's what you look at. So don't worry about other people. You've got to worry about yourself and say, "Lord, is that me? Is my life worthy of the Gospel? Is my life, the way I live, the way my choices of response, of the response of choices that I make, does it beautify the Gospel of Christ? Or does it defend my personal rights?" You see, those are the questions you gotta ask.

So rather than worrying about everybody else, we know what we're supposed to do, and that is this. We are to go and preach the Gospel to every creature. We cannot be satisfied until that happens. That's the role of the gathering. That's the role of the assembly. That's our responsibility. We have responsibilities in our redemption. This isn't a free ride.

The issue here, guys, is we understand the significance of what we're involved in. We're involved in something that has its roots in eternity past. The gathering God's people, the Kingdom of God and the plan of redemption. We're all involved in that. That's the heart of the church. That's why one of the marks of a healthy church must be a biblical understanding of the Gospel of Redemption. A biblical understanding of the Gospel. Not a cultural one, an American version. But the one that we're describing right here, that is saying this. The kingdom, the plan or redemption, and the Gospel of Christ were all chosen and planned before the foundation of the world. Does your church understand that? There are tremendous implications if they do, and there are tremendous implications if they don't. You see, that's why you have to take a look at a church and say, "Does my church really have a biblical understanding of the Gospel of Christ? Is it something that we do? Or is it a message that we proclaim?" As Paul says, "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power unto salvation to all who believe." What is the it? It's a message, and the message of the Gospel is this. The holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the person of Christ, the work of Christ and repentance and faith. That's the biblical Gospel.

Now we trivialize that so much, and I don't mean to be picking on people, but we trivialize it when we make a statement such as, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." That's trivializing the Gospel. Now there's truth to that, good grief. But when somebody's going through hellacious suffering, is that a wonderful plan? They can be in Christ. They may be going through tremendous pain, tremendous suffering, and somebody comes along and says, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," and this believer over hear is saying, "I'm going through hellacious pain and suffering and you're telling me that's wonderful?" Now it may be God's will because part of our being in Christ is that we might suffer. So we have to be very, very careful. The question is does your church really have a biblical understanding of the Gospel and the plan of redemption.

Don: I think it's also a grave mistake, because that's how sometimes the Gospel is presented to unbelievers. If a person does not come to Christ and repent, God's plan for him is not wonderful. It's ghastly.

That's right. That is absolutely right. That's why we have to be careful that we, in our churches, that we make sure that we are involved in churches and that we help our churches have a clear understanding of the biblical Gospel of Christ. It means it's a theological biblical one; not a cultural one. That's what we're learning. That's why we're taking our time to go through these two verses. Just look at these verses how you break it down; the significance of that. That's the heart of the Gospel that we preach.

We need to understand that the time of the formation of the body was before the foundation of the world. The time of the formation of the kingdom was before the foundation of the world. The time for the plan of redemption was before the foundation of the world. Now what is the purpose of those plans?

Ted: What was that verse about living a life worthy?

Let me make sure I got it right. It's Philippians 1:27 I think. Let me make sure. Ephesians 4:1 would also be, but the one I was referring to was Philippians, I think it's 1:27. That correct?

Audience Member: Yes it is.

Audience Member: [UNCLEAR]...

Yes. That's a beautiful little expression, guys. Let me go back and repeat that. Philippians 1:27, "Live a life in a manner that beautifies the Gospel of Christ." Now look at the power of that, that you are a walking beautification of what we are learning here in Ephesians 1. You see, look at the significance that you have in life. It has nothing to do with your position in life. It has to do with your position in Christ. It has nothing to do with the possessions that you have in life. It has to do whether you possess a life of God. You see, when you have that position and that possession, you are now in a position that literally change the condition of people's lives by being a means by which they see the beauty of the person and work of Christ in your life. You talk about worth and value and significance. Therein lies our worth and our value and our significance. It's in the fact that you and I have been positioned from the foundation of the world to be the means by which God is going to put his life on display. Look at that. And we have the audacity to say, "I don't feel good about myself. I have a self-image problem, My self-esteem is low because I don't make as much as somebody else." You see how ridiculous that is? Self-esteem is not the cure; it's the disease. Self-esteem is thinking too much about me and not enough about the fact that I've been redeemed, and that I'm in a position now to beautify and make worthy the Gospel of Christ. You see, that's what we take into the marketplace.

Audience Member: I heard a great example of that this morning by a radio pastor that I listen to. In order for us to be effective, it's like when we're...I know you do a lot of trips, Pastor, and one of the safety things that they give you if the cabin depressures, and that means [UNCLEAR]...you're to put on that oxygen mask first before you can help somebody else. So when you put on the full armor of God, and Christ's robes of righteousness, then you're effective...

You can help somebody else. [UNCLEAR] So we've seen that the time of the formation of the body was before the foundation of the world. Next we see the purpose of the formation of the body before the foundation of the world, and that is this. Back to Ephesians 1:4, "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him." That's the purpose of all of this that we've seen. God chose us before the foundation of the world. The church was formed before the foundation of the world. The Kingdom was formed before the foundation of the world. The plan of redemption was formed before the foundation of the world. The reason is so that you and I would be holy and blameless before him. That's a wonderful expression of saying that you can have fellowship with God.

You see, we can't have fellowship with God unless we are holy and blameless before him. Who's the beforehand? It's not before each other. It's before him. Notice the words "that we should be holy and blameless before him." The word preposition phrase there "before me" is to have a relationship with him. It means your relationship is such that he accepts you because you're holy and blameless. Why is it that you have to be holy and blameless? Because he is holy and blameless. That's what it means to be before him. This is the idea of fellowship.

You see, we have been created before the foundation of the world, formed before the foundation of the world, as a gathering so that we can be holy and blameless to have fellowship with God for eternity. What a wonderful, tender expression you see of our worth and our value and our significance.

Let me show with you something here to help us understand it. Let's go to Isaiah chapter...

Tom: *Isn't that the basis of our good self-esteem?*

Absolutely. Tom's point...go ahead and speak to that.

Tom: *Well I always get ticked off by these people who, you know, bad mouth self-esteem. When you look at a lot of Christians going around downcast and there's no joy in their life and so forth. Self-esteem comes from the fact that you are owned by Christ and that you're one of his, you're part of the Kingdom, all this. Everything you have is from him, and he loves you. Wow! Does that change us.*

It does. You see, that's why Colossians tells us to "set your mind on things above. Set your heart on things above." You see, our thoughts become our words. What we think about is what we're going to talk about. What we talk about, words become your actions. When you act on that long enough, actions become our habits. That habit becomes your character. Character becomes your destiny. You see, it all starts with how you think. That's why we're spending so much time in the book of Ephesians to help us think correctly about the gathering, the assembly of the church and what it means, its formation and its function. That's why we're spending this time on that.

Don: *Tom, I'm going to throw a monkey wrench in here. Is that self-esteem or Christ esteem?*

Audience Member: *Same thing.*

Well, we need to have Christ esteem. The problem is we have self-esteem.

Don: *Yeah.*

We need to have Christ esteem. That's what Colossians tells us. Paul tells the church at Colossians, at Colossae, "set your mind on things above." That's Christ esteem. Set your heart on things above. We need to be more Christ centered and less self-centered.

Audience Member: *To tie that together, you know, a lot of people say to me, "Why do you smile all the time?" I say, "Well, if you know where I'm going, you'd be smiling too." {LAUGHTER}*

That's good. I want to show you something about fellowship. Now notice, we have just seen the purpose of the formation of the church, the gathering, is so that we would be holy and blameless before him. In other words, he's going to do the one thing that we can't do, and that is to redeem us so that we can have fellowship with him. Now that's the one thing we can't do, but that's what he's doing for us. God never requires of us something he doesn't equip us to do beforehand. He desires us, ordains us, to have

fellowship with him, therefore, he has to equip us to be ready to stand before him in a condition that is worthy to be in his presence. What is that worthy characterization? It's holy and blameless. God does for us, he makes us holy and blameless so that we can have fellowship with him. That's the purpose of the formation of the body.

I just want to show you how that works a little bit. Go to Isaiah 48. You see, the purpose of the formation of the body is that we are to be holy and blameless before him that we can have fellowship. Here's just a cross-section to help us understand this. Look at Isaiah 48:9. Now notice, look at this in the context of our fellowship. "For the sake of My name I delay My wrath, And *for* My praise I restrain *it* for you, In order not to cut you off." Now that's a Hebrews idiom, a poetic phrase, meaning to have fellowship with, to have a relationship with.

Now go back and look at this, "For the sake of My name," in other words, you're not the reason that God does this. Who's the reason? God is. God is...you and I are never the reason God does anything. God is the reason that God does it and we receive the overflow of what he chooses to do. That's why we're motivated by gratitude, because we know this. I was never the reason in the first place. For the sake of my name, my character, my attributes and my nature, I don't give you what you deserve...which is wrath. I don't give that to you, and here's the reason I don't, "For the praise of my name I restrain it from you in order that we can have a relationship." Guys, do you understand the significance of that? God doesn't give you what you deserve. It's not because you're worthy of not deserving it. It's because for the praise of his name, he wants you to be holy and blameless so that you can enter into eternal fellowship with him forever. Do you see that?

Now go to Isaiah 43.

Audience Member: *I'm not sure I understand, and I'm maybe thick this morning, as usual, but...*

Sure.

Audience Member: *Thanks. I don't know what that means, where the, for my praise, I...for my praise. What's he mean? Does he mean us praising him?*

No. No. It means for his glory.

Audience Member: *For his glory.*

For his glory. In other words, he doesn't give you what you deserve. He does it for his glory, not for your benefit. That's what the word praise means. It means for his glory. To the praise of the glory of his grace, as we're going to see here in a moment. Now go to Isaiah 43, and I think it's verse 25. We saw what he did in Isaiah 48:9. He holds back his wrath. Here's how he does it "'I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions,'" because you deserve it. It doesn't say that. Now notice, "'I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.'" Can you imagine that? Now we have just defined the word "grace." God's resources at Christ's expense. God doesn't give us what we deserve.

We need to understand grace in the context of two other words—justice and mercy. Justice is getting what you deserve. What is it we deserve? Wrath. We deserve his wrath. Mercy is not getting all that you deserve. Everybody who's ever lived has experienced God's mercy. They just don't know it, because they didn't get what they deserved, which is justice. We're not talking about fairness. We're talking about justice. Fairness is a human evaluation. Justice is a spiritual one. Justice is not getting what you deserve. Mercy, not getting all that you deserve. And grace is getting what you don't deserve.

We have just seen the formation, the purpose of the formation of the body of Christ, the gathering of God's people before the foundation of the world is so that you and I can be holy and blameless before him in order to have a relationship with him. You see, that's the purpose of the church, is to have a relationship with him. What we do is we learn how to live in a manner that beautifies the Gospel. People are either turned off or turned by that, and you don't control that. The issue is what quality of life am I offering the world, not what kind of response do I get from the world. There's a difference. We need to emphasize what quality of life am I offering the world, and not worry about what kind of response am I getting from the world. That doesn't mean that you and I can be sloppy and be irresponsible and do something stupid. I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is we don't adjust the quality of our life to get a response from the world. Our role is to be faithful. God will take care of the results. Because all of this was formed before the foundation of the world. That's our confidence. That's our confidence.

The point I want us to make here in the purpose of the formation of the body is that we are holy and blameless before him, in his own presence. Before him, in his own presence. That means we can have fellowship with him. Let me show the extension of this fellowship. Not only does it begin now as we are the chosen gathering of God's people. Go to John 14—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. I want you to see the extension of this fellowship. John 14:3, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also." You see, this fellowship that started before the foundation of the world, when God chose us in him to be holy and blameless before him, that is going to extend for all of eternity because Jesus will come back to gather his own. That fellowship that we now begin, right now, has an eternity to it. It doesn't end. The great confidence we have is yes, our world may be going down the tube, but one of these days, Jesus will come back for his own. The reason he didn't come back on May 12th, or whatever it was, {LAUGHTER} was this. Because God hasn't finished gathering his elect. He hasn't finished yet. He won't come until that happens, because Jesus says in John 17 and John 10, "I will lose none of the ones you gave me. You gave them to me and not one of them will I lose." That means he can't come back until all have been given to him. So we don't worry about the timing of this. We just recognize that when he does come, he's going to come and gather his assembly together to be with him forever.

Look at John 17:24. What a wonderful verse. John 17:24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me." Here he defines the "they." Who are the "they"? The ones that God gave him. "Be with me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world." You see, brothers, do you begin to understand the significance of the gathering of God's people? All this was planned before the foundation of the world. There's significance to what you and I are doing now, on a Friday, and what we do on the Lord's day, and whenever God's people gather together. There's tremendous significance of what's going on because it was all designed before the foundation of the world. It's now being implemented through you and me.

Look at this verse, "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given me." Now we talked about this last week. God chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. That's means this. If you're in Christ today, you, personally, are a love gift from God the Father to God the Son. God gave you to the Son as a love gift. And he then says this, "I desire that they also, those whom you have given me," those love gifts. You personally. Me personally. "Will be with Me where I am so that they may see My glory, which You have given Me when You loved me, before the foundation of the world." We just ought to sit in silence and ponder that. Because you see, the whole reason that God chose you and me before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless beforehand is so that we could spend not only our present day with him, but our eternity with him, in fellowship. That's the whole purpose of it. It's so that you and I will now have an eternal fellowship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, and see all of their glory that was created before the foundation of the world.

One of the things I just yearn to see is the glory of Christ. I'm not going to see that in my earthly life. The promise is I'm going to see that in all its magnificence when the Lord returns and gathers all of those who are given to him as personal love gifts of God the Father to God the Son.

Don: I think sometimes people have a skewed perspective of heaven. I don't know how many times I've heard people, particularly celebrities, and they...well, for example, now John Cigna's driving a Harley or Mayor Caligiuri, a couple of years ago, or not Caligiuri, whatever his name was...

Audience Member: Connor.

Don: O'Connor, yeah. He's out there playing golf and eating kielbasa sandwich. I mean, if people really understood what heaven is, that we're going to see God, that's what, you know, Phillip wanted Jesus, it shows the Father and it will be enough for him. We're going to see him as he is. That's what heaven is all about. Whatever else it may, that's the glory of heaven, and if God weren't there, heaven wouldn't be heaven.

That's right. Amen to that. You see, all of a sudden, we're talking about right now, will come and clear make sense because we're going to see, as Jesus just said, "I want them to see my glory, which You gave me before the foundation of the world." That's why I keep going back to this phrase, "before the foundation of the world." So much was decreed before the foundation of the world that you and I are now experiencing, and that we should never lose sight of that. It's really not about us, is it. It's not about us. It's about what God has decreed for his glory. Even the way he holds back his wrath. It's not about us. It's about him and his glory, "For the sake of my praise, I do not hold back."

Audience Member: Can you help us understand, I mean, if I'm Jesus and I look at this gift that I'm given, a bag of sinners, I'm not real excited about it. [UNCLEAR]...

Well, you're not Jesus, so don't try to be. {LAUGHTER}

Audience Member: We're not loved because of our worth; it is his love that makes us worthy. So if his love is so great that he would love a sinner like you or me, and that is the greatness, the grandness and the glory of his love, it's not that we're worthy of the extent that he should delight in people like you and I.

We need to be careful not to bring Jesus down to our level and try to figure that out. We need to make sure that we go up to his level. Now I can't answer your question, because I am not Jesus. But from what I understand of the Scripture, when he was on the cross, I was on his mind. I think that he said, "I'm willing to do that because I love him enough that I'm going to do it." I think in his heart, in the midst of all of that, in his deity, there was great joy. In his humanity, pain. We already know that. Now we just need to let that exist. But we need to be careful not to bring it down and say, "Do I understand what Jesus was thinking?" My answer is no. I have no idea what he was thinking, and I shouldn't even ask that question. What I need to be saying is, "Do I understand what he did and why he did it?" That's what my response is based upon. We need to be careful not to bring Jesus down to our level. We need to make sure that we go up to his level.

Audience Member: If people are saved for God's glory and not so that they go to heaven, when you want somebody to go to heaven, how do you adjust your self-centeredness to be motivated to want God's glory rather than a loved one or even yourself [UNCLEAR]?

I would say ask the Holy Spirit to change your thoughts. That's the role of the Holy Spirit is to guide

you into all truth. If what you're saying is not consistent with the sufficiency of Scripture, then we have an advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will be the one who will guide us into all truth. Let's let the Holy Spirit do that. Study the Scripture and say, "Lord, reshape my thinking to make it more biblically correct." That's why it's so important that our churches be theologically sound. Not only does a sound church have a clear understanding of the Gospel, the church needs to be theologically sound. That means that we're teaching people how to think correctly because of the sufficiency of Scripture. I think what we do is just say, "Lord, I'm not sure that my thought patterns are right. Would you help me understand and guide me into all truth so that my prayer is acceptable and its worthy of the way it should be."

***Audience Member:** There's a quote from a study from C. S. Lewis that we're doing right now. I think its really relevant. He said, "It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling around about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday of deceit. We are far too easily pleased."*

Yes. Go back to the summary of Colossians. Let your mind be set on things above. Let your heart be set on things above. In other words, we need to be thinking theologically correct. So even in our prayer, we need to say, "Lord, guide me into all truth so that I am thinking theologically correct based upon the sufficiency of Scripture." But don't be afraid of the word theology. It's the study of God. That's essentially what it is. It is the study of God. There's nothing wrong with having a desire to study the character and nature of God. That's what theology is.

***Audience Member:** Bruce, you said that we have to make sure that our church is biblically sound and they understand redemption. How do you do that? I mean, do you read the by-laws and it will tell you that? Do you meet with the Board and they explain that to you? I mean, we sit in a pew and we get a message, we get a message, you know, we get a sermon. You go to a Bible study in the church, and you meet with people and you say hi and you have fellowship in the lobby. How do you find out if the church is biblically sound being a member of the church?*

I would say you do all the things you just said. You do sit down with the Board. You sit down with the pastor. You listen to a message. You talk to the people. I think you do all that. We're going to come to that later on in our study when we talk about what are the marks of a biblically-centered church and how do we go about discerning that. I think we're going to get into that. That might be a couple months down the road, so you can hang on and come back. We'll get to that because that's an excellent question. That's a question we need to be asking.

The most important decision we make whenever you move is what church do I go to, not what house do I buy. Often times, what we do is we go look for the house and then find a church. What I'm going to suggest is you find the church and then look at the house that's going to help me be closer to that fellowship that I'm joining, because that's the center of your life. It's not the house that's the center of your life; it's the fellowship of the gathering of God's people. So if you're moving, if the Lord takes you away to Pittsburgh, find the church, then say, "Now where can we find a house that's going to allow me to be involved in the gathering of God's people which was formed before the foundation of the world for his glory?"

***Ted:** Now Bruce, you just went from preaching to meddling.*

Okay. {LAUGHTER} I'm meddling into your lives. Sorry.

***Ted:** The house is very important.*

Yes.

Audience Member: *You discussed the responsibility that we have with God. What's our responsibility to each other in the body?*

We'll get to that. That's going to be the expression, I mean, we won't go through the series, but the 58 one another commands would be our responsibility to each other, one another. We relate to one another, we receive one another, we respond to one another, and we restore one another. Those are the 58 one another commands. They're given to us. So we'll get in that in some detail when...what is our responsibility, but essentially it's the one another commands is our responsibility to fellowship. Fellowship has its responsibilities, and part of that is the one another commands.

Audience Member: *In amongst these questions, wouldn't it be up to us to be prepared to distinguish the right church from wrong church or the right fellowship from wrong or the theology [UNCLEAR] to come into a group and have some sense of what we're looking for as opposed to them teaching us.*

Yes. We have to have some biblical understanding of what is the true church. Yes, we need to have that understanding so that we are discerning when we go and explore a fellowship. Now remember this. That church will become less perfect when you join it. {LAUGHTER} You've got remember that. If it's perfect now, it won't be if you join. We don't go saying, "Oh, here's the standard. I know the perfect church." We just realize the moment I get involved, it's less perfect than it was before I got involved. But yes, we need to be discerning. We need to be wise in our discerning what are the characteristics of a healthy biblical church. We're going to get into that. We're just now on the introduction, guys. We're going to be here awhile.

Bill: *Getting back to holy and blameless. In essence, we are not holy and blameless.*

That's correct.

Audience Member: *Only Christ is holy and blameless. If we're in him and he is in us, then we're holy and blameless.*

That's justification by grace alone. You get credit for his sinless perfection and perfect obedience. Let me touch on that. You see, the prerequisite for fellowship with God is that we be holy and blameless, and that's where we understand what it means to be justified by faith alone. Justification means that you are declared righteous. You're declared holy and blameless in God's sight.

Justification is a forensic term. It's a statement that God makes about you. It's how he views you. He views you differently. When you are in Christ, you get credit for the righteousness of someone else; not your own. There's no way that you and I will ever be holy and blameless by our own conduct. That's an impossibility.

The possibility is this—that when you are in Christ, by repentance and faith, and you are in Christ, then you get credit for the sinless perfection and perfect obedience of the person and work of Christ. Sinless perfection and perfect obedience. That's what we mean by holy and blameless. You get credit for somebody else's righteousness. It's what we would call an alien righteousness. It's righteousness outside of ourselves. That's what permits us to have fellowship with God the Father. It's because you're justified by faith alone—not through works, by things that we've done, things that are perishable like gold and silver, things that of our own futile nature—but by the blood of the cross, by the blood of the Lamb, you and I are declared righteous. And now God looks at you differently and he says, "He or she is holy and blameless because they're in Christ. I have given them credit for the sinless perfection and perfect

obedience of my Son. I have qualified them to have fellowship with me and that began before the foundation of the world.” You see that, guys?

We’re involved in something of absolute eternal significance. Don’t ever worry about what’s the condition of the church. The church isn’t the denomination. The church isn’t a building. The church is you, and it’s me. It’s the gathering of God’s people chosen before the foundation of the world, and those people will not be ever taken away from the person and work of Christ. He will not lose any of those. That’s why Jesus says the gates of hell will not prevail against what? The church. It’s the gathering of God’s people. He’s not talking about a building. He’s not talking about a denomination. He’s not talking about activity or programs. He’s talking about people. The gates of hell will not ever prevail against God’s people, his gathering, and that’s because it was formed before the foundation of the world for the praise and the glory of his grace.

We’ll pick this up next week because we’ve only touched on the first couple of verses. Let’s pray. Father, I’m just overwhelmed at the work of your Holy Spirit in guiding us into all truth. Father, to the best of our efforts we try to do, try to be excellent as we can in our study, but we’re human and we’re frailty, we’re sinful. So Father, I just pray that if we or I have said anything that is contrary to your nature, your attributes or your glory, that you would remove that from our minds and only those things that have been guided by the Holy Spirit would be the things that we would remember. Father, we thank you for what we’re learning about our significance of being part of your chosen member of the assembly of the Kingdom of God that was planned before the foundation of the world. To that end, all of God’s children said...Amen!