

Look What Is Being Built In The City!

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[0 : 00] Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. Amen. It is happening all over the city.

Building. Nearly everywhere we turn, building. In the downtown core, constant daily activity. Dump trucks, construction cranes, jackhammers, electric saws, pneumatic nail guns.

It's happening in residential neighborhoods like where Sharon and I have lived the last 11 years.

Old houses being demolished and newer and bigger houses being built.

Laneway houses being constructed in nearly every alley. All over the city, building, building, building. Nothing, of course, compared with what is going on in the great cities of Latin America and Asia.

For miles and miles in every direction, building, building, building. Now that I have been to New York City, my heart's desire is to go to Shanghai.

[1 : 11] New York may still be the media and advertising center of the world, but everyone knows that Shanghai is now the financial center of the world.

Building, building, building. And in the midst of it all, in every city of the world, another kind of building is taking place.

To which the Apostle Paul is pointing us in the text we just read. Through Ephesians chapter 2, verses 11 to 22, Paul helps us realize that in the midst of all the building going on in the world, the living God is actively building something else.

In every village, in every town, in every city of the world, the living God is through Jesus Christ, building a new human race, who constitute a new commonwealth, who together are given access into the presence of God, and who, amazingly, constitute the new dwelling place of God in the world.

Step back for a moment and recall with me the flow of Paul's letter to the Ephesians thus far. It's good whenever focusing on one section of Paul's letters to see and hear the text in the larger context.

[2 : 39] Chapter 2 of his letter flows out of a prayer that's recorded in chapter 1. In that prayer, Paul asks God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, as he calls him, Paul asks God to enlighten the eyes of our heart, so that we might know the hope of his calling, so that we might know the glory of his riches in the inheritance of the saints, and so that we might know what is the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe.

I pray that you might enlighten their eyes, so that they might know what is the surpassing greatness of your power toward those who believe. Paul then heaps up a whole bunch of power words to describe the power God is exercising toward those who believe.

They are in accordance with, he says, the working of the strength of his might. A lot of power. This power, says Paul, was first exercised in Jesus Christ, when God raised him from the dead, and when God seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, authority, and dominion.

This power, says Paul, was then exercised, and is being exercised, by taking us, who were dead in our sins, who were captive to the powers of evil, who were slaves to our own lust, taking us, and making us alive with Christ, raising us up with Christ, and seating us with Christ, in the heavenly places in Christ.

This power, says Paul, was exercised, and is being exercised right now, by making us into new creations. People who now participate with God's good works in the world.

[4 : 32] Then, in the text we just read, Paul is telling us, that this power is at work building. Building a new human race, who constitute a new commonwealth, a new society, who together are granted direct access, into the presence of the Holy God, and who, amazingly, constitute the new temple,

where the creator of all things, can finally fulfill his great desire, to come and live in the world.

Paul is in jail, in Rome, chained to a soldier. He's awaiting trial before Caesar, the most powerful man alive at that time. And yet, in jail, he can see that all around him, God is building something, which only God can build, which no one else could or can build.

And what Paul sees, and wants us to see, this alternative reading of reality, is nothing short of revolutionary, especially when it comes from the lips, of a lifelong Jew.

There's simply no way, for us Gentiles, to feel, how revolutionary, this vision is. In New York City last week, Sharon and I, in the pews, stayed at the guest house, for Jews for Jesus, on 31st and Park Avenue.

They, can feel, how revolutionary, this vision is. At their guts, they can feel, how startling, it is, what Paul develops, in this text.

[6 : 14] It is this vision, of God building, something new, in the world, that got Paul, into jail. Paul is not locked up, because he offended Rome.

Paul is locked up, because he offended, his fellow Jews, who then wanted, to kill him. Paul is in Rome, awaiting trial, before Caesar, because, as a Roman citizen, he had appealed, to Caesar, to protect him, against some, of his fellow Jews, who wanted to wipe him, off the face of the earth. In the next chapter, of his letter, in chapter 3, Paul will speak, of himself as, quote, the prisoner, of Christ Jesus, for the sake, of you Gentiles, close quote.

He is in trouble, because he preached, what he called, the mystery of Christ, the mystery of Messiah, the mystery, that, quote, Gentiles, are fellow heirs, and fellow members, of the body, fellow partakers, in Messiah Jesus, through the gospel.

The vision, of this new human race, constituting a new temple, in the world, is what got Stephen, one of the first deacons, in church history, in trouble.

[7 : 31] Stephen is standing, before the Sanhedrin, the ruling body, of Israel. They are meeting, in the great temple, and Stephen, dares to say, the most high, does not dwell, in houses, made by human hands.

The text says, the leaders, gnash their teeth, they take Stephen, out of the temple, to the edge of the city, and they begin, pelting him, to death with stones. Standing by, and approving, all of this action, is Saul, who would have become Paul, who would take up, Stephen's vision, and expand it, and as a result, find himself, in trouble.

I hear Paul, saying through this text, look, look, at what is being, built, in the city.

A new human race, constituting, a new commonwealth, who together, as Jews, and Gentiles, have access, into the holy presence, of the holy God, and who amazingly, constitute, a new temple, a new dwelling place, of God, in the world.

Now, as you can see, in here, in this text, Paul is working, with a number, of different metaphors. Beneath them all, is the architectural, metaphor, of temple.

[8 : 51] Temple. People living, in the first, in the Roman Empire, of the first century, knew all, about temples. Everywhere you traveled, you met temples.

Ephesus, was especially proud, of its temples. The biggest one, was built, for the goddess, Artemis, as the Greeks, called her, or Diana, as the Romans, called her. At the time, that Paul wrote, Ephesians, the temple to Diana, was one of the seven, wonders of the world.

It was built, on a platform, get this, measuring, more than, 100,000 square feet. That's, two times, the average, football field. It was built, with 100 columns, all made of marble, each of them, 55 feet high.

Ephesus was also, the center, of the worship, of the goddess, Roma. It was the center, of the worship, of the emperor. Rome, honored Ephesus, for being loyal, to the empire, by allowing Ephesus, to build many temples, to many Caesars.

The temple, to Domitian, for instance, was built, after Paul wrote, had eight, stone columns, five feet in diameter, and each, 46 feet high. So, Ephesians knew, all about temples.

[10 : 07] Life in Ephesus, revolved around temples. But what Paul, especially has in his mind, in Ephesians 2, 11 to 22, is the temple, in Jerusalem, built by Herod the Great.

It, too, was one of the wonders, of the world. It, it no longer stands. You might know, that it was destroyed, by the Romans, in 70.

That was the most, devastating event, in the history, of Judaism. Now, there simply, is no way, to exaggerate, the role, the Jerusalem temple, played in the life, of first century Jews.

It was thought, to be, the place, where the living God, dwells. Everything, in Jewish life, revolved around temple. And it was, for many, literally, the center, of the cosmos. Which is why, Jesus' actions, in the temple, especially on Palm Sunday, were so problematic. Jesus is messing, with the cosmic center, of the universe. Now, the temple, is made up, of four courts.

[11:16] From the outer, moving inward, we have the court, of the Gentiles, the court, of the women, the court, of the priests, and then, the court, of the holy place, the holy of holies.

The court, of the Gentiles, was so named, because that was, as far in, as Gentiles, could go. And even then, with much disdain, from the hyper-religious.

As Paul says, in the text, they were far off, they were far away, from the presence of God. The court, of the women, was so named, because that was, as far in, as Jewish women, could go. And even they, suffered the disdain, of some of the hyper-religious. The court, of the priest, is so named, because that was the place, where the priest, offered up, the daily sacrifices, and prayers. And then, you get to, the holy of holies, or the holy place, so named, because it was thought, that there, is where the holy God, chose to dwell, in all, of his holiness.

[12:21] Only one person, could enter that space, the high priest, and only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, and only after, an elaborate process, of purification, and only at great risk, to his own life, for fear, that if he did, something wrong, in that space, he'd get fried, by all the holiness.

They used to tie a rope, around the waist, of the high priest, so that should he die, in that place, they could at least, retrieve his body. You can see then, why the temple, was thought to be, the center of the cosmos.

And I think you can see, why Paul's vision, of this mystery, of Messiah, is so revolutionary, and why it got him, in trouble. Paul, the lifelong Jew, is declaring, that Jesus, the Messiah, has changed, everything, through two, principal works.

Through his blood, says Paul, Jesus has broken, and Jesus has abolished. Jesus, by his blood, has broken down, the barrier, of the dividing wall, verse 14, and Jesus, in his flesh, has abolished, the enmity, verse 15.

Jesus has broken, and abolished. Jesus has broken down, the barrier, of the dividing wall, or the middle wall, of partition, as some translated.

[13:52] To what is Paul, referring here? Well, here we need to know, just a little bit more, about the Jewish temple. Gentiles, standing in the court, of the Gentiles, standing outside, far away, far off, could look up, and they could see, the real temple.

They could see, where the place, where God was dwelling, but they could not, approach it. That's putting it mildly. Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us, that around, the Jewish part, of the temple, there was this wall, built, as a partition.

It had an inscription, which told all foreigners, they had to stay away. The wall was about, three cubits high, four and a half feet high. On the wall, were the words, laws of purity, and in Latin and Greek, the words, no foreigners.

In 1871, archaeologists, discovered, the actual wording, that was on the wall, and it goes like this. No foreigner, may enter within, the barrier, or enclosure, around the temple.

Anyone, who is caught, doing so, will have himself, to blame, for his ensuing death. As a number, of commentators, have observed. The sign, did not say, trespassers, will be prosecuted.

[15:12] It was saying, trespassers, will be executed. Barrier, of the dividing wall, the wall, of partition. Jesus, broke it, down.

Can you hear, the gasping, in Paul's voice, in this text? Stunning, startling, revolution, of revolutions. The Jewish, the Jewish Messiah, breaks down, the dividing wall.

It's not, a Gentile invader, who does it. It's a Jew, the Jew, the Messiah, who breaks, down the wall, of partition. This is what Jesus, was doing, in his ministry, from day one.

He broke down, all kinds of walls, to offer a drink, to a Samaritan woman. He broke, down all kinds, of walls, to go to the home, of a Roman soldier, whose child was sick.

He broke down, all kinds of walls, to touch those, with leprosy, and those who were, otherwise unclean. Jesus is always, jumping over, and breaking down, walls, to seek, and save sinners, to draw near, those who were, far off.

[16 : 24] The actual, dividing wall, would stand, until 8070. But in 8033, when Jesus Christ, died on a cross, that wall, came down.

And says Paul, Jesus abolished, in his flesh, the enmity, or as other, translations have it, he put to death, the enmity, to what is Paul, referring here? The law, of the commandments, contained in ordinances, verse 15.

The law, the enmity, that kept people, apart, was law. Now, here's where we need, to be very careful. To what law, is Paul referring here?

Jesus has abolished, in his flesh, the enmity, which was the law. What law, has been abolished?

The so-called, moral law, as it is, embodied, in the ten commandments?

Or the so-called, ceremonial law, proscribing, and describing, all of the ritual, about cleanliness?

Which law, has Jesus abolished, put to death?

[17 : 32] Paul, cannot be referring, to the moral law. There's just no way. He knows, the teaching of Jesus, especially as we have it, in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5, 17.

Do not think, that I came to abolish, the law, or the prophets. I did not come, to abolish, but to fulfill. In jumping over, all kinds of walls, to seek, and save us, he did not, have to put, the moral law to death.

In the rest of his, Sermon on the Mount, Jesus draws out, the inherent goodness, of the law. He expands it, he deepens it, and he calls us, to the fundamental reasons, it was given, in the first place.

The moral law, is not the enmity. Oh yes, when we meet, the moral law, we realize, how far short, we have fallen. And when we meet, the moral law, we realize, how helpless, we are, to keep, God's good will.

But in order, to seek, and save us, in order to draw us near, Jesus did not, have to abolish, the moral law. He takes away, the curse, for our disobedience.

[18 : 35] He also cancels, the debt, for our disobedience. He breathes, his spirit, into us, so that we are, empowered, to be able, to keep this good will. But he does not, abolish the moral law.

He abolishes, the ceremonial law. All the supposed ways, humans, were to, find a way, to make themselves, clean, before a holy God.

Jesus put it all, to death, because it's no longer needed. Jesus has fulfilled it, on his death, on the cross. He's the final, sacrifice, that makes all, other sacrifices, unnecessary.

By offering, up his life, on the cross, there's no longer, any need, for the sacrificial system. No more, blood, needs to be shed.

His blood, is enough. By his blood, we are made, clean. Who can, wash away my sin? Nothing, but the blood of Jesus.

[19 : 37] Who can, make me, pure within? Nothing, but the blood of Jesus. Jesus. And as a consequence, of Jesus' work, broke down, and abolished, God, is building, something new, in the world.

God, is building, a new human race, who constitute, a new commonwealth, who together, have direct access, into the holy of holies, and who, amazingly, constitute, the new temple, of the living God, in the world.

A new human race. For he himself, is our peace, says Paul. He made, both groups, into one. Verse 14. Can you hear, the gasping, in his voice?

He, in himself, created, the two, into one new man. Verse 15. Again, this gasping, this thrill, in his voice. Both, into one, the two, into one, into one new human.

Now remember, it's a lifelong Jew, who's telling us this. Circumcised, on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew, of Hebrews, as he says, to the Philippians.

[20 : 46] And yet, he sees, that in Jesus, the Messiah, and in the Messiah's work, on the cross, Jews, and Gentiles, are brought together, into a new human race. Jesus, is the new human, and anyone in Jesus, is part of this new race.

Incorporating, both Jews, and Gentiles, yet transcending, both Jews, and Gentiles, a third race, as some put it. So, Paul can tell, the Colossians, living in a place, near Ephesus, put on the new human, who's being renovated, to a true knowledge, according to the image, of the one, who created him.

A renovation, in which there is, no distinction, between Jew, and Greek, circumcised, and uncircumcised, barbarian, synthecon, slave, and free, but Messiah, is all, and in all.

And he can tell, the Galatians, there is neither Jew, nor Greek, there is neither slave, nor free, there is neither male, nor female, for you are all, one, in Messiah, Jesus. God is building, a new human race, who, constitute, a new commonwealth, among the nations.

Apart from, the Jewish Messiah, Gentiles, says Paul, were excluded, excluded, verse 12, excluded, from the commonwealth, of Israel. Now this word, commonwealth, is translating the word, politia, from which we get our English words, polity, political, politician.

[22 : 11] It refers to a whole way of life, shaped by common vision, and common values. And in the case of the Jews, it was a politia, shaped by all the covenants, God made with the patriarchs, covenant with Noah, the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with David, and the promised new covenant, to which, Paul says, Gentiles were strangers.

But, now in Messiah, no longer strangers or aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints. This phrase, fellow citizens, is in the text, sum politia, with politia.

In Jesus Christ, and because of Jesus Christ, we Gentiles, get in on this politia, God has been shaping for centuries.

Becoming members of God's household, verse 18. The term household, interestingly, in the Greek version of the Old Testament, translated the word for blood relation.

Mercy, mercy, mercy. Gentiles in Christ, are now blood relatives, with Jews in Christ. The blood of the Jewish Messiah, brings Gentiles and Jews together, in a new humanity.

[23 : 29] A new commonwealth. Now, all of this is why John Stott, gives his masterful commentary on Ephesians, the title, God's New Society. God is building a new politia, a new commonwealth in the world, centered in the one who is our peace.

Who together have access, says God. It says Paul. He's quoting God. Access. It's a life-giving word.

Now, in Paul's day, this word access was used for those who were granted an audience with the emperor. We both, Jews and Gentiles, we both have been granted an audience with the emperor of emperors.

In terms of the architectural metaphor of the text, we both have been given access into the holy of holies.

We get to go all the way in, through the court of the Gentiles, through the court of the women, through the court of the priests, all the way in, to the holy of holies.

[24 : 38] Can you handle that? Free, full access into the presence of the holy God. Verse 18.

It's the foundational text for a theology of prayer. A foundational text for a theology of intimacy with the holy God. For through Christ, we both have our access in one spirit to the Father.

Through, in, to, through Jesus Christ, God the Son, who makes peace between human and human, and makes peace between human and God.

In the Spirit, God the Holy Spirit, who carries us into God's presence. To God the Father, who so loved the world, He sent His Son to make it all happen.

Never again, never again, will we meet the sign that says, restricted access. The wall is down. All the walls are down.

[25 : 42] Full, free access into the very heart of the triune God. And then, in a morphing of the metaphor, we are not, not only have access into the holy of holies, the new human race becomes the holy of holies.

verse 21, in Christ, the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord. Now remember, it's a lifelong Jew who is telling us this.

He lived all his life with the idea that the temple was the cosmic center of the universe. And now he says that Jews and Gentiles together in Christ are this new temple.

temple. Now get this. The New Testament has two different words that we translate temple. One of the words is used to describe the whole of the temple, all four of the courts.

But another word, the word naos, N-A-O-S, refers just to the holy of holies. And it's that word that Paul uses in this text. Growing into a holy temple, growing into a holy naos, growing into a holy, holy of holies.

[26 : 59] We, mere humans, broken, sinful, being redeemed, being made into new creations, we, mere humans, are now the new holy of holies in the world.

We not only get to go into the holy of holies, we are the holy of holies. It takes my breath away. Built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, like Paul and Peter and Priscilla and James, who

brought the good news.

The chief cornerstone being Jesus himself. You architects and builders can tell us that the cornerstone determines the size and shape of the building.

Given who Jesus Christ is, this building can be very big. And it will be very beautiful. A new human race, constituting a new commonwealth in the world, who together have access into the holiest space in the universe, and who together make up the dwelling place of the creator of all things who cannot be confined in any human-made temple.

people. So, what are the implications for us in this city? First and foremost, we are to invite the city in on the building project.

[28 : 27] We are to invite as many people as we can to join what God is building in the midst of all the building. And then, we are to make sure that we do not create new forms of the barrier of the dividing wall.

Jesus Christ has reduced all the walls, and the church must be careful to not bring any of them up again. They are all gone.

And, we are then to treat each other in light of this building project. We are to treat each other as members of this new human race, as this new commonwealth. We are to treat each other as members of this new temple, this holy place.

at New Life Fellowship in New York, when someone speaks ill of a member of the church, they say, the Father does not speak to his children that way, and neither will you.

We are to treat each other with the reverence holiness demands. We are holy things.

[29 : 38] and most of all, we are to do whatever we can to grow in sensitivity to this holy presence. In all we do, we are to seek to live aware of the presence of the triune God of grace who comes to live among us and in us.

Now, here I want to conclude with a reading from C.S. Lewis. This reading for me captures the message of Ephesians 2, 11 to 22. Imagine yourself a living house.

That might have triggered some of those of you who know where this is going to go. Imagine yourself a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he's doing.

He's getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew those jobs needed doing, so you're not surprised. But, presently, he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense.

What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he's building quite a different house from the one you thought of. Throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards.

[30 : 58] You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage. but he's building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

What a vision.