

A greater plan

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Date: 02 September 2018

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[0 : 0 0] Now, after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome. And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

About that time, there arose no little disturbance concerning the way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen.

These he gathered together with the workmen in similar trades and said, Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.

When they heard this, they were enraged and were crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel.

[1 : 4 2] But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him, and even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theatre.

Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward.

And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defence to the crowd. But when they recognised that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!

And when the town clerk had quietened the crowd, he said, Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?

Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess.

[2 : 5 2] If, therefore, Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another.

But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.

And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

[3 : 54] Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love, he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he has blessed us in the Lord.

Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Now I want to spend the first part of this talk thinking about why Ephesians was written, and why it is such an important letter for us in London in 2018.

I've called it the Rough Guide to Ephesus. You'll see that on the outline on the back of the service sheet there. Imagine for a moment living in a city where to be a follower of Jesus Christ is very much to be on the edge, on the edge of the cultural and social mainstream, where genuine biblical Christianity is at best tolerated and at worst thought of as being a force not for good but for ill.

[6 : 16] A society where there are clear flashpoints when the Christian worldview stands at odds with the worldview of the surrounding culture.

In other words, when the world looks big and where the cause of Christ and the local church correspondingly looks small and unimpressive.

Now of course you and I don't have to imagine a city like that, because it's precisely the city in which we live.

But it's also I think what it would have felt like to be a follower of Jesus Christ in first century Ephesus. With a population of 250,000, it was the second most important city in the Roman Empire.

In the first century Christianity was not yet a formally recognised religion. To be a Christian was to be on the edge. What's more, Ephesus was dominated by one building, the Temple of Artemis.

[7 : 20] It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. If anyone's been to Athens, if you've seen the Parthenon there, the Temple of Artemis was twice the size of the Parthenon. In the words of one contemporary writer, Here I've seen the walls of the hanging gardens of ancient Babylon, the statue of Olympian Zeus, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the mighty work of the ancient pyramids.

But when I saw the Temple of Ephesus rising to the clouds, all these other wonders were put in the shade. In that reading from Acts chapter 19, which we had first of all, when the Apostle Paul had first been to Ephesus six years earlier, we heard, didn't we, of the near riot that was caused by the preaching of the message of Jesus.

What is the charge against Paul in Acts chapter 19? Well, here it is. There is danger, not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the whole world worship.

And the crowd responded, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. I wonder if you can begin to feel the grip that this goddess Artemis might have had on the city.

So again, imagine what it would have felt like to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The non-Christian world, very big, very powerful, compared to which your little church gathering would have felt very small and very unimpressive indeed.

[8 : 58] Now I think that all makes sense of the main ways in which Paul applies his teaching through this letter. So just turn over the page and have a look at chapter 3 verse 13, for example.

As the Apostle Paul says to the church in Ephesus, chapter 3 verse 13, So I ask you not to lose heart over what I'm suffering for you, which is your glory.

Paul is in prison. They're in danger of losing heart. I guess we know something of that, don't we? Perhaps every time we read that a Christian preacher has been arrested simply for saying what the Bible says, or a Christian employee has been sacked or disciplined, again, simply for being publicly Christian at work, it does make a stop, doesn't it?

Perhaps I should keep a lower profile. Perhaps I shouldn't speak up. The temptation to fit in with the world, to be intimidated, not to live distinctively for Jesus.

I take it that's why there's so much in the second half of this letter about our walk, our daily, day-to-day Christian lives. Chapter 4 verse 1, I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

[10 : 23] Chapter 4 verse 17, now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk, as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.

Chapter 5 verse 15, look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise. You see, Paul writes this letter because he is passionate that the Christians in Ephesus stand firm.

It's how the letter finishes. Chapter 6 verse 10, finally be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Verse 13, stand firm. Beginning of verse 14, stand therefore.

Because you see, to be a Christian in first century Ephesus, just as in 21st century London, is to face a conflict. It is to face conflict with the world around.

And of course, the reality is, few of us like conflicts. I guess there might be one or two of us who like conflict, but I guess on the whole, we dislike conflicts. And therefore, we know, don't we, the temptation is to keep a low profile when there is conflict, and just to fit in with everybody else.

[11 : 42] Of course, it may well be that you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, and you are just looking in on the Christian faith.

But actually, it may be that this is one of the things which is stopping you becoming a Christian. You know, it's going to be costly to be a born-again Christian, to take the Bible seriously in 21st century Britain.

It's very much, isn't it, to put yourself on the edge of our social and cultural mainstream, just as it was in 1st century Ephesus.

Well, that brings us, I think, to verses 11 to 14, because they are full of assurance. They are here to give us great confidence. First of all, that God has always had a people.

Verse 11. In him, that's in Christ, we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.

[12 : 55] Last week, in verses 1 to 10, we saw, didn't we, that the Apostle Paul is full of praise for what is true of everyone who has put their trust in Jesus. Do listen online if you missed the talk.

we are meant to count our blessings and rejoice in them. And to those blessings of last week, Paul now adds, verse 11, we have obtained an inheritance.

Literally, we have been made an inheritance. In other words, not so much that we have an inheritance, but that we are an inheritance. We are God's inheritance.

Paul is speaking in the first place of Jewish Christians like himself, but notice in verse 13, he extends that to the non-Jewish Christians who would have made up the bulk of the church in Ephesus.

He says, when he says, you also, when you heard the word of truth. Because you see, God has always had a people. He's always had an inheritance. I put Deuteronomy chapter 32, verses 8 and 9 on the outline.

[13 : 55] Just have a look at those verses. When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

God gave the nations their inheritance, the land they occupy. But then it goes on to make the point that God also has an inheritance or a portion.

It's just the same word that's there in Ephesians chapter 1, verse 11. But the Lord's portion is his people. Jacob, his allotted heritage.

God has always had a people. Stretching way back to the Old Testament, those he's chosen, those he's predestined to belong to him. We thought more about that last week. We said, didn't we, that it's a fantastic thing that God chooses people who will belong to him.

Because nothing can get in the way of his purposes. Verse 11. He is the one who works out all things according to the counsel of his will. So you see, how do you think of yourself if you belong to Jesus Christ?

[15 : 07] We live in a world, don't we, which is both connected and yet disconnected. Connected all the time through our smartphones and social media with far more friends than we can properly relate to.

And at the same time, we live in a society which is very disconnected. Growing rates of poor mental health, a loneliness epidemic.

Apparently, more than 9 million people in this country often or always feel lonely with the Prime Minister earlier this year appointing a so-called Minister for Loneliness.

Can you see, in our society of isolated connectivity, actually one of the joys of having put our trust in Jesus Christ is that we're not alone. We are part of God's worldwide people chosen by him longing for the day when we will be gathered around the heavenly throne in the new creation.

That leads to verse 14. Now there's some debate about how the verse should be translated. It could be translated as it is here in the ESV if you look at it, which speaks of the Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.

[16 : 21] In other words, Christians are looking forward to possessing our inheritance in the new creation. Or it could be translated as the footnote does, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until God redeems his possession.

And it seems to me that that makes more sense of the context that we are God's possession, we are his inheritance, he will take us to be with him in the new creation.

And of course, once we've grasped that, that is going to help us to stand firm as his people. Because you see, there are two ways in which you and I can think of ourselves if we are followers of Jesus Christ.

Okay, the first way is to simply think of ourselves as isolated individuals. It's how we naturally think, isn't it, in our individualistic, privatized Western culture.

Me as an isolated individual. But here then is the question. If you're a Christian in Ephesus, what then happens when you come up against the might of Rome or the might of Artemis when you are just one of a handful of Christians?

[17 : 32] Perhaps just a handful at school. Perhaps the only Christian at work. Well, it's very easy, isn't it, to get discouraged. It's hard to stand firm because your mindset is it's just me on my own against everyone else.

Whereas the second way to think about being a follower of Jesus is to do so corporately. Yes, I'm a follower of Jesus Christ but I'm also something, a part of something much, much bigger.

I'm part of God's chosen people. I'm part of his inheritance. Heading for the day, heading for the new creation when everything as we saw last week is going to come under the rule of Jesus Christ.

What then happens when you're a Christian and perhaps in danger of losing heart, in danger of not living distinctively, of not standing firm? Well, I remind myself that God has always had a people who belong to him as his people.

That I'm not on my own. That the future belongs to Jesus. Perhaps you've been to a sports fixture and your team has been playing away and as you look at the other supporters you think to yourself, well, there's an awful lot of them and not many of us.

[18 : 49] At which point the great temptation is to keep quiet. We better keep a low profile until that is you remind yourself, no, we belong to a team that is so much bigger than the little cluster of people we can see here.

And at that point you won't be cowed. So God has always had a people. But secondly, being sure you are part of God's people because I guess it's the obvious question to ask once we've established that God has always had a people, well, how can I be sure and certain that I'm part of God's people?

Well, have a look at verse 13. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

Notice, will you, the three-part process by which anyone becomes a follower of Jesus, a genuine Christian. First of all, you need to hear the word of truth.

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Now we'll see in chapter two in a couple of weeks' time that the gospel is both bad news, the bad news that all have sinned, that we all naturally reject God, that we all naturally fall short of his demands and face his right, settled wrath on the final day.

[20 : 13] And it's also good news, the good news that Jesus Christ died on the cross to bring the forgiveness of sins, not because we deserve it, but simply because of his kindness and his mercy.

And just that one phrase you see, the word of truth, how very encouraging that would have been to the Christians in Ephesus living as a minority. You know, with the world perhaps telling them your Christianity is just a myth or that there are far more important things to be investing your life in, just as it's strengthening for us.

God is truth. He doesn't lie. His word is the word of truth, the truth that stands over and above every other competing truth claim that there is in our world.

Which means that if you're here looking in on the Christian faith, please keep coming back because actually the very best way to consider the claims of Jesus is to keep on hearing the word of truth, keep on hearing the Bible.

And of course it means too, doesn't it, that as a church family we need to have confidence in God's word, confidence in the word of truth. Our mission statement as a local church, let me remind us of it, is this, our overall purpose is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

[21 : 36] Our overall purpose is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. What do you say, how is that going to happen? Well, through people hearing the word of truth.

which means, of course, doesn't it, we need to have confidence as a church family in the word of truth. Confidence in its content that it really is the best news in the world.

Confidence in its power. So as Rupert reminded us, we have a guest service coming up into Sunday's time. Will we invite friends and neighbours to hear the word of truth?

Or those who have a school or university see you, will you invite friends to hear the word of truth?

Secondly, believe in Jesus Christ. Back to verse 13 and just that little phrase, and believed in him. Because, you see, we become part of God's people not simply by hearing and accepting the message as simply something that's true, but by believing in Jesus, by putting our trust in Jesus Christ.

[22 : 49] Maybe that you'll hear this morning, it may be that actually you've heard the word of truth many times. Perhaps at one level you even give your assent to what you've heard, but actually you have never come to the point where you have put your trust in Jesus and believed in him.

There's never been that active response of repentance, turning away from living your way without God, to trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and following him.

In other words, there's a world of difference between being part of the 60%, I gather, of Londoners who say they are Christian, but of course in reality it is no more than simply a cultural label and those who have actually believed in Jesus Christ.

Maybe that here this morning you are part of that 60%. In which case, what is stopping you believing in Jesus today? Of course, it may be that you have genuine questions.

We'd love you to read a book or to join us on our next Christianity Explore course. Do chat to me afterwards about when that's going to be. But it may, of course, be that there is nothing stopping you believing in Jesus Christ and putting your trust in him.

[24 : 06] Possibly even to do so today. In which case, I'd love to chat to you afterwards again about how you might do that. And I take it it means too that as a church family we shouldn't be afraid to challenge friends or neighbours who have heard the gospel and to say to them, have you yet believed in Jesus?

It's wonderful that you come along to hear the word of truth, but actually, have you yet got to the point when you have believed in him? If you haven't, what's stopping you?

How about believing in him today? So, being sure we're part of God's people, hear, believe, thirdly, be sealed with the Holy Spirit.

Again, end of verse 13, we're sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. A seal is a mark of possession just as a farmer might brand their cattle not only as a mark of possession that this animal belongs to me but also as a sign of protection.

And in a far more wonderful way you see God seals his people with his Holy Spirit. And so I guess the obvious question is, well, how do I know I have the Holy Spirit? After all, you see people walking through Dulwich Village, you can't tell, can you, who has been sealed with the Holy Spirit and who hasn't simply by looking at them.

[25 : 29] Well, look again at the verse because actually it's very simple, verse 13, if you've believed in Jesus Christ then you do have the Holy Spirit.

And because the Spirit is a person, we can't receive more of him. Yes, we'll see later on in Ephesians it's possible to grieve the Spirit, that we need to be filled with the Spirit and strengthened by the Spirit.

But we can't receive more of the Spirit. Nor, as some people have taught, do we need to wait for some kind of second blessing of the Spirit to be sort of even more fruitful as Christians.

Striking, we'll see next week in verses 15 to 23 that Paul doesn't pray for these Christians in Ephesus, he doesn't pray that they'd receive more blessings from the Spirit, he prays that they had grasped more fully the blessings they already have.

And notice verse 14, will you, it's the Spirit who is the guarantee of the future. In fact, I gather in modern Greek that word guarantee has come to mean an engagement ring.

[26 : 37] Perhaps you can see why. When I proposed to Rachel I gave her a ring and it signified a number of things. Firstly, it told everyone else she was a taken woman.

She was, if you like, mine. She had pledged herself to me and I had pledged myself to her. But the ring was also a pledge that we would get married.

It was a future promise that there was more to come simply than engagement. Well, can we see in a far greater way God's Holy Spirit is both the mark of God's ownership upon us now and also it is the deposit guaranteeing God's final and full possession of us in heaven in the new creation.

Now, I don't know about you but it seems to me these are words of terrific encouragement, aren't they? If we have heard the word of truth, if we've believed in Jesus Christ, we have the Holy Spirit.

We belong to Jesus as part of his people. Now, I take it that is a foundation that you and I need to have grasped, a foundation that you and I need to be reminded of often and to be certain of if we are not to lose heart as follows of Jesus Christ and instead we are to stand firm.

[28 : 14] Let's have a few moments quiet. I shall then lead us in prayer and then I think we've got time for questions so if anyone would like to ask a question then that would be a good time to do so. Let's have a few moments quiet and then I shall lead us in prayer.

Thank you. until God redeems his possession.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for this wonderful truth that you've always had a people and that those who have trusted in Jesus Christ whom you have chosen and predestined from before the beginning of time are now your people, your glorious inheritance who will be with you in the new creation.

And we pray Heavenly Father for ourselves just as no doubt the Apostle Paul prayed for these Christians in Ephesus in a world which seems big where church and the cause of the Lord Jesus the gospel to be a Christian seems small.

We pray Heavenly Father please would you grant us a great confidence in your purposes that you have indeed set us apart as your people to stand firm to live distinctively for the Lord Jesus.

[29 : 53] Please help us not to lose heart and we ask it in his name. Amen.