

A greater building project

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[0 : 00] For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given to me by the working of his power.

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This is according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

[1 : 25] Well, the key verse of this passage, if you look at it, is verse 13. It is the application of this section of Ephesians.

Have a look at Ephesians 3, verse 13. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. So I want to start by asking you a question this morning.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, I wonder what is the thing that is most likely to cause you to lose heart, or perhaps to give up even being a follower of Jesus altogether.

Or if you are here this morning and you are simply looking in the Christian faith, what is the thing which is most likely just to stop you dead in your tracks?

I am not going to ask for answers out loud, so have no fear, but just ponder for a moment. It may be something obvious, I guess, like having a job perhaps that sucks the life out of you.

[2 : 27] Or it may be just gently drifting away from church, becoming less and less regular. I guess it could be an addiction of some kind, pornography or gambling.

Or perhaps actually, if you are honest, it is not really a question you have given much thought to. And yet if we take the Apostle Paul seriously in this letter to the Ephesians, then very near the top of the list will be forgetfulness.

That's a surprise, isn't it? Forgetfulness. It doesn't really sound very serious. Yet actually, in the first half of this letter, I wonder if you have noticed over these last few weeks, there are actually only two commands.

Have you noticed that? The first command is chapter 2, verse 11. Therefore, remember. It's repeated in the next verse. Remember. And the second command is the one I've just read out, chapter 3, verse 13.

So I ask you not to lose heart. Because remembering is the key to not losing heart. To being strong. To standing firm as a follower of Jesus.

[3 : 39] Remember, first century Ephesus is very much like 21st century London. A major city where the world looks big, the world looks impressive, the world looks powerful.

And where to be a follower of Jesus looks very small. And to be very much on the edge. And so in chapter 1, verse 10, Paul began this letter by doing what?

By reminding them and us of God's plan for the world. Have a look back to chapter 1, verse 10. God's plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, all things in Christ Jesus, things in heaven and things on earth.

God's master plan for a whole new creation under the rule of Jesus. He then goes on to remind us again, chapter 1, verse 21, that the risen Jesus is now seated, 121, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.

And above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. In chapter 2, verse 13, he reminds us of the great salvation that lies at the heart of the Christian faith.

[4 : 53] But now in Christ Jesus, you who once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Do you see, Ephesians is a don't lose heart letter.

It's a stand firm by remembering letter. A letter, in other words, which helps us to see with the eyes of our heart the spiritual realities that we cannot see with the eyes that are in our heads.

Well, I put an outline on the back of the service sheet. Let me warn you, the first point is significantly longer than the second point, so don't lose heart in about 20 minutes' time.

The first point, don't lose heart when the opposition looks big, or probably better, don't lose heart when the world looks big.

Because it's hard to miss the fact that this whole section is framed by conflict and suffering. Chapter 3, verse 1, For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, on behalf of you Gentiles.

[6 : 01] And then chapter 3, verse 13, Paul's suffering. The Apostle Paul, who had brought the gospel to Ephesus in the first place, who had planted and established the church over a period of three years, he is now in prison.

And so it's not surprising, is it, that they are losing heart. It raises, I guess, all kinds of questions. Is God's plan really on track? Is Jesus really Lord? Is his power really at work in the church?

So we need to remember the significance of the conflict. Because you see, there's far more going on here simply than one man being put in prison.

The big picture is that the proclamation of the gospel always leads to conflict. It's precisely what Paul experienced when he first went to Ephesus several years previously.

Keep a finger in Ephesians chapter 3 and turn back for a moment to Acts chapter 19. Acts chapter 19 on page 1118.

[7 : 10] Acts chapter 19 on page 11. Now do read the whole of this chapter later.

It is full of the language of conquest and conflict and power. So can you feel the power of God in verse 11?

As we're told. And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul. Can you feel the sense of conflict in verse 12?

So that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. The sense of conquest in verse 20.

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. And then in verse 26 Paul's ministry is summarized. And you see in here that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia that is what we would call Turkey 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.

[8 : 27] And then the resulting conflict verse 29. So the city was filled with confusion and they rushed together into the theatre dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel.

Here is a massive crowd of demonstrators. The great theatre the great amphitheatre in Ephesus we're told held 24,000 people. Now we're not told that every seat was taken but nonetheless it gives us something of an idea of the enormous opposition there was protesting at the progress of the gospel in Ephesus.

Just as now several years later the Apostle Paul is in prison for preaching that same gospel. Let me ask you a question. When you go outside on a rainy day and you get wet what do you imagine is happening?

Do you imagine that do you imagine yourself to be one of those cartoon characters walking around the place and there's a kind of solitary rain cloud over their heads and everyone else is enjoying glorious sunshine?

And wherever they move the kind of rain cloud moves with them and everyone else is still enjoying glorious sunshine. Is that what you imagine it's like? Of course not.

[9 : 52] Because what you do is you look up don't you and actually you see a whole sky full of dark angry rain clouds. Something far bigger than simply one solitary cloud sitting over your head.

And in the same way if we're to understand the significance of opposition to the gospel we need to do exactly the same thing and look up. You see it's not just that there happens to be one solitary rain cloud of opposition over the head of the Apostle Paul when he first established that church in Ephesus.

It's not just that there happens to be yet another solitary cloud of opposition as several years later chapter 3 verse 1 he finds himself in prison. Note it is that he's engaged in a far bigger spiritual battle because wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed the spiritual powers of darkness in the universe hate it.

Do you remember chapter 2 verse 2 how all of us by nature follow the prince of the power of the air the devil we follow his lie that life without God is better than life with God.

He hates it that Jesus has conquered his power he hates it when the gospel is proclaimed he hates it when people put their trust in Jesus and so there will be conflict it's why and I don't know if you've noticed as we've been looking at Ephesians over these last few weeks Ephesians is full isn't it of big picture language it's how the letter starts with the big picture of God's plan for the fullness of time big picture language to assure us you see that the plan of God and the power of God are so much greater and so much bigger than the forces of evil and it's how the letter finishes big picture language just turn over the page to chapter 6 verse 11 and 12 Ephesians 6 verse 11 put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers against the authorities against the cosmic powers over this present darkness against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places so don't lose heart when you face opposition and conflict whether it's in the HR department at work or the sneering of the media or the friends at school or the colleague who is completely dismissive of Jesus or even opposition faced by a local church whether from the secular establishment or the religious authorities remember the significance of the conflict but secondly remember the significance of the apostle Paul

[12 : 54] Ephesians 3 verses 2 to 9 because you can imagine his suffering his imprisonment would have raised all kinds of questions for the Christians in Ephesus is he the genuine article did we make a mistake trusting his message so next is in verse 2 how Paul sees himself as a steward someone who has been entrusted to pass something on verse 2 assuming that you've heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you a steward of what he calls the mystery it's there in verse 3 the mystery was made known to me by revelation it's there again in verse 4 and it's there again in verse 6 this mystery now by mystery he doesn't mean what we mean by mystery which is something that we have to work out for ourselves like Hercule Poirot and Agatha

Christie or something like that rather what he means is new information new information that God has now provided that wasn't available previously in the Old Testament before Jesus came not available to Abraham Moses David Isaiah yes they knew that the Gentiles non-Jewish people would be blessed there are Gentiles non-Jewish people in the Old Testament who come to put their trust in the living God think of people like Rahab and Naaman so what's the new information well it's there in verse 6 this mystery is that Gentiles are fellow heirs members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel the key word in that verse is the word fellow it's actually there three times in the original fellow heirs fellow members of the same body fellow partakers of the promise in other words

Jew and Gentile together in Christ and in Christ together on completely equal terms it means that a Gentile someone not from a Jewish background doesn't have to become a Jew in order to be forgiven and part of God's people rather both have come to put their trust in Christ and done so on completely equal terms fellow members of God's household equal in status it's no wonder is it that in verse 8 Paul describes this gospel message as the unsearchable riches of Christ it's no wonder that in verse 9 it's the preaching of this message that brings people from spiritual darkness to spiritual light maybe I guess that you could be here this morning and actually you've never really seen this to belong to Jesus

Christ is to possess the most enormous riches far greater than anything this world can offer greater than pensions greater than any investments greater than any property wealth or income wealth you may have and that to belong to Jesus Christ is to have moved from the realm of spiritual darkness to the realm of spiritual light that is the gospel the apostle Paul was entrusted with which means that it's through him that the church beyond the geographical boundaries of first century Israel will come into being verse eight to to to me though I'm the very least of all the saints this grace was given to preach the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in

God who created all things that is the unique role which the apostle Paul was given given to him when he was converted on the Damascus road I put Acts chapter nine on the outline just so we can see that but the Lord said to him go for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name do you notice significantly Jesus commission of Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles includes suffering so don't lose heart don't lose heart when you insist that Paul's gospel is the gospel and you encounter opposition for it instead remember the significance of the apostle

[18:07] Paul a unique role in taking the gospel to the Gentiles which is us well I guess most of us we are recipients wonderfully so and just as opposition was a mark of Paul's ministry so it will be for those who preach that same gospel today that's why it's no surprise that the apostle Paul is so largely dismissed in our secular culture whether it's his teaching about the roles of men and women in the family and in the church or the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus or his teaching about the judgments or on marriage or sexuality we should expect that from unbelievers why well because they are still in the realm of darkness and for those of course who are within the church who deny the truth of Paul's teaching why it simply reveals that they too belong to the darkness rather than the light so you see we mustn't let opposition to

Paul and opposition to his gospel cause us to lose heart yes we need thick skins but we need to hold on to the significance of Paul as the apostle chosen by the Lord Jesus and have confidence in him don't lose heart when the world looks big but secondly don't lose heart when the church looks small verse 10 so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places this was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord now that word manifold in verse 10 simply means many colored it was a word which would have been used for the many different colored trees on many different colored leaves on a tree or a plant or something like that and in the same way as we've seen throughout this series in

Ephesians members of God's new humanity his new society the church are many colored so the Ephesians would have read this and thought immediately of course of Jew and Gentile perhaps in our culture we think of those with different colored skin or from different cultures or different social status some poor some wealthy some well educated some less well educated and so on you see the power of the gospel is seen as people who humanly speaking wouldn't give each other the time of day are brought together with a new identity united in Christ serving him as Lord and indwelt by his spirit and notice when you in verse 10 that the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places they know all too well the significance of that the spiritual forces of the universe Paul especially I guess thinking about the powers of evil as they see the church they can see the significance of it they know that their days are numbered that their power has been decisively broken and their final defeat is imminent as

God's purposes move towards their climax just imagine for a moment you had been on holiday in Indonesia at the beginning of last month on the island of Sulawesi and as you sat there on the beach reading a book or whatever it is you like to do on the beach you suddenly notice the most extraordinary thing the sea receding out from the shoreline at the most extraordinary rate the ocean floor being exposed moving so fast that fish were left stranded on what then became the beach now I guess at that point you might have had one of two reactions if you'd understood the significance of what was happening then you'd have fled because you'd have known all too well that the very next thing was going to be a tsunami but if you didn't know the significance of what was happening I guess you might have stayed put you might have just thought to yourself that's a bit odd

I haven't seen anything like that before unaware completely of the significance unaware of what was going to follow just as there are two ways in which you can look at the church one is to completely miss the significance of the church to look at the church and think that's weird and to see the church as little more from a hangover as a hangover from the past redundant in modern 21st century society the other though is to see the church not as a hangover from the past but as a pointer and a signpost to the future a picture if you like of where the world is heading chapter 1 verse 10 to a new creation and God's plan to unite all things under the rule of Jesus that is what the spiritual powers and authorities in the universe understand when they look at the church they know what is coming next in other words they look at our gathering here this morning a mix of people from all sorts of different backgrounds people who perhaps humanly speaking have very little to do with each other and yet all united around

[24 : 06] Jesus they then zoom out a bit and they look at churches across London and the huge variety of people who have all put their trust in Jesus Christ they then zoom out even more and they look at churches meeting across the whole world today people from every tribe and every country and every nation all united under the rule of Jesus Christ at which point the spiritual powers and authorities in our universe they tremble because they know that God's master plan for a new creation under the rule of King Jesus is on track may not be obvious to us but it's obvious to them to be a follower of Jesus is to be on the right side of history so what's the application verse 13 don't lose heart and don't fall for the lie that the church is insignificant and the work of the gospel is insignificant let's just finish by thinking about what it might look like for us to lose heart

I guess for some it may mean drifting away from Jesus altogether but more likely I suspect for most of us to lose heart we may well keep coming to church and yet we would drop the ball in terms of being committed to gospel ministry we would drop the ball in terms of seeking to speak to others about Jesus why well for the very simple reason that the eyes of our heart begin to look elsewhere and therefore our ambitions and our desires move elsewhere to well whatever the kind of countless projects and ambitions that so easily consume us whether it's our career or home improvements or whatever compared to which seeing the local church established growing strong mature seeing the gospel being proclaimed can so easily take a back seat because we forget how very significant the church is that it's in the church that

God's future purposes and plans for his world are seen and we forget that actually we have an invisible audience watching us this morning humanly speaking our gathering looks very unimpressive doesn't it unimpressive perhaps for some of us compared to the business deals we have on at the moment or coming up in the week ahead unimpressive compared with the political dramas of the day unimpressive I guess for many of us compared simply with the stuff that we're thinking about and processing and there we've got coming up in the week ahead but don't let appearances deceive you because row upon row of spiritual powers and authorities marvel and tremble at what they see as they look at this gathering this morning as they look globally at churches meeting people united under the rule of Jesus they tremble they marvel confirmation that God's plan for his world for a new creation in the future united under the rule of

Jesus is indeed on track let's pray together time for quiet and reflection I'll then lead us in prayer and then we'll have time for questions if there are any questions so I ask you not to lose heart over what I'm suffering for you which is your glory heavenly father we tell you that so often we are tempted to lose heart because the world around us looks big and the church in our culture looks small and insignificant and therefore we praise you for this wonderful reminder both that opposition always goes with gospel proclamation the reminder of the confidence we have in the apostle Paul and the reminder of this audience we have this morning as rulers and powers in the heavenly places marvel and tremble as they see what we cannot see confirmation that your plan for all of history is indeed on track and we pray therefore heavenly father please would you help us to remember these things please would you help us not to lose heart please would you help us to be those who stand firm and we ask it in Jesus name amen