

God's Building Project

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[0 : 00] Okay, good afternoon everyone. Welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime talk. It's very good indeed to see you all. You're very welcome.

Good. Well, let's make a start. Can you turn your Bibles to Acts and chapter 14 and you'll find on page 923 if you have one of the visitor Bibles there.

We're looking at a short section here at the end of chapter 14. I'm going to read from verse 19 to the end of the chapter.

And before we do that, I'm going to pray. So let's pray. Our Father God, we do thank you for this opportunity to gather in the middle of the week, a time to sit together under the authority of your word.

And please would you draw near to us this afternoon. Would you open our eyes to see new things in your word? Might they be things that we need to hear perhaps this afternoon?

[1 : 18] So please help and encourage each one of us here for we ask it in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Okay, so this is taking place midway through, towards the end of Paul's first missionary journey.

It begins, a journey that begins in chapter 13, setting off from Antioch. They head to Cyprus and then from Cyprus they head up to the mainland of what we now call Turkey. And they travel there inland and we're joining Paul after he's been in Iconium.

And he's now coming to the end of his time at Lystra. And he's encountered a bit of opposition along the way as we'll see here. So verse 19 of chapter 14. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium.

And having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city. And on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

[2 : 55] And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Then they passed through Poseidon and came to Pamphylia.

And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Atitalia. And from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled.

And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

And there remained no little time with the disciples. I'll begin with a question. Are you clear on what God is doing in his world?

Are you clear on what God is doing in his world? And that's a key question, isn't it? Because knowing what God is doing in this world, that really ought to shape what we devote our lives to.

[4 : 02] If we know what God is doing, then we ought to align ourselves with that, mustn't we? The worst possible thing we could do with the precious time we've been given on this earth is to waste it.

So we do need to know, don't we? We do need to know what is truly important and what is worth investing in. And what God is doing, it's clear as you read through the book of Acts, what God is doing is building his global church.

Notice how Luke describes the gathering in Antioch once Paul and Barnabas returned. Look at verse 27. This is what Paul and Barnabas say when they arrived and gathered the church together.

They declared all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. See, that is God's work.

This was his plan, the gospel going to the Gentiles, to the nations. And Luke has shown us again and again, if you read through the book, Luke shows us that God is achieving his aim.

[5 : 15] The gospel advances. It is absolutely unstoppable. He is reaching the world through the gospel word being proclaimed and through gospel churches being built up and established.

And what we see in this short passage we read together, what we see here is that the apostle Paul, he was crystal clear on what God was doing and he committed himself to the real core work of gospel mission.

That's what we're seeing here. Paul was fully committed to building churches for the long term. And that remains the task for God's people today.

That is how God is at work in his world. He is building his church. And so, for us, Luke would urge you, all of us, to align yourselves to that, to that task of building the church.

That is what God is doing. And so, all of us need to align ourselves with that. Let's look more closely at these verses then. So, verse 21, we're going to begin with.

[6 : 27] And we see here that Paul's work was building churches. And that's the ongoing task of God's people. Now, verse 21, it is a pretty extraordinary verse.

It can perhaps pass us by. It can wash over us. But just stop to consider the reality this verse contains. Yes, Paul is absolutely committed to proclaiming the gospel to the unconverted.

That's his great passion. He goes to new places where the gospel's never been heard. And he goes and preaches. And we've seen that in the previous few chapters. He breaks new ground, goes to new places, seeing great numbers, repenting and believing in the gospel.

And he's showing great resilience as he's done that. Just verse 20, which I read, or verse 19 even. You read there what happens there in Lystra.

Paul is stoned. He's almost killed because of his work. He narrowly avoids death. And you can imagine that, can't you?

[7 : 32] He's been dragged out of the city. They think he's dead. And what does Paul do next? Well, does he head off to the spa for a nice retreat?

No. Is that what it says? He gets back on the road, verse 21, and he heads to Derby. And he continues to preach the gospel.

And wonderfully, we see that people there, like in other places, they repent and they believe the good news. Now here comes the really extraordinary bit. Look at the end of verse 21.

He returns. He goes back to the places they've just been. He goes back. He goes back to Lystra, the place where he was stoned. He goes back to Iconium and Antioch.

These were places where Paul had been driven out. He had been fiercely opposed, where his life had been in previously great danger. And Paul goes back.

[8 : 33] Isn't that extraordinary? Why on earth would he do that? Well, Paul's clear, isn't he? He's understood the task that the Lord Jesus has given to him.

And the Lord didn't call him to hit and run evangelism. He knew there was more to it than that. Listen to what Paul says later on in chapter 15.

We read this. After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord and see how they are.

And later on, you see him doing just that. He went through all the places he'd been before, strengthening the churches. So Paul's concern, it was to strengthen the churches, to revisit the places he'd been, to see again those who had come to living faith, to strengthen, to encourage them, to build them up.

And he was willing to do whatever that took. He was willing to go back, to return to Lystra, to Iconium, to Antioch. And notice in this verse two things that Paul was willing and prepared to do.

[9 : 43] First, he was willing to face great danger. Paul, as we've seen, was willing to go back to places, to cities, where only recently he had faced great danger and even threats to his life.

And these were not just threats in name only. We read he'd been stoned in Lystra, left for dead. but he was prepared to go back, to head into danger for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of those young believers in those places.

Now, we might think that this was a bit foolish and reckless, but Paul was clear on the bigger picture. He was prepared to do what it took in order to strengthen the church.

He was willing to face great danger. And that is often the reality for Christian believers as they seek to not only proclaim Christ but also strengthen and encourage the church.

So, we're not to be surprised nor are we to scoff at those who go into great danger. Perhaps people you know, missionaries, people go to dangerous places. It's not foolish.

[10:57] They've got clarity, haven't they, on what they're about. And are we prepared, willing to face great danger? It's just what the Lord Jesus called us to. He never promises an easy ride or a life of ease for the Christian, does he?

Till the end, he says, there will be trouble. So, are you willing to face great danger? Are you willing, even, to endure much smaller inconveniences for the sake of strengthening other believers?

Paul was certainly willing to face great danger, but also, we see in this verse, he was willing to travel great distances. So, through his first missionary journey, Paul has covered a lot of ground already.

He sailed to Cyprus and then from Cyprus up to the Turkish mainland and traveled around inland in Turkey. Now, by this stage, when he reaches Derby, the obvious thing to do in order to get back to Antioch is to keep traveling east, inland, towards Antioch, to take the main road from Derby to Antioch, about 200 miles.

And he could always just drop in on mum and dad and Tarsus on the way. It's en route. He could have done that, but he doesn't do that, does he? Instead, Paul travels a great distance going back through all the places he had been.

[12:23] Notice verse 21. He goes back to all the places he had been and then verse 23, he continues his journey back to Perga and then sails from Atatalia back to Antioch.

Talk about taking the scenic route home. Instead of taking 200 miles overland, he does about four times that, going back all the places he's been and then taking the boat. So not only was he willing to go through great danger, he was willing to go a great distance.

He was willing to do that for the sake of strengthening the church in all those places he's already visited. And that is, I'm sure, a great challenge, isn't it?

A great challenge to me at least, as well as to you, I'm sure. As we think about our own roles in Christ's church today, are we willing, are we prepared, as Paul was, to endure great danger and to travel great distances in order to encourage the church?

The Christian life is hard work. It involved great sacrifices as we partner together, as we stride side by side for the sake of the gospel.

[13:32] There are no passengers in the Christian church. We all have a role to play in building the church, prepared to go great distances, prepared even to go short distances.

They're often the hardest ones, aren't they? I certainly feel on a Wednesday night when it comes around to the prayer meeting, the last thing I want to do is travel a short distance. But actually, that is a great source of encouraging other Christians, isn't it?

To go along, to be with them, to spend time together with other Christians. You can build up his church by bringing along unbelieving friends to this service every week.

Bring them to come and hear about the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why not bring some along to holiday at home in a few weeks' time? Great opportunity to hear the word of the gospel.

So our task remains building up the church. Paul was clear on that. And I hope we are as clear as well. Well, let's look on then to the next couple of verses where we see what it was that Paul actually did as he was traveling those great distances, enduring great danger.

[14:43] So verse 22, Paul's church building work meant building up the disciples. So look again at verse 22. Three things we see Paul doing here.

First, he strengthens the souls of the disciples. Now these are young converts that Paul is visiting and they would need strengthening.

Christians constantly need strengthening. I don't know about you but I always need strengthening. If there's anyone in this room who doesn't need strengthening I'd like to know your secret.

But notice the very personal, grounded, down-to-earth nature of this. He strengthens the souls of the disciples. That is, he strengthens the individual believers in terms of their inner lives, their very souls.

this wasn't a sort of trite, superficial work. There was no slap on the back and get on with it. No, time was spent speaking with real people, strengthening them, helping them to remain upright, to keep going, to keep standing.

[15 : 50] And that is a necessary part of mission, of establishing churches, of building healthy churches to strengthen the souls of the disciples. and that is a necessity in any work of evangelism.

The need is not only that a decision of faith is come to, but also to maintain it, to continue in the faith, in the face of every possible discouragement or position that may come along.

To continue to build up and strengthen those who follow Christ. And that is a responsibility that each of us has to one another. that task of encouraging and strengthening.

Just think about the person you're sat next to this lunchtime. Think about them and what areas might they need strengthened in the Christian life.

Are they recently bereaved? Have they endured some other sort of loss or disappointment? Are they difficulties in the family?

[17 : 00] how might you ask after them? How might you strengthen the person sat next to you even after this service? So, summon up the courage.

Ask the question. Get into a conversation and encourage the souls of one another. That's the first thing Paul does. Secondly, look, he encourages them, verse 22, to continue in the faith.

So, Paul not only strengthens them, but he encourages them to keep going, not to turn back. Now, in each of these places that Paul has been, there is division everywhere he goes.

Some hear the good news, they repent and believe, but others harden themselves and oppose, sometimes fiercely, the gospel message, and in particular, the gospel messengers.

But that division, that wouldn't somehow magically dissipate the moment that Paul walked out of town. Those who professed faith, they still lived in these places.

[18 : 07] They still lived in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch. They still had to rub shoulders with people who completely disagreed with them. They had to do business to get on with those who rejected the gospel.

And I'm sure they felt real pressure. real pressure to return to their old ways, either to Judaism or to go back to paganism.

Great pressure to give up. Hence, the need for Paul to come and to encourage them to continue, keep going, don't go back, don't give in to the pressure.

And that is a necessary part of missionary work today. It remains our key task. The Christian life is not a short sprint, it's a long marathon. It's an endurance race and people need to be encouraged to keep going.

And Paul knew that and we're to encourage each other likewise. That's the second thing. Thirdly, in verse 22, Paul teaches them that it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God.

[19 : 14] That's the end of verse 22 there. And there's no glossing over the reality, is there? There's no pretending the Christian life is otherwise.

Paul's clear, you must be prepared to endure hardship, tribulations, persecution. And these words would have come with quite some force, don't you think?

Don't you think the sight of Paul there with them on his return, battle scarred, marked by his sufferings of the gospel.

Only recently he'd almost been stoned to death. You could probably see it on his face. Seeing him there proved an inspiration to those new disciples that added weight to his exhortation that they must, through many tribulations, enter the kingdom of God.

To see someone passing through tribulation triumphantly, it's the best incentive, isn't it, to bearing it oneself. hearing as we do from time to time from folk who have endured terrible things, terrible persecutions.

[20 : 25] It's very humbling to hear about the sufferings endured by persecuted Christians around the globe, but it does give us courage, doesn't it? It gives us courage to see them stand, to see them endure, to see them keep going.

And we see here that the Christian life, it is cross-shaped. To pretend otherwise, that's simply anathema to Paul's gospel.

So don't get sucked in by those who say otherwise, and plenty of people do. Don't listen to those who promote life and health and wealth now for the Christian.

I don't imagine that Creflo Dollar, if you've heard of him, Creflo Dollar flying in on one of his private jets, I don't suppose he would get much of it hearing to persecute Christians in North India.

I imagine they'd tell him where to get off, beat it. It's a load of nonsense. Yes, one day, one day there will be unimagined life and prosperity for the Christian, but only in the new creation.
[21 : 36] Only then, when Christ returns, will we enjoy all those good things and restored world, but not until then. In this world, Jesus promises hardship and suffering.

In this world, Jesus says in John 16, in this world, you will have tribulation. And that's the reality. And that's what Paul is clear about as he goes back to each of these churches.

So what does Paul do as he returns to these cities, as he visits these young churches? Well, he strengthens, he encourages, and he teaches that tribulations must be endured.

Paul's building up the church. And that, as well as speaking the gospel, is part of building healthy churches. That is part of real mission work.

Then and today. Building one another up. Encouraging. But there's one other thing that Paul does as we close. Verse 23. Paul's church building work meant setting apart leaders.

[22 : 45] Paul and Barnabas, they go and appoint elders in every church. And Paul is making provision for the future growth and the stability of the church. These places couldn't be dependent on Paul, could they, week by week?

He was going to move on. He was going to new places. So they couldn't be dependent on him for their teaching and oversight. And so Paul sets aside particular elders for that task, knowing that they would need constant teaching, constant encouragement, strengthening, because of what we've just seen, the Christian life is one of tribulation.

Paul knew they needed constant input, constant redirection, keeping focused. Paul knew that Christians need a healthy church to keep going.

Don't you need that week by week? Gathering together, hearing the word, meeting one another. We need that, don't we? And that is why Paul does this. That's why he puts in place leaders, elders, teachers, so that as they gather they continue in the faith together.

It's no good starting out well and then fading away. Paul wants them to build on that and grow and grow and grow. And so this task that Paul is setting about, the task of the church today, it is a long-term work, isn't it?

[24 : 07] We're building something that lasts. He was in the business of establishing communities of believers, churches that would endure for the long haul. This was no quick one-stop show.

He went back. He strengthened the believers. And that was God's program for the explosion of the gospel across the world.

That was his building project. It began there. And you look around today, it's global. And this was the roots of it. So let's all of us align ourselves with God's building project, his church building project.

That is how he's going to reach the world. That is how many millions around the world will hear the gospel and repent and believe. So let's all of us, each one of us, take up our responsibilities to strengthen one another, to encourage each other, to help one another persevere, so that his church will grow and grow and grow to the ends of the earth.

Because his church is growing. Nothing will stop it. And what a waste it would be, an eternal waste, if you or I missed out on that.

[25 : 28] So don't waste your life. Throw yourself into God's building project. And we all have a role to play. It's not just for the upfront minister.

All of us, each of us, has a role to play in God's building project. So let's join together, shall we, with the Apostle Paul, with Christians around the world, in what God is doing in his world.

Let me pray before we close. Father God, we do thank you for the clarity of your words, for the great thrill of seeing what it is that you are doing in your world.

You are building your church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And so, would you encourage each of us to take up our role in that great church building project.

encourage us in the small things that each of us can do in order to build and encourage and strengthen your church, which you love so much.

[26 : 36] So please help each of us to that end. Encourage us and strengthen us. Equip us by your spirit, for we need your help in it. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.