

Why is Church so Hard?

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[0 : 00] Please do take a seat. If I could just echo Neil's welcome. It is so lovely to have you here with us this morning. I'm going to finish our studies in Ephesians this morning.

We've been going through Ephesians. We've had 13 sessions on Ephesians. And what we've seen is that Paul has held up the church. He's tried to show us the significance of church.

Why church is important. Well it can't just be me and God. But it has to be me and God and God's people. We saw that the first half is predominantly doctrine.

What God has done for us in the Lord Jesus. And then chapters 4, 5 and 6 are what we must do now in response to that good news.

Of Jesus who gave himself up for all of us. It's been pretty stretching at times. But I wonder if you could all stand up.

[1 : 01] And we'll see how we got on with listening to Ephesians. Stay standing. If this week you've made every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.

If this week you can say I have made every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. If there's nothing you could have done better. Then stay standing.

One model people. Stay standing if you've been completely humble. Stay standing if you've fully invested in using your gifts to do your part in making the body grow.

Stay standing if you have put off falsehood and spoken nothing but the truth to your neighbor. Stay standing if you've gotten ridden. If you've gotten rid of all bitterness, rage and anger.

Stay standing. If you haven't exasperated your children this week. Let's just say it's very difficult isn't it?

[2 : 11] It's one thing turning up on a Sunday and listening to Ephesians. It's another thing putting Ephesians into practice during the week in our lives.

Which leads to the question why is church so hard? There was very little ambiguity in what Paul was telling us to do. It wasn't an understanding problem.

It was a doing problem. So last week we listened to Paul and he exhorted particularly the husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. And I went out of here and thought this week Aileen.

You're going to get what you deserve. In a good way. So I'm going to love you as Christ loved the church. By Sunday lunchtime I hadn't done the washing up.

And I just failed miserably and retreated back into being quite a mediocre husband. For a wonderful woman. There were some okay bits but substandard would be the report card standing here on Sunday.

[3 : 13] Why is church so hard? We hear it. We go out with zeal to do it. And yet so often we fail to be the church that God has bought with the blood of his own son.

Well there's two things isn't there? That we have a sinful nature. We're not perfect as we should be. The old self still rears its ugly head. We haven't totally put off what we once were.

And we haven't yet put on what one day we will be. But chapter 6 says there's an enemy who is all about trying to spoil our walk with the Lord Jesus.

Both individually and corporately. There is an enemy who hates you as a Christian and hates church as a group of Christians. There is a real enemy.

Yes we have a sinful nature. But the devil stands and strums the strings of our sinful nature to make us into a discordant dirge. Why is that?

[4 : 21] Well because God has a plan and his plan is that all things in the end will be brought to unity under the Lord Jesus. In the end. But in the present there's a working model of that called the church.

Where groups of people saved by the Lord Jesus gather together where Jesus reigns. And as the devil looks at that model he hates it. He hates it and will do anything possible to destroy it. Will leave no stone unturned. Every time he sees the church working he's reminded of his ultimate end. Which is a lake of fire and ultimate destruction.

Do anything to sabotage God's perfect plan. See now in the local church. The devil's made a few shadowy appearances already in the letter.

Chapter 2 verse 2. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live. When you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

[5 : 28] The spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. There's a real enemy. He's trying to get everyone to rebel.

And those that aren't in the Lord Jesus are under his power and being led astray. From the things of God. Chapter 4 verse 27. In your anger do not sin.

And do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. And do not give the devil a foothold. Don't give the devil a way in to destroy the church.

We have one who wants to lead us astray individually. And one who wants to divide the church corporately. Church is hard because there's a real enemy who hates you.

If you know the Lord Jesus. And church is hard because there's a real enemy who hates us. Who gather in the name of the Lord Jesus for his glory.

[6 : 33] Paul is therefore going to finish his letter very appropriately. By talking about spiritual warfare. It's not that he thought. Do you know what? I haven't really written about spiritual warfare to anyone yet.

I should probably say something. Or I've got a little bit of paper left on the end of this papyrus. And it would be a shame to leave it blank. And I'm no good at drawing. He puts it in because it is the perfect end.

To make his readers aware. That it is the devil who will ultimately destroy the model of the future. Seen presently in the local church.

So if you've got a Bible. Please turn with me to Ephesians chapter 6 and verse 10. Paul writes this. In addition to all this.

[8 : 02] Take up the shield of faith. With which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation. And the sword of the spirit. Which is the word of God.

And pray in the spirit on all occasions. With all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind. Be alert. And always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Pray also for me. That whenever I speak. Words may be given me. So that I will fearlessly. Make known the mystery of the gospel. For which I am an ambassador in chains.

Pray that I might declare it fearlessly. As I should. Take a curse. Take a curse. The dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord. Will tell you everything. So that you may also know how I am.

And what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose. That you may know how we are. And that he may encourage you. Peace to the brothers and sisters.

[9 : 01] In love with faith. From God the Father. And the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who. Who love our Lord Jesus Christ. With an undying love.

Let's pray. And then we'll dig into this. Together. Father God. Thank you that you're good. Thank you that you're strong. Thank you that you're mighty. But Lord. Thank you that you're gracious. And you've condescended. To write your word down for us. So Lord we're here asking that that same spirit. Who inspired it to be written. Would come now. And illuminate it for us.

Give us soft hearts. Diligent minds. Give us wills ready to be bent. In accordance with yours. Father may we leave here strengthened.

Trusting. And fully ready to stand. On the Lord Jesus. For the Lord Jesus. For his glory. Amen. Three things.

[10 : 00] I want us to see from this passage. First one is this. Switch on. Switch on. Switch on. You're in a battle. What Paul says here. Is that you. Are in a battle. And it's important. That you know that.

Ephesus knew the reality. Of a spiritual battle. If you read Paul's journey. In Acts. To Ephesus. You'll see that the powers. Of the gospel. And the powers. Of darkness.

Collinds. And we get this amazing account. Of the seven sons of Sceva. Who tried to jump on the Jesus bandwagon. By casting out demons. In Jesus name.

But because the seven sons of Sceva. Didn't know. The Lord Jesus. As the man who they try to exercise. Stands up. And beats them senseless. And they go running from the house.
[10:58] Fear grips the place. And there's an enormous bonfire. Of all the dark scrolls. In the city. That are literally worth. Millions of pounds.

As people see. That the gospel. Is more powerful. And conquers. The power of darkness. Paul says.

To the people in Ephesus. To us. In Bruntsfield. You're in a battle. There is a war. Waging in and through. Your lives.

This battle is not a pitch battle. On the streets of Edinburgh. This battle is taking place. Behind. The earthly realm. In the spiritual realm.

In the heavenly realm. In the heavenly places. And the good thing is. That's good news. Why is that good news? Because Jesus rules.

[11:55] Over all the heavenly places. It's where he's seated. Chapter 1 verse 3. It's where he's blessed us. With every spiritual blessing.

Chapter 1 verse 20. It's where we're seated. In him. Chapter 2 verse 6. The heavenly realms. The heavenly realms. For the Christian. Are not a place of fear.

But a place of security. That though the battle wages. In the heavenly realms. There is one ruler. Of the heavenly realms. And his name is Jesus. And that's good news.

That means that this isn't. Good versus evil. Playing out in a cosmic realm. And it could go one way. Or the other. And we'll turn on the news. Every day. To see who's winning today.

This is a war. That's already won. In the Lord Jesus. Through his incarnation. Through his crucifixion.

[12:53] Through his glorious resurrection. And ultimate ascension. To rule. In those heavenly places. Paul's already prayed. In chapter 1 verse 18.

That the eyes of their heart. Would be open. To see the way things really are. And we need to have. Our same eyes opened. To see. The way things really are. He says.

Switch on your inner war. Some of the more seasoned. Members of our congregation. Will have lived. Through a time of war. Will know what it's like.

To wake up. With your country. Having to declared war. On another country. Particularly thinking. World War 2. The overnight. Things changed.

Everything changed. You had blackouts. Where if you failed. To cover your windows properly. The military police. Would come and knock. You had rations.

[13:50] Where Asda. Wasn't a place of plenty. It was a place. Where your book. Determined exactly. How much you were allowed to take. Place of air raids.

Where your sleep. Would be interrupted. By this whining noise. Going up and down. And it meant. Even in your pajamas. You had to go to the nearest air raid shelter. You had to carry your gas mask.

With you. People in your village. Would go off to war. Some you wouldn't see again. War affects everything. About our lives. And that's the same thing. Paul is saying to us.

We're in a war. And it needs to. Inform us. About how we live. In prayer time. In war time. Three things.

I think we can see. That it's a defensive battle. This is more Zulu. Than it is charge of the light brigades. This is taking a stand.

[14:45] Look at verse 11. Put on the full armor of God. So that you can take your stand. Against the devil's schemes. Verse 13.

Therefore put on the full armor of God. So that when the day of evil. Comes. You may be able to stand your ground. And after you have done everything. To stand.

Verse 14. Stand firm. Then. This is not. Onward Christian soldiers. Onwards as to war. This is not. In heavenly armor. We'll conquer the land.

This is. A defensive battle. Because the war's already won. This is taking our stand. On the gospel. For the gospel. And repelling the attacks.

Of the evil one. The victory is won. Eternally. But the battle still rages. In the present. Put on the full armor of God.

[15:47] So you can. Stand. Stand firm. Stand tall. Stand true. Second thing we see.

Is that we have no. Ability to fight this battle ourselves. We have no. Strength. No ability. None of us went to spiritual. Standhurst.

This is not going to go well for us. If we try and do it. In our own. Strength. That's why he says.

Verse 10. Be strong in the Lord. And in his mighty power.

It's a derived power. It's one we can't muster. It's not about going to boot camp. It's about standing with the Lord Jesus. For the Lord Jesus.

In the power that the Lord Jesus. So readily. Brings. It's not a call to search for the hero inside yourself. You're not trying to summon your inner Rambo.

[16:43] This is power coming from God. By his grace. Through our faith. He's already said. Dwell.

That the message of Christ dwell. In you. That you might be strengthened by. The gospel. It's a defensive battle.

We need the Lord's strength. And finally we have a cunning. And ruthless. Enemy. Verse 11. Put on the full armor of God. So that you can take your stand.

Against the devil's schemes. The devil's schemes. You don't just see him coming over the hill.

Thinking. Oh there's our enemy.

He's crafty and cunning. We read that he masquerades as an angel of light. He's the tempter. He's the accuser. He's the one who's prowling around.

[17:42] Looking for someone to devour. I don't know if you saw the news this week. In Georgia.

With all the flooding. And all the animals escaped. And they thought they had them all. Until one guy went into the warehouse of his workshop.

And there was a snow leopard. And it devoured him. Because he was alone. Creeping around in the darkness. Looking for a meal. That's the same idea.

I think in the western world. The sneakiness is. In the apparent ambivalence we have. And in a poll. Only 25% of people would say.

There is a real personal devil. Who hates Christians. That's even amongst the church. That our enemy is so cunning. That he's managed to wear an invisibility cloak.

And is able to unhindered go about his business of stealing. Killing. And destroying God's flock.

Devil's purpose is to divide the church.

[18:41] And wreck the model. Lead people astray. Reject the Lord Jesus. Doesn't that help explain. Why when church goes bad.

It goes so horribly bad. It almost seems to go nuclear. When churches really go bad. And that's because it's not just people on people. But there is an enemy who delights.

In the destruction of the church. First thing we need to know. From this passage. Switch on. There is a real battle really going on. In your lives.

Number two. Suit up. Suit up. You're in a battle. Says repeatedly.

Put on the full armor of God. Verse 11. Verse 13. Put on the full armor of God. When you get serious about something. You buy the kit.

[19:36] Don't you? When you get serious about something. You buy the kit. So I tried to take up running last year. Sports Direct was the shop I visited regularly. To try and improve my performance.

My cricket bag is full of loads of stuff. That I never am in long enough to use properly. If you're a guitarist. Buy a guitar.

And a case. And a strap. And a tuner. And then you buy a capo. And then you buy some music.

Because you're serious about it. Golfers are the worst aren't they? If you're a golfer.

You have all sorts of trinkets. You have loads of clubs. And the ball still bobbles along the floor. In my experience. You're going to war.

You need to buy the kits. If you don't have the kit. Particularly when it comes to war. You're putting your life in danger. That's what we learnt in 2013. From the Chilcot Inquiry.

[20:31] Where they were sending British troops. To the front line. Without sufficient body.

Armour. Get suited up. Get kitted. Out. And there's six items.

In the armour of God. Six items. Which are all the gospel. Applied to different areas. Of the body. Basically.

In short. What he's saying. Is you need to be dressed in. From head to toe. In the gospel. That's what he's saying. You need to get suited up. For the war. That is.

Waging. Paul is writing this. In chains. So he's probably. Chained to a Roman soldier. So he has a very visible. Idea of what. Armour.

Looks like. And notice. That when you wear armour. Particularly as a Roman soldier. It's not purely for. Defence.

[21 : 27] And protection. It's also for. Identity. And projection. That it's not only. To keep you safe. But it's to show everyone. Who you are.

You're a Roman soldier. You're the real deal. And I think we see that. With the armour. That the things that he's saying. Are not just. Things that keep us safe. But all things.

That we should project. To a dark world. So he says. Put on the belt. The undergarment. Of truth. That is both. The doctrine.

That we rely on. The truth. Of the gospel. But if you look back. In chapter 5. Verse 9. For the fruit of light. Consists in all goodness. Righteousness.

And truth. It's not just. Something we wear. But it's something we project. We stand on the truth. Of the gospel. And it transforms us. To be truthful.

[22 : 20] People. The breastplate. Of righteousness. Both the righteousness. We get. From the Lord Jesus. An alien righteousness. But back in chapter 5.

Verse 9. The fruit of the light. Consists of goodness. And righteousness. That the righteousness. We adopt. Leads to right living. In. And through.

Our lives. Same for all of these. Gospel boots. If you're wearing boots. There. There are two things. You need your boots to do. They need to bring stability.

And agility. You need to be able to stand firm. Anybody who plays rugby. Knows this. You need to be able to stand firm. But you also need to be able to get around the field.

There's no point having lead. On the bottom of your feet. Both the stability. To stand on the gospel. But the agility. To apply it. Particularly when there's times of conflict.

[23 : 14] Because it is the gospel of peace. Shield of faith. This full length. Shield. That you can hide behind. So that when the devil's arrows come and go.

You can't really trust God for that. Oh it is God that's got you into this mess. Oh. How could a good God let you lose your job this week? You hide behind that shield of faith.

You say God is good. All the time. And that faith extinguishes. The accusations. And the doubts thrown at us. By the devil. Put on the helmet of salvation.

Your helmet's very vital. We've all seen the war film. Don't we? Haven't we? Where there's a time of peace. And people get a bit complacent. And you see the guy whose head is above the line of sandbags.

He takes his helmet off. And the next moment. It's introduced quite forcibly to a bullet. Helmet of salvation. And the sword of the spirit.

[24 : 13] Which is the word of God. If we want to see how the sword of the spirit is wielded. Then the Lord Jesus is a great example. He gets baptized. He's led into the desert. By the spirit there.

He's tempted. Forty days without eating. And the devil says. Why don't you turn these rocks into bread? And how does Jesus parry the attack?

By quoting Deuteronomy. Which most of us would struggle fully fed. Let alone having not eaten for forty days. Man shall not live by bread alone. But by every word and that from the mouth of God. Parry. Defend. Riposte. But also it is the word. The sword of the spirit is the only attacking instrument. Because it is God's word.

It is the gospel shared and responded to. Which breaks people out of darkness. Which rescues people from their shackles.

[25 : 12] To the prince of the power of the air that leads to disobedience. So we are standing. But we're taking every opportunity to share this word. In order that it might penetrate the darkness.

And rescue many. Suit up. Put on the full armor of God. But no. This isn't just an individual thing. Because as we think about Roman soldiers. Their favorite battle formation was called the testudo. Which is literally Latin for tortoise. And they would line up like this. Where everybody had a part to play. Some people shields at the front.

Shields at the side. Shields at the back. Shields over the top. And it's the reason they were managed to be so successful in military conquest. Because they were all tightly packed together. Moving forward together. And were utterly impenetrable. Kind of Wellington did it 200 years ago with his squares. That they were impenetrable.

[26 : 09] Because they all had everyone else's backs. And therefore when we put on the full armor of God. It's not just you taking responsibility for yourself. But it's you seeking through your armor to protect everyone else.

To be a close knit unit. Standing firm. Against the one who hates us. The devil. Lastly. Verses 18 to 20.

Cry out. Cry out. Verse 18. And pray in the spirit on all occasions. With all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind.

Be alert. And always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me. That whenever I speak. Words may be given. So that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel. For which I am an ambassador in chains.

Pray that I might declare it fearlessly. As I should. If you're in a battle. Communication is key. Staying together is key. You have radio operators everywhere.

[27 : 13] Radioing back to high command. To know where they're supposed to be doing. What they're supposed to be doing. And Paul here is saying. In our spiritual battle. Crying out is vital.

Crying out to God. In whose power we're standing. Notice how comprehensive it is. Verse 18. On all occasions. On all occasions.

With all kinds of prayers and requests. Always alert. For all people. Closely knitted communication for absolutely everyone.

It doesn't matter if you're the best soldier in the world. You still need to be part of an army. Which means that you need to be communicating with everybody else.

Paul's so conscious of this. That he's in prison. But he's still praying that they might. He's still asking that they would pray for him. So that every opportunity he might fearlessly proclaim the gospel.

[28 : 12] Stand with me in prayer. He's saying. Not just withstanding. But winning people.

Through the proclamation of the gospel. I was in Sky last week. It was lovely. Except for one thing. Sky sucks for mobile reception. It's awful. But I thought I'd come back across the bridge.

And I'd get loads of text messages. It didn't happen. I wasn't as popular as I dreamed. Paul here is saying. Stay online with God all the time.

Don't let your reception. Don't let your communication be hindered ever. That if you're going to stand firm. With the Lord Jesus.

On the gospel of the Lord Jesus. For the glory of the Lord Jesus. You need to stay connected. You need to pray. All the time. For all the people.

[29 : 10] In all kinds of ways. That they would stand to. And that as this tortoise. We might stand firm. And go forward. Together. Isn't it interesting.

That Paul says. Verse 19. My natural tendency. Is to be afraid of evangelism. That left to myself. I would be fearful. And would not make known.

In the mystery of the gospel. Well Paul saying that. And I dare say it's true. For all of us. That we're all. Actually scaredy cats. When opportunities come.

It is the sweat. Going down the back. It is every. Inclination of ourselves. Inclination of ourselves. To stay quiet. And when fear comes. Prayer must rise.

Prayer must rise for ourselves. But if we can include others. And get them to be praying for us as well. That we might have opportunity. And we might take opportunity. What a glorious stand we can take.

[30 : 09] It's a very dense chapter. It's one that says switch on. You're in a war. Against an enemy who hates you. And hates.

The church of Jesus Christ. He says suit up. Apply the gospel from head to toe. Because it is that where your power will come from. And he says cry out. That when you're a week.

And afraid. When you're cowering in a trench. The time is to pray. Pray continuously for yourself. And for everyone else.

Brunsfeld. We're in a war. And I'm so thankful as I look out on the ranks. Of the people I get to fight here with. That you're included in this. Battalion.

Shall we pray. Father God. Thank you that Jesus is one forever. That through his death. Death.

[31 : 07] Through his perfect life. Through his unending grace. We get to be on that winning team. But Lord. We're so conscious that in the present.

This battle rages. That there's a ruthless enemy. Who knows his time is short. Who would love to devour us. And destroy this church. So Lord.

I pray we would be wise. Father. Father. That we would be strong. In your mighty power. Father. That we would be fully. Kitted out with the gospel. That we would be continuously. Putting on. The whole armor of God. So there wouldn't be a weakness. There wouldn't be a chink. In the armor. Where the devil can. Play a mark. And lead us astray. And Father. We want to declare. Our absolute dependence on you. [32 : 02] So we pray. You would make us a prayerful people. That we would continuously. Cry out to you. For strength. Continuously cry out to you. For wisdom. Continuously cry out to you. For opportunity. And continually. Cry out to you. For courage. That we might. As Paul prayed. Fearlessly proclaim. The mystery of the gospel. That you might be pleased. To save many. Through our witness. Amen.