

A spiritual house

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[0 : 00] I think it's very easy at the moment to be discouraged about the state of the church, particularly the state of the church in our nation. I don't know whether you feel that discouragement, but to all outward appearances it looks as though the church in the UK is in terminal decline and Christianity is in terminal decline.

All of the statistics are showing fewer and fewer people identifying as Christian in any sense. The most recent census, less than 50% of people for the first time in any way identified as Christian. Most of the mainstream denominations are in catastrophic decline. That is only going to continue in the next 20 years, basically because of demography.

Many of the churches, the Anglicans, the Methodists, the United Reformed and others, congregations are elderly and quite frankly they are going to literally die out. The average Anglican at the moment is now over 65. There are many churches that have no young people at all.

The picture is bleak in terms of the decline of Christianity in our culture and in our nation. We might want to say there are many reasons for that. I think fundamentally the main reason for that is because so many of those churches no longer preach the gospel in the way that they once did.

[1 : 21] It's not surprising that the church is declining when the gospel is not preached and the gospel is not taught. In a sense it's cultural Christianity which is declining rather than faithful biblical Christianity.

But it's easy to feel that sense of discouragement and all around us we might be seeing churches close, converted for other uses. And we may wonder kind of what is the future of the church? What hope sort of is there? The best statistics would be that no more than 2-3% of people are evangelical believers in the UK. And if we're going to bring the gospel back to our nation we seem to face a massive task.

What hope do we have? Is that realistic? How can we even begin to go about it? Well that's why I think it's helpful for us to look to kind of one Peter.

Because I think it's all too easy to be taken in by that picture of discouragement. Whereas actually I think this passage helps us to be encouraged about the task that we face.

[2 : 28] It helps us to know that that is a task that will succeed. It's a task that's possible and it helps us to know what we need to do to be involved in that task.

We were thinking this morning 1 Peter is a letter written to a church in the first century. It wasn't a church that had experienced a period of decline. But it was a church that was beginning to face increased persecution and opposition.

And finding itself more marginalized in society. So this is a church that Peter was fearing might begin to decline. As people begin to suffer the social consequences of being a Christian.

And they give up on their faith. And he was writing to them to encourage them. To encourage them that the gospel they believed in revealed the true grace of God. And to encourage them to stand firm in it.

So the letter was a message of encouragement. It's a letter that is both thoroughly realistic. About the sort of situation the church finds itself in. The persecution and opposition that it will face.

[3 : 28] But yet it's a word of encouragement to them. That sort of ensures them that they have believed the truth. And that Jesus' purposes will triumph.

So that's the context of 1 Peter. And three things I think from this passage that I hope are an encouragement for us. The first is simply this. This passage reminds us that God is building his church.

God is building his church. That's really the main point of verses 4 to verse 8 of this passage. Peter describes the church as God's great building project.

I was kind of being taken on a tour of Brighton with Philip and Daniel earlier. And as we were going along, Philip was pointing out all of the buildings that are being built. Kind of new student accommodation here.

A new building over here. A new development. There are obviously loads of building projects that are being brought about in Brighton. And you can see them in all different sort of stages of construction.

[4 : 30] Some of them kind of relatively kind of early in that process. And others actually very near to kind of completion. Well what this passage tells us is that the church is basically God's big building project.

In fact it's the particular kind of building. The building that is being built is a temple. God is in the business of building his kind of temple. That is the work that God is kind of doing.

And of course the key encouragement here is that it's God's project to build his church. And of course the consequence of that is because it's God's project. It is a project that will be completed and will be accomplished.

God is not a builder who's going to go bankrupt before finishing the job and leave an incomplete kind of structure. His work is going to be accomplished. In fact this is a big biblical theme.

I don't know whether you've ever thought about it. But the Bible is kind of large amounts of the Bible are taken up with temple building projects. In the Old Testament both kind of Solomon and then after the exile the kind of the rebuilding of the temple.

[5 : 36] It takes up an immense amount of Bible material because that's actually a picture of what God's doing in the world. He is building his kind of temple. He's involved in a building project.

And these verses remind us that the project that he's building, the temple that he's building, is built on Christ. It's a building project built on Christ himself.

Christ is described as being the cornerstone, the very kind of foundation, the starting point from which the whole sort of structure will kind of rise.

And the point here is that God has laid the foundation stone for the building. The cornerstone is the kind of stone from which the whole structure takes its shape. Basically God has already laid that.

In fact in 1 Peter that's in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. That's how the cornerstone is laid.

Jesus has been raised from the dead to bring a new and living hope to God's people.

[6 : 34] And it's on that truth of who Jesus is and what he's done that the building is going to be built. So the cornerstone has been laid.

The kind of the shape for the building has been put in place. We're not starting from scratch. We are in a sense building on the work, the foundation that God has done.

It's built on Christ. But the surprising feature here, and this is the kind of the way the metaphor is used, what this temple is built of is people.

This is not a physical structure. This is actually a temple that is constructed of people. The temple is simply a metaphor for what God is doing. But verse 5, what the building is being built of is people who are kind of living stones being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood for God.

So what God is doing is he is building his temple. He's founded it on Christ and it's being built of people. People who are brought to new spiritual life.

[7 : 38] That's the meaning of this idea of being living stones. Again, in chapter 1, we're told that we've been given new birth into a living hope through the Lord Jesus.

That's the new spiritual life that Christians are given. And they become living stones that are then built into this kind of new sort of building. So God is building his church on Christ.

I think here there must be an echo in Peter's writing of Jesus' own words, I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. That is the work that God is all about and it will be accomplished.

And the way that this temple is built, how do people become living stones and they're built into this structure? Well, the answer is it's through the gospel and by faith. That's how this temple is built.

That's the kind of building technique that brings this structure about. It's by the gospel and by faith. And that's actually evident from the quote in verse 6 from Isaiah 28 verse 16.

[8 : 44] Jesus is the cornerstone. How do you get built into this spiritual house? Well, you have to be the one who trusts in him. The way you come to be built into this structure is by being the one who trusts in Jesus and is built on the kind of cornerstone.

So Peter contrasts in verse 7 those who believe and trust in the cornerstone, who are built into this temple, with in contrast those who do not believe, who stumble, who disobey the gospel, and are not built into this kind of temple and as a result end up experiencing God's judgment.

So it's through the gospel and it's by faith that people are built into this temple. And that theme has run through the whole of 1 Peter up until this point.

So Peter's emphasized in chapter 1 and verse 5 and verse 8 that it's through faith that these Christians he's writing to have come to have a living kind of hope.

Chapter 1 and verse 12, the way that they came into enjoying that hope is that someone preached the gospel to them by the Holy Spirit. Chapter 1 and verse 23, they've been born again through the word of God, the imperishable seed.

[10:02] So here's the work that's going on. God is building his church, he's building his temple from living stones. The way that people become living stones and are built into this building is through the preaching of the gospel and responding in faith.

And I think even despite all that we see, we need to take great encouragement that all around us, God is building the real church. We are seeing the decline of cultural Christianity, the decline of compromised gospel denominations that no longer preach the gospel and don't build on Christ as the cornerstone.

And we shouldn't mourn that. But what we are seeing is the growth of the true kind of church through the faithful preaching of the gospel that is building on Christ, the cornerstone.

And one of the great privileges I have working with the FIEC is to visit churches all around the country and engage with leaders all around the country. I'm hugely encouraged to hear story after story of churches that are growing through the faithful preaching of the gospel.

So there's a very strange thing going on in our culture. The church as a whole is declining. The media thinks that's the whole story. But the reality is that faithful gospel churches are growing. I've probably preached at 35 churches since the end of the COVID crises.

[11:25] And every church that I've preached at has reported significant growth. And that's been a combination of both conversion growth. And I think I've seen and heard of more conversion growth in the last two years than in the 10 years before that coming out of COVID.

But also significant quantities of transfer growth, particularly as people have moved from churches that have compromised the gospel, to want to be in churches that are faithfully preaching Christ.

The reality is the true church, even in our own country, is continuing to grow. And Jesus is building his church. Churches are reporting more baptisms than we've heard in the last 10 to 15 years.

I was speaking to, I think it was Mark this morning, who was at Christ Church Southampton last week. They had seven baptisms last Sunday morning, including somebody from a Muslim background who's become a Christian.

Jesus is, God is building his church with a kind of living stones. Now it's not rapid, it's not big, it's not revival, but that work is continuing where the gospel is being faithfully preached.

[12:30] And I would hope that even in your own congregations, you can see signs of the way that God is at work, bringing new living stones into his building. Now let's then put that in worldwide perspective.

In worldwide perspective, there are more Christians today than there have ever been in the whole of history. The gospel has been growing in remarkable ways around the world over the last 150 years.

The people who founded this work, who I've got no doubt would have met regularly to pray for world mission and places around the world would be absolutely astonished to see how the gospel has grown in the very places that they were praying for 150 years ago.

Many of the places that our forebears here were praying for are now places that are much stronger in terms of evangelical growth than the UK. But the reality is that God has been building his church around the world.

Now God doesn't always build his church at the same speed in all places, but surely we should be immensely encouraged at how the gospel has been building the church.

[13:35] And often in the face of very significant persecution and very significant poverty and other challenges. We should have no reason to be discouraged.

Do not believe the media stories that the church is in terminal decline. The church is growing because God is building his church. And we are, as his people, on the winning side as we seek to

be involved in that work.

So God is building his church. Peter is very realistic here. The church is built through the preaching of the gospel and people responding in faith. He makes quite clear here that not everybody is going to respond.

That actually is one of the sadnesses of gospel ministry and evangelism, and we easily give up because people don't respond even when we share the gospel with them. I don't know about you, but it takes an amount of courage to share the gospel with a friend, a neighbor, a colleague. You kind of stomach up all of that kind of courage to be able to share the gospel with them, however imperfectly, and it seems to make no difference to them whatsoever. Well, this passage reminds us that although that's the way that God builds his church, it isn't the case that everybody who hears the gospel is going to believe.

[14:53] Actually, again, Peter is very realistic. There are some who disobey the message. They hear it, but they don't believe it. They don't respond to it. They turn away from it. That shouldn't discourage us.

That's part of God's sovereign plan in the world. That is not an indication that the church is not being built. There will always be those who hear the gospel and do not respond.

Don't be discouraged simply because there are those who reject the gospel message. So God is building his church. Secondly, God has commissioned his church.

God has commissioned his church. The church is built out of people who become living stones. We are built into the church, but actually we are also the workforce that brings about the building project.

We kind of fit in in two places. We are both the material out of which the church is built, but we are also the workforce for how the church is to be built. And that's what Peter emphasizes in verses nine to 10.

[15:53] He reminds these Christians of the commission that God has given to his people. God is building this temple, which is also a kind of a priesthood, a place where there are to be kind of spiritual, sort of a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices to God.

And Peter fleshes that out in verses kind of nine to 10. Those who've become part of this temple, who've been built into it, are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

And their purpose is to be able to declare the praises of God to a watching world. Now this simply picks up God's purpose for his people in the Old Testament. God's purpose for his people when he chose them was that they would be a holy nation, a royal priesthood.

This is the language that was used of God's people in Exodus chapter 19 just before they received the law at Mount Sinai. You'll remember the story. God redeemed and rescued his people from Egypt.

He brought them into the kind of wilderness, took them to Mount Sinai where he met with them to give them his law to show them how to live as his people. But before he did that, Exodus chapter 19, he tells them that he is making them a holy nation, a royal priesthood who are to serve him.

[17:10] Now priests are intermediaries. To be a priest is to be a go-between, to be someone who kind of connects and links. Basically, what God was saying to his people there was you are to be the go-betweens between me and the rest of the world.

That was God's purpose for his kind of people. It goes back to kind of Genesis chapter 12. God called Abraham, said to him, I'm going to bless you and make you a great nation and through you I'm going to bless all nations of earth.

That's always been God's plan that through his people ultimately all nations would be blessed.

That's what it means that he makes his people a royal priesthood. That's the job that he's given them to do.

And it's to be done by a combination of their speaking, their praying and their living. That's what a priesthood does. A priesthood speaks God's word.

A priesthood intercedes on behalf of others and a priesthood is to be set apart as holy. They are to be a living example to the world around them.

[18:18] So for God's people to be a royal priest at a holy nation involves speaking and praying and living. And that's what God calls his people to do.

And I think the reminder here of verses 9 to 10 this task that God has given us is captured in many ways in the Bible. It's the same as being we are called to be light in the darkness. We are called to

be a city on a hill.

These are all ways of describing the role God has given us in the world to make him known to others. What I think we need to grasp here is this. This is not a burdensome task.

It's actually a remarkable privilege. That's what's being highlighted here. I think sometimes as Christians we feel this is a burdensome heavy responsibility that we've been given. Something that we've got to kind of reluctantly be and do.

And actually what Peter is saying here is just remember who you are. This is the most astonishing privilege. Not only have you been built into this temple as living stones but you're a chosen people. [19 : 21] A royal priesthood. God's special possession. You belong to him in a way that nobody else does. And in a sense the way that you do this is simply by praising God.

Praising him for who he is and what he's kind of done. We will never be effective in our mission and ministry as churches and Christians if we are not first and foremost praising God for the blessings we've received from him.

Our mission flows from our joy in God and our delight in him. And actually we need to be those who are declaring his praises. If we don't think he's praiseworthy we simply won't do the job that he's given us to do.

And notice that Peter wants these kind of Christians to remember what they were. Not only is this a remarkable privilege but he wants them to remember that this is not what they've always been.

He wants them to remember the wonderful grace and mercy of God that they've experienced in their lives. These were Gentiles that he was writing to. They weren't born into the nation of Israel.

[20 : 29] They've been included because of their faith in Christ. They weren't the people of God. They were under God's judgment and they'd not received mercy but now they have received mercy. They now are God's people.

Again, so often through the New Testament Christians are urged to remember what they were in order that they praise God for what he's done for them. and that is what Peter is urging these Christians to do.

So God has commissioned his people to realize who you are. You are a royal priesthood who are meant to mediate God's blessings to the world and to the communities kind of around you.

That's the task that he has given you to do. A wonderful privilege not a burden. And then lastly in verses 11 to 12 I think we see that God will be glorified by his church.

God will be glorified by his church. Here is this kind of royal priesthood. That's what we are. What are we meant to do and why do we do it?

[21 : 38] Well that's really kind of fleshed out in verses 11 to 12. The answer is it's not as difficult as you might think. Here we are to be a kind of a royal priesthood declaring the praises of God.

How do we actually do that? Well verse 11 and 12 there are two sides to that. We live in this world. We rub shoulders alongside other people.

And we are to do two things. On the one hand we are to abstain from sin. Even as Christians even those who have been born again we continue to have to struggle against the sinful desires of our fallen flesh.

The Christian life is a permanent ongoing battle against those desires that come from our fallenness. Those won't be eliminated until we are resurrected with the Lord Jesus until we're glorified and we no longer have a fallen human flesh and we are completely recreated in his likeness.

But until then every day of the Christian life is a battle against our fallen flesh. we need to be those who abstain from our sinful desires who don't live according to them don't allow them to control us don't allow them to win the victory in the war.

[22 : 57] We need to fight against sin in order to be a holy kind of people. But the consequence of that positively verse 12 is when we do that we then live such good lives amongst the pagans that they see the difference God has made in our lives.

And actually really Peter's saying it's as simple as that. The way that you serve and fulfil your purpose of being a royal priest is simply live good lives amongst the pagans that God has put you amongst.

We're not called to be separate we're not called to be disconnected from others we're not called to withdraw into a holy huddle of the church that has nothing to do with the rest of the community we're actually meant to be amongst the pagans but we're meant to live differently amongst them.

And actually the strong emphasis such good lives we're meant to be living lives that are outstandingly different to the people who are kind of around us.

In actual fact the emphasis through the letter of Peter is all about doing good. Doing good is a massive theme that runs through kind of Peter. And I think sometimes as evangelical Christians who are very hot on our doctrine of justification by faith alone which is absolutely right we can very easily lose sight of the fact that we are justified and transformed in order to do good and do good works.

[24 : 19] We are not saved by good works but we are saved for good works. That is what God wants us and calls us to do. And we're to live amongst the pagans living such good lives that are noticeably different that are kind of attractive and that in some ways are challenging and condemning of those around us without us even needing to use words.

That we stand out as different. And actually that was exactly the way the early church impacted the society around them. The way the church grew its crucial influence was because the pagans looked at the Christians and saw how different they were.

They saw that they treated women differently. They saw that they treated poor people differently. They saw that they treated babies differently. They saw that they treated everybody with dignity and respect.

They saw that they were willing to care even for their enemies. And the result was that people were attracted to this new community and attracted to the saviour on which it was built.

So abstain from sin, live such good lives amongst the pagans. And the goal and purpose is so that God will be glorified. That's why I said God will be glorified by his church.

[25 : 41] As the church does this, the result is that people will be affected by the good deeds and will be brought to being those who glorify God on the ultimate day of judgment when he returns.

That's the goal. The goal is to turn people from rejecters of God into those who glorify God on the day that he returns. And the hope and the encouragement here is that what Peter is saying is if you do this, that is what will happen.

If you live such good lives amongst the pagans, the result will be they will see your good deeds and they will glorify God on the day he visits us.

God's purpose and mission for his church will be accomplished if the church does these things.

Now, it's worth saying Peter takes it for granted here that the church will also be speaking the good news of the gospel.

As I said earlier, we see all through chapter 1, you heard the gospel, you believed the gospel. In chapter 3 of 1 Peter, he says, always give a reason for the hope that you have.

[26 : 52] When your lifestyle attracts questions, take the opportunity to speak the gospel. Peter is absolutely not here saying people are saved without hearing the gospel just by seeing good lives.

But actually, it is good lives that often give the context for speaking the gospel and that make people open to hearing the gospel. Again, as I visit churches in our context in the UK, I love asking people, how did you become a Christian?

I can tell you that 95% of the stories go basically something like this. Well, I wasn't a Christian but I had a friend who was a Christian. Over a period of time, I got to know them and I saw that there was kind of something different about their life and the way that they treated me.

I realized there was something different and I didn't know kind of quite what it was and then they started talking to me about Jesus. They then invited me to church and I didn't really want to go because I don't think church has got anything to offer but I kind of to shut them up I went in the end and when I went into church I discovered it was totally different from what I expected.

You wouldn't believe how nice the people were in church when I came and I found myself coming back and do you know what? About a year and a half later I realized I was a Christian and I could say I've heard that story basically again and again and again and again it's really very simple.

[28 : 19] Christians in churches who were living alongside pagans living good lives that were attractive and different getting to meet the Christian community and seeing something different in the Christian community and through that hearing the gospel and ultimately understanding the reason why there are those different kind of lives.

Now that's not every story I also hear of people who are converted through street preaching hear of people kind of converted on the internet through apologetics ministries but that is very often the most common way that lots of people at this particular time are being converted and that sense the

church is doing its job fulfilling its mission and Jesus through that is building his church. So I want to say be encouraged. Be encouraged by these great truths. The church is not in terminal decline. Jesus is building his church.

The task is not impossible. Jesus has commissioned us as his royal priesthood to declare his praises and bring his blessing to others.

The church's purpose will be accomplished. Jesus, God will be glorified through the work and witness of his church. and in essence it's not rocket science.

[29 : 46] The task of the church simply requires you to fight against sin to live good lives amongst the pagans and then as you do that to share with them the good news of the Lord Jesus which is why you live the way that you do.

I hope that's an encouragement to you. I would say that around the country as I see churches doing that they are seeing slow, steady gospel growth.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father we want to thank you and praise you so much for the church and thank you that it's your great purpose to build your church and gather a people for yourself. Thank you that you are building a church out of living stones people born again and given new spiritual life. I want to thank you and praise you that you have made us your royal priesthood with that task of sharing your blessings with a lost world around us. Help us to count that a great privilege and never to forget the great mercy that we've received.

And please through us would people be brought to come and glorify you. We want to ask and pray that as we live our ordinary everyday lives in the world alongside pagans that we might live such good lives that would be evidently different that it would cause people to want to ask questions about why we are the way we are.

[31 : 06] And please as those opportunities come might we speak of the Lord Jesus as the one who was changed and transformed us. And we pray that as a result they would come to believe and trust in him.

So thank you for your word. Please help us not to lose hope but please help us instead to be encouraged by all that you are doing for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Amen.