

I will build My church

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[0 : 00] Whenever a story appears in our national press about the state or condition of the church or Christianity in our land today, it usually has an incredibly negative headline and a reminder that things are in decline or there's some kind of warning about the ultimate destination of the church.

And statistically speaking, we're always reminded of how grim things are and how desperate the situation is for Christianity.

In fact, every now and again, somebody will come out with some kind of statistic that tells us if rates continue to decline, that by the year whatever, there'll be no church left.

We always hear these kind of things and sadly they often have what I believe is the devil's intent. They have a very dispiriting and discouraging effect upon us.

We all know that statistics rarely tell the full story. For eight years I was in the presbytery of Irvine and Kilmarnock. Statistically, we were losing a congregation every year when you added up the members who had passed away.

[1 : 12] The reality in that denomination at that time and that situation is that many of these statistical members who had been removed from roles had probably rarely been in church in the previous years.

So statistics can be manipulated. Statistics can be misleading. But more importantly for us is this truth. We're not driven by statistical record.

We're driven by the spiritual power and promises of God in his word and by his spirit. And so there can be on a human level much that is discouraging and that much that can depress us and give us the gloomy outlook when we think of all the agendas that are at work in our nation today.

Just two weeks ago, I was listening in a series of messages given by a man who works for the Evangelical Alliance. He works in the advocacy department in London.

He works in Westminster. He spends a lot of his time in the parliament. And he was sharing some of the depressing things that have happened within government over the last few years and the blatant assault in the Christian traditions of our nation.

[2 : 25] But yet one thing he also remarked. He's coming across more praying churches in London in the last few years than he has for a long time.

He's beginning to see people in churches call on God's name in ways that maybe was missing for a long time. Maybe for the long enough time to leave us in the mess we're in.

Because friends, we're not driven by statistics. God is at work in our world. And God is building his church in the world.

And I wanted us to look at this promise today from the words of Christ. As we read these verses in Matthew 16, I was conscious there are so many powerful verses in that section.

So many texts that would be worthy of consideration. So many texts that we could take to our hearts today. How many of us have over the years heard some of the most powerful evangelistic messages preached on verses like What will it profit a man or a woman if they gain the whole world but forfeit their own soul?

[3 : 31] And these are truths that we don't want to just gloss over today because we recognize the continued weight of them and importance of them as they address every one of us today.

What's the value in everything you have in life if at the end of your life all you ever had is just the things you had in life? We're looking for the glory of salvation and for the power of God's love and mercy to invade repentant souls and to bring to us the glory and assurance of eternal life as Jesus spoke of to his disciples in this context.

That's just one verse. I'm also conscious that there are many difficult verses that we could spend a long time trying to work out exactly what Jesus meant. But maybe to the relief of us all I can assure

you that today I just want to focus mainly on this promise.

I will build my church and the gates of hell, the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

It is such a powerful assurance for us in a day where so much would say to us things are diminishing, things are declining. And in many ways they are.

[4 : 45] In many ways there are things that do cause despondency. We are discouraged when we see fewer coming to pray or fewer coming to worship.

But the fact is our hope is never in people. Our hope is always in God except the Lord who built the house. They labor in vain who build.

We are looking to the Lord and we are looking to what he is doing and we find understanding of that from his word. And what Jesus said to his disciples has to give us in what is undoubtedly a difficult age for Christianity in 21st century Britain.

Yet this is what gives us some assurance and some confidence. I want us to think about it for a few moments today. I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And we need to think a little about the context in which Jesus gave this promise. The fact that they had arrived in Caesarea Philippi is maybe an interesting geographical point.

[5 : 55] And we know that often these points are given to us to enable us just to fix exactly where Jesus was when he said certain things and when he met certain people. But the place and region of Caesarea Philippi is of great interest for us when we understand it and when we know something about it.

And particularly when we think that it's in this place Jesus makes this promise. Because what we know of Caesarea Philippi is that it was even in Jesus' day a place of religious and spiritual convergence.

That it was a place where many spiritual traditions had met over the years. And I'm not talking good spiritual traditions. I'm talking of the diversity of human beliefs and pagan religions that Caesarea Philippi, an area of renowned beauty, natural beauty, had drawn many false worshippers to its environs over the years.

And it had a long history of being a place where man-made religion was established. And the false spiritual realities of the world were expressed.

We learn in the book of Joshua, in Joshua chapter 11, in verse 17, that this was a place that had once had a shrine there dedicated to Baal, to the false god Baal.

[7 : 20] We learn from history that in that place as things changed in the political realms and cultural realms, that when the Greek empire expanded, that in this region they built a shrine to the god Pan.

The god of nature. It was a beautiful place that we are led to know. And then in the 20th century, before Christ, Herod the Great, in this area, built a great white marble temple, dedicated it to Augustus Caesar.

And after Herod's death, his son, Herod Philip, made the town bigger, and he named it Caesarea in honour of Augustus Caesar. And we know that in the Roman Empire, the Caesar was worshipped as lord.

Caesar as lord was the mantra of the emperor. And I think it's profoundly significant for us, who wrestle with all the issues of multi-faith, multi-religion, multi-culture in our day, and sometimes led to believe that somehow this is the problem for the gospel, that we're living in such a multi-spirited age, and we've never had to live in these circumstances before.

And maybe we've never had to live in these circumstances before. But the promise to build the church was established in the face of multi-religion, multi-faith, multi-culturalism.

[8 : 49] Everything that is expressed from the sinful heart of humanity, as it seeks to find some form of identity and something to worship, has existed in this world before.

And in the very epicentre of these things, Jesus of Nazareth said, I will build my church. I will build my church. Jesus, in this place, where many religions had staked a claim for the hearts of humanity, where cultural and political issues had tried to express their authority and power of humanity, it was there that Jesus said, I will build my church.

So things may be new to us. It may be surprising to us and disappointing to us. But they're not new in the context of gospel history, and in the history of the church of Jesus Christ.

And it's also significant here, that not only do we have this kind of panoply of ideologies coming together in one place, where historically and universally there had been challenges to the truth of

the one through God.

But we find that Jesus makes this promise to build his church in the context of the very personal testimony that Peter gives concerning him. In an area, in an area where there were all kinds of religious ideologies floating about, Jesus asked the question, who do people say the Son of Man is? [10:21] And some said John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. So he recognized that even when it came to the true Messiah, there were all kinds of thoughts and ideas and notions.

And again, this is one of our problems today, that even within what is called Christianity, there's all kinds of ideas and notions and all the rest. But that doesn't stop Jesus from making his promise. He makes his promise against the backdrop of all that's going on religiously and spiritually in the world. But he makes his promise to his disciples, following the greatness of the revelation of the testimony received in their hearts concerning him.

Friends, what encourages us today, despite all that's happening politically, that all that's happening socially, all the assault that is coming against education, we pray for our teachers, we pray for our schools, because they are at the forefront of the spiritual battle for the lives of young people.

With all that's happening today, one of the things that gives us the great confidence is that there is no power in the world that can stop the revelation of Jesus Christ to human souls and to human hearts.

[11:41] When he asked the disciples, who do you see I am? Simon Peter, the natural spokesman, said, you are the Christ. You are the son of the living God.

And the response he got was, blester you, Simon, son of Jonah. Blester you. Because this isn't something you've come to because you're cleverer than the rest.

This isn't a conclusion you've come to because you've interpreted secret keys that others have missed. This is a revelation you have come to because it has come to your heart.

Your heart has come to see that Jesus is the Christ. Your soul has come to experience the greatness of the uniqueness of the son of God. You have come to see the wonders of Jesus Christ and his redemptive love for the world.

Blessed are you. Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father who is in heaven. And friend, if you're in here today, and if your hope is in Jesus Christ, the voice of heaven would still say to you, you're blessed.

[12:46] You're greatly blessed. We maybe don't realise and appreciate at times how blessed we are when we come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. That we're receiving something.

And we all know we have our own different testimonies, all the factors that worked into our lives to bring us to that place. But all the glory of knowing today that if we've ever come to a place where we've realised that Jesus Christ is our Lord, our God, our Saviour, then that's not by flesh and blood.

That's not by human tradition. That's by the revelation of God himself to your soul. People, you're blessed if you know that today. Whoever weak you might feel in that faith, whoever insecure you may feel at times in your faith, if you know that your only hope for eternity is that Jesus Christ died and rose for you, then you are greatly blessed.

And Simon speaks for the disciples. And there's this real sense of celebration that the disciples have reached this place of understanding who Christ is.

I find it, it's not a coincidence. I believe it is part of the purpose of Jesus that he only makes the promise to build his church once there is a clear understanding of who he is.

[14:03] And sadly, that's where many churches have gone wrong. We've started building with people on the fringes who don't know who Christ is. The church of Jesus Christ is the gathering of people who know who their Saviour is and who know who Christ is and who are consistent in their beliefs about Jesus with what God has revealed about Jesus.

So this promise is shared in very encouraging circumstances for us in the world that we live. The promise is shared in a multi-spiritual, multi-cultural world.

This promise is shared to people who understand the truth about Jesus. And he says to them, I will build my church. And so having seen the context of this promise, I want us to see that from verse 21, in many ways we begin to understand some of the consequences that are to flow from this assurance.

I'll come to the content of the promise a little later, but if we can just look at some of the things that begin to happen. If you look at verse 21, it tells us from that time, Jesus began to show his disciples.

When I said earlier that this was a very significant passage in the testimony of Christ and the ministry of Jesus, that's emphasized for us in this verse. Because once they had reached this place of knowing exactly who he was and he makes the promise of the church, we recognize that his teaching and what he emphasizes to them becomes focused on particular issues.

[15:43] The event has opened up another level of training and teaching for the disciples. From that time on, everything becomes very focused. Jesus taught many things in parables about the kingdom of God.

Jesus taught many things about the nature of humanity through his miracles, taught much about his authority and our need to be healed from all our blindnesses and all our ailments and all our spiritual maladies and all the rest of it.

But from this moment, there seems to be an emphasis to us that the teaching, if you like, hones in on what he is going to do at Calvary. What Jesus shared with him is critical for us in our understanding in the nature and life of what the church of Jesus Christ is and what it means for us to belong to.

The consequences of understanding that the church that he is going to build is going to be centered on his atoning sacrifice. It's no surprise that evangelicalism in the broadest sense in the United Kingdom is in such a mess when a number of years ago some leading evangelicals drifted in their beliefs about the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

It's no wonder we're now in such a mess when we've drifted from the central doctrine of the Christian church that Jesus Christ was the propitiation for our sins.

[17:11] That he came to atone for us. That he came to be punished for us. That he came so that the iniquity of our lives could be laid upon him. And Jesus begins to focus on this once they have grasped the reality of who he is and made the promise that he will build his church.

He says, I need you to understand this. From this moment on, I'm going to Jerusalem. I'm going to suffer. I'm going to die. I'm going to rise again. People of the church and you as a Christian, sometimes we can lose our way in our faith.

Sometimes we can lose excitement in our faith. Sometimes we can lose appreciation in our faith. It's often because we've drifted from the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ at the heart of our faith and marveling at the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light and the burdens of my sin rolled away.

It was there by faith I received my sight. And coming to the cross in that place of drawing near to God in his sacrificial death for us and in all that that conveys to us of his holiness, his righteousness, his justice, his mercy, his desire to forgive and all that it reveals to us concerning our fallen nature and our weakness and our brokenness, our helplessness and all that we needed in order to be restored to God.

It's at the cross. And Jesus focuses their mind more and more upon the cross. And as he goes on, he also reveals to them that this church that he is going to build, like I say, I'll come back to the immediacy of the content of the promise, but just look at some of these consequences from verse 21 onwards.

[18:59] He shows us that it must be a cross-centered church. It must always focus on the atoning sacrifice of Christ. That's his priority in his teaching. The priority in the teaching is met with Peter rebuking him and we learn through that and other things taught in this passage that the church of Jesus Christ, the one he promises to build, will constantly face conflict with darkness and temptation.

It's quite astonishing to see the way that Jesus speaks to Peter. Get behind me. Satan. The one that was lauded just a few moments previously as he spoke for the disciples and said, you are the son of God.

You are the Christ, the son of the living God. Jesus said, and blessed are you, Simon Barjon. Within a few moments, get behind me.

In fact, it's quite a challenge to the traditions that we'd want to say because of what Jesus said in verse 17, blessed are you, Simon, and on this rock I will build my church and that has led to the heresy of him being the founding stone of the church.

It's interesting if that expression in verse 18 makes Peter the founding rock of the church, what on earth does the expression in verse 23 make? get behind me, Satan.

[20 : 28] I think we see in Peter what we should see in Peter, the reality of our human flesh, the reality of human life that can one moment be caught up in the glories of spiritual revelation from God and the next moment can be bound in the darkness of deception from Satan and how much that human life needs to come to Jesus Christ and to the power of the cross and to the power of redemption to walk in the light of God and in the salvation of God.

Peter is a reminder to us that every one of us is in spiritual conflict. Jesus uses such powerful force, get behind me, Satan. Why does he speak of him as such a, as being an agent of satanic activity? Because he sees someone in his church who has in mind the things of man not the things of God. I have to confess that phrase continues to perplex me in all my thoughts on church leadership.

Do I have in mind the things of God or the things of man? Because the church that Jesus builds will be in constant conflict with powers of darkness and with human desires.

It's a church that needs to be cross-centered in its doctrine and it needs to be, as we see here, a church that is shaped by committed discipleship. Jesus said to his disciples, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow him.

[21 : 59] I don't want to say too much about this just now. I want to speak more about discipleship this evening. But we see here that Jesus, talking about his church, recognizes that his church will be shaped by committed discipleship, by people who recognize what it is to take up their cross and to follow Jesus.

One of the reasons we face discouragement and disinterest in our own day and age is that in many ways we've drifted personally from the demands of the gospel. There is an all-encompassing call in Christ's call to follow him, to be part of this glorious church that he is building.

We're all called to deny ourself. What a contradiction for us in the world that we live. One of the greatest activities of this generation is taking a selfie.

My children don't understand me when I say to them, if I had walked down the street in Stornoway when I was in high school and took a picture of myself in a camera, I think I probably would have been arrested or at least investigated for the well-being of my mental health.

And yet it's natural now. We promote ourselves. We have to sell ourselves. We have to put self forth. The church of Jesus Christ is not built upon the elevation of human self.

[23 : 21] In fact, the church of Jesus Christ is characterized by the denial of human self. Take up my cross. Take up that cross.

And again, identifying with that sense of crucifixion and put into death that which is contrary to the life of Christ and follow me.

And as one preacher rightly pointed out, we're not asked simply to admire him, nor to esteem him, nor to eulogize him, but to follow him.

The church of Jesus Christ we see in the following of his making of this promise. Before we think about the greatness of the promise, just think about these things.

It has to be a church that is proclaiming the cross continually. It has to be a church that is constantly aware of the conflict with darkness. And it has to be a church that is in the business of committed discipleship.

[24 : 31] But here is the encouragement that the founder of our faith says to us that he will build his church. And every single word in that sentence is worthy of consideration.

I will. I. it's amazing to think that Jesus Christ is personally involved and engaged in the work that is going on in the world and in your life and in my life in the building up of his church.

He's not somebody who has simply drawn up the plans, passed them on to the constructors and left the building companies to get on with it as they seem fit.

Now in this expression here we see something of the wonder of the identity and the intimacy of which Jesus is involved in the process of the building up of the Christian church in the world today and in the salvation of souls today.

You know one of the wonderful things Paul tells us when he describes his proclaiming of the gospel I think it's to the Corinthian church and he says this that when we made an appeal he said.

[25 : 49] It's not that we were making an appeal it's as if God himself is making his appeal through us. Now when a preacher comes and preaches the gospel and urges you to give your life to Christ and your heart is stirred and something within you knows that you need to give your life to Christ it's

not because the preacher is particularly good or particularly gifted it's because Jesus is reaching you and Jesus is involved and Jesus in his love to you and in his personal care for you is reaching you personally and intimately aware of you knowing you caring for you watching you guiding you shaping you in providence bringing you into encounters with people in providence guiding you to meet with others and so on so that in all these circumstances you will one day see the hand of God was throwing you to himself I will build my church I will do it he sees it's not an effort it's not that we have to try harder though in many areas of life we may need to reapply ourselves and rededicate ourselves but the assurance we have that the church of Jesus Christ will be built the assurance comes from the words of

Jesus himself it's not from the passing of acts of parliament it's not from the condition and health of the national denominations our confidence comes from this Jesus said it Jesus will do it and Jesus never fails I will build my church I will do my church and again that sense of his own intimate relationship and control and it is remarkable to think friends how he's building it he's not just building my church he's not just going to build your church he's not just going to build Presbyterian churches for some reason he's quite happy to use all kinds of people and praise God he is but all over the world he is building his church just last week I met with some men from Moscow and it was amazing because for my generation Moscow was probably one of the scariest places in the world in the height of the cold war and all that emanated from that city and from its rulers with regards to atheism and communism all that was against the church of

Jesus Christ an area where many Christians were persecuted and I was amazed sitting with I think there was about six of them six men some of them already full time pastors some of them very successful businessmen investing in the church of Jesus Christ and they were sharing how they're engaged in church planting in Moscow today one of their churches has a problem he was telling us we don't have enough old people so many young families and we don't have enough old Christians to lead them and to guide maybe some of you need to think about latter day missionary service mentoring young families in Christ I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against in the world today there is more going on that we are conscious of Jesus used this wonderful expression it's the only time he used it the word that we translate as church in the Greek Ecclesia very close to our own Gaelic Ecclish it's a word that simply means people who are called out and gathered and congregated together around him and in him in our saviour Jesus this is the word he used that this is what he's doing in this world and he gives us this assurance we recognised earlier that that it's going to be in constant conflict with darkness but here's the assurance the gates of hell shall not prevail against now I know that again we could spend a long time discussing all that is meant in that verse some of you will have footnotes in your bible that suggest the gates of Hades which was the place of death as opposed to the place hell the place of eternal punishment some scholars reckon that's significant because if you think about it these men who heard this promise that Jesus would build his church would win witness him be put to death and yet his death many times the death of a man will mean the end of a movement but the death of Jesus is the very foundation and the very power of the life that will flow to his church that same power which raised Jesus from the dead is now at work in us says the new test the power of God in this world at work and death will never quench it death will never destroy it they killed Jesus they could not stop the church growing they've killed the martyrs in more countries than we could count this morning they have not stopped the church of Jesus Christ growing and no power and no force will stop when the world does its worst when the powers of darkness come in and rage like a flood the church takes confidence you know Jesus the gates of death the gates of hell you promised us they would not prevail against your charge death is devastating in so many ways and the martyrdoms and loss of leaders and of churches can be such a debilitating force but take strength from the promise of the one who conquered the grave

[31 : 42] I will build my church and death is not going to stop death is not going to prevent it from going forward this is our assurance friends in a world with many challenges to Christian living Jesus said he would build his church and he's never failed in a promise and so as we close what does this promise convey to us what does it mean for you and for me today well in the first place I think it should challenge each one of us are we part of what Christ is doing in the world today are we simply sitting on the sidelines as observers to this or is our heart in it is our heart in it Jesus you're building your church I want to be one of the living stones I long to be one of the living stones being neatly joined together on that great foundation of Christ the head corner stone and then the

apostles and prophets being built up to the day when it's complete and all of creation and everything you ever made will see it in all its glory many who mocked and scorned and who came against the church will cower in fear and disappear in terror and the realization of the glory of what God is doing and I ask you friends do you have that assurance in your life today that you are part of what Christ is building part of what

Christ is doing the second thing that this promise challenges us with it challenges us to examine our hearts whether we're a part of it it challenges us to be humble and recognize that we can never do more or we can never do other from what Christ is doing I'll probably say more about this tonight but I came into ministry at a time when there was you could buy any number of books about what we had to do to build the church and all the programs and all the plans and all this and all that what are we doing to build the church I will build my church we have responsibilities we have issues to do but friends let's never forget that the confidence and assurance of the health and well-being of the Christian church is based upon the fact Christ is doing it by the power of his spirit to the ministry of his word it challenges us who are within the church it challenges us to be humble and recognized we can never do more or other from what

Christ is doing it challenges us with regards to our spiritual obedience when we look in the book of revelation in the very first century we recognize there were so many various church situations and Christ addressed them and challenged them as he sought to build them there are many churches when you read the seven letters to the churches in the book of revelation we know that the majority of them received rebukes because Christ was seeking to build in them and he warned them if you don't do it I won't be here but if you do repent I will be and the working will continue here it gives us assurance in many ways there are maybe three negative challenges the the question whether we are in this the humility that we cannot do this except in his strength and the conviction that we must be obedient to him in every area but here are the final two points the assurance we can have it is going to be built they're not going to run out of money it's not going to be an abandoned project it's not going to forget what he's doing the church of

Jesus Christ is going to be completed when the son of man comes with his angels and that assurance friend should lead us to excitement you promise a child something and the excitement can come because they know something's going to happen because you made the promise friends we should be excited we should be excited when we read our bibles excited when we pray excited when we look out even in a broken world because in the midst of the mess and from the mess God is building his glorious church let me definitely finish with a quote from Bishop J.C.

Ryle nothing can altogether overthrow and destroy the church its members may be persecuted oppressed imprisoned beaten beheaded burned but the true church is never altogether extinguished it rises again from its afflictions it lives on through fire and water when crushed in one land it springs up in another the pharaohs the herods the neros have laboured in vain to put down this church they slay their thousands and then pass away and go to their own place the true church outlives them all and sees them buried each in his turn the church is an anvil that has broken many a hammer in this world and will break many a hammer still the church is a bush which is often burning and yet is not consumed let's pray when we it's almost gracias

[37 : 23] After Air