

Don't Lose Heart

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Please keep those words of Paul open in front of us as we look at them together. And as we do that, let's pray for his help. Precious Father, we thank you for this great gospel that by your Spirit you revealed to your apostles and prophets. And Father, as we hear those words of that mystery of the glorious gospel of Christ, we pray indeed, Lord, as we have done already, that our hearts would be enlightened to know this wonderful truth and all that you have done for us and given us in him. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder, what discourages you as a Christian?

When do you find yourself losing heart? We've been hearing some amazing truths over the last four or five Sundays from the letter to the Ephesians as a church, haven't we? Really life-changing stuff if we take it in. Paul has said that because God loved us when we were dead in sin, he brought us to life in Christ. It doesn't get much more life-changing than that, does it?

And that he's raised us with him and seated us with him in heavenly places. And we've heard that he's not just done that for us individually, but together as a church. We heard last time that Christ died to give us peace, peace together with God himself and peace between each other. So that he said when Christ died on the cross, he broke down walls that stood between us to create one new humanity. So if we step back and look at the whole thing together, we can see, can't we, that Christ's church here on earth, us sitting here, Bon Accord Free Church, that we now are the beginning of God's plan for the fullness of God's plan for the fullness of God's plan for the fullness of time.

It's to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and on earth, so everything back together in its proper place in the fullness of God's plan for the fullness of God's plan. And he started that plan by bringing every kind of person together in his church.

So Paul wants us brothers and sisters to see that us sitting here, ordinary people, normal Christians, an everyday church, that we together with every gospel church in our city and country and throughout the world are the embryo of the new creation that is one day to be born. The church is the earthly embassy of a heavenly kingdom that will one day come to rule the earth or the show home, if you like, of God's new development, the glorious new city that will come down out of heaven from God. Someone I read this week, Simon Austin says this, until the day when the new heavens and earth are created and the visible unity God purposes is seen in all its fullness and glory, the only visual point of contact between the heavenly realms and the earthly realms is the church.

[3 : 4 7] How special then is God's plan for his church, his people? Being part of God's church is surely the greatest privilege that any of us could ever have. The life of an ordinary, everyday church like ours is not so ordinary, is it? But it is a wonderful everyday. And he has brought us in for free, simply through Christ's death and resurrection. What glorious truths!

But somehow, being part of God's plan for the universe doesn't always feel like the best thing that's ever happened to us, does it? Often it feels pretty ordinary, nothing special.

At worst still, sometimes it feels pretty weak or even, if we're honest, pretty pointless. What causes us to become discouraged as Christians? Perhaps it discourages us when we don't feel like these incredible truths are as life-changing as we've been told. Perhaps we feel like we get it, but actually our progress is painfully slow or just feels non-existent. Or it can really cause us to lose heart, can't it? When relationships in the church go wrong, when we don't see in the church that peace, that grace and unity that Christ has won for us, but instead it feels like, you know, more of the chaos and darkness that we've been saved from. There are lots of things that can discourage us if we are honest with ourselves. Here in Ephesians, it's discouraging for the church to see Paul suffering.

Paul, who brought them the gospel, is in prison, and it's the gospel that's put him there. So, if the gospel is so great, Paul, well, how has it led to your suffering, your imprisonment?

But to that, Paul says in verse 13, That's where our passage lands. Please don't be discouraged, he says. Meaning, therefore, that what he says up to that point is supposed to lift our hearts, surely, and help us see again the great glory of God's plan so that we wouldn't lose heart when it seems like the gospel isn't doing what God says it should be doing. So, brothers and sisters, we've got an appointment with Dr. Paul this morning for our discouragement jag to be immunized and protected against losing heart in God's plan for the universe. And Dr. Paul is going to give it to us in two parts today, two reasons not to lose heart in God's plan. And the first is because the gospel mystery is God's gracious open door.

[7 : 04] Now, at first glance, what Paul says here might not seem that important. It's almost like reading it, someone's interrupted him to say, hang on, Paul, for those who don't know you, do you think you can just briefly introduce yourself to us? Let's see that. So, Paul starts saying, verse 1, for this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles. And then he interrupts himself to say quite a bit about himself. And then he picks it up again in verse 14, Luke. For this reason, he says again. And then he says what it sounds like he was going to say back in verse 1. So, for this reason, I bow my knees before the Father. And then a brilliant prayer. So, couldn't we just sort of put verses 2 to 13 in brackets, which we don't really know what to do with, and just skip straight to verse 14, you know, a really inspiring prayer? You know, after all, we know all about Paul's conversion and his preaching, don't we, from Acts? What's this doing here? But the question is, what would be missing from this letter if we did that? Because, of course, another way of looking at it is that Paul considered this bit so important that he interrupted himself mid-sentence to include it in his letter, in which case it's super important, isn't it? And as we read it and see what he says about God's plan and his place in that plan, it becomes obvious that it's really super important, because what Paul's reminding the church is how they've come to know these glorious truths and become part of God's household in the first place. And in one sense, it's only because of Paul.

See that? Verse 2 and 3, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was revealed to me by revelation, as I've written briefly. So, God has revealed something to Paul and given him the task of spreading that knowledge to the Gentiles, to the world, to us. And now, I don't know if any of you have ever had a class called Home Economics.

So, maybe going back a bit at school, Home Economics. Sort of food science, I don't know if you did that at school. Well, here's a little Greek lesson. For Greek speakers like Paul, the word home in Home Economics would actually be redundant, because our word economy comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which is two words stuck together. *Oikos*, house, and *nomos*, law. So, that's why we get in translation sometimes household management, or here in verse 2, stewardship. It means sort of the day-to-day running of a household.

And that's what Paul says God has entrusted to him, *oikonomia*, which is interesting, because he is called in chapter 2, verse 19, he's called the church and an *oikos*, a household. So, he's kind of stretching out the illustration. If the church is a household, and Christ is the head of that household, well, Christ has put one of his servants, Paul, in charge of running his household. Christ has unlocked the store cupboard, and he's shown Paul all the goods that are inside of it, and he's told Paul that he is to distribute his riches to the household at the time and in the way that he has instructed him. So, Paul has a special role in God's church.

He's a servant put in charge of the distribution of God's grace to us. In other words, he's an apostle. That's what an apostle is. Christ revealed the gospel to them and charged them with spreading it to us. And Paul is special even among the apostles because God gave him the special task of spreading his grace to us who are not Jewish, Gentiles. And so, brothers and sisters, how do you know what the gospel is? Do you know if we can only be sitting here today because the gospel was revealed to and by Paul? Jesus did not come to you personally, did he, and spell it all out, the promises, his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection, his ascension, the coming of the Spirit. We only know that because he did that for 12 men plus Paul, and they spread it and taught it and preached it and wrote it so that the church would know what Christ had made them to know. And Paul did that specially for us sitting here. He preached and taught that gospel for us Gentiles around the world. So, we can only be to be sitting here, friends, today in church, worshiping God, trusting in Jesus and hearing the gospel because Paul did his job. He fulfilled his office. He was a faithful steward of God's grace in God's church, a true apostle. And so, what is it we receive from Christ through Paul? What are those goods, those riches that he's been charged to get out to us? Well, the goods he's responsible for giving to us are contained in that word in verse 3, mystery. The mystery was made known to Paul by revelation.

[13 : 05] And that's a big deal because Paul says no one was ever let into this mystery before. It was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it's now been revealed to the apostles and prophets by the spirit. So, to be clear, it's not a mystery like we might say about something. It's a mystery. We don't know. We can't know. No one knows. No, it's a mystery in the sense that God had kept it secret in the past but has now chosen to tell us. So, it's something that we can actually know but that was hidden and now is unveiled, revealed. So, what is in this big secret storeroom that God has shown Paul for the first time in the history of the world? Well, it's there in verse 6. Black and white. What is it? Well, you can know it. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Get it? It's been secret for ages and ages and now you get to know it. It's that the Gentiles, we are part of God's household through the gospel and we're fully part of God's household through the gospel. It doesn't show up in translation but Paul sticks the word with on the front of three words, heirs with, body with, and sharers with God's people in Christ through the gospel.

So, that the gospel which Paul is writing about in this letter and which he preached in the beginning for the church is God's gracious open door to the whole wide world.

If you're here this morning and you're not sure what it is to be a Christian, well, it's not a secret anymore. You don't have to be in the dark. It's this, whoever you are, wherever you've come from, whatever your upbringing, whatever language you speak, however long you've been in church or however little you've been in church, God has opened the door for you to be fully part of his family through the message of Jesus that Paul shares in this letter.

Jesus died on the cross to make peace between us and God and he rose again to bring us to life with him and we receive that rescue when we believe that message and he welcomes us into his church.

[15 : 55] Friends, through this message, God's door is open for every kind of person to come in. The gospel Paul preached is therefore a thing of incomparable, magnificent, and infinite glory.

The gospel is how God works to bring us from death to life. The gospel is how God tells us what he's done for us in Jesus. The gospel is how he brings us into Christ and into his family, into the church. The gospel throws wide open the doors that were locked shut to us for ages past to welcome us graciously into God's house.

And not as second-class citizens, but as equals and just as we are. And friends, we would not know that unless Christ had told Paul and Paul had told us.

We would take all of Paul's letters out of the Bible, would we know that? Don't actually do this, okay? But if you were to get home and you were to tear out of your Bible all the bits of Acts that tell us about Paul's preaching and his ministry, what couldn't we know?

Well, we could not know this, the fullness and the freeness of the gospel for people like us. We could not know what God has done for us in Christ without the gospel that Paul preached.

[17 : 32] What a glorious gospel that is then, that has opened the doors of God's house to us to come in. We would not be here if not for that open door.

Discouragement jag number one then, don't lose heart in God's plan, because the gospel mystery is God's gracious open door. Discouragement jag number two, Paul says gospel ministry is building God's glorious church.

So the gospel mystery was revealed to him, and now he focuses in on the gospel ministry that was given to him, verse seven, of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. So he's saying not only the revelation is a gift from God that he knows the gospel, but his commission is a gift from God that he gets to preach it.

Now there's something specific again to Paul here, isn't there? He says he's the very least of all the saints. And that's not him just being down on himself. Paul had spent his time previously chasing Christians down to put them in prison. And now the irony is that he's in prison for that same reason. What he did to others has been done to him. And that is deeply humbling and sobering and sobering. And it's surely part of his sense that he is in prison and he is the leastest of all Christians, but the lowest of the low. It's what he calls himself.

And hence his recognition that God's power is the source of his ministry because it couldn't have come from him. And his amazement that God has been gracious enough to give him the best job in the world. To me, to me, he says.

[19 : 30] To me, though I'm the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. So Paul has this special sense of God's power and grace at work in his ministry.

But friends, this is still true of all ministry that falls in line with Paul. All ministry that has that gospel preached by the apostles at its heart. Because Paul's speaking not only as an apostle, but as a gospel minister, verse 7. So as I stand here before you today, it's no exaggeration, and Paul would agree, that this is the best job ever. The best job ever. If being part of the church is the greatest privilege in the world, then the greatest privilege in the church is to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ.

His beauty, his value, his love, his power, his grace that extend all the way in every direction, his birth, his perfect life, his death upon the cross, his resurrection, his ascension, his Holy Spirit, his throne, his return. Paul counted God's call on his life, pure grace, the product of great power.

You friends, ministers are nothing special. We are the very least of all Christians. I'm certainly not here because I'm anything special. But by his grace and power, God gives weak and flawed and little men the greatest task in history of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people.

Some of you are weighing up a call to gospel ministry. And others of you might feel pulled even now towards that.

[21 : 40] Let me say for all the costs, there is nothing better in the world to get to do. T.H. Spurgeon said to everyone who applied to his school of ministry, do not become a minister if you can help it.

But if you cannot help it, if a divine destiny drives you on, thank God that it is so. You are a happier man if you are able to preach the gospel than if you had been elected to a throne.

There is no business like it under heaven. There is nothing like it. So if you feel called, well thank God and pursue it.

And I say that largely because of its result, which Paul says in verse 9 is to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

So Paul's unveiling the gospel mystery through his gospel ministry, and the result is quite literally, out of this world.

[22 : 54] The dots that we've joined so far are perhaps hard to follow, but they're still conceivable or perceivable, aren't they? That Christ made the gospel known to Paul, who's made it known to us.

So far, so good. But hang on, he says, so that through us, something about God would be made known to spiritual powers in heavenly places.

Like, we're well out of our comfort zone now, aren't we? But there's more. Because in Ephesians, those spiritual powers are evil spiritual powers.

So chapter 2, the spirit that's at work in the sons of disobedience. Or chapter 6, the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places. So God is making his plan known to evil spiritual beings through the church.

Yes, says Paul, God's plan for the church is that big. It's cosmic. So what is going on here? Well, Paul says through the church, God is projecting his manifold wisdom into the cosmos.

[24 : 12] And I found out this week that that word manifold, it's the same word that's used in Greek to describe Joseph's coat in Genesis.

So his coat of many colors, or as Andrew Lloyd Webber would put it, his technicolor dream coat. So we could say God is displaying his technicolor wisdom through the church to the heavens.

And most commentators think that's referring to the fact that God is now bringing all kinds of different people together into Christ, into his church.

So that the church is not only a new Israel, or a new society or culture, but a new humanity. The peoples of the world reunited by Christ's death, and therefore one new kingdom, family, home, temple in Christ.

So think of a stained glass window. Different shapes and sizes and colors of glass are joined together, so that as the light shines through them, they display, don't they, a beautiful, a stunning picture.

[25 : 24] What Paul's saying is God brings us together. And all the diversity of our different personalities and nationalities and races and ethnicities and languages and upbringings and classes and identities.

And in all of our diversity. And as he's joined us together in Christ and his light shines through us, he is displaying a beautiful, stunning portrait.

So that these powers and rulers are looking at us sitting here. Think of the greatest stained glass window that you've ever seen.

And they cannot get their heads around it. How has God done that? People from throughout the world living in peace, worshiping as one. You know, don't think it's a stretch to say that as they look at our church of many colors, they see God's wisdom of many colors reflected.

Not only because he's created us all, but because he's saving us all together. And Satan will never understand God's wisdom in doing that.

[26 : 39] But here's what he does know. That the existence of the church spells his doom. Because, of course, this is just the beginning of God's plan for the fullness of time.

One verse 10. To unite all things in him. Things in heaven and things on earth. So since God has successfully united together every kind of person in Christ.

Well, what does that say to these rulers and powers? His plan is in progress. His purpose is definitely happening and cannot be stopped.

The powers of darkness will be put in their proper place in God's universe forever. And that place is being crushed under Christ's feet. So brothers and sisters, can you see what gospel ministry does?

As Christ is preached, a church is being built that proves that God's plans are working. That confirms the eternal purpose that is realized in Christ Jesus our Lord by beaming God's technicolor wisdom into the universe.

[27 : 54] Do you realize what we're doing when we come together like this to worship? Or when we bear each other's burdens, we serve each other. Or we pray together.

Or speak the truth in love to each other. That in God's brilliant design, we are giving not only the world, but the heavens. A taste of what it will be like in God's new heavens and new earth.

Friends, the church is not a means to an end. It is the end before the end. As Simon Austin puts it again, the church is where history is heading.

Not a hangover from the past, but a picture of the future. What a glorious thing the church is then. Brothers and sisters, do you believe it?

There is nothing more precious, more amazing, more beautiful, more glorious on earth than the church of Jesus. And what a glorious thing gospel ministry is.

[29 : 02] The midwife that births the church into existence. And there's Paul's second discouragement jag for us this morning. Don't lose heart in God's plan.

Gospel ministry is building God's glorious church. As we finish then, let's not rush on.

There's always that bit after your jacks, isn't there, when you have to sit and wait for a bit. Let's take a few minutes to recover. Let's draw some threads together. I want us to still feel the bruise on our arm this week.

So finally, for these reasons, don't lose heart when the gospel suffers. Verse 13, so I ask you not to lose heart because of what I'm suffering for you, which is your glory.

When do you feel discouraged as a Christian? What causes you to lose heart? Paul isn't in prison anymore.

[30 : 06] But the world still tries to silence his message. The church is still put on trial. And gospel ministers are still put in prison.

In other words, the gospel still suffers in our world and at the hands of spiritual darkness. How does it feel, brothers and sisters, when the things that Paul wrote and taught and preached are called inhumane, hurtful, things that no decent human being could ever believe?

We live in a society where preaching or believing or living out Paul's letters is a harder and harder thing to do. How does it feel to be part of a church that people see as backwards?

Not only culturally as a hangover from the past, but because of what we preach, what we believe? You're not part of that church, are you? If it wasn't hard enough to invite people to come to church, you never come.

What about people who come, listen to the gospel and never come back? Because the message is too narrow. Two ways to live? Really?

[31 : 24] Two black and whites. Do you ever hear that and wonder, is this really God's plan for the universe? Is the church really the embryo of a new creation?

Imagine being part of a church where the minister is put in prison or kidnapped or threatened or killed, as happens throughout our world. Northern India, Nigeria, Malaysia.

If that was happening here, would it seem to you that that was part of God's eternal purpose? But friends, Pastor Paul says, look around.

Look around. Open your eyes. Open your ears. Look what God's doing through the gospel. Look who's come in through that wide open door through the gospel.

Look at the church God is building here through the gospel. Look at the church we belong to. Look at the rich blessing that we have in the gospel.

[32 : 25] Look at the Christ that we are united with through the gospel. Look at us sitting here. Look at us. Look at us. Look at us.

Look at us. Look at us. I wonder, do we tremble? Is it an awesome thing to ye to belong to the church of Christ because of the gospel?

Does it seem to ye that this is a wonderful everyday, the most precious thing on earth, to gather with God's people, to belong to his family, ordinary me and ye, little people, but one in Christ through the gospel?

Friends, the gospel is glorious. So do not lose heart when it suffers or it brings suffering because it is how God is working out his plans for the universe, for the fullness of time, to bring all things together into Christ in heaven and on earth.

Let me tell you a story as we finish. There's a church at the bottom of our road. Lots of you will have passed it.

[33 : 40] It's one of the most progressive parish churches in the country. I've chatted to a few people near us who go there. And you know what they say? There's no young people.

Everyone is in their 80s and 90s. And they cannot understand why that is. And when I tell them about Bon Accord, and they really can't understand, they really can't understand why there are young people in such a mix of different people gathered here.

Because by worldly logic, a church that preaches progressive values should look like this. And a church that preaches the gospel should look like that.

But brothers and sisters, God's wisdom is wiser than the world's wisdom. His eternal purpose is to unite all peoples, all things in Christ through the gospel that Paul preached.

And the proof of that is seen here in this room. His technicolor wisdom displayed. So don't lose heart when the gospel suffers and is ridiculed or hated or put on trial.

[34 : 57] Because the gospel is for our glory, according to God's eternal purpose, that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And we are the proof of that. Let's pray that we would take that in. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together. and that we individually are here and part of it. Forgive us, we pray, Lord, when we lose sight of what a precious and amazing thing it is that we can belong to your family simply through a message about Jesus.

Father, we thank you for your great grace towards us in the gospel. We pray that we would treasure it. We pray that we would treasure what it brings about your church, your people, and that we would own our identity in your world and your cosmos and that we, too, would tremble to think at what you are doing among us as the powers of hell tremble as they look upon your church in the world.

Bless us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.