

Church Planting

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[0 : 00] 2 Thessalonians, and you can see on the screen this, is from chapter 2, verse 13, to chapter 3, verse 5. But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you.

Pray that we might be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command.

May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. We're going to take time now and look together a little bit at the passage that we read, and especially the first verse of that passage, or the first verse of chapter 3 in 2 Thessalonians, which says, finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you.

[1 : 33] So through the month of November, what I want to do with you is to just remind ourselves a little bit of the vision of Cornerstone, our church, the things that we stand for, the things that are really important to us, what's in our DNA.

And this week, we're going to talk about church planting. We started Cornerstone as a new congregation over six years ago now, and we said that we wanted to be a church plant that planted more churches.

In Scotland, over the last 20 years, around 1,800 churches have closed and less than 300 churches have started.

And I was talking to somebody from the Church of Scotland Glasgow Presbytery this week. There are 125 Church of Scotland congregations in Glasgow, and the Presbytery reckons that about 25% of those churches will not reopen after COVID.

And that's a picture that's going to be repeated across denominations and across the country, that many small and elderly congregations actually won't reopen once the pandemic is past us.

[2 : 51] And so we have to think about what about those communities that are going to be left with no church and no Christian witness? How can we help to bring new gospel churches into those communities?

And we plant churches because really, we want God's Word to be spreading powerfully throughout the land of Scotland.

We pray then that the Word of the Lord would speed ahead and be honoured, as has happened among you. Paul is remarking there on how the Thessalonians, when he went to Thessalonica in northern Greece with the gospel message to plant a church there, the gospel word spread really powerfully.

Now, as he writes this letter, he's in the city of Corinth in southern Greece, and it's a really different situation. And he's asking, pray for us that the gospel will spread here, just as it did with you, because it was really tough.

Now, we live in an amazing city, don't we? We love Edinburgh. Look at this beautiful skyline, if you can see that picture there beside me. I love the people of Edinburgh.

[4 : 09] I love the places of Edinburgh. The architecture, the parks, the Pentland Hills, the skyline. The city has a great intellectual history.

World famous writers. I was off for a few days last week. I read this book by former Morningside resident J.K. Rowling as a detective, the cuckoos calling using the pseudonym Robert Galbraith. So there's lots of amazing things about Edinburgh that we love. Live music, concerts, cafes, restaurants. And God tells us this. He says this.

Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I've carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. Now, Christians, we see this world as our temporary home, our lasting home is in the new creation with God.

But although we may have a sense of being exiles in this world to some degree, it doesn't mean that we're hostile to the world we live in or we remove ourselves from its concerns.

[5 : 16] Rather, we pray and we work passionately for the city where we live to flourish. And part of that flourishing is to see God's word spread rapidly.

It's also to serve the city that we live in. I read of one church plant in Edinburgh, one of the poorer communities of our city, that I think by September or October had fed 14,000 meals to people during lockdown.

14,000 meals from one church to needy people in Edinburgh through lockdown. Churches have a great job to do in serving the people of this city, but also in spreading the word of God and praying that that word spreads freely and rapidly.

Do you know what? I would love everyone in Edinburgh to be a Christian, to know God's word and to believe it. Not because I want everybody to agree with me, but because as Anna Lorne said right at the beginning, if you were there at the start of the service, we flourish when we live beside the river of God's presence.

Our humanity comes alive. We're made new and we're given new life. So we love our city and we want it to flourish. And Paul, Paul loved Corinth and cared about it.

[6 : 38] Now, I was in ancient Corinth last year with another couple of members of Cornerstone, David and Nina, Meredith. So I don't know how these photos will show up, but that is me up here.

OK, that's me. And that's the temple of Apollos behind me in ancient Corinth. So look at that. See the location, if you can. On the Mediterranean coast, you can see the sea in the background. If you look carefully, obviously sunny and beautiful. That was in November. The weather was still fantastic. So ancient Corinth, where Paul is as he writes this letter and asks for help in prayer. Ancient Corinth was a really great, beautiful city, a place of influence and power. People came to Corinth because it was wealthy.

It was a strategic location and trade routes made a lot of commerce happen there. And so you could go to Corinth to make it in life. The Isthmian Games were held there every second year, part of the Olympiad.

[7 : 44] It was a city of beautiful gardens, temples and villas. A city that was on the map in the Roman world of the first century. And one of the interesting things about Corinth is that it had its very own Arthur seat.

So that's the temple of Apollos again. And then if you look there, that's the, it's called the Acro Corinth. It's a big rocky hill above the city of Corinth.

Their very own Arthur seat, but they were even more ingenious than us. They built a temple at the top of the Acro Corinth. It was a temple to the goddess Aphrodite.

So very spectacular. But tragically, sadly, they kept a thousand sex slaves in the temple of Aphrodite.

And every night they would walk down this mountainside carrying lanterns, coming into the cities and offering their bodies freely to the citizens of Corinth for sex as part of their cultic worship.

[8 : 55] Sex slaves who were there to serve the rich and powerful men who frequented the city of Corinth. Not much wonder Paul's finding it tough planting a church in Corinth.

He says in verse 2, pray that we'll be delivered from wicked and evil men. When there's a sex, when there's over a thousand sex slaves and all that goes on around that, you know that there is a lot of wickedness and evil going on in a city.

A lot of oppression, violence and darkness. And Paul finds that a hard place. Earlier he says, or in another place he says, You know, I came to Corinth in weakness and trembling and fear.

He found it a very intimidating environment. And when he feels overwhelmed by what God's asking him to do, what does he do? He says, man, please pray for me.

Pray for me. And that's true for all of us today. When we feel overwhelmed by our circumstances or by the challenges facing us personally, or the challenges facing us as a church, we want to say, please join us in praying for what we're up to.

[10:05] As we serve Edinburgh, as we love our city, we believe that we want the Bible, the message of the gospel to run free. Because it's the most powerful resource for good in our world.

The Bible is a book that you may not have read or not read carefully, but which you've been told is full of, you know, ancient myths and legends and terrible ideas and intolerance and violence and oddities.

But actually, when read carefully and thoughtfully, what you'll find is this. The Bible is a book that brings life, love, hope, joy, forgiveness, freedom, justice and restoration.

Where the Bible is read and listened to and taken on board, then it teaches us to love and value each other as human beings and to love and value the world we live in.

Think about Corinth with its thousand sex slaves. That was normal in Corinth. People didn't blink an eye at it. In our world, a city where there was a thousand people kept in sexual slavery, hopefully that would be abhorrent.

[11:25] And it's abhorrent to us because of what the Bible taught us about the nature of being human and the nature of our duty to love and care for every person and see them flourish.

The Bible changed the way we see the world, the way we see God and the way we see other people. It's a great book. We want to see its message really freely move through our own lives and through our own church and through our whole city.

And so there's more than what I'm trying to do is to reconnect us to the vision of Cornerstone, the original vision of Cornerstone, to plant churches so that God's word will spread rapidly and be honoured through our city.

So our Thursday thought, oh, look, I've skipped a slide there, but this is David Meredith, one of our members. That's the actual Corinth behind them at the back there.

And David is standing in front of the bima, which was the seat of judgment where the magistrate ruled in ancient Corinth. And if you misbehaved in any way, you would be brought before the bima to answer for your misdemeanors.

[12:42] So don't know what David was up to exactly there, but no good, I'm sure. But we want to plant churches because the message of Jesus brings life to the city.

Isn't that a great idea? Let's plant churches because the message of Jesus brings life to the city. So here we are. Keep church planting as a great focus.

I think that's really important for me personally in my ministry, and I think it's important for us as a congregation that we keep church planting as a focus, that we don't become inward-looking because of the pandemic.

As I've said, you know, Paul wanted the gospel to spread rapidly and to be honored. And he's here in Corinth planting a church for that very reason.

And he says there in that verse, we want it to spread rapidly and be honored just as it was with you. So that's a reference to his time in Thessalonica in northern Greece, saying, when I came to you, the gospel really spread so powerfully through your city.

[13:50] We read about that in the book of Acts chapter 17, that after Paul had preached in the synagogue three weeks running, some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

So there was a really successful church planting mission in Thessalonica where the gospel had really spread powerfully. In his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul said it this way, our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep convictions.

So that's what he wants in Corinth. That's what we want in Edinburgh. That when we talk about Jesus, when we talk about the Bible, that it will come with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

That it won't just be words. There'll be power, the Holy Spirit, deep conviction. That's why we have to pray so that God will be at work through his word.

Paul had a very definite missionary strategy in the book of Acts. We can trace it as we see the ministry of Paul in the book of Acts, the great leader of the mission of the church to the Gentile world.

[15:09] And he went from urban center to urban center, planting new churches, which then spread the gospel through their region.

So that's a great pattern for the church today to follow. Start new churches that will spread the gospel through their region, through their area.

So we want to keep the pattern of Paul's mission, but also the focus of Paul's mission. Two things then to bear in mind right there.

Let's keep this pattern of starting new churches, but let's keep the focus that there is in there. We don't just start churches for the sake of starting churches. We start churches so that the gospel message will run free.

What does this look like for us at Cornerstone? It's been a kind of strange time through this last year, and I probably haven't communicated as clearly with you about some things as I should have.

[16:14] Back in 2019, we met with members of the congregation, and we had a town hall, and we started thinking through, what do the next few years of Cornerstone look like?

And at the start of this year, we said that we wanted to go on the theme of a journey of hope.

There's such a loss of hope in our world. Even before coronavirus, there was a huge spike in what they call deaths of despair in the Western world.

A lot of anxiety and fear, and that's been accentuated by the pandemic. So this idea of a journey of hope is really important, and in 2020, that journey of hope was towards God.

And so one of the things that I really wanted to emphasize through this year were habits of hope that help us to live more in God's presence. Prayer, reading the Bible, community, Sabbath, service, generosity, hospitality.

Habits of hope that we've talked through through the year. We've really tried to encourage you towards a life of prayer and a life of living in God's word, a life of community together.

[17:22] That journey of hope, as we think, look forward into 2021, is about a journey of hope towards our city. We're not just wanting hope for ourselves. We want hope for our city through evangelism.

Hopefully, those of us who are Christians are more convinced than ever, as we've seen what the pandemic does to our culture and the fragility of life and all the things that we take for granted.

Hopefully, that's convinced us that evangelism is really important. People need good news. People need life in Jesus. And we want to move to our city, towards our city, through evangelism and through church planting.

And then in 2022, the journey of hope is about using the old schoolhouse, the refurbished old schoolhouse, to serve and bless our neighborhood, to use it for creative arts and music and in lots of other ways.

So we really want to be in this journey towards God. That's the most important journey, isn't it? The vertical one towards God, but also towards others, through church planting, through evangelism, through using our resources to serve our neighborhood and our city to help people flourish and thrive.

[18:40] If you're not a Christian or if you're unsure or you're new to church, you might be thinking, do we really need more churches? You know, if churches are closing, does it not just mean Christianity is in the decline, that, you know, starting new churches is a bit pointless?

Is the church not the relic of an unwanted past? Shouldn't we just let it die in peace and fade away? And I think I want to say to that, that, you know, the church, whenever we encounter a human expression of the church, yes, it will be imperfect and it will have flaws, but overall churches are still a force for good.

Caring for the needy, the broken, promoting what is good and true, standing for justice. In the 21st century, we live in not the secular age, but the post-secular age.

You know, religion is growing and thriving throughout the world. Even in places where the church is in decline at some levels, active faith is growing.

The church is still the most dynamic organization in this world. And religion is growing as a proportion of the human population. And Christianity is growing as a proportion of the human population.

[20 : 00] God is not dead and the church is not dead and religion is not dead. So the church is exploding across the world. And we want to see the church renewed, revived, reawakened in Scotland.

We want to see God's word run freely and powerfully through our nation because we have good news for hurting people. And we have good gifts to help people flourish wherever they are, no matter who they are.

Healthy churches living and teaching the message of Jesus are life-giving and bring health to the city. So we want to see more churches started. As we do that, though, I also want to say, let's keep the Bible and prayer at the center of everything that we do.

That's what Paul's saying. I'm here in Corinth trying to get this church, this mission established. So pray for us. Pray, pray, pray. That the word pray there is about the tense of it.

And the Greek is, you know, let's keep praying. Pray in an ongoing way. Constantly pray, continuously pray. Don't stop praying that the message of the Lord will spread rapidly and be honored.

[21 : 16] So as we think about starting new churches, we're keeping the Bible and prayer at the very core of what we're doing. Church planting, as Paul shows us here, depends on sharing the word of God and praying for that.

So speaking about the Bible a lot, praying a lot, go hand in hand for the starting of new churches. Nothing happens without those two foundational aspects of church life.

We share God's word with others. It's indispensable. We can't neglect that and we can't neglect prayer either. So when we do evangelism, what are we doing?

We're talking about the gospel, the good news of Jesus. We're sharing our faith and how what God says to us in the Bible has changed our lives. The gospel we read as a powerful active message. This is Romans chapter 1 verse 16. Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel. I do want it to spread freely and powerfully. And I'm going to work for that because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.

[22 : 29] The gospel is not just a word. It is a power, a life-changing power for everyone who believes first to Jew, then to Gentile. So we want to do that, but we also want to pray more and more.

We want to spread the word and we want to pray about the spreading of the word. Because the gospel, despite its power, often meets resistance and rejection.

So Paul's here in Corinth, home to the Isthmian Games. So there was four great Olympiad Games held in Greece in a four-year cycle.

The first year was the Olympic Games themselves in Athens. And then years two and four were in Corinth. And they were called the Isthmian Games because it's on this isthmus, this narrow neck of land.

So huge crowds of people and athletes and all the commerce. Think of the Edinburgh Festival and how our city comes alive during the festival.

[23 : 35] And it brings so much money and wealth to Edinburgh to have the festival. Well, the Isthmian Games function the same way. You know, the population triples. Lots of businesses come and make a lot of money and lots of services are supported through the money that's made at the Games.

And Paul's thinking about the athletes here in the Isthmian Games. When these athletes are competing, they need to run freely. That's where this idea of God's word spreading powerfully comes from.

What it literally means is we want to run freely like an athlete. No obstacle in our way. No impediment. No interference. Running freely to win.

To get the crown. To be honoured on the podium at the end of the race. That's what Paul is praying for. So there's a picture of the athlete striving to win the prize.

And Paul's saying we want God's word to run powerfully through Corinth so that it's on the podium. That it's being honoured and being given glory.

[24 : 42] We want God's word to have that impact in our city. And so in Edinburgh, we want God's word to run freely and be honoured. If you're into Formula One racing, we want the message of Jesus to be the Lewis Hamilton of all messages.

Or if you're into football, we want the message of Jesus to be the Liverpool FC of truth. With table-topping exploits and goals galore. And if that's going to happen in our city, it's not going to happen without prayer.

If we don't care about this enough to pray about it, to talk to God about it, and to ask him for it, then God says, I'm not going to do it. There are many things in this world that God will do, but that he has decided to do only in answer to prayer.

Because he wants to draw us into the process, draw us into that partnership, and align our priorities with his priorities.

So God says, I care for the city. I want the people of the city to come to faith. I'm not willing that any of them should perish.

[25 : 57] So will you pray for them? So that they don't perish. So that God's word will run freely amongst them. So those are the two foundational aspects of church growth and church planting that we want to see.

Sharing the message of God and praying. Whenever we start new churches, whenever we start new congregations, we're doing it from a foundation of prayer and God's word.

And out of that, we believe that we can then build new communities, Christian communities, church families. We can share the gospel. We can organize new worship services and see new congregations emerge.

What does this look like for us at Cornerstone? Well, do pray for these things. Do pray that God's word will run freely in our lives and in the life of our city.

For Cornerstone, the journey of hope for our city. As we look ahead as a church family in 2021, there are several things really weighing on us.

[27 : 09] Cornerstone is not a big congregation. You know, we have about 70 homes and maybe 170 people connected, adults and children. And so we're not in a place where we can go and start lots of new congregations and send away lots of people.

But we do want to just help start new things where we can. And so instead of planting new churches, what we're thinking of doing is planting new congregations from Cornerstone then.

Or having expressions of Cornerstone in other locations or having different services for different groups of people.

So that's kind of how we're thinking about 2021. And especially thinking about Gilmerton and about the Latinos. When we move back into the old schoolhouse, especially with social distancing restrictions, but even when they're gone, we anticipate that the old schoolhouse is not going to accommodate everybody who's connected to Cornerstone in one service on a Sunday morning.

So we know we're going to have to do multiple services. So what we're asking ourselves and what we're convicted about is that maybe we should do those multiple services in multiple locations.

[28 : 29] So maybe have a service in Morningside and a service in Gilmerton, but also in multiple languages. Maybe have a service in English and a service in Spanish every week.

And different congregations meeting different needs in different ways, different languages and in different locations. So that's going to be our focus in 2021 is can we really work with our city group in Gilmerton to help them share God's word in their community and perhaps start a new congregation of Cornerstone in their area.

And we also want to see that same thing happen with our Latinos. Can the Latino city group work together to do more for mission in their community and maybe have a service that meets the needs of Spanish speakers who don't have English?

So that's where we're looking ahead to. We can't do this on our own. We've got no hope of doing it on our own. We're only going to do it if God's in it and if we really pray about it.

So do ask God to lead our church and help us to see what we should be doing. Do be praying about these great things.

[29 : 47] So I want to just finish by asking you finally about God's word in your life. Is God's word running freely in your life?

There's my slides come back, but, you know, it's one thing to talk about letting God's word have free reign. In the city.

But I also want to think just about you as an individual. Does God's word have free reign in your life? Does it speak with authority to who you are?

Do you read it with hunger, with interest? To find out more, to understand more clearly? To get to know God better in a really personal and living way?

So that you will know your own life better and be changed by your daily encounter with God through his word. The Bible is a living book full of power.

[30 : 55] Is it alive in your life? A lot of us are pretty close to the Bible and its message. We rarely pick it up. And if we do, we do it with a closed mind and a closed heart because we don't want to change.

We've given up hope of change. But instead I want to say, let God's word have free reign in your life. Speak with authority. And pray that it brings life to you.

And that's just a really, really important way to end this message and this conversation this morning. Is the Bible speaking into your life?

Is it speaking with power into your life? Why? Well, what's my biggest need this morning as Neil McMillan? And what's your biggest need, whoever you are? My biggest need is I need Jesus. I need a savior. I don't have life right. I don't have my heart right. I don't have my relationships right. I don't love God the way I should love God.

[31 : 59] I don't love other people the way I should love them. When I wake up every morning, the one thing I need more than anything else is forgiveness and grace from God. And so I have to turn again to God every morning to hear his message of grace and forgiveness.

Do you know where the message of grace and forgiveness is found? Well, it's found in the Bible. The Bible is a book that narrates to us the great work of God's grace and salvation.

Wherever I turn in the Bible, that's the overarching theme that I'm going to find. A story of a God of love and mercy working in saving ways in the life of messy, broken people.

I hunger and thirst for more of that in my own life. I hunger and thirst for more of that in your life.

And I hunger and thirst for more of that in the life of our great city. So please pray for me.

Pray for yourself. Pray for each other and your city groups and community groups. Pray for us. Pray for our city and just pour out your heart to God. Pray for me. That in 2020 and 2021, in the pandemic, that he's going to do great things in us and through us for the city of Edinburgh.

[33 : 21] let me say a short word of prayer and then fergus is going to take us into our last song lord we do want to pray for the things that we've spoken about that we we want to do new things for our city with the latinos and in gilmerton but lord that we can't do any of this on our own we want to do new things at the old schoolhouse in the morningside in brunswickfield but we can't do it on our own and lord what we want above all is to see the message of the gospel run freely and powerfully through our own lives through our church and through our city so hear that prayer we ask this morning and answer it in remarkable and absolutely mind-blowing in astounding ways help us as we pray to have a great sense of expectation that you're a mighty god who answers prayers in mighty ways amen