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## The Prevailing Church: Built on a Strong Commitment

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TEXT: Matthew 16:21-28 (NASB)

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds.

"Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

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Dear Friends:

I begin today with a question: will the Church of Jesus Christ, as we know it, survive the 21st century? Could we even imagine it thriving around the world? Jesus says this promise: "Upon this rock, I will build my church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail

against it." What a promise! Jesus doesn't mean the person of Peter as a rock, rather the confession of faith which Peter makes: that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the savior of God, the Son of God, the Lord of Eternity. He will save us and the Church will prevail.

Ever since the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the church throughout history has endured and thrived despite many significant challenges. In fact, one could argue that the Church of Jesus Christ blazes most brightly in dark, stormy times. Just think: the days of the early Roman Empire against Christians in persecution, the Jewish oppression, periods of worldwide disease, even world wars, the periods of the Crusades, flawed belief systems, heresies, philosophies questioning truth, severe persecution and oppression of those that believe in Jesus by certain political rulers and regimes, immorality from within, corrupting and rotting the church; yet the Church of Jesus Christ and the life-changing message of the gospel still proclaims and resonates through the 21st century worldwide. In American culture today, the church seems to be shrinking and influence, numbers, and impact. Yet Jesus' promise is perhaps more important and encouraging than ever for us to hold hope. "Upon this rock, I will build my church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Jesus' church will prevail. Contrary to appearances, the love of God conquers all. It is true that the meek will inherit the earth. Grace overcomes evil. Jesus is Lord of life and Lord of love. He's the Lord of eternity, and in the end, God wins. In the end, God's will will be done. And the Church of Jesus will prevail, and we will prevail with Christ.

So in our time today, we celebrate this truth: that Christ's Church prevails because it is built on a strong commitment of faith. Jesus calls to us: "Anyone who wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up the cross and follow me." It's a call to faithfulness, it's a call to self-denial and sacrifice. The devoted disciples who follow Jesus in faith empower the church to be a prevailing church.

What is that strong commitment that builds Christ's church to prevail? First, it's a commitment to loyalty and devotion for Jesus. Have you ever watched surfers at an ocean? Maybe you've surfed yourself? I watched those surfers ride those powerful waves and it looks exhilarating. The power to surf is not in the surfer himself or herself. The power of the surfer is in the wave. So also our faith in Christ harnesses the power of Jesus' victory so that we know we're the people of God. We're forgiven and graced, loved, eternally alive, never alone; and we will prevail. We owe Jesus a debt of thanks, we can never repay. The power of His salvation is our free gift and everything He's

done on our behalf: coming to Earth in the incarnation, His miracles, the teaching of the kingdom of God, His blood shed on the cross of Calvary, His resurrection – it's all great news for us. It awakens faith in the truth that we owe Jesus everything.

In 1865, there was a woman singing in the choir who thought that her pastor's prayer was too long, and in the middle of his prayer she started scribbling on a note – the words of a poem that became a beloved hymn:

Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe.  
Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.  
For nothing good to have I,  
I'll wash my garments white in the blood of Calvary's lamb,  
Jesus paid all, all to Him I owe.

The only proper response when we understand the magnitude of what Jesus has done for us and the free love and grace that flows to us every day is to devote our lives to Him. That commitment makes the church prevail.

But be careful! Just as Satan seduced Peter in his perspective of who Jesus was and what it meant for him, Satan attempts to seduce us from our loyalty to Jesus as well. Peter's problem, when Jesus told the disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to be sufferer and to be killed, was to see that that would short circuit Peter's desire to ascend to the top with Jesus and rule the world victorious. Peter's problem can become the church's problem if we see Jesus as a means to our own personal end, rather than worshipping Him as Lord and God.

Satan attempts to seduce Christ's disciples to follow Christ for personal gain. That leads to what I might describe as carnal, worldly Christians. They believe, but prefer comfort, pleasure, convenience, and watching everyone else over discipleship, devotion, servanthood, and faithfulness. Remember in Revelation 3, where it says, "You're lukewarm. And because you're lukewarm I'm going to spit you out." Whatever deters us from pursuing the will of God and living as Jesus' servants in the world is seduction from the Dark Prince.

Years ago, I went to a Christian conference in Denver, Colorado, and on the route from the airport to the conference, the driver of the shuttle bus was a Muslim man from Pakistan. He said to me, "I came to the U.S. expecting a Christian nation. But these

people who are Christian here believe in nothing except self-glorification. They're practical atheists." Whooo! No wonder Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan."

The prevailing church is built on devotion to Jesus, but also a willingness to endure and persevere with tenacious hold. Do you remember the passage in Hebrews 11? It says "People were tortured, mocked, whipped, put in chains, imprisoned for their faith, stoned, sawn in two, put to death with the sword, though approved to God through their faith. Yet in this life, they did not receive what was promised." All they could do, even suffering to the end of their physical life, was to cling in hope to the promise that someday God will keep His word. And then it goes on. In Hebrews 12: they ran with endurance the race set before them. How? "Fixing their eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of their faith." The church prevails when the people of Christ are committed with tenacious hope to Christ.

But we're also committed to share the message of Christ to all the world. How many of you remember the story of the great African missionary David Livingstone? After he'd served 16 years as a medical missionary in the interior of Africa, Livingstone returned on furlough to Great Britain and he was asked to speak at the University of Glasgow. Perhaps he would have declined had he known what was waiting for him. It was the custom of undergraduates at Glasgow in those days to heckle speakers that came, and they were well prepared for this preacher. But when Livingstone walked on the platform with the tread of a man who had walked 11,000 miles, his left arm hung limply at his side, having been almost ripped from his body by a huge lion. His face with dark, leathery brown from 16 years in the African sun. It was furrowed with innumerable lines from the bouts of African fever, which had wracked and emaciated his body. He'd been attacked by savages who were plying their vicious slave trade. He was half deaf from rheumatic fever, and half blind from branches that snapped back to slap him in the eyes in the jungle. The Glasgow students stared and knew that here was a life literally being burned out for God. Not a rattle moved, not a foot shuffled. A hush crept over the vast auditorium as they listened in rapt silence as David Livingstone told of his journeys and about the tremendous needs of the vast African population. "Shall I tell you," he said, "what sustained me in the midst of all those toils, hardships, and incredible loneliness? It was a promise, a promise of a gentleman of most sacred honor. It was this promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world."

Livingstone buried a child in Africa. Later, he buried his dear wife, who had come to visit him. For over thirty-nine years, Livingstone trudged 29,000 miles across the face of the continent of Africa. Light shined in the darkness and two million Africans were brought the gospel. And to this day, the light continues to shine. There's a devoted life, committed to the hope that the gospel will still change people's lives; that the word of God, the good news, will not return void. And Livingstone is a shining star of an example to us – of how the church prevails when those who believe in Jesus are devoted to share that message with others.

But the church prevails also when we're committed to the power of sacrifice. There's a history lesson from the early 1700s in the Virgin Islands. Danish immigrants forced the Virgin Island natives to work as slaves on their plantations. Later, Moravian missionaries came to the islands to share the message and love of Jesus with the natives. The Danish landlords, who were Lutherans, didn't like it. They required that if the Moravians were going to share with the slaves, they themselves must surrender to be slaves. And to the amazement of the Danes, those Moravian missionaries immediately agreed without the slightest hesitation. The Danes were so shocked at the Moravians' willingness to surrender to slavery in order to tell the people of the Virgin Islands about Jesus Christ, to surrender the great personal sacrifice, that they never officially required that enslavement. However, the Moravian missionaries shared living quarters, economic poverty, and all other aspects of life with the slaves for the sake of reaching them. The Danes were shamed and began to witness to the slaves. Before this, they had only sought to share their faith with other Danes (that is, people just like them.) Perhaps that's why the Danish country was one of the first countries in the modern era to outlaw slavery. Just think: the Moravian missionaries were willing to sacrifice their personal freedom and become slaves for life if it offered them the opportunity to share their love for Jesus with the people.

Ultimately, though, the church prevails because Jesus Christ commits Himself to the church. It's not our human response to God that is the true foundation of our hope for a prevailing church, but rather Christ's commitment and faithfulness to us. You and I will never be perfect or pure in our faith commitment. It's the cross of Jesus where He shed His blood for the forgiveness of our sins, and the resurrection of Jesus to give us eternal life that is our hope. Jesus knew what He had to do. He was willing, in obedience to the Father's mission, to shed His blood. He emptied Himself of all power and glory to be our servant. Jesus' faithfulness is still our hope today, and we are more than conquerors

because Christ has loved us and still loves us. Jesus Christ still washes our feet and forgives our sins, opening doors to new beginnings. Jesus still prays for us. Jesus still pours His Holy Spirit and love into our hearts every day. Jesus still promises, "Lo, I'm with you always, even to the end of the age." It's Christ's commitment to us that allows the church to prevail.

I close with the story of Jim Elliott, the famous missionary to the jungles of South America, where he shared with the Huaorani the hope of Jesus. He was martyred for his faith. Later, though, the whole tribe of those Huaorani came to believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Savior of the world. Here's what Elliott said: "That man is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

With Christ, the church prevails for all eternity, and we are more than conquerors in His love.

Amen.