

YES in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Now, there are many roles you take on as a father in the family. Uber driver, hunter-gatherer, click-and-collect manager.

But one of the jobs I have, recently dormant, is that of tour manager. So good was I that my family created a pseudo-company for me by the name of Mark Chu Tours.

Now, for those of you who are experts on this, a critical aspect of a seamless and successful tour is meticulous planning. Especially if you go on a grand multi-country tour where, you know, all the rail connections and flight connections have to be lined up.

And you've got so little time that you have to fit everyone's bucket list into the itinerary. And then, invariably, there'll be a hiccup to the well, the best late of plans.

And then, you know, panic and anxiety would set in while you try to get things back on track. Well, if you read the book of Acts, you will find that Paul, too, was a seasoned traveler himself.

[1 : 1 3] His travel, however, was not driven by pleasure, but by the gospel. To go, gather, and grow disciples. Hey, he had the same vision as H3D. And in our passage today, Paul explains some of these plans to the church in Corinth.

And in order to understand the teaching in this passage, we need to first understand a little of these travel plans. So, as you can see from the outline, I'm going to tackle the passage a little out of sequence.

Not totally, but just a little. Work out what these plans were in the first place. Why it changed. And then come back to see what we can learn from it. So, Paul writes in verse 15, which is a little on in the passage.

Because I was confident in this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and then to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea.

That's back in Jerusalem. Yeah, Jerusalem is in Judea. Was I fickle when I intended to do this, or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both yes, yes, and no, no?

[2 : 2 3] Paul, we know, had already been to Corinth before. In fact, if you read Acts, he was the one that started the church there. But now, as he continues his travels, he writes to explain why he wasn't doing what he intended.

Originally, he was going to come by Corinth on his way to Macedonia. And so on the map, a bit small, but you can see Archaea, just below that's Corinth, and Macedonia is just north of that.

And so you can see that he was trying to go to Corinth first on his way to Macedonia, and then to return again on his way back, probably to sail off from Corinth.

But somewhere along the way, those plans changed. Now why? Well, he explains that in verses 1 to 4 of chapter 2. So we skip on to that. He says, You see, there were problems with the church in Corinth.

We read some of it in 1 Corinthians. But bad as sinful behavior was with certain people in that church, that wasn't Paul's real concern.

- [3 : 58] Rather, his real concern was that the church was unwilling to address it, to call out the sinner. Now perhaps the leaders and the members were divided as to what to do, or maybe they thought it was not important enough.

But either way, Paul initially thought that he needed to come personally to deal with it. But now he's changed his mind. Because he felt that probably the confrontation would be too painful for the church.

There might even be a risk that there would be a permanent breakdown in their relationship if he came and confronted them. And yet as the apostle who started this church, he was responsible for doing something.

So he writes them a letter, hoping it would be less confrontational and then more effective. This is commonly known as what we call the severe letter, which he refers to in verse 3, which we read.

So that's 1 Corinthians, there's the severe letter, and then there's this second letter. And there's even another letter even before that, we think. But it's like when a teacher, you know, writes a warning note in the student's homework, making it clear the effort isn't good enough.

- [5 : 17] It's meant to give the student a chance to change his attitude quietly, isn't it? Without being publicly embarrassed and dragged up the front of the class to be told off.

And so that's what Paul did. But unfortunately, it appears his intent may have been misread by the church. They might be thinking, is Paul being fickle now about his travel plans?

Why would he do that if he's trustworthy? Say he's coming and then change his mind. Maybe it's no longer convenient for him. He has more important things to do. Maybe he never intended to come in the first place.

Well, much of this passage is given to dealing with this concern, that perhaps as an apostle, he lacked integrity. Perhaps he was acting out of expedience, not principles.

He wasn't having regard for the well-being of the Corinthians. And so in the outline, I set out three points, or lessons we can learn from Paul's actions.

- [6 : 16] And so let's backtrack to the start of the passage, where Paul first explains that no, he's acting with integrity and godly sincerity. Verse 12. Now this is our boast.

Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We've done so not relying on worldly wisdom, but on God's grace.

For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that as you understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us, that is, boast of our integrity, just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Paul has searched his conscience, and it's clear. He's not done this with impure motives, not use worldly methods. Rather, he's done what's good for the Corinthians, to ensure that they'll stand on the day of judgment before the Lord.

All throughout, he says, his actions are shaped by God's grace. And so for us too, that's the same, isn't it?

- [7 : 21] Whether in life or ministry, this is the most important starting point, isn't it? It's not that we'll never make mistakes, but it's about speaking and doing all things with integrity.

It goes to the very heart of character. What is our motivation, whatever we might be doing? Are we serving out of our own interest, or for the interest or well-being of others?

Or do we have a selfish, hidden agenda? Have you asked those things of yourself when you go about doing things? It does require a level of self-awareness, doesn't it?

And self-reflection. Otherwise, it's quite easy to deceive ourselves. And it doesn't matter whether it's church, or family, or work, or marriage. We may even think that we're doing God's work when actually, we're hiding selfish ambition or desires.

Now, sometimes there will be others that are kind enough to point that out to us. But ultimately, we need to humbly ask God to give us that kind of sensitive conscience that is attuned to God's will.

[8 : 33] We need to be open as we hear God's word so that it can serve as a check on us, so that it can serve as a check on our motives.

And so, for example, when you speak well of yourself, is it boasting you're engaged in? Or when you insist that what you're doing is the right thing to do, is it just self-interest that's talking?

Or when you criticize others for sinning or doing the wrong thing, are you being hypocritical in any way? Well, Paul has checked his conscience, and he knows it's clear before God.

He even dares to call upon God as his witness further down in verse 23. And so, if that's the case, then why has he changed his plans? Well, now in verse 18 to 24, Paul reveals that it's not so much that the change in plans, in travel plans, but the constancy of God's plan that Paul aligns his actions with.

You see, God's word never changes. But sometimes, in order to stay true to God's plans, our plans need to change.

[9 : 47] So, listen to his explanation. He says, But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who has preached among you by us, by me and Silas and Timothy, was not yes and no, but in Him, it has always been yes.

And so Paul is saying to them, don't focus so narrowly on my travel plans. Rather, rather, see what the big picture that God has is. So it's like going on a Mark Chu tour.

My big picture plan, if you come on my tour, is to ensure everyone enjoys themselves. And so to that end, I might say, we're going to Euro Disney.

No excitement there. But if on the day of the trip, there's lightning and thunder and all sorts of, you know, wild weather, should I change my plans?

Of course. Might my family think that I've then broken my promise? Perhaps. But hopefully when, you know, I take them somewhere else, just as fun and safer, they'll realize that I was acting in their best interest, even though I had changed their plans.

[11 : 04] Because why? My big picture intention is to give them an enjoyable holiday. Euro Disney was just a means to that bigger picture, isn't it?

And so likewise, God's big picture for His church and His people is found in His promises to them in the Bible. For the Corinthians, it was the Old Testament specifically.

They didn't have the New Testament or not in full as yet. And some of them weren't even Jews. So God's promise only came to them in Christ Jesus. It's their faith in Jesus which unlocks the yes to God's promises in the Old Testament.

But whether you're a Gentile or a Jew, God's promises are only yes because of what Jesus has done on the cross. It's His sacrifice that allows the blessings of God's kingdom to flow to all humanity.

And so Paul says, none of God's big plans has changed. It's always been yes, but fulfilled in Christ. And so he says, for no matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ.

[12 : 15] And so through Him, the Amen is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Christ's work having been done, God now works in us to stand firm in Christ. We've been anointed by the blood of Christ, sealed with His Spirit, and that guarantees God's ongoing work to help us stand firm right to the end.

And that's always been God's big picture plan. It doesn't change regardless of what Paul's travel plans are. And so for Paul, that has always been his aim, whether he came to Corinth directly or personally or not.

And so he may initially have said yes to coming to them and then later changed it to no, but that was only because in the back of his mind, what he wanted to fulfill was the bigger yes of helping them to stand firm in Christ.

What he thought he was going to do in person, which was better, he now realized on reflection that perhaps that was not the best thing to do. That actually it was better for him to write.

[13 : 34] And so he says in verse 23, I call God as my weakness and I stake my life on it. That's how sure it is. That it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with joy, we work with you for your joy because it is by faith you stand firm.

And so it's like my change of travel plans. Euro Disney was what I thought would be fun, but not with the thunderstorms. And likewise, Paul was always concerned for their faith.

And initially he thought, if I came in person, that would be the best way to help them. But perhaps then he realized that if he was going to be there in person, it might only force them to obey Paul grudgingly.

Like, you know, he's standing there, you've got to do this. And they might say, yes, because he's the apostle. But then he thought, no, that's not what I need from them. I need them to obey by faith, not by force, from a willing heart, with joy.

Now those of us who wish to be faithful in ministry and life need to realize this is how God works. The big picture of what God promises in Christ are always yes.

[14 : 51] In fact, there's Isaiah 55, which was the other reading, verse 11 says, once God's word is pronounced, is as good as done. It would achieve what God intended from the start.

But how he does it, however, is not known to us. That's why earlier in Isaiah 55, God declares that his thoughts are not our thoughts, and neither are his ways our ways.

And so God's plan, as he reveals it to us and is made known in his word, is always to grow his church. It's to make his children like Jesus, his son, to grow us in the fruit of the Spirit.

But sometimes, he may achieve it in what looks like success in our eyes, but at other times, he does it in what might look like failure to us.

Can you see? So take, for example, our plans with the St. John's Partnership. Many of you have been helping out, down in Blackburn, where we went down there. It was meant to be a five-year partnership, right?

[15 : 56] And in my mind, I had expected that by the end of three years, which is now, we would have established a stable partnership with growing congregation at St. John's, you know, progressively, then just steadily growing from there.

But COVID has stuffed up my plans, hasn't it? We've lost the best part of two years in consistent, you know, ministry, gathering together, building community.

But does that mean that God has let us down? That it's been a no to His promises? Well, I don't think so. Our plans, like Paul's travel plans, have had to change because of COVID.

But it doesn't mean that God's promises hasn't been yes or haven't been yes. His goal is still to mature us as His church, right? And so when we regather at St. John's, which we did this morning, a small group of us, we'll just have to take stock, reassess, and work out how God will keep doing that in our midst going forward.

And that's the point, isn't it? Just as we saw last week, God's purpose is still being done when affliction and troubles occur. We may prefer to be part of God's plan in the successes, but so-called failures are still yeses to God's promises in Christ.

[17 : 22] Not just for us as a church, but perhaps even for your own life. And so, let's not look at our plans in those worldly terms and measure success and failure that way.

Rather, we need to see in light of what God is promising to do among us in His Word. And when we do that, then we can say, look, the last 18 months has not been a failure.

It has not been a waste of time. It has not been a detour from what God wanted us to do. Because we need to look closely and say, okay, we haven't been able to gather, we haven't been able to do this, that, or the other, but what aspects of God's promises has still been fulfilled among us?

And now, it was the same with Paul, and now, as we look, this example of the sinner that he talks about. At first glance, you would say, well, no, you know, this church has failed, hasn't it?

They have a sinner in their midst, they haven't even, you know, initially failed to do anything to deal with him. But Paul can still say, no, God's promises are still yes in Christ.

[18 : 31] And how has this been so? because, whether they're sin or not sin, the aim in that church for God was to produce steadfast faith and obedience, even if it takes a slightly unexpected route.

You see, the church may have thought that the best way to deal with this failure is to punish this sinner, get him out of the church. After all, that would get rid of the problem, isn't it?

And the church would be now much better for it, and they can go forward with God's plans. But no, Paul says, that's not God's big picture plan. Rather, Paul is looking to nurture faith and obedience, not just for the sinner, but for everyone in the church.

And so he says in verse 5 of chapter 2, if anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent, not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient.

Now, now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.

[19 : 44] Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I've forgiven, if there was anything to forgive, I've forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us, for we are not unawares of his scheme.

Now, notice Paul didn't just want the sinner to repent and obey. He says so, doesn't he? He also wanted the church to obey. And the test wasn't just to rebuke the sinner, it was to obey in everything.

So there was more than one thing the church had to do, wasn't it? And that includes reaffirming their love for him. That includes forgiving him. That was part of their obedience as well.

And that was what Paul wanted all along. Yes, the sinner is to be punished, but so also the majority are to love and forgive. Why was that?

Because God's promises of yes in Christ includes, requires forgiveness, doesn't it? And because Christ has forgiven us, so now the forgiven are to live God's promises in a forgiving community.

[20 : 58] That's part of God's big picture for the church in Corinth and us, to live in a forgiving community. But has it occurred to you that you can't be a forgiving community if there's nothing to forgive?

Have you thought about that? That when you think, Paul says, make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit, that it doesn't require effort if there is no conflict?

Now, we've all seen how COVID has divided our society, right? At first, it was lockdown, then vaccines, and now vaccine passports. And not surprisingly, it's impacted our church as well.

But thankfully, by God's grace, nowhere as seriously. Now, some of you may not be aware of this, but this week, some of that did spill over into a little conflict in a particular WhatsApp group on our 5pm community.

Now, I'm not a member of that, but from what I hear, it's not a major conflict, so I don't want it overblown. But it still created some soul searching among us, hasn't it?

[22 : 10] Now, I don't want to deal with the disagreement itself about vaccines and stuff like that, but rather I want to speak to how we respond to conflict whenever it happens. Now, conflict upsets us, doesn't it?

And often our immediate response is to just try and shut it down. So in this case, some of you might have responded, well, I'm just going to leave the group so I don't have to deal with the conflict.

Or let's just shut down the group completely. Then there wouldn't be any conflict, would there? Or let's limit the chat to non-controversial things, just like organizing dinners or catch-ups.

Let's not talk about serious stuff. Now, some of all this I think is actually quite sensible because social media is just not set up for in-depth discussions on important topics.

But what if this arose in a Bible study instead? What are we going to do then? We can't have authentic community, which is everyone wants to be authentic nowadays, when we can't talk freely about things, can we?

[23 : 13] Now, I'm not saying that there shouldn't be any controls or guidelines, but we mustn't allow the fear of conflict to then result in controlling behavior.

See the difference between controls and controlling? That is to silence people or to make sure that nothing can be said that would go wrong? That would be to stifle the community, doesn't it?

Of course, the best way is what? It's not controls or controlling behavior. The best way the Bible talks about is actually self-control, isn't it? By each of us.

But that cannot be forced, is it? You cannot force people to have self-control. Then it's no longer self-control, is it? It needs to be practiced. It needs time to grow.

We need to learn how to do that. And in the meantime, guess what? People will make mistakes when they try to do that. So yes, there will be sin. And that's when Paul says the church needs to be forgiving.

[24 : 18] But grace requires that we allow people the room to make mistakes, to fall into sin. Not deliberately. And when that happens, we need to call it out, we need to correct gently.

But it needs to be allowed to occur. The Bible says this is what's right and what's wrong. We need to teach that, we need to model, we need to aspire to it. But sometimes when we get it wrong, we need to allow one another the freedom to say sorry and then to be forgiven.

Even pastors like me will need this from time to time. And there doesn't need to be any shame with it to say you've done the wrong thing. Because all of this is simply part of God's big picture plan, isn't it?

to produce a forgiving community. That is part of the yes to Christ promises, isn't it? Repentance, forgiveness, faith, and obedience.

These are the big things that he wants as part of our church. Not just the growing in numbers, not just all that fancy, whatever, I don't know, beautiful slides and all that kind of stuff and snazzy music and great bands.

[25 : 36] Forgiveness, repentance, faith, and obedience. These are the big markers of success in our church. But in order for that to happen, we have to be able to stuff up from time to time and not get so upset when it happens.

So we shouldn't be discouraged when sin occurs. That's just who we are. But we need to respond rightly for the one who has sinned to repent and ask for forgiveness and for the community to freely forgive and reaffirm with love.

That's how it works. That's how it is with us and God and Christ. And so that's how it ought to be amongst us as well. So friends, you probably realize this already, but church and Christian life, they're messy.

Okay? Our ideal picture of God's plan for us is not God's plan, often. And yet for me, this is the only place I'll be, I'd rather be, not anywhere else, in God's messy, messed up church, where God is at work bringing His promises in Christ to pass so that we may be glorifying Him in place.

Last week, we had God's comfort in affliction. This week, it's God's promises fulfilled in our sin or mess. God's power, human weakness.

[27 : 12] That's the theme we're going to keep seeing in 2 Corinthians. Let's pray. Father, we're sorry that we don't live up to your perfect law, and we are discouraged when it looks like the church is failing again, and that the success that we desire for ministry appears to be wanting.

Forgive us. Help us to know that all of your promises are yes in Christ, and that this has already been accomplished by Him. Open our eyes so that we can see your hand at work fulfilling this, even in the messiness of our lives and plans.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.