

Moving Forward in Faith:

Building an Unstoppable Church

Matthew chapter 16, starting with verse 17 is part of Jesus's conversation with His disciples.

In verse 17, Jesus responded to Peter, saying, "Blessed are you, Simon, Son of John, for this revelation comes from my Father in heaven. You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will grant you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on Earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on Earth will be loosed in heaven."

I found it intriguing that verse 18 mentions Hades or hell, while verse 19 speaks of the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. This reminded me of my time as an evangelism pastor at a church when I was forming an evangelism task force. We aimed to be proactive in reaching the lost and serving our community. We intentionally avoided the term "committee" to prevent any misconceptions that we were merely a group of talkers. Instead, we chose to be called a "task force."

During our discussions about our mission, one member proposed a logo using the acronym "TASK," which stood for "Taking Away Satan's Kingdom." It was clever and agreed that we should be a force that counters Satan's influence. We planned to use it in our materials. However, the pastor called me into his office the next day.

He preferred us to focus on advancing God's kingdom rather than emphasizing Satan's kingdom. Reflecting on the pros and cons of the acronym, I still believe today, as I did then, that advancing God's kingdom inherently involves countering Satan's kingdom. It's a necessary part of the process.

By the way, I used to be a news enthusiast. How many of you share that enthusiasm? I was more than an enthusiast. I was, in a way, almost addicted to watching the news. Now, I don't watch any news. The constant reporting on our culture was having a detrimental effect on me.

I understand that news often has a one-sided spin for ratings, so I take it with a grain of salt and read between the lines, gathering information from multiple sources to get a clearer picture.

Despite this awareness, I still saw the news report more on the Kingdom of Darkness making headway in our society than the Kingdom of God and Heaven. It frustrated me, so I had to cut back on my news consumption. It's all about negativity.

Jennifer LeClaire wrote a book called "The Next Great Move of God." She lists seven influences on society: economy, family, education, government, spirituality, media, and the arts. These influences form the foundation of any culture, and the news focuses on how the Kingdom of Darkness is progressing in each area.

I acknowledge that God is still at work, and His church is advancing, but the news drowned out that positive news. It was vital to actively seek out the good things happening by attending church, reading about our missionaries, and keeping up with our church's activities. Consuming five to six hours of cable news a day overshadowed all that.

Being the kind of church God wants us to be, embracing our "you shall be" promise, involves understanding that advancing God's Kingdom means confronting Satan's Kingdom. Serving God's Kingdom will inevitably put us in enemy territory. It's not always a pleasant experience, as some of you might understand.

Matthew 11:12 tells us that from the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been advancing forcefully, and forceful people lay hold of it. If we're going to advance God's Kingdom in our lives, homes, church, and community, we must be prepared for a fight sooner or later.

In verse 18, Jesus declares, "On this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it," or as another translation puts it, "the gates of hell will not prevail." What is Jesus conveying here? He's telling us that He will establish a church that no evil force on Earth can stop.

He's constructing an unstoppable church.

Let's ponder the word "unstoppable" for a moment. Is there truly any force on Earth that is completely unstoppable? Nations have risen and fallen. Economies have thrived and crashed. Power, influence, titles, authority—they've all come and gone. How about natural forces like hurricanes, tornadoes, and tsunamis? They wreak havoc for a while and then dissipate. There's not much, if anything,

that we can call an absolute unstoppable force. But Jesus affirms that even the gates of hell won't be able to overcome His church.

Many people read this verse without fully grasping its meaning. They view it purely in a historical context. In other words, we understand that Peter's name means "rock." He was the most influential figure after Christ's ascension on the day of Pentecost. Peter preached a message that led to the salvation of 3,000 souls and is considered the birth of the church's foundation.

So when we read the verse, "upon this rock," with Jesus looking at Peter, saying, "Upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it," we tend to think Jesus is referring to that specific moment, and to some extent, that's correct. But if we examine the passage more closely, we'll discover there's more to it.

You see, it's Peter's revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that I believe Jesus is pointing to. When Peter acknowledges, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus responds, "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven." It's upon this revelation that Jesus will build His church. He's not primarily referring to Peter himself, but rather to Peter's profound revelation—that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

In other words, Christ would not build His church on any one individual, but rather, He is building His church on all who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God—both then and for all time. The focus isn't solely on Peter as "the Rock"; it's on the entire church, the body of Christ. Peter is just one of many rocks spanning generations. Today, you and I are among the rocks Jesus uses to build His church.

God is calling Duncannon Assembly of God to be a part of an unstoppable church, a force that advances His kingdom on Earth. God is calling each of you as individuals to be part of an unstoppable force that advances His kingdom in your homes, families, among friends, and within your communities. I believe Jesus's outline for an unstoppable church is within the verses we read.

Find Direction

Now, to help us understand these three essential elements of an unstoppable force, let's picture a freight train in our minds. When we think of a freight train, we notice it's on tracks, right? A train is firmly on its designated tracks, locked

into a specific destination and direction. It can't swerve left or right at will. There's no room for spontaneous decisions like, "I'll take a left turn here." It's locked into a particular path because of the tracks. This is how the call of God should be in our lives.

Just as Peter received the revelation that Jesus is the Christ, we, too, receive direction from God through revelation. When something is genuinely revealed to us by God the Father and becomes a conviction in our hearts, it sets our course like the tracks of a train.

Doubting or ignoring this revelation becomes nearly impossible because it resonates deep in our hearts, locking us in a specific direction. So, point number one is clear: If you want to be part of an unstoppable move of God, you must find direction.

Finding direction is the first step towards becoming an unstoppable force for God. Those who frequently change their minds struggle to accomplish much in life. They start over in marriages, jobs, finances, churches, and ministries. While God may lead us through transitions, living an unstoppable life and participating in an unstoppable work of God means intentionally focusing on the rails of God's revelation.

We find direction and revelation by prioritizing the kingdom and righteousness of Christ. Remember Matthew 6:33: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Our primary focus should always be the Kingdom of God and the righteousness of Christ, a recurring theme in Scripture.

Consider the Old Testament and the history of the Israelites. After 400 years of slavery in Egypt, Moses led them to freedom, crossing the Red Sea on dry ground with the Egyptian army defeated. But instead of immediately heading to the Promised Land, God instructed them to build a tent, a tabernacle. He wanted their attention on His house, not just their desired destination.

God gave Moses detailed revelations about the Tabernacle's structure, outer courts, inner courts, and holy of holies. Moses obeyed this revelation and began constructing the Tabernacle. God then instructed further how the tribes should camp around the Tabernacle. Three tribes faced south, three faced north, three faced west, and three faced east, and they all faced the Tabernacle. God taught them to focus their attention on His house, His presence, His glory, and His kingdom.

Similarly, Peter received revelation from the Father because he spent time with Jesus. So, finding direction and receiving revelation from God comes from seeking His kingdom and righteousness while consistently aligning ourselves with His presence and plans.

In contrast, we won't receive revelation if we're scattered in our focus, distracted by various pursuits and desires, or inconsistent in our church attendance, word study, and prayer. People won't be drawn to you or this church because of facilities, programs, charismatic pastors, or personal charm. Instead, they'll be drawn by God's power, presence, and glory evident within you and this place.

Moses received detailed instructions from God on building the Tabernacle, and his obedience led to the manifestation of God's power and presence among the Israelites. To experience God's manifest presence and glory, we must follow the rails of revelation, staying locked in a specific direction, leading us to the place where His power moves. Revelation from the Father keeps us on these rails, making us an unstoppable force against the enemy's influences.

Move Forward

Now, let's return to our freight train analogy. A crucial characteristic of a freight train is building momentum to reach its destination. It starts slowly, and initially, it may seem like it will never reach its goal.

We often wish God would move faster, but His work doesn't operate that way. The slowness of God's work can be frustrating, but it's part of His process. We desire instant results, like a microwave meal in a minute. However, God is establishing something unstoppable in our lives and churches, and it requires a gradual process, a slow start followed by building momentum.

When Jesus tells His disciples that He will build His church, the terminology implies a process and journey. So, point two is clear: Just like a freight train, we must move forward, trusting that God is orchestrating a process leading to unstoppable momentum. There's no left, right, or backward; it only moves forward.

Moving forward might sound like common sense; of course, a train moves forward, a church should move forward, and people should move forward in life. Logically, it makes sense. However, too often, I've observed that many of God's people and churches struggle with this concept. I've seen churches either stuck

in the past or trapped in the status quo, which means they're not moving forward.

Let me elaborate on this notion of churches and individuals being stuck in the past or mired in the status quo. I'm contemplating a topic for a future message, which I might call "Anointing vs. Nostalgia." Think about it: Anointing and nostalgia can both elicit warm, fuzzy feelings.

Sometimes, we mistake nostalgia for anointing. We sing an old hymn, use an old chorus, or maintain an old ministry or program, giving us that comforting, nostalgic sensation. We might say, "Yes, this is anointed." But God may respond, "No, it was anointed in the past, but now it's just nostalgia, and it evokes the same warm, fuzzy feelings."

So, some individuals and churches get stuck in the past because they want to relive what God did rather than embrace what God wants to do. On the other hand, some aspire to move forward and experience the next level of life, faith, and ministry, but for some reason, they stagnate without understanding why.

Let me share an illustration from my high school days to illustrate this concept. I had what I considered the perfect job back then: working in a supermarket deli in Farmingdale, Long Island. It was a delightful job, surrounded by rotisserie chickens, homemade roast beef, Italian pastries, salami, provolone, and fresh-baked bread.

I was in charge of the evening shift and was responsible for leading the evening crew at the deli. I would come in after school, usually around 3:00 or 4:00, and my shift would end at 9:00 or 10:00. One of my tasks was to prepare the deli for the next day because the full-time employees, who worked until 4:00, handled all the cooking. Unfortunately, they left quite a mess behind, particularly in the industrial-sized kitchen sink with double stainless steel basins.

One evening, I was training a new employee, Mary, who had just started her first day on the job. She joined the night shift, and we quickly became friends. I showed her how to use the slicers and assisted some customers. After a while, I asked Mary to head to the back and clean the sink since it was piled high with dirty pots and pans that needed to be cleaned and made ready for the next day. While I continued serving customers at the counter, I heard the clinking and clanging of pots and pans and thought, "Wow, Mary is really going above and beyond. She's working hard."

About 20 minutes later, I decided to check on her progress, and when I peeked into the back room, I noticed something was amiss. Mary was diligently cleaning the sink, but all the dirty pots and pans were neatly placed on the counter. I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight. I approached her and said, "Mary, I must admit I've never seen the sink this clean. You're doing an excellent job. However, what I meant when I asked you to clean the sink was to put the dirty pots and pans back into the sink and then clean both the pots and pans and the sink itself."

We both had a good laugh, and it taught us a valuable lesson that day – the importance of clear communication. See, for those of us who were already familiar with the deli's routine, we understood the shorthand language. However, Mary wasn't yet familiar with our lingo. This experience underscored the significance of effective communication, and I learned to communicate more clearly with Mary.

Mary and I learned an invaluable lesson in the following days and weeks. Mary discovered that doing an excellent job at the wrong task is ultimately a futile effort. It's worth contemplating this moment because when God brought this story to my mind years ago, during a season of personal lessons, it convicted me deeply. As I reflected on the incident, God redirected my focus to His Kingdom on Earth, and I feared that many of God's people, myself included at that time, might be making a similar mistake in His work.

Looking closely at our lives and ministries, we may discover that we often engage in tasks God never assigned us. In essence, we might be excelling at the wrong job. Churches and churchgoers are often adept at keeping themselves busy, but sometimes, this busyness involves activities that God never intended for us. Consequently, we remain stagnant in the status quo. Occasionally, we require a "Mary cleaning the sink" moment to realize we may have missed God's guidance.

This realization led me to Psalm 127, which states, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain." God recognized that there would be instances when we are too engrossed in tasks He never ordained. The verse conveys that unless the Lord is the architect of our efforts, all our labor is in vain, particularly in the context of eternity. Often, what we do in church, ministry, marriage, parenting, or any endeavor as Christians appears good, blessed, and productive, much like Mary's pristine sink. However, if it deviates from God's instructions, something vital might be missing from our obedience.

Imagine the tragedy of one day, in heaven, looking back on a life filled with accomplishments that held no significance in the grand scheme of eternity. This revelation shook me to my core because I had been in that situation, busily cleaning that sink but making no eternal impact. This self-evaluation prompted me to recognize that there are times when I am indeed fulfilling God's will. He has spoken to me and revealed His plan. These are the moments when I am riding the rails of revelation. For instance, He called me to ministry, and there was no doubt about it. He reaffirmed His calling repeatedly throughout my journey.

Similarly, when I embraced my role as a godly husband and father, He provided clear guidance on how I should fulfill these roles. Whenever I moved into different places or ministries at various life stages, He revealed His purpose. In these instances, I was diligently carrying out His calling.

After dedicating time and effort to working for the Lord, there often comes a moment when I pause, look around, and experience what I like to call a "Mary cleaning the sink" moment. We can observe this phenomenon in churches across America—a sense that something is awry or missing. Despite having larger churches, more resources, greater finances, an abundance of programs, and easier access to spreading the Gospel than ever before in Christian history, there's still an unsettling feeling that something isn't quite right.

Perhaps we've been so engrossed in cleaning the sink that we've overlooked the lingering clutter within ourselves that requires cleansing. We need our own "Mary cleaning the sink" moment. Over time, I've realized that in these situations, it's not that I completely missed what God was saying. No, I initially received a revelation from God and diligently embarked on the work He had called me to do.

However, I gradually started adding my own desires and preferences to God's original revelation. I incorporated what I believed God's will needed. Consequently, it wasn't a matter of missing God's plan; instead, I had added so much to His plan that it ceased to be His will. This tendency to add so much to God's original plan that it becomes something else entirely is not uncommon.

Consider the story of Jesus overturning the money changers' and merchants' tables. These people were buying and selling items necessary for the annual sacrifices. While their activities were not inherently wrong, Old Testament scriptures permitted such transactions to purchase sacrificial items. You

wouldn't want to travel with your animal sacrifices, like doves or lambs, over long distances. So, it made sense to buy these items locally. Traditionally, these merchants conducted their business outside the temple, typically a few blocks away, ensuring they didn't spoil the sanctity of the temple grounds.

Gradually, these merchants realized that the most crucial ingredient for business success was "location, location, location." So, they inched closer to the temple because they wanted to compete for those sales nearer to the sacred site. Initially, they might have been a block away, but eventually, they found themselves inside the temple courts, a place intended for prayer.

When Jesus overturned the tables, His anger wasn't directed solely at the merchants. He was upset with all those conducting business within the temple precincts instead of using the area for prayer. Convenience and accessibility often drive people, churches, and ministries to make choices that keep them stagnant in the status quo. These choices arise because we've incorporated our own desires, wants, and wishes into God's original plan.

This episode led Jesus into a holy tirade. It reminds us how the church sometimes needs to eliminate the comforts, conveniences, and easy accessibilities that have obstructed us from following God's Word and will. Mark 11:17 emphasizes the importance of the temple as a place of prayer for all nations. Yet, Jesus entered the temple that day expecting to find prayer but instead encountered convenience and comfort, which provoked His righteous response.

To sum it up, if something is not initiated, sustained, and propelled by prayer, all our efforts will ultimately be in vain. Sometimes, God grants us revelation, sparking a great idea or initiative, but without prayer to birth, sustain, and advance it, our endeavors become futile. Therefore, it's crucial to understand that only the power of prayer can propel you forward in God's kingdom.

Imagine the train and its tracks again. Revelation serves as the rails upon which we set ourselves. However, what propels us forward on these rails? It's prayer. Yes, prayer is the locomotive with the power to advance us. Prayer frees us from distractions that could slow us down or divert us from God's intended path. It prevents us from adding our own desires to God's plan and ensures we use our time wisely, aligning with God's timing.

Prayer is our safeguard, preventing us from excelling at the wrong task and ensuring we keep moving forward. Remember Psalm 127:1, "Unless the Lord

builds the house, its builders labor in vain," and Mark 11:17, where Jesus declares that His house should be a house of prayer. To recap our three key points:

Carry Weight

Just as a freight train carries overwhelming weight which, at first, appears too much to bear, this weight ultimately propels it forward, building unstoppable momentum. Similarly, in our lives, the weight of God's presence and the unity of believers, locked arm in arm on the same rails of revelation, builds momentum through the power of prayer.

Now, let's delve deeper into Matthew 16:19, where Jesus mentions giving us the keys to the kingdom of heaven. As we know, keys open doors, granting access to what would otherwise remain closed. The Hebrew word for "kingdom" is "malkuth," and the Greek word is "Basileia," both define it as the rank, authority, and sovereignty exercised by a king.

So, we can deduce that those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and those who diligently work to advance God's kingdom through prayer have been entrusted with the keys to the kingdom. We have been granted access to God the Father's rank, authority, and sovereignty through Jesus.

John 3:8 tells us that Jesus came to destroy the devil's works. In Luke 11:20, Jesus claims that casting out demons is a sign that the kingdom of God has come. In Matthew 10:7-8, Jesus instructs not just His disciples but all who believe in their message to preach the kingdom of heaven, heal the sick, cleanse lepers, raise the dead, and cast out demons freely.

We've freely received the Kingdom of God, the rank, authority, and sovereignty of God the Father. Now, it's our responsibility to freely give it and become an unstoppable force advancing God's kingdom.

The phrases "to bind on earth" and "to loose on earth" were familiar expressions in Jewish culture. "To bind" meant to forbid or say no, while "to loose" meant to allow or say yes. Jesus emphasizes that because we can access the kingdom of heaven on Earth, we can forbid the kingdom of darkness and allow the kingdom of heaven to operate in our lives.

We're witnessing the kingdom of darkness making headway in various aspects of our society, such as the economy, family, education, government, spirituality,

media, and the arts. As individuals and as a church, we can rise up and advance God's kingdom in these areas.

Perhaps God has called you to influence one of these realms. Whether it's your family, workplace, or community, you can access the Kingdom of God to forbid darkness and allow His kingdom to have influence. Imagine the impact if all of God's people across the country lived this way, becoming an unstoppable force that advances God's kingdom. It's the weight of God's presence and glory upon your life and the church that helps create this unstoppable force. Revelation from God puts you on a track leading to the next level of life, faith, and ministry.

Prayer is the anchor that keeps the power behind your actions and guides you in the right direction, preventing those "Mary cleaning the sink" moments when you feel lost. The weight of God's glory and His presence in your life empowers you to overcome obstacles that might derail you or keep you stuck in the status quo. Learning to find direction, move forward, and carry the weight of God's presence will make you a part of an unstoppable force advancing the Kingdom of Heaven and resisting the kingdom of darkness in your life, church, and community.

You are called to be a united body of believers, much like the many cars of a freight train, proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Through prayer, you allow Christ to build His Kingdom in and through you, and you share a passion for experiencing the kingdom and glory of God in your midst.