

Growing Christians

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[0 : 00] The subject today is growing Christians, and I want to say first of all that this subject really matters.! There's an urgency in Paul's writing. This certainly mattered to him.

! I draw your attention to what he says in verse 19 as he writes as a pastor, as he writes as evangelist, as he writes as a Christian, to fellow Christians, my dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

Pretty strong physical language, how he aches that they should become mature believers in Jesus Christ.

This is the repeated theme of the New Testament. It's a strong theme in the teaching of the Lord Jesus, and especially I'll remind you of a number of the parables. In fact, most of the parables can be put through this same grid of an understanding about the kingdom of God and the way the kingdom of God grows, and this is what it is meant to be.

And yet we see problems. So we think of the parable of the sower and the seed. Think of the parable of the talents. Think of the parable of the unmerciful servant.

[1 : 19] And you could look at others like that. It's a massive point of concern for the apostles generally in all their letters. In the book of Colossians chapter 1 and verses 9 to 14, Paul says about these particular believers in Turkey at the time, he says, For this reason since the day we heard about you, we've not stopped praying for you and asking God.

And what does he ask God for in that passage? He tells them exactly what he's been praying for them. He's asking that God should fill them with knowledge, knowledge of his will, that they might live a life worthy of the Lord.

They may please him in every way. They might bear fruit. They might be strengthened with his power. On and on he goes. These are all things about growing as Christian people.

This is at the heart of God's purpose. This is exactly why Jesus Christ came into the world, that a new people should be formed. A people who love and follow God.

And it's a fair question for all of us to ask. Am I a growing Christian? To be a Christian is inescapably linked with the issue of being a growing Christian.

[2 : 44] And if we're not a growing Christian, where does that leave us? Because the hidden question behind it is, what do we say about not growing Christians?

So what does this subject look like? Well, there are plenty of versions of what it means to be a Christian out there.

We're going to stick as closely as possible to the Bible in this matter, because God has given a very clear understanding to us of what his purpose is.

It's likeness to his son, Jesus Christ. That's a high calling, isn't it? But it's what God has made a people for himself, that they should be more and more like his son, Jesus.

We look at Jesus and we read of him in the Gospels. We see him walking about and talking and doing life and so forth. And he is our model. And it is God's powerful work in the life of every Christian that they should be changed and to become like Jesus Christ.

[3 : 57] God's purpose for every Christian is that there should be something about our lives that is a story. It's a story. It's a story about the way he saves, that he takes every one of us, whatever our background is, and that he makes us different.

And that difference is a wonderful difference. It's a positive difference. It's a supernatural difference. And it's something that only God could do. He takes somebody who has been a sinner and power is given so that they should not continue to live a life of sin.

He changes us. And it's a testimony. And it gives glory to him. He's getting us ready.

He's getting us ready because this world is not our home. It's not our destination. He's getting us ready to that time when we will be with him forever.

And again, I think you can put through this grid and sieve a number of the parables that the Lord Jesus spoke about. Think of the parable of the foolish and the wise virgins.

[5 : 17] What is that about? Some were ready and some were not. What about the parable of the wedding banquet?

Some was ready, someone was ready, and someone was not. It's very important that we understand that we grow in order to be prepared for the life to come.

The heaven, the new heaven and the new earth is our real home. And God is very keen to make us ready for that moment.

The Bible's picture. It's a great picture, isn't it? I've got so many babies on the internet. Who do you choose? This is the iconic view in the Bible of what it is to be a Christian.

That we have been born again. And I refer you to 1 Peter 1 verse 23. Where Peter says of those believers and all of them.

[6 : 33] For you have been born again. Not of perishable seed, but of imperishable. Through the living and enduring word of God.

It's a great picture. It tells us something of the perfection of what God does when someone becomes a believer. It's God's perfect work.

It's a flawless work. To become a Christian is to have God's flawless work done within you. It's just the beginning.

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. This pure spiritual milk is the nourishment that we need as Christians in order to grow.

It's an imperative. It's not an offer. It's an imperative. That we should grow in our knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

[7 : 47] What are the marks of growth? If you're a baby, six to eight weeks, listen in.

Because I will tell you what the marks of growth are. You will have an examination. You will look into the baby's eyes with a light to see if there's any cataracts.

The heart gets listened to. The lungs are listened to. The baby's tummy is examined. You don't have an enlarged liver or spleen or any abnormal swellings.

There's something unmentionable that happens to boys, which I won't tell you about. The back, the baby's back is examined. Your head and your weight is being measured.

And so it goes on. What a lot of care and attention is paid about the growth of babies. So our granddaughter just wasn't putting on enough weight.

[8 : 56] Big concern. Back to the doctor. Why is that happening? And that's the sort of absolute care and attention that's paid to the human baby.

Now that's the sort of care and attention that we actually need to lavish and nourish upon the new believer in Jesus Christ. What are the marks?

And it's not just the new believer. And it's not just the early days. And the baby picture sort of begins to fade out. Because we go on.

There's a new life. So I refer you to Galatians 2 verse 20. And if you have your Bibles, it'd be good to catch up with these particular verses. Galatians 2 verse 20.

I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

[9 : 56] I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. That's an extraordinary phrase, isn't it? This sort of idea we are, we quite glibly talk about people inviting Jesus into their life.

Paul himself says, there's something so dramatic about the life which I now live, which can only be described as the presence of Jesus Christ within me.

A new devotion. Turn to Romans chapter 12 verse 1. Where Paul urges them to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

What a challenge that is to people of Brighton and Hove. to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is the picture of sacrifice. It's the picture of devotion. It's the picture of the altar. It's the idea of giving ourselves wholeheartedly in all that we are to God.

[11 : 22] It's a new devotion. And so it's a fair question to ask of each one of us. To whom or to what are we devoted? What is most precious to us?

What's most important? A new mind. Do not conform, says Paul, any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind because our mind has been badly damaged by our own sinfulness and by the rebellious world in which we live where God is constantly excluded and suppressed.

So to become a Christian is to have to start to think in a different way. Our mind is beginning to be changed and it's changed primarily as we read the word of God.

We begin to have a different thought pattern, a different understanding of what is right and what is wrong. What is good and pleasing and what is actually to be pushed away.

And surprising it is that quite a lot of what God has to say is the direct opposite of what the world has to offer us. It can be quite challenging.

[13:03] And a new character. So Galatians 5, 22 to 24. Contrasting the way of the old life and the sinful nature, the way of the new is a fruit of the spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Where such things exist, great glory goes to God. There's no plan B.

There is no other option that is given to any believer here this morning. When I was a young Christian, there was an idea running around and maybe it's still prevalent which divided Christian people into two groups and it suggested that one group was a carnal group and one was a spiritual group.

That it was possible to be a Christian and yet to have one foot in the world and one foot with Jesus Christ. And living in that sort of twilight position.

And that there were other Christians who'd actually become decided for Jesus Christ. Who'd given themselves wholeheartedly and the distinction was made that there were some people who had Jesus as saviour but not as lord.

[14:56] But the spiritual people had actually embraced Jesus Christ as their lord, their commander, the one who told them what to do and the one whom they would follow. Have you heard of that theory?

theory? It's a very convenient theory because it excuses us of a lot. It allows us to behave as we would wish and to go our own way.

But I want to suggest to you that actually that's got no biblical basis at all. There is no biblical and theological space for a zero growing Christian.

There's only trouble and worry and concern. And you sense that in the apostle Paul's writing when he encounters people who are not growing as Christians.

He's puzzled. He's concerned. He wonders what has happened. And he wonders whether they really do have the root of the matter in them at all.

[16:09] I imagine we might be touching on this tonight in the book of Hebrews. This really challenging idea that there should be people who call themselves Christian on the basis of some decision that they may have made in their past some time ago but they're not showing any of those evidences that I referred to earlier.

The new life the new devotion the new mind the new character all those things seem to be missing. It's like a kind of a cardboard cut out of a Christian but they say I'm a Christian because I made a decision some time ago.

I've given my life to Christ Christ is you know in charge of this situation. He'll look after me but where's the evidence of the change? Their life seems to be like everybody else's life.

They don't seem to have a different attitude about the use of their money or about the use of their leisure. Their conversation seems indistinguishable from other people's.

They still have an unbridled temper. They still have a harsh disposition. they still lose it. So in opposition to self-control there is out of control.

[17:37] In opposition to a new mind they think like everyone else in the world. I use the word think they but of course it's us isn't it? It could be us. So here's a big challenge isn't it?

And I would plead with you today please do not think for a moment that there is a plan B that there is some subset of Christian life and living which is somehow acceptable.

How could God begin a work in any person and be content to see that work drift unfulfilled throughout a whole life?

How could someone live for 70 years 80 years or more and claim to have been a Christian for 50 of those and yet there's been no change in that person at all? How could it be that any of us should

stop growing as Christian people?

Is there some sort of a threshold a cut off when you're in your midlife? You've learnt all there is to learn you've learnt all the doctrines you know your Bible well enough you can get by you go to church you do the rest of that stuff but there doesn't seem to be there's a dead calm in your life it's not going on in any other way that's the so called plan B but I think God has called us all to something better something richer something which looks like growth something that looks like change something that looks more like being more and more like Jesus Christ so I give you a template this morning in these verses in Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 to 3 which is a template for growth we've been looking at the book of Hebrews on Sunday evenings and you will know that here were a people who appeared to start well and then they seem to be drifting off tack so let's see how this particular writer deals with this issue what is a biblical perspective on this how to encourage people who are going astray or are just stuck how to encourage all of us because we're all in danger of drifting how should we grow as believers this is a template for growth please find in your bibles it's page 1210 and I start with this the encouragement of others therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses!

[20 : 23] Hebrews chapter 11 is the tale of particular believers and it picks out from those believers lives those things that are particularly encouraging for us it's a very carefully crafted chapter it tells us a great deal about the sort of characteristics that should be of immense encouragement for us for the Hebrews they were going through a hard time a time of persecution a time of loss and they needed to be reminded of people of the past who had gone through exactly that sort of experience but had got through the other side they'd not given up they'd persevered to the end and the writer says here this is a big encouragement to us it's a great encouragement to us to be able to know about the lives of people who have lived before Christian people and what they've done and the things that they have experienced and how they've got through by

God's grace so Ben was telling us earlier about the meeting that was held here last Saturday about the railway mission great it was to see Mr.

Ewert Hellyer standing there 95 years old and the first thing he said to us was what were you doing in 1948 right can anybody remember 1948 go on don't be shy put your hand up if you can remember 1948 a vast multitude not excellent and I thought you were only 20 1948 Mr.

Ewert Hellyer came to be secretary or superintendent superintendent of this mission and he lived in the house next door 1948 that's a long time ago isn't it 67 years 67 years he comes down as a young man and he starts a Christian work and he's carried on ever since in all sorts of situations all sorts of challenges and he's just buoyant for the Lord and he's so pleased to hear about the encouragements of God's kingdom it was delightful to see and I want to say it as a kind of an encouragement to older people do keep your minds looking out do keep your minds looking out because the things of the kingdom of God are just thrilling and it'll keep you young as well if you're like you at Hellia you play doubles tennis still at 95 well that's a challenge isn't it I've never played doubles tennis but you know what a testimony

I was hearing about somebody yesterday 91 retired pastor he's so busy in the work of the Lord still why not God has kept him and it's a big encouragement to have such people around younger people please do not avoid talking to older people please sidle alongside them and just get to know them a bit because hopefully they'll be able to give you something which is going to be a blessing they'll be able to tell you something if it's just a simple truth God has kept me that's pretty much okay that's enough to keep us going isn't it God has kept me I'm a lot older than you I've seen a lot of things but God has kept me that's a grand testimony older people don't be ashamed if that's a testimony you've got just tell it just say it say it again I love to hear the prayers of older people

[24 : 14] I love to hear the way in which they have got used to sort of approaching God and God is their friend and they love the thought that he has given his son for them if you don't read biographies I ploy you and I urge you to do so I brought a pile of them with me I'm going to put them on the table over there and just take one and read it five English reformers five pioneer missionaries lives from today lives from the early Christians great books I'm reading at the moment the diary of George Muller who lived in the 1830s that's a fantastic book and he says at one point after the Bible the next best thing I would to read would be the lives of Christians quite a statement isn't it quite a thought it's just immensely encouraging we enrich ourselves hugely by knowing about the lives of those who have gone before people but don't limit it to people who are dead and buried and gone to heaven please don't limit it to that just be part of the church just be part of the church people who

exclude themselves from church life actually rob themselves hugely of

Hebrews chapter 12 verse 1 you cannot believe the immense encouragement that can be obtained just by mingling and getting close to people in the rough and tumble of everyday life and this is what this church should be about we're a family together young and old and we have so much to learn from one another so much to be encouraged about as we are with each other do not forsake the gathering of yourselves together as a habit of some is get together be part of the church if you're holding back on that particular point and you just happen to have drifted into church today I'd say to you great I'm so glad this is your moment this is your opportunity God is saying something to you and it is get involved if you're a Christian there's an absolutely straight line connection between being a part of a church family as well there's not a plan B for that either by the way it's great isn't it how God makes these things so plain you don't have to agonise over that point you just need to find out which church needs to be and join it and say

I'm with this 100% the encouragement of others you are running a race you'll find that one in the end of verse 1 let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us we went out for a very nice walk yesterday in the Barcom area and it was a stroll strolls are very nice but actually the Christian life is not a stroll it's a race and the picture that the writer here uses and the apostle Paul uses frequently in other parts of scripture is pretty strenuous so of course the runners in London will be doing somewhere probably about 10 miles in they're hitting the wall all that hard stuff of being a marathon runner well how apposite for us today that they should be running the London marathon because that's exactly what you're doing in your life but it isn't just something that's going to happen on Sunday the 26th for three hours but actually something that is lifelong for us we're running a race and maybe that's a bit of a revelation to you to even think that the Christian life should be about that but it is the Bible picture the Bible picture is about the gym it's about the boxing ring it's about the race it's about keeping going it's about being an athlete not a couch potato it's about putting the things of God in such a focus that this is the one thing you're going for so you hear about these athletes they come to the end of the

Olympic Games and they think shall I go for another one I'll just sign up and just turn up in five years time four years time they don't think like that do they I remember one of the Olympic rowers saying I'd love to do it but do you know what it means it means that tomorrow I'm back in the gym I've got four years of this just to get ready for the next Olympics they're counting the cost they know what it means they're saying I want to do this it really is a priority in my life but I'm counting the cost and that really is where every Christian needs to be we're counting a cost our priorities are not the priorities of those who are not Christians yes we go to work yes we have families but our priorities are not the same it isn't our biggest priority to become the general manager of your company that's not the biggest priority it can't be and if it is the biggest priority

I'm just going to challenge you and say are you sure is that right your biggest priority is not to be doting on your children they're fantastic beautiful angels most of the time but that can't be your biggest priority and I remind you seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you that is a great way to live life as a Christian seek first the kingdom of God and God will look after the other things yeah you're going to have to go for interviews you're going to have to spend money you're going to have to do all the other things as well but your priority is seeking first what he wants and being right with him starting every day saying I just want to be right with you Lord I want to learn what you want to say to me I want to go where you want me to go my life is in your hands it's running a race and it's running a race with perseverance that's the word that's used here let us run with patient perseverance the race marked out for us that's a great word and actually [31 : 10] I haven't looked it up but I don't know how many times in the New Testament the word perseverance is mentioned but if I think of another word like overcomer I'd say that's pretty strong in the Bible isn't it in the New Testament in the book of Revelation especially every church is addressed in the book of Revelation it's about people who persevere to the end he who overcomes will be saved he who overcomes will be saved he who overcomes will be saved they're going to have a part in the new heaven and the new earth they get to the end they're an overcomer they reach the finishing tape they go through the end they overcome whatever it gets thrown at them they overcome how do they overcome it says they overcame by the blood of the lamb by the testimony of Jesus they overcome but one thing which is absolutely sure is that Christians are overcomers so if you're not an overcomer today then your

Christian testimony is being challenged by the word of God if you're constantly in a state of spiritual defeat your Christian testimony is being challenged by the word of God if you ran for a while but have just stopped and are just sitting on the sidelines your Christian testimony is being challenged because again and again and again the risen Lord Jesus Christ says to the people of those churches that it's the person who overcomes who will be saved perseverance getting rid of weight let us throw off everything that hinders the idea there is we just get rid of everything that would weigh us down because it would be ridiculous to try to run a marathon race carrying a couple of weights or three shopping bags or whatever wouldn't it you just wouldn't do it now I think this is a very interesting phrase that's used here every weight

I don't think it's necessarily got a sort of negative connotation we'll go on to that a little bit but the weight the weight could be things which are permissible but just get in the way of running the race so there's actually a lot of things in our lives that are permissible that God hasn't sort of put a three line whip against and said you can't do that we're given the dignity of being mature and making decisions about what we do with our lives and there's not a big sort of sign that says sin over a lot of things it's just judgments we have to make and here's wisdom it's about choices it's about priorities it's about saying I could do that but actually that's just going to get in the way of being the best that I can be for Jesus so I won't do it and as I read the biographies of men of the past men and women of the past

I notice I notice that the ones who have gone on into a closer relationship with the Lord and have more and more likeness to Jesus Christ are people who have learned to make the choices of getting rid of weights in their lives so I leave that thought with you say what weights are there in your life that may just be getting in the way of you running this race and what is there that should stop you just saying that's not so important we had it on screen earlier where Paul says I count all things but loss for the sake of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord he said I count them as rubbish if only I might be found in him do you know

I think this is one of the key issues that afflicts Christians in 21st century Britain and 21st century Brighton and Hove all things are permissible that not all things are beneficial have you learnt the difference between the two or are you sailing just so close to the wind on this matter well God hasn't really told me it's wrong therefore why should I drop it I think that's a dangerous path to go putting off so easily entangling sin says the writer here the sin that so easily entangles well every sin entangles and I'm sure for the Hebrew people the problem they had was that matter of being able to trust

[36 : 41] God in Jesus Christ but let me just suggest a few things that might so easily entangle us because we're all different and what your problem is is not my problem what your particular sin problem is is not my particular sin problem but I have my own so for us it could be double-mindedness or pride or anger or pornography or bitterness and unforgiveness or laziness or a judgmental spirit or greed or envy or unbridled ambition and you could add more to such a list as that and I want to say I do think that this particular verse is not being general and just saying just get rid of sin but it's saying the thing that's going to really wreck your

Christian testimony is if you allow the things which are particular temptations in your life to begin to rule over you and if you're a real Christian I'm absolutely sure you know exactly what I'm talking about I'm really convinced you know what I'm talking about I know what it is to fail in the areas where I failed before and there is nothing that the devil delights more in than to see defeat in those areas to see us blocked it just rips us of testimony it rips us of joy in the Lord it rips us of a desire to be following him and if you're entertaining a sort of sin that's entangling you at the moment and just saying well the rest of my life is okay but I'm just going to allow this in there I want to say that's a very dangerous course to be this is all about growing as

Christians and then he finishes with this particular encouragement because he tells us not to be fixing our eyes on all these great saints of the past but there is one person who we should fix our eyes on and we can be really confident wherever we fix our eyes on him we're going to get a good response and that's Jesus Christ let us fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith or maybe the beginner and the ender of faith the one who has gone before the one who has ploughed the way the one who has lived the life that is a perfect example to us of the life that we're going to have to live we fix our eyes on him and when we fix our eyes on him that gives us enormous encouragement because he endured in spite of all things you say he was the son of God but he came onto this earth and he lives his life as one who trusts in his father who receives the benefits of

the word of

God and he defeats the devil by the use of the word of God as one who in agony in the garden is facing this enormous temptation to go the painless way he says your will be done and he is our grand example and the writer to the Hebrew says this is what we need to do we need to fix our eyes on Jesus to look at him and to embrace the loveliness and the hopefulness and to minutely examine him because when we minutely examine him we find that's exactly what we need to know he was tempted in all points like as we are yet without sin so I end with a quote from the message of Hebrews 12 1-3 for our encouragement do you see what this means all those pioneers who blazed the way all these veterans cheering us on it means we better get on with it strip down start running and never quit no extra spiritual fat no parasitic sins keep your eyes on Jesus who both begun and finished this race we're in study how he did it because he never lost sight of where he was headed that exhilarating finish in and with God he could put up with anything along the way cross shame whatever and now he's there and he said to his followers at the last supper I'm going to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be forever so where are you heading are you getting ready are you looking forward to being with the Lord Jesus Christ everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself even as he is pure God