

Live your Lives in Christ

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a delight to be with you again. Thank you so much for your welcome. We're dealing with quite a complicated part of Colossians, but there's something else I want to do during these few moments together.

I tell young Christians that a very good habit is whenever you read a Bible passage to turn it into a prayer. Because we read things which are wonderful or challenging or hard to understand or personally demanding or new or familiar, but we need to turn those into prayers so we're asking God to make these precious words part of our lives.

Do you see that? So we think, oh, that's wonderful, that's true, the Lord is my shepherd. But how wonderful to follow that by a prayer, thanking our gracious God that he is our shepherd.

And I think the habit of turning Bible readings into prayers is a great habit to get into. It enriches our prayers, and it means we're breathing out to God in our prayers what we're breathing in through the scriptures.

So I'm going to lapse into prayer, not lapse into prayer, break into prayer during the session tonight, and I'll be trying to show you how, in a very simple way, you can turn the Bible into prayer.

[1 : 40] And I want to encourage you with that habit. Continue to live in Christ. Continue to live your lives in Christ.

Last week we talked about how vitally important that little phrase is, in Christ or in him. And we reminded ourselves that we not only live where we are in this world, but more fundamentally, more deeply, and indeed eternally, we are alive, not just near Christ, but in Christ.

We're alive, not just by the work of Christ, but we're alive because we're in Christ, who is alive. And all the forgiveness and consolation and comfort and strength that we receive is not just from Christ, but from Christ because we're in Christ.

Well, let's turn to the section for today. Chapter, verse 27, sorry, verse 23, in verse 23, the verse just before the one we're looking at, Paul describes himself as a servant of the gospel.

And I want you to see in this little section, 23 to 28, that Paul serves the gospel and serves the church. And for Paul, those two things are inseparable.

[3 : 33] You can't serve the church without serving the gospel. And you can't serve the gospel without serving the church. So we need to be committed to the gospel as well as committed to the church, or committed to the church as well as committed to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Paul serves the gospel and serves the church by suffering and by making the word of God fully known.

That's not the order you might have expected. But if you remember in Acts 9, when Paul is converted, the first thing that's said is, I will show him how much he, Paul, must suffer for my sake. So, for Paul, suffering as it is at the heart of his ministry. As indeed, for every believer, suffering as it is at the heart of our discipleship.

if anyone would come after me, let them take up their cross daily and follow me.

[4 : 56] The idea that being a Christian will protect you from suffering is a silly one, though a very common one. The New Testament's warning, as a matter of fact, is that being a follower of Christ may increase our suffering, not decrease it.

Because, in addition to the ordinary sufferings of human life, we have to give ourselves in self-sacrifice to Christ. We have to sacrifice our wealth and our possessions and our affections for the sake of Christ.

And we may suffer persecution for the sake of Christ. See how remarkably Paul puts this for himself in verse 24.

Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you. Well, that's a bit of a stunner, isn't it? I rejoice that I'm suffering for you.

And, even more remarkably, I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church.

[6 : 14] Do you remember when Paul was being converted? Jesus' question was, why do you persecute me? When actually, Paul was on his way to Damascus to persecute some Christians.

Christians. But when Christians suffer, Christ suffers with them. They suffer because they are in Christ.

Why do you persecute me? Jesus asks Saul, soon to be Paul. And it's very clear in the Old Testament and in the New Testament that there are afflictions of Christ, that is, sufferings for Christ and his body, the church, which will go on from the ascension of Christ until his return.

And one of the notable questions we ought to ask Christian leaders is, are you willing to suffer for your church?

As we ought to ask Christians, every Christian, are you willing to suffer for the sake of Christ and for the benefit of his church?

[7 : 41] I rejoice in what I'm suffering for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church.

So suffering in Christian ministry is for the benefit of the people whom the minister serves, the missionary serves, and it's also directed at Christ.

It's suffering in Christ. It's suffering and filling up, Paul says, what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions.

And if Paul is a servant of the gospel, verse 23, he's also a servant of the church, verse 25, 24 and 25.

His body, which is the church, I've become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness. And what is the fullness of the word of God?

[8 : 51] What is the fullness of the gospel, the message that God has for the world? Well, it's described in verses 26 and 27. The mystery that's been kept hidden for ages and generation but is now disclosed to the Lord's people, to them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

So, throughout the Old Testament we read of Gentiles who are attracted to Judaism and associate with Judaism so strongly that they become Jews.

And a lot of this was happening in the first century when Paul was around and Jesus was around. I think because many Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, they were polytheists, that is, they believed in many gods, and their religions had no morality attached.

We find that an odd idea, but it's true, there were no moral demands, there were only ritual demands for the common religions of Paul's day.

And so, many people were becoming Jews, and we meet some of those God-fearers in the book of Acts, don't we? The Ethiopian eunuch is a fine example, as is the soldier who's converted through Peter.

[10 : 46] But the big news that Paul brings to the church is that, as he says in Ephesians chapter 3, the Gentiles don't have to become Jews to become Christians.

Gentiles can become Christians and they're fully members of the body of Christ, along with Jews. And if you've read Romans or Galatians, you'll know that it was a big issue in New Testament times. So here's the wonder that God came and sent his son, not only for his own people, Jews, but also for Gentiles. No wonder at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.

And that still remains the great joy and privilege and task of the Christian church. God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles, the non-Jews, the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

well, with those responsibilities, what is Paul's response? Verse 28, he, that is Christ, is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

[12 : 20] So Paul is not just looking for people who are converted, he's looking for people who are built up in Christ, to grow up into maturity in Christ.

And however long you've been a Christian, you are still growing up into maturity in Christ. One of the great pleasures of human life, I think, is ongoing learning and ongoing growing, isn't it? It's a great delight. And one of the joys of being a Christian is that there's always more to find about God and about Christ, always more to learn from the scriptures.

Whenever I read a passage of the Bible I've read many times before, I think, I didn't notice that verse. God must have snuck it in while I wasn't looking into my Bible.

And of course we discover more about the character of God, don't we, from the Christians we meet. So we should be always on a journey up into maturity in Christ.

[13:23] And don't think because you're old you'll necessarily mature. I can see that many of you are both old and mature. But the big aim you see is not just for people to know Christ and be converted to beginners disciples, but to come to maturity in Christ Jesus.

Are you growing? Or have you started to shrink? It's one of the funny things about old age that one's body does start to shrink.

And I keep saying to young people, how big you are. And I can see them thinking, how little you are. But we should be growing up into Christ.

And that's a great aim for this year, isn't it? To grow into maturity in Christ Jesus. And Paul says to this end, verse 29, I strenuously contend with all the energy that I have.

No, all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. Isn't that wonderful? So, God gives Paul a big job to do.

[14:40] God gives Paul a big job to do, but the energy to do it. Indeed, I want you to know, to one, how hard I'm contending for you, and that is for the church in Colossae and for those at Laodicea, a town just nearby with the church, and for all who've not met me personally.

My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart, united in love, that they may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your servants, even today around this world, who are suffering for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the church and for the sake of the gospel.

Please care for them, encourage them, and strengthen them in their witness and in their suffering. And, great God, we thank you so much that your Son is the Saviour, not only of Jews, but also of Gentiles, of people from every nation, tribe and language and people.

And we pray that that gospel may go out. We pray especially for parts of the world which are gospel poor, where the people have no access to the Bible or to Christians or to a church.

[16:32] Please have pity on those people, we pray, and please raise up laborers for that gospel harvest. And, Father, as Christ is proclaimed to us, day by day, week by week, we pray that we may grow to maturity in Christ, that we may have the full riches of complete understanding, that we might know your mystery, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of your wonderful wisdom and knowledge.

Please do this gracious work in us as individuals, and in this church, we pray. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, great aims, but there are some dangers.

Verse 4, I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit, and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

And then the two verses, verses 6 and 7, which I think are the heart of the message of this letter.

And if you're into memory verses, these would be great verses to put to memory for your own benefit, and so you can share them with somebody else when opportunity comes.

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

[18:23] In fact, it would be good for us to say those two verses together. I want to get them into your minds, into your hearts and memories, together. So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Well, they have received Christ Jesus as Lord. What should they do now? Continue to live their lives, where? In him.

And if they live their lives in him, they will be rooted in him, that is, derive all their strength from him, and they'll be built up to maturity in him.

They will, as they live their lives in him, they'll derive their strength from him, rooted in him. They'll come to maturity in him, built up in him, strengthened by the faith you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

So it's not just enough to be in Christ, we have to continue to live our lives in him, that is, deriving our strength from him, our direction from him, that he is the continuing source of our energy, that he shapes our memories, and our minds, and our emotions, our desires, our wills, and our actions, that we're living consciously in him with his people, together in Christ, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

[20 : 13] And my little note, I've got notice in him and in the faith you were taught, well that's a great connection, to stay in Christ, to be in Christ you have to continue in the faith you were taught, but I forgot to add, and you have to overflow with thankfulness.

So, we often remember that in order to stay in Christ we have to stick to the faith we've been taught, keep reading the Bible and trusting the scriptures as the word of God, but Paul adds something else we need, and that is to overflow with thankfulness, not just an occasional thank you God on a quiet day, but overflowing with thankfulness.

Well, I was speaking at a ministry conference in England with a lot of very, well reserved English ministers, could put it that way, and they were the kind of people who everything was an understatement, you know, how's ministry?

Oh, okay. Having a happy family life? Oh, it's all right, pleasurable. It's all very understated. Anyway, we got to this verse, overflowing with thankfulness.

I said, we'll now have ten minutes in which you all have to overflow with thankfulness at once. Well, they're exhausted. We had to stop and have a cup of tea, because they weren't used to ten minutes of thankfulness.

[21 : 46] but notice in verse four, Paul talks about fine sounding arguments.

In verse eight, he says, let no one take you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition, the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

And in verses 16 to 23, he continues with even more warnings. Why does he need to do that? The answer is because we don't live in a neutral world.

We're being encouraged by Paul to keep on living in Christ, but the world around us is giving us different messages all the time. The world around us is giving messages like, being a Christian cramps your style, being a Christian makes you dull, being a Christian makes you a fuddy-duddy, being a Christian is old-fashioned.

Nobody nowadays would take Christianity seriously. Or the world is offering us other ways of finding meaning in the universe.

[23 : 04] I went to a secular funeral recently, and I was assured that the departed was now playing golf in the great golf course in the sky.

I thought, they know that heaven doesn't exist, but they believe in a golf course in the sky. Is that not remarkable? So there are lots of ideas around us which might well drag us away from Christ. So Paul is right to warn us. And why should we stick to Christ? Well, verses 9 and 10, which I talked about last week, are those remarkable verses in which Paul says, for in Christ all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form.

And in Christ you have been brought to fullness. Isn't that extraordinary? If God is in Christ, and you are in Christ, you couldn't be closer to God.

And all of God is in Christ. That is, Christ is not just half God or three-quarters God. No, he is fully God, though also, of course, fully a human.

[24 : 20] For the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form. And in Christ you have been brought to fullness. And he is the head over every power and authority. So, don't be taken captive because all the fullness of deity lives in Christ, and you have been brought to fullness in him.

And then these difficult verses 11 to 15, which you need to take a deep breath for these. Paul says, in him you are also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands.

What does that mean? Paul explains. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ.

When did that happen? When you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead.

Christ was born.

[25 : 36] He embraced us into himself. As Christ was dying on the cross, he embraced us into himself, so we died with him.

him. And as Christ rose from the dead, he embraced us into himself, so that we rose with him. As Christ died, he embraced us into himself, so we died with him. When Christ rose from the dead, he embraced us into himself, so we rise with him.

sin. So the power you have to die to sin is not your own power, it is the power of the death of Jesus. And the power you have to lead a new life, a continually transformed life, is the power, is Jesus' resurrection power.

[26 : 46] It's not your power, it's Christ's power. death enables you to stop a sin, and Christ's resurrection enables you to replace it with newness of life.

You'll find similar ideas in Romans chapter 6, and if you're thinking through this, you might like to look at that later on. So you see how powerful the death of Jesus was.

It was not only Jesus offering himself as a perfect sacrifice to God. It was not only Jesus paying the penalty for our sin.

It was also Jesus, by his death, enabling us to die to sin as well. And you see the powerful the resurrection of Christ was.

Not only did God raise Christ from the dead, but in raising Christ, he also raised us, believers in Christ, those who are in Christ, to new life as well.

[28 : 01] And as a matter of fact, the resurrection of Christ was so powerful that on the last day, everybody will be raised whether they like it or not, by the power of the resurrection of Christ.

For he is, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. Just the first fruits. And one day everybody will be raised from the dead to salvation or to judgment.

And they'll be raised by the power of Christ's resurrection. For, verse 13, when you were dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.

He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us. He's taken it away, bailing it to the cross.

And in the cross of Christ, not only dealt with our sin, and the resurrection of Christ not only dealt with our sin, but it also, in that Christ also won a great victory against Satan and the lies of Satan and the power of Satan and all the principalities, authorities, and powers who are opposed to God, triumphing over them by the cross.

[29 : 29] Now, notice that we've been looking at the phrase, in him, but now we have the little words in verse 12, with him.

He raised us with him, or verse 13, God made you alive with Christ. So, here's a big idea.

Because we're in Christ, what happened to Christ happens to us, because he embraced us into himself. So, when he died, we died, when he rose, we rose.

That is, his power in his death and resurrection still works today to change us, to help us to stop sinning and start leading a godly life.

And, as a matter of fact, in Colossians, in him also leads to with him in his death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. So, there's some practical application for the Colossians in the last verses 16 to 23.

[30 : 42] There are three examples. Some people are taking religious practice too seriously, especially at Colossae, I think. They're still keeping Jewish festivals, new moon celebrations, or Sabbath days.

Well, if they want to keep them, Paul says, that's fine, but don't make them a rule for other people. Isn't it amazing how often when we find something good for ourselves, we want to make everybody else do it as well?

Well, Paul says, these are a shadow of the things which are to come, verse 17. The reality, however, is found where in Christ. Or another example, some people are boasting about their special religious experiences.

Don't let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person goes on in great detail about what they've seen. They're puffed up with idle notions and spiritual mind.

But they've lost connection with the head, that is Christ, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

[31 : 45] So, obsession about religious practices can take us away from Christ. Focusing on exciting experiences of worship can take us away from Christ, the head, who enables his body to grow from him.

And finally, it would be incomplete without these wonderful moral rules. And Paul here begins with the reason why they're wrong. Since you died with Christ, to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belong to the world, do you still submit to its rules?

Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Because the only power which enables us to resist sin is the power of the death of Jesus. And Jesus not only by his death enables us to die to sin, but by his resurrection enables us to lead a new life every day.

[33 : 20] Gracious Lord Jesus, we thank you that you've embraced us into yourself. Please help us to continue to live our lives in you, wilted up and built in you, strengthen the faith as we were taught and overflowing with thankfulness.

Thank you that by your death, your mighty death, you enabled us to die to sin, as well as providing us with forgiveness when we do sin. And thank you by your mighty resurrection, you enabled us to lead a new life.

So please help us, protect us from being taken captive by silly ideas and worthless suggestions and help us to hold onto you, Christ, in whom we live and in whom we will die and in whom we will live forever.

Amen.