

# Growing into Jesus

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, you'll find it very helpful to have a Bible with you to this passage, Colossians 1, 24 to 2, chapter 7. And today we come to the hinge, the pivot passage in Colossians.

Those last two verses, chapter 2, verses 6 and 7, are the hinge where the Apostle takes all the astonishing truths that he has spoken of in Jesus Christ, his glory, the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and reconciliation and redemption and our new identity in Christ.

And then he turns them into practical application in our lives. Because there's no doctrine apart from practice in the New Testament.

It's not possible to know Jesus Christ without change and transformation and growth in us. There's no theology apart from devotion, love and affection.

And the book of Colossians is about the hows and whys of Christian growth and transformation. But here's the problem. We, almost all of us, think of growth individually.

[ 1 : 1 2 ] We think of my growth, of what fits and what works for me. But the Apostle says that true spiritual growth is mutual. It's communal.

It's corporate and shared together. There is individual responsibility to grow, but you cannot grow on your own. You cannot grow in Christ without taking your part in the body of Christ.

It's just not how it works. How it works is that each of us ought to be more concerned with the growth of others in the body than working on my own growth.

In fact, if you want anything to do with the growth that comes from God, your priority ought to be the spiritual growth of others. Just now, this is just a trailer for next week.

If you look down at chapter 2, verse 19, we'll look at this next week. This is the growth that comes from God. Verse 19, the Apostle says, he wants them to hold fast to the head, that's Jesus Christ, in whom all the fullness of God dwells, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with the growth which is from God.

[ 2 : 2 7 ] There is a growth that comes from God. God's will is that his churches continue to grow. Here, it's not so much numerically or in size, although that is important.

But the growth he's talking about is in love with Christ and deeper love with each other. Each part strengthening the other part, nourished and knit together like bones and muscles.

And as we grow closer to Christ, we grow closer to each other because we are the body of Christ, which is very difficult to do in COVID-19 when you're stuck online.

And we need his supernatural help to do this, which is what the book of Colossians is all about. So we come to this passage, 124 to 27, and I'm going to ask two questions of it to try and get to the heart of it.

Number one, why this focus on the growth which God gives? And secondly, how does God give this growth? I think the passage answers both those questions.

[ 3 : 31 ]     Number one, why this focus on the growth that God gives? If you look at chapter 2, verses 1 to 5, there is a disturbing new teaching inside the church in Colossae.

It's offering a new way for spiritual progress and development and growth. The Apostle Paul had never been to Colossians. The church was planted there 10 years before by Epaphras.

But some of the new Christians had grown frustrated and disappointed with their Christian growth, and they were ready for something new, something a bit more fancy than Epaphras had given them, something that added on to the simple gospel of Christ, enhanced the gospel with new spiritual practices, augmented the simple gospel with new spiritual experiences, including experiences with angels.

And in the cultural context of Colossae, this new teaching captured the cultural mood perfectly, and it sounded so attractive. That's why Paul is writing. You see verse 4, I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

No one may deceive you, fool you with fine-sounding, eloquent arguments. Now next week from verses 8 onwards in chapter 2, we're going to look more detail in this new teaching.

[ 4 : 57 ]     But what's great for us is we can't exactly nail it down because otherwise in our pride and arrogance we would say, I've got that, I don't need Colossians. And it's even better for us that the Apostle Paul, who's 2,000 kilometres away from Colossae and had never met them, in prison, wrote this letter because it strengthens us and prepares us for exactly this kind of deceptive teaching today.

And although we can't be exact about the new teaching, we do know that it drew heavily on the current religious outlook in the valley where they were, where Colossae was.

And it appealed to Christians who were disillusioned with themselves and didn't feel that they were growing enough. And it tried to supplement the Gospel with these exercises and experiences and it promised to give them fullness, a spirituality that would fit them individually.

That's why fullness is such an important term in Colossians because the Apostle wants to fortify the Colossians against this new teaching. He deliberately says again and again and again that fullness is all in Jesus Christ.

Just scan your eye down to chapter 2, verse 9. In him, in Christ, the whole fullness of God dwells bodily and you have been filled in him who's the head of all rule and authority.

[ 6 : 27 ]     Amazing. Again, next week. Though he had never met them, the Apostle's heart goes out to them. Chapter 2, verse 1. I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those in Laodicea, which was just down the road and for all who've not seen me face to face.

This extraordinary verse 5, he says, although I'm absent in the body, yet I'm with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and firmness of your faith in Christ. It's an amazing thing for him to say, I'm with you in spirit.

This is not a sentimental throwaway line. Oh, you're in my thoughts. Or, you know, I'd like to be there, but there's a small matter of me being chained here in Rome.

Nor is he thinking there's some sort of spiritual intergalactic transporter. How is he with them in spirit? He's with them in this letter. The way the Apostle is present with them is in the inspired words that he wrote in this letter as he is with us today.

Because this is not any old letter. It's written under the inspiration of God himself. And therefore, this church at Colossae, like all churches, are under apostolic authority.

[ 7 : 39 ] When he was called, Paul was specially set aside by the risen Jesus to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. And every Gentile church answers to the Apostle Paul. And what's so lovely here is that in the face of this attractive danger, which offers new ways of growing, the Apostle is very gentle.

He sees the issue with devastating clarity, which is why he says so much about the sufficiency and the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. And he fills his writings with Jesus. Look at verse 2 in chapter 2.

He says, I'm writing that your hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach the riches of full assurance of understanding and knowledge in God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

So if this letter does its work in our church and in our lives, there will be three signs. Number one, our hearts will be encouraged and strengthened, particularly with a deeper view of the magnificent Messiah, whom is ours.

We won't become discouraged with the slowness of our growth or begin to think that growth is going to come from somewhere else than Jesus. We'll be encouraged in our hearts. Second, we will be more knit together in love.

[ 9 : 06 ] Knit. I mean, one of the first signs of straying from Jesus and going our own way is divisiveness and disunity. We saw back in chapter one that a key work of the Holy Spirit in the first verses is love for other Christians.

And when we get to the very practical section in chapter three, it's all about mutual kindness and compassion and forgiveness. It's about communal life together.

So if this letter works, we'll be strengthened, we'll be united in love, and thirdly, we'll have full assurance of the knowledge of God. We will discover and find all the fullness that we have in Jesus, this side of heaven, that the riches of God are in him, and that we grow as a body as we come to know him more deeply, trust him more sacrificially, serve him more generously.

That is why there's such a focus on the growth God gives. And I think it makes all sense of the fact that Paul says in verse one, that he struggles for them.

Because serving each other doesn't just come automatically, it's costly, and it always involves suffering, something that the new teachers are allergic to. The apostle deliberately describes the shape of his ministry in the last five verses of chapter one, and gives us a glimpse of his own life.

[ 10 : 35 ] He shows that for the believer, suffering and the resurrection of Jesus go together. Look at this. In verse 24, he says, I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.

Just think about that. I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake. He's in prison, never seen them. And in my flesh, I'm filling up what's lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church.

Verse 29. For this I toil, the words agonizomai, I agonize, struggling with all the energy that he powerfully works within me.

Now, Paul is not a masochist. He does not enjoy suffering for suffering's sake. He is suffering for your sake, for the sake of the church, he says.

He's not adding to the atonement of Jesus. He's continuing the pattern of Jesus' ministry, because the gospel goes forward through suffering of those, all those who serve Christ and his church.

[ 11 : 41 ] And as we serve each other and serve Christ, we participate in Christ's sufferings. It's so different than how we think today, isn't it? I mean, we resent suffering.

We think pain and suffering are just a curse. We struggle, all of us, with this sense of entitlement, that God owes me a pain-free life and endless pleasure. But the apostle rejoices in his suffering, not in spite of his suffering, not after the suffering is over, not even as a private discipline that's going to make him a better person.

He rejoices in his suffering because this is how the resurrection power of Jesus Christ is made real. Look again at verse 29. The evidence of the resurrection power at work in Paul is his struggle.

In the face of terrible hostility and opposition, he is in prison after all. The struggle of prayer and pastoring and serving and sacrificing are more than any human can endure.

And it's here that Christ's risen power alone is sufficient. And you can see he's got a very high goal in his ministry in verse 28.

[ 12 : 52 ] He says, Him we proclaim, speaking about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Mature in Christ. That's exactly the same aim we ought to have for each other. You think of the people you have contact with this past week or this next week.

How can you help them mature in Christ? What are you going to do? The other reason he's so joyful is not because the ministry has to do with his abilities and talents or persistence, but because of Christ himself.

You see verse 27? He wants them to know how great are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Three times in this passage, he refers to the gospel as the mystery.

It simply means something that was hidden in the past by God and has now been revealed. It's not something tricky and puzzling like a Rubik's Cube that we have to figure out.

[ 13 : 57 ] Nor is it something spooky and supernaturally other that we can't put into words. It's simply this, that no human in a million lifetimes would ever come up with this gospel.

The idea that God would become a human and die violently and shamefully, take responsibility for our sin and hostility, bringing the cosmos to reconciliation, creating a body that will suffer and serve sacrificially and empowering us to do it.

We'd never come up with that. Here it is. Here is the mystery, Christ in you, the hope of glory. That's why there's such a focus on growth God gives in Colossians.

There's so much more to Jesus Christ than we could have ever imagined. And that brings us to the pivot in the book and to our second point. The key moment in the book, here is the first command in Colossians.

So I move from why the focus on the growth God gives to secondly, how does God give this growth? Chapter 2, verses 6 to 7, let me remind you of them. Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus, the Lord, so walk in him.

[ 15 : 07 ] There it is. There's the first command. Rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

It's very simple. The way of Christian growth and progress is not a great secret available to an exclusive gold club member Christians. It's not some spiritual exercise or experience that puts you above other Christians.

It's not a special list of do's or don'ts. It's simply this. Keep going in fellowship with the same Lord Jesus Christ you already received. Continue in the faith that you were originally taught in the gospel.

Because the temptation for the Colossians, like the temptation for many of us today, is to focus on my needs, to think I'm special. And when I begin to have a vague spiritual disappointment, I need something that uniquely fits me.

It's only a short step from that to think that real fullness is found outside Jesus Christ. And real freedom is making my own spiritual choices, ignoring Jesus. The Apostle says that's the way of delusion and slavery.

[ 16 : 18 ] He wants to encourage us, to strengthen us, and to preserve us from losing touch with Christ. He wants us to grow deeper into Christ, to discover the treasures that we have in him.

There is no more glorious person. He is infinitely rich in wisdom and knowledge and grace and kindness. Jesus is on fire with perfect love.

He gives his life away for you. He makes himself inexpressibly poor, to make us inexpressibly rich. He's perfect and without sin in every way, and yet he completely understands us as sinners, and welcomes us, and draws us back to himself.

You're not going to find all you need anywhere outside, or you will find all you need in him. And part of growing in him is coming to know that love in Jesus Christ that passes knowing.

And God's way of growing churches and individuals within those churches is just very simple. Verse 6, As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him. Continue to live in him.

[ 17 : 34 ] You've received the one who made you and who loves you and has given you a hope of glory. You've received the same one who we talked about back in chapter 1, who's the very image of God, in whom and through whom and for whom God made everything.

All the fullness of God delights to dwell in him, who bled and died for you. Remember this in chapter 1? Who has reconciled the cosmos to himself through him.

You've come into the closest possible relation with God the Son, who's the head of the body of the church. And the more we move in him and live in him and walk in him, it changes who we are.

It changes how we think, how we live, what we choose, what we love, how we behave. So progress doesn't come from leaving Jesus behind, moving on to something that's easier or more tempting or a better fit for me.

It comes from growing into Jesus deeper and deeper, allowing your roots to sink into him. Our growth has to be consistent with the beginnings of the gospel.

[ 18 : 42 ] That's why this command is so simple. Walk in him, literally continue living in him. This word walk means it's actually how you behave.

Not so much what you think, it's what you actually do. Not just your attitudes, but where you go, what you do with your bodies. Bible's very clear.

There are only two ways to live, only two paths. And sometimes when we're walking in Jesus, it feels like we're swimming upstream. And sometimes when the hills get high, we think help, help, help.

But Christ has not only walked this way before us. Christ himself is the way. To walk in Jesus is to behave in certain way with our resources, with our time, with our bodies, with our money, with our love, how we treat people.

It all comes out of deliberately drawing our strength and our life from communion with him. The way to grow up for those in the body of Christ is to go down, to sink our roots more deeply into him, to consciously draw our life and behavior and attitudes from him.

[ 19 : 54 ] That's the way we bear fruit together. If you're an older person, that is the way you stay green through all the seasons in life. And as you look at these words, the question comes, how does this work?

You know, when Paul says rooted and built up and established, it sounds like they are things that God does. Should we just be passive and let God do them? No, he's putting these, these things this way because they're both God's work and ours as well.

Take this little phrase being built up in him. It is God who does the building, but we have to put ourselves in the way of what he does.

To build up literally means putting something on top of something else. The foundation is Jesus Christ. And like living stones, we have the privilege of being built by God onto Jesus Christ to be a temple for God to dwell in.

It's the same as being established. It's the same as being established, literally being strengthened. The growth that comes from God comes as we are, look at the verse, established in the faith just as you were taught.

[ 21 : 04 ] This is an encouragement and a warning that we need to learn our faith. This is more than Bible study or more than just coming to church once a week. We have to learn the whys of what we believe.

We Anglicans have a funny word for it. It's called catechesis. Paul is saying you should grow deeper and stronger in the basic doctrines of the faith.

The basic doctrines, God the Father, Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Spirit, the universal sinfulness of humanity and the lostness apart from Christ. The person and work of Jesus Christ in his incarnation, in his atonement and his resurrection.

The communion of the saints and the place of the church in God's will. Salvation by growth through conversion and the dwelling of God amongst us by his Holy Spirit. The coming of Jesus to judge the living and the dead.

These are the basics of the faith that we ought to grow more deeply in. During this COVID time, we're so focused on our own physical health and safety and on ourselves, as though COVID is the most important thing on the cosmos.

[ 22 : 13 ] But I wonder if it could be a particular time of growth for us at St. John's. That if we as a church body could emerge from this pandemic, ready for the open door that Christ is going to set before us, stronger in him, letting our roots, they've gone down more deeply in him and were more deeply knit together.

Eugene Peterson translates this by saying, you know the way around your faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out, he says, quit studying the subject and start living it and let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving. Again, the apostle hits the note of rejoicing and thanksgiving. It's the infallible mark of growth and it's the way of growth too. Taking joy in the maturing of others and in what God has given us in Jesus Christ.

And I know it's so easy to complain. Which opens the door for dissatisfaction. And if you're someone who's tempted by ingratitude, go back to the unsearchable riches that we have in Christ.

Give thanks. And it's a terrific discipline once a day to make a list, either mentally or start writing it down. Ten things that you can thank God for in that very day.

[ 23 : 35 ] Because when we begin giving thanks, we realise we're not self-sufficient. We're not self-made, self-created or self-saved. I'm not in control.

God is. And he is good. And I can trust him. I can't do it on my own. Now,