

Growing into maturity

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[0 : 00] So I was foolishly voted onto the leadership team at my church in Thailand. And I thought, what on earth is the church really about?

So if you turn to the next slide, I just led to this verse from Ephesians 4.13. So Christ himself gave, and then he goes on to a list of people, you know, prophets, pastors, evangelists, all these different people, to equip his people until we all become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

So the church really is a kind of maturity factory, which is what a brewery is. Oh no, anyway. So God is using the church to mature us and also for us as a church to mature.

So I thought about that. Well, okay. So what does it mean to be mature? You know, what's the output of this thing? If we're a factory, what are we supposed to be producing?

And that took me on an interesting little journey for a while, until God led me to this next passage, which is, we've been studying 1 John in our life groups, and here's 1 John 2.

[1 : 24] I don't know how many people have got to 1 John 2. Some are probably sales way past it. Some people, like our group, are still in 1 John 1.1 or somewhere. Okay, different speeds.

And that's fine. So let's read this passage. I'll read it out to you. I'm just going to read down the columns. It's right there. I'm writing to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

I'm writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I'm writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, dear children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. And I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Now, I don't quite understand why he's done the order children, fathers, young men, although it nicely fits with our vision statement up there, which says being with Jesus, which is very much the child thing, being like Jesus, which is very much the father thing, and doing what Jesus does, which is very much the young men thing.

[2 : 42] So that fits nicely. But generally, people go from childhood to young men to fathers. So that's the order I'm going to take it in. So turn the slide, and we'll see what we're up against.

We've got six different aspects, three different stages. That's 18 slides, 10 minutes a slide, so we have about four. So I'll go a bit quick.

So childhood, what does it mean? We become, we are born again into new life with Christ. Your sins have been forgiven on account of his name. You know the father.

At this stage, we're learning Christ is for me. Christ is there for me. He knows me. He loves me. If we turn to the next slide, I'm going to basically point to Josh.

He's going to have to keep watching because we're going pretty quick. I'm not going to have time to read out these passages. I'm just going to talk about them. What great love the father has for us.

[3 : 37] He's lavished on us that we should be called children of God, almighty, creator of the universe, the one whose foot is on the accelerator for history, the one who knows what he's doing, that he should call us his children.

What a glorious wonder. And as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

This is wonderful news. By the way, I'm going to send these slides out so you don't need to write down everything. Write down what I say, not what's up there because you'll get it all at the end.

Okay. Did I point? Come back, come back. Still on the last slide. This is a glorious wonder that we should never, ever lose.

That Christ is for us. He loves us. He loves us. He loves us. If you don't know that God loves you, that is huge.

[4 : 43] Get it sorted out. Come and get prayer for it. You need to know, almost I think, you need to hear it from God himself, that he loves you, each one of you, a precious child of God, loved by him.

Okay. So what are we doing at this point? Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it, you may grow up in your salvation.

What do children do? They grow. There's the joke. Stop growing. What do they do? They're supposed to grow. They're supposed to get bigger. We need to feed.

We need to be growing and feeding in the word, listening well. There's lots of great teaching out there on the internet and there's some terrible stuff out there.

Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you've learned. Keep away from them. Knowing what's right and wrong on the internet is really hard when you've just come to faith and you don't know anything.

[5 : 47] All right? So what do we do about that? Let's move on to the ethics. I've told you we're going to go rapidly here. Seeking wisdom. How do you get wisdom?

When you're just starting out, you barely open the Bible, you go, what is this thing about? Lord, help me to understand it. You start in the Gospels and you start walking with Jesus and you walk along with the disciples and see how they walk into lampposts and you're going to realize, I'm no better. I'll walk into lampposts too. Seeking wisdom. It's a strange verse here. We don't like it. Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority.

Ooh, that's a bit weird, isn't it? Because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. There's a responsibility here for leaders. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden.

For that will be of no benefit to you. At this stage, it's find good leaders and trust them and follow them. All right? Your identity and meaning, as we go on to the next slide, is found in who we're with.

[6 : 53] All right? We join a tribe. I belong to a Whitby, which one are we? A Whitby Christian Fellowship. I don't know where I am.

That's my tribe. And woe betide anybody who's not with us. You know, let's go together. You're no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.

This is a household built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. We know who we are because we know who we belong to.

They're our gang. But the thing about all these stages is we're encouraged to grow. And particularly this stage is a transitional stage. If you've been a Christian child, as it were, for many years, you may have got stuck.

And look at that stuck slide. And we shouldn't. If God is moving you on, you need to move on. Now, I want to point out very strongly that it doesn't matter which stage you're at.

[8 : 01] All of these stages are wonderful and good. I'm going to be basically saying, this one's wonderful, this one's wonderful, this one's wonderful. There's no one better. Don't get caught up with this idea that you have to pass an exam and move on.

No. You can stay as a Christian child the whole time if that's where God has you. The important thing is knowing Christ where you are. And if he moves you on, then you need to move on with him. But at this stage, it's fine.

But the danger is we can get a bit tribal. One of you says, I follow Paul. No one says, I follow Paulus. Well, I follow Cephas. I follow Christ. Okay? It's not about which tribe you're in.

And the danger is we get a bit tribal. And you can see that all over the internet. Oh, you don't... And we all yell at each other. Christians are great at yelling at each other rather than listening to each other. How about this one?

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.

[9 : 08] We should be growing, getting deeper in God's word, building up these funny things called spiritual disciplines. Prayer, worship, giving, hospitality, all these different things that God will reveal to you as he moves you forward in growth.

Okay. So we want to move forward. So the next stage, youth, adulthood, I'm going to call it that. Young men trying to be sort of, you know, it's young women as well, all right? If I just use the male thing, sorry, it's women as well. You're just as much involved. What does John say about them? You're strong. The word of God lives in you. You've been taught you know stuff. You have overcome the evil one. This is the stage where I live for Christ. It's about growing in power, in strength, the ability to do things for God. The wonder of this stage is that God should use me to fulfill his purposes. [10:26] That I should be his agent? That God should reduce himself to using me? I mean, how crazy is that? God must be absolutely crazy.

And he is. Because he uses us. He uses you and you and you and me for his purposes. That the world might know there is a world that so desperately needs to know Jesus. We sang about it. Dark is the land. Come, Lord Jesus. And he comes through you and me. The world can only know Jesus by looking at the church. how are we doing at representing Jesus to the world? And how are you involved in what God is calling you to do? Are you listening and saying, Lord, I long to do your will. I want to do what you want me to do. Call me. Call me out to do mission. Whatever that means. Mission can be being on the cleaning roster. [11:27] Mission can mean cooking in the kitchen. Mission can mean teaching Sunday school. Being on the worship team. These are all things that God is calling us to do. You might come up with something really creative for you.

It would be really cool. It would be exciting. Go with it. The 70th returned and said, Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name. We go out and we defeat the devil. Do you realize when you're painting the wall, you're defeating the devil? It's amazing. He said, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy. God gives us power. Nothing will harm you in your relationship with God. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. Let's remember it's not about what we do. It's about a God who loves us. [12:31] So what do we do at this stage? Well, it's a lot of work. It's about working. It said, what does it say? It said, he overcame the evil one.

Well, how do we overcome the evil one? Well, there's this lovely passage in Revelation where John again says, they triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb, by what Jesus had done, and by the word of their testimony.

Now, that's not just my testimony of how I became to know Christ. It's the testimony of knowing what God is doing through me. As I look around and seeing God doing stuff, there's nothing more wonderful than being used by God. To see God use you and to go, thank you, Lord, for allowing me to see that. Look at what God did. Look at what God did. They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Will you give your life to God? I feel pressed in, this is a quote from Henry Martin who was a missionary who went off to India.

[13:38] Didn't have a long ministry but boy, it was bright. I feel pressed in spirit to do something for God. I have hitherto lived to little purpose, more like a clod than a servant of God.

Now let me burn out for God. Now there's a difference between burnout and burning out for God. Burning out for God is you go out with your light blazing.

I remember there's a lovely missionary lady who I knew and she was out there doing language survey. She was very sick. She took a pile of pills every day to keep her going and then one day caught up with that and she went into a hospital in China and died.

And my image of her is her arriving in heaven on a white charger going, right, let's go, come on, what are you sitting around there? Come on, let's go. She burned out for God. May we burn out for God, for his glory, going out in a blaze of defeating the devil.

So what happens at this stage? What's the ethics like? Next slide. The temptation is that we use any means possible to do what God wants us to do.

[14:56] It becomes, our ethics can become very sort of functional and sort of utilitarian. Whatever works will do that. You know, there's a danger in that.

Because God didn't call us to just go off and do it. He wants to do it with us. He wants to do it through us. And how we do our work is much more important actually than what we do. So, yeah, just be careful on that one. The danger is that we can actually end up almost as functional atheists. We end up going, okay, I'm going to do God's work using the world's way of doing things. God wants to do his work his way. Let's be praying as we do his work that we would do it his way and that we would go slower if necessary and we would wait for him to lead the way. So, where do we get our meaning from at this stage? Well, faith by itself is not accompanied by action. Oh, sorry, faith, if not accompanied by action, is dead. [16:06] This is from James. But someone will say, you have faith, I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by my deeds. temptation is to think we are what we do.

It's not bad, we are called to do stuff for God. We're doing it for God. We know that. It's a form of worship, a life of worship lived for God. Worship isn't just us standing here singing songs. Worship is what we do when we walk with the Lord every day of our lives, giving our lives to him for his work and his service and his glory that many might come to know him, that we might bless each other, that we might do what he has called us to do. This is a good stage and many people spend most of their Christian lives at this stage. This is a good time. Enjoy it. But you can get stuck there. Let us not become weary in doing good. For the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

[17:20] We can get weary in doing good. Who's caring for me as I care for others? We limp into church, we lift our heads up and go, oh, Jesus be the centre, and we just about get there, and then we walk out and pick up our lives again and carry on.

Now, that might sound a little harsh, but we can get stuck there. And we are wondering, Lord, is there more, is there not more to life than this? He's saying, yes, there is. Will you become a spiritual father or mother? Let's go on to the next stage. Now, I must admit that I'm cheating you here, because I'm not giving you the whole story, which is all the gaps in between of the transitions.

That's a whole other sermon. father's mother's and the transition to father's mother's is deep, long, and hard.

And we can talk about that another time. But in that transition, we get to know him who is from the beginning. Life no longer becomes about what we do.

[18:28] it's about who we are and who Christ is. Life is Christ. We learn to become self-feeding meat-eaters that we might feast on the word of God in a new way that we never thought possible.

What's the wonder of this stage? I have been crucified with Christ. Christ. That's the wonder. And I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. That is the wonder. Do you know Jesus went to the cross so that you might join him there?

We're called to really die. That Christ might live in me. And the life I now live in the body, the flesh, the socks, the old life.

I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. We never stop being children.

[19:43] As you progress through these stages, you take the other one with you. You're still a child of God. You're still a young man or woman of God, still doing stuff for him. Christ is still for us.

So we have Christ is for us, Christ is with me, and now Christ in me. What's the work at this stage? There's a bunch there. There's so many passages I'm not going to read them all out, and they all look a bit weird. The big one that most people grasp here is authenticity. I so want to be like Christ. I so want to be Christ in me. I want an authentic life that my life lives up to what I sing, that I live with Christ, that Christ is everything in me.

A huge work of just bringing that authenticity, of killing the old nature in us, that we might be holy Christs, entirely in me.

[20:59] An age of discernment, of knowing what God is saying in every situation. I have a holy indifference of saying, all this other stuff is not important, but to know Christ, to know Christ in every circumstance of my life, to realise that everything that goes on in my life is a chance to know Christ

God, right? This is a, we need that. And God gives strength to people. And if you're finding that you're sitting there in the church and going, oh, you know, these sermons are okay, and there must be a bit more, God's going, yeah, I've got more for you, I've got things you can do.

You know, it's not just amazing that there's somebody standing up the front, you might be the one standing up the front because God equips you to do that. Don't be afraid to embrace ministry.

[27 : 23] Don't be afraid to go, you mean I could do something for God? And God goes, yeah, I've got cool things for you to do. I made you this way, this shape, this colour, this, you know, these gifts, these abilities.

I've given, and sometimes he goes, and here's one out of left field. Boom! Here's a gift. Run with that. And you go, oh, that's cool. Don't be afraid to allow God to pray for these gifts, to pray that God would use you to glorify his name, to live a life of wonder with him.

But you may have been doing that for years and you're going, oh, again, I've got to prepare worship yet again. Surely there's more to this and you're limping along. And God's going, yeah, there's more.

will you die? Will you come and die with me that you may become a father and mother to the church? Because he needs those.

And as the world comes to Christ, we're going to need more fathers and mothers in the church. So let's be working to do that. just as an aside, it's really hard for pastors to become fathers and mothers because part of the process of becoming fathers and mothers is God reconstructs your faith from the ground up.

[28 : 49] He rips it apart and pulls it back up again. It's really hard to be teaching when your faith is just falling apart around you. If you feel that your faith is just falling apart, don't be afraid.

this is natural part of growth. You are not falling away. Hang in there with Jesus and wait. Seek him, keep praying. If you can't read the Bible because it just doesn't make sense anymore and it's just like, no, no, wait, wait, wait.

Hang in there with Jesus. Keep loving him. He will see you through. And boy, when you come out of it, it's great.

Everyone is equally valuable. There is no one more valuable than the other. Jesus loves each of you exactly as you are.

And he has wonderful things he wants to do through you. I think I've got one more slide because I can't remember what it says. We never stop being children of God.

[29 : 58] Enjoy being a child of God. We sang it today. We were going to sing the powers of the cross and that would have fit perfectly for this. Time precluded, that's fine.

We are you, I, are children of God and he loves us soon. He is for you. God is on your side. Who better to have on your side?

As you look at the Old Testament, how God looked after his people, carried them forward. There are wonderful things in the Old Testament to see how God works with his people. And then God should use us.

Is God using you? Are you knowing him as your Lord and excited because he's leading you into a life worth living? A life worth living that is so great that you're willing to give up your life for it.

Is that where you're at? May it be so. And if you're tired, pray for strength. Come forward and we'll pray for you.

[31 : 05] That you can be strengthened in what God has for you to do. And if you're being called into Christ, that can be a long and arduous process and we happily pray for people who are struggling through that transition, which I haven't gone into, that you may know Christ more and more deeply.

Thank you.