

Strength to live for God

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[0 : 00] Well, a warm welcome to you all on this very chilly and rather unpleasant day. It's a pleasure to see you all here with us, and I'm glad you were able to battle your way through the weather to get to us.

It's probably good we don't believe in extra points as Christians for things like that, otherwise we'd be feeling rather good about ourselves this morning. Let's start, though, with a prayer.

Dear Lord Jesus, we ask you as we come to you this day to give us peace in our hearts and a consciousness that you are about to speak to us.

We want to hear you speak, Lord. We want your word to come into our hearts and to affect not just our understanding but our whole beings. We pray that in the next few minutes you will do that in us. We pray for all those who haven't been able to make it through the snow today, all those who are ill, and we pray you'll encourage them and strengthen them, and that they'll be aware we're thinking of them as we meet together.

[1 : 12] But now keep us looking at your word and help us to focus on it and grow through it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

So we're in the second week of a very short series on the prayers in the book of Colossians and the book of Philemon, looking at what the Apostle Paul has to say about growth in the Christian life.

If you could turn with me to the book of Colossians, that's page 983. We'll read the same passage as we did last week, but we're about to focus on a slightly different part.

So that's page 983, the book of Colossians, and we're going to start reading at verse 3. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.

Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.

[2 : 30] He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. And so from the day we heard we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Now, let's start by asking ourselves a very simple question. Is the Christian life easy or is it difficult? Is it a happy life or mainly a hard life? And if you are not a Christian, ask yourself that question.

Would life be better or worse if I became one?

[3 : 50] Now, the Colossians, the people to whom this book was written, were tempted to say that the mature Christian life is the life of a spiritual superman.

It's one in which you have dramatic gifts, that as you grow you become more knowledgeable, you see visions, you pry into the secrets of the universe. And if you have difficulties, they are self-imposed ones, self-made rules designed to give you further spiritual greatness.

It's a life of triumph. It's also a very self-focused life. Now, last week we saw that growth as a Christian is rather different from that.

It's something that comes through prayer. It's focused on pleasing God through the knowledge of his will. And in the passage we've just read, we see that Paul prays for four great characteristics of that life.

First, in verse 10, that we bear fruit for God. In other words, that we're useful. We love other people. Secondly, that we increase in the knowledge of God.

[4 : 58] Thirdly, that we're strengthened for endurance. And fourth, that we're filled with thanksgiving. We saw a little of the first two last week. And this week we're going to concentrate on the second two.

Strengthening for endurance and thanksgiving. Together they form one simple truth. The Christian maturity that comes from God's work in us leads us to thankful, joyful endurance.

The Christian maturity that comes from God's work in us leads to thankful, joyful endurance. Now, that falls very naturally into two halves. As we said, there were four characteristics and we're looking at two of them.

And the first is that we may be strengthened with all power because God's power at work in us gives us joyful endurance. Look with me at verse 11, if you will.

Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy. As we've said, the Colossian church wanted God's power.

[6 : 14] It wanted it for dramatic supernatural life of visions and superhuman feats that would show the spirit's power over the body. They wanted to be spiritual supermen.

And Paul says, yes, God's power is on offer for you. Not just God's power, but all power. The power of God's glorious might.

What power could equal that? That is the ultimate power in the universe, which made the universe and raised Jesus Christ.

The surprise here is what it's for. Paul says that that power, that power is available for us to give us all endurance and patience with joy.

He's saying to the Colossians, you do need that power, but you need it simply to keep going in the right way. Because the Christian life is hard. As Jesus Christ said, it involves taking up your cross daily.

[7 : 12] Involves dying daily. And let's face it, normal life can be pretty hard as well. Day after day of mortgage and childcare and bills and then all the challenges of loneliness and sickness and toiling through the snow and everything else that life can throw at us.

To keep you going in that, God's power is available. And Paul prays for that for the Colossians. But again, there's a little surprise.

What is that endurance like? It is endurance with joy. Now that is the exact opposite of what our world expects of endurance and patience, isn't it?

It's a stoic, grim face plodding onwards, just keeping going, gritting your teeth, stiff upper lip. And it's a hard thing to keep these things together.

I think we as Christians tend either to go to one extreme or the other. God's power makes life easy and happy. Or it's just hard and I'm hanging on by my fingernails till Jesus comes back for me.

[8 : 17] And both of those things have a little of the truth, don't they? But the mature Christian life is one of endurance with patient joy.

And that is something supernatural. I used to volunteer in a hospital chaplaincy and in that sort of setting you see a lot of, well, basically medics often have a struggle with Christians who think if they believe enough, if they pray enough, they won't have to die.

It will be all right and they'll be going back home again. And then they have the struggle of watching them die, shocked and frightened as those expectations are not met.

How many medics, I wonder, have been put off the Christian faith by that kind of false expectation? People who do that have the wrong expectations in the same way the Colossians do.

Thinking God's power means they don't have to live like normal human beings. And without for a moment denying that God answers prayer and heals people, there is another way.

[9 : 28] Some die very differently. I remember particularly a really lovely older man, a Baptist who I saw decline week by week over several months. He had all the indignities, all the pains, all the agonies that go with dying in hospital.

Which I'm sure some of you are aware of the unpleasantness that hospital can give you from lack of sleep all the way through to serious pain.

And he had them all. And yet he was absolutely radiant with a joy that lit up not just himself but his whole ward. Or rather the room in which he was in that ward.

So after going round on my weekly round, talking to countless people in despair at the end of their lives, feeling broken by meaningless, I would walk in there and instead of going into comfort, as you're supposed to in a chaplaincy, I found a joy that touched me, a joy that was clearly supernatural because there was nothing joyous in his circumstances, a joy in Christ that had enabled him to endure the very end of life with the greatest joy.

That is the mature Christian life that Paul wants for us. Now hopefully most of us can practice a little before we reach that point. Most of us though I think have a double problem, don't we?

[10:53] First of all, we don't want to go too far in the Colossian direction. The way that some Christian television does, where you've got people with a luminous smile and a radiant tan telling you to live your best life now, offering you all the joys of life right now in the here and now in a way that just denies the reality of life.

And then the other problem is that if you are like me, a Scot, we are naturally fairly doer. We are unlikely to dance in the aisles, thank goodness.

But put those two things together and are we not perhaps prone to push things a little too far? We're very happy for Paul to pay for endurance and patience, but joy? And when we hear it, we perhaps think, he's just talking about an attitude perhaps.

It's not really a feeling. Surely I can't change my feelings in this way. You hear that even from preachers. But the Bible never says that. The Bible expects joy to be something that is real, something we feel, something people see.

If your joy is so deep down that others can't see it, then it might not be there at all. It's often me, I'm afraid. The simple thing we need to do is raise our eyes to the possibility that joyfulness and endurance can and should go together by the power of God.

[12:20] The second thing this passage teaches us is that real maturity comes from God's work in us, giving us continual thankfulness.

God's work gives us continual thankfulness. Look at verse 12. He wants us to be giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

A mature Christian is one who is thankful. Thankful particularly for the gospel, for the good news of God's rescue of us. You see, the Colossians, these people to whom this book was written, thought the gospel was the beginning for the Christian life.

But living, growing, meant going beyond that gospel. And you do often hear that now. You hear people criticize evangelical churches and say, they're great at the start.

They're great at getting people to become Christians and at giving them a basic foundation in the Christian life. But maturity means going beyond that to something else. And Paul will have none of that at all.

[13:29] No, the focus on the gospel is the keystone of his four characteristics of a mature Christian life. It's the last one, not the first one. This is actually an absolutely key idea in his whole letter.

Versus, verse two, chapter two, verse seven, talks about being rooted and built up in Jesus Christ and established in faith and abounding in thanksgiving.

This is what Paul wants for them. Maturity requires deep thanksgiving. And it is built first and foremost and a reflection on what Jesus Christ has done.

If you get a few moments over the next few days, do try reading through Colossians. It's not long. And just look at the way Paul shows how the gospel and how Jesus Christ are so much greater and deeper and richer than the Colossians ever thought they were.

Here is something universe-spanning, earth-spanning, utterly glorious. And yet it is the simple gospel at the heart of the Christian faith. Even here, he reflects on it.

[14:42] He says, the Father has qualified you, not just let you into heaven, but qualified you, made you one of those who rightfully share in the inheritance of the saints in light, those who are with God himself, with an inheritance from God himself.

He has delivered you. He's taken you from the domain of darkness, that is, from the power of evil, from the power of ignorance, from our own dark side and the spiritual powers of evil out there and delivered us, made us part of his son's kingdom of light and hope and goodness.

The kingdom of the son who redeemed us, who brought us back from the evil we committed and broke us free so that we could be ours, giving us the forgiveness of every sin we ever committed or would commit.

This great work of God leads us to continual thankfulness. I think the best examples of this I have seen in daily life have generally been missionaries.

There's something not very surprising about that, but, you know, missionaries often actually have much harder lives than we ever think and when they come back to this country, there's often a real challenge reintegrating into a society that's totally changed from what you believed and yet, when I think of the people in my life who have exuded thankfulness about the gospel, they've been people who have been missionaries and come back, I think particularly of a dear friend in Nottingham, with continual health problems, continual challenges in life, busy, difficult life, and yet just overwhelmingly thankful to God for what he has done for her.

[16:34] And the reason for that is very simple. It's not because she's superhumanly spiritual. It's because she's spent her whole life telling people about the gospel. She's spent her whole life thinking about the gospel, thinking about what Jesus Christ has done for us, thinking about what he offers us, thinking therefore about how much he has loved us.

No wonder she's full of joy. No wonder she's full of thankfulness. And so for the rest of us, how do we become that way?

Well, let's remember again, this is a prayer. We start with prayer because it is supernatural. But then we've got to remember we never graduate from this basic gospel of Jesus Christ.

And if we find ourselves becoming bored with the same old words about what Jesus has done for us, the problem isn't what he's done for us. The problem is that we need to find fresh words and fresh sight of what he's done.

Think about the gospel. Ponder it. Roll it round and round your mind. Remember just how much he loves you, just how much he's done for you.

[17:48] When you read your Bible, see how varied the ways are that it describes what he's done, how he's rescued you. See its worldwide scope and yet see how it zeroes in on you and your heart in personal love for you as well as that universe spanning scope and plan.

Come back to the love of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit for you. To come back to our introduction, is the Christian life hard? Absolutely.

Is it good? Definitely. The mature Christian life focused on Jesus Christ is one of deep joy in hardship, not one or the other.

This was written, after all, by a man who wrote in another place, I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. Not because I'm without difficulties, but because the Christian life has a supernatural joy that comes from God.

The more mature, the more we grow in it, the more we come back to that basic gospel. So is it better or worse to be a Christian? Well, if you look around the room, I'm sure you'll see people who have lost friends.

[19:11] Some of us have lost jobs. Some of us have been divided partially or completely for our families because of our faith, because of what we are committed to in Jesus Christ. And though those challenges in some ways are small compared to what Paul faced or the Colossians or many people in our world today, we still need that supernatural endurance and hope and peace and joy and thankfulness.

And they are on offer. That joy is available in the Christian life here and now, not just in heaven, 10,000 times more in heaven, but also here and now.

Christian maturity is full of joyful, thankful endurance because of God who saves us and gives us a gift of that joy in our hearts.

Let's pray. Lord God, there are so many forces combining to make us dour and unthankful Christians.

We need you to make us Christians who endure joyfully, patiently and with great thankfulness. But you have done so much for us and that is right.

[20:44] And we pray that you would make us people who do. In Jesus' name. Amen.