

Growing Together in Love

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[0 : 0 0] Because of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

Let's pray. Lord God, we have these marvelous gifts through Jesus Christ. Gifts of wisdom, gifts of being made acceptable to you so that we can know you.

We have been given redemption, bought from the kingdom of darkness and brought to know you in your kingdom, the kingdom of light. For many of us today, perhaps those things are ideas that are very far away.

And I pray that over the next few moments, you will encourage us, strengthen us, remind us of what you have done. That we might reach full, confident assurance in you.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, a very warm welcome this lunchtime. It's lovely to see you all, particularly if you are here for the first time.

[1 : 0 9] It's a pleasure as well to have a chance to chat to you and meet you after we're done, if you are able to stay for a cup of tea or coffee. Well, let's now turn to our reading, which you'll find in chapter 2 of Colossians on page 983 of the Bibles in your chairs.

That's page 983. We're in our third week of a little series learning about what we can learn about growing in the Christian life from the prayers of the Apostle Paul in this book, Colossians.

That's Colossians chapter 2, starting at verse 1, and that's page 983. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Now we're just going to read two more verses. If you turn over the page to 985, that's chapter 4, verse 12. Chapter 4, verse 12.

[3 : 0 4] Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Now, if you were to ask yourself just now what you want in your Christian life, what you're really aiming at in your Christian life, what would the answer be, do you think?

I feel that for myself and for many of us, it is very easy just to be content with putting one foot in front of the other again and again.

We want to get to the end. We want to get to heaven. We want to get to Christ. So we come to church to be encouraged, just to be strengthened for that next week's perseverance.

We want to hear those good old truths again so that we'll be encouraged to believe them for one more week. And that is all good. But the Apostle Paul here wants far more for us.

[4 : 32] He sees that there is far more in reach for each of us. We saw, if you were here two weeks ago, that our growth as Christians depends on growing in knowledge of God's will and gaining spiritual wisdom and understanding.

And if we have that, it really transforms our perspective on life, both the big picture, where our life fits in the whole picture of the universe, down to the little details of how I'm to live day to day.

Well, here we have a prayer where Paul tells us exactly how we get that wisdom and understanding.

And so it is very much worth listening. Now, there are three things I want us to see in our brief time looking at this today. Firstly, that knowledge and wisdom are really worth hard work.

Secondly, that knowledge and wisdom are found in Jesus Christ. And thirdly, that knowledge and wisdom come to us through love.

[5 : 44] Firstly, knowledge and wisdom are worth hard labor. The very first thing he wants us to know in this passage is how great a struggle I have for you.

He has a real struggle and there's a reason for that, verse 4. There's a danger of deception. He says, I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

There is a real danger that these people, these Colossian Christians, will be deceived about things in a way that will warp their faith and slowly lead them astray.

And so here, Paul struggles. He toils for them. And so also, Epaphras, as we saw in chapter 4, who was probably one of the Colossians, who was visiting Paul and telling him about them, he too was struggling.

He too was working hard for them. You know, the apostle Paul had never even met these people. That's what he's saying. Those who haven't seen me face to face.

[6 : 47] They're people like us. People he's never met. And yet, having heard of them, he struggles and toils for them. What he wants is so critical that this is the kind of effort he puts in for them.

Now, pause a moment. What kind of struggle is this that he has? Now, I've already given away the clues I've talked about. This is a prayer.

And it doesn't say prayer at any point in this passage. I think you can probably see that. But that's why I wanted to read the section of chapter 4 about Epaphras as well, where he does say that his struggle is a struggle of prayer.

Paul was, at the moment he wrote this, in prison. 4 verse 3 tells us that. People in prison don't generally have the chance to put in what we normally think of as a day's work.

He is not working for these people hundreds of miles away in Greece by any means other than writing this letter, talking to Epaphras, and praying.

[7 : 59] And what kind of prayer it is. He says he's struggling. He says he's working hard. And those are really weak translations of the Greek words. This is hard, painful labor.

This is toil. This is working till your back aches and your fingers blister. It's a tense, exhausting prayer, pouring out his heart for them. I think it's the kind of prayer we're probably most likely to know from a crisis in the life of someone close to us, whether that's a terrible diagnosis, or a family crisis, or someone desperately clinging onto their faith and at risk of letting go.

It's those moments that perhaps you have sobbed your heart out before God. And when you stop praying, you're washed out and physically empty and emotionally weary.

That's how much Paul cared for these people, that he was praying for them like that. Now, preachers probably shouldn't pause at a point like this in their message and come away from the main point, but that's exactly what I'm going to do for a second, because we do have to think about prayer for a second here.

We often give up prayer because we find it hard, don't we? We find it difficult. And often we think that's because we're not spiritual enough.

[9 : 24] If I was a really spiritual person, prayer would come more easily to me. Well, look at how it came for the Apostle Paul. It was toil. It was hard work.

It was difficult. It wasn't because he wasn't spiritual enough. Prayer is hard because it's supposed to be hard, because it's hard work, because it's real.

Paul was working for the Colossians just as much in his prayer as if he'd been there preaching every hour of the day. And prayer for those we love, prayer for our churches, prayer for those we know, it is hard work, and that's why it's difficult.

And in a strange way, I hope that's an encouragement to you, because when you find it hard, you needn't be surprised or discouraged. You know then you're doing the real thing.

Of course, there's a challenge to it for us as well. Perhaps like me, you look and you think, my prayer is so simple and easy and quick compared to this. And then it is a challenge to us, isn't it?

[10 : 30] To love one another in a way that results in this kind of prayer. But to return to our main point, we need to see what they were praying for, because it clearly mattered so much.

So our second point, knowledge and wisdom is found in Jesus Christ. All the wisdom and knowledge we need for growth is found in Jesus Christ.

So remember week one, we saw that knowing God's will, that being filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding, was the key to Christian growth. And Paul says, this is where to find it.

The riches of full assurance of understanding, verse two, that is, full confident grasp of our faith, is found in Jesus Christ, in knowing him better.

It is all, all these riches, verse three, are found in Christ. He wants them to lay hold of Jesus Christ with a firm and confident grasp, to get hold of the reality of our faith and understand it in a way that washes away all weak and wavering uncertainty and replaces it with a real, joyful confidence.

[11 : 52] He wants them to have knowledge of God's mystery, the mystery already revealed, the mystery that is Jesus Christ. And that is how we gain access to the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, through knowing him.

Paul is saying that everything you need to know how to live life really well is found by knowing Jesus Christ better. Now he doesn't mean by that, of course, that there is nothing worth knowing in the world apart from that.

Science has taught us much. So has our technology and our medicine and our psychiatry, as well as the softer things we don't think about, like history and art.

They're all useful. But to get to the heart of what matters in life, to really get the right perspective on how we live, we simply need to know him better.

Think about who he is saying this to. He is saying this to Christians. He has said to them that they have great, strong faith. He's delighted to see it. We saw that in chapter one.

[13 : 07] In verse five, he says, I rejoice to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. He's not saying you need Christ to be saved to start out on your Christian life. He's saying you need to know Christ better to go on in your Christian life.

And the Colossians were in danger. They were in danger of being deluded, as we've seen in verse four, by plausible arguments. There were strong ideas at that time that to grow spiritually or indeed to grow as a human being, you needed mystical visions.

You needed to make your body suffer so your spirit could grow. And like so many Christians before or since, they could see they'd been saved by Christ.

But they looked to grow in a different way by looking to the ideas of their time. And there were so many people trying to persuade them to do that. And it's no different nowadays.

There are plenty of people out there trying to persuade you that the key to a fulfilled life of real well-being is meditation and clean eating. There are plenty of TV ads persuading you on a rather more foolish, but still strangely persuasive way that only people with a really marvelous love life and preferably great foreign holidays can ever be really fulfilled human beings.

[14 : 32] These things weaken our faith so much. They ruin our growth because knowledge and wisdom for life are found in Jesus Christ and knowing him.

The Colossians, when they came to Jesus Christ, were like people who have opened the curtains in a dark room just a crack and the light that has flooded in, the strong summer light of a noonday sun.

And they think, wow, this light's incredible. I want more light. I'll go and switch the lamp on. Instead of sweeping the curtains wide and getting everything they can from the light of the sun itself.

Thirdly, knowledge and wisdom. The knowledge and wisdom we've been talking about. The knowledge and wisdom found in Christ. Knowledge and wisdom come through love. Now this is, I think, the real surprise of the passage.

Where do you think knowledge and wisdom come from? Where do I think they come from? Most of us definitely think in slightly more intellectual terms about these things.

[15 : 42] But Paul says the way to reach the riches of full assurance of understanding and knowledge is that their hearts may be encouraged being knit together in love.

In other words, to grow in wisdom and in confidence, they must be encouraged by being joined together in love.

The Colossians thought their spiritual problems were solved by themselves. They had their solitary visions, their spiritual practices. And we are from a far, far more individualist society than they were.

And I think most of our churches have made spiritual growth into an almost entirely solitary thing. Me and my Bible and my prayer.

And those are wonderful things. But there is a reason that our churches are so often filled let's not just look out at our churches, let's look at ourselves with people who are wavering in the faith, who are deeply discouraged by the anti-Christian tides in the culture outside, who feel at sea in this world and faltering in their faith, in our faith.

[17 : 02] There is a reason for that. And it is that like all Christians in every time and every place, that in order to feel encouraged and strengthened in our confidence in our faith and in our knowledge of Jesus Christ himself, verse 2.

We need to grow together in love. This encouragement, verse 2, is not simply that they might feel a little better. We could translate it strengthened.

It was what a general wants in the hearts of his soldiers before a battle. Real, strong confidence. How does that come? It comes together.

It comes as we are knit together in love. There is a reason we like you to stay for tea and coffee after a service like this.

I know lots of you have to dash off to work or whatever. But there is a reason we want to get to know each other and love each other. We can only go so far with just me talking from the front.

[18 : 07] Paul shows the Colossians how this is put into practice in chapter 3. He says in verse 16 that we are to let the word of Christ dwell in our hearts richly.

To do what? So that we can listen better to the preacher? No, so that we can teach and admonish one another in all wisdom. He envisages a church where every single person has a role.

Every single person is there to encourage and fortify their brothers and sisters. Every single Christian knows a little of Christ and is there to buoy up their discouraged brothers and sisters to strengthen their faltering brothers and sisters in helping them to see Jesus Christ again.

You know, maybe you don't know your Bible well. Maybe you're not confident in that. But do you know one truth? One truth someone might forget at some time that you could remind them of?

Or maybe you're on the other side. Maybe you feel I've been at this for decades. Probably at least twice as many decades as that strange bloke up at the front who's preaching to us now.

[19 : 24] I'm a wise Christian. I've read my Bible for years and years and it's hard for me to learn from younger Christians. Well, the reality is, I think, if most of us know after not long as Christians, it's entirely the opposite.

I've learned so much from wiser Christians, so much from Christians who know more than me. But I'm not sure I haven't at times learned far more from new Christians, people wrestling with fresh truths and rejoicing in the discovery of the gospel for the first time and asking those difficult questions I've forgotten to wrestle with.

They, just as much as the old wise Christian, have their place in fortifying and strengthening us all in our knowledge of Jesus so that we might grow as Christians.

That's why Paul in another place describes the church as a body in which every single person has their role, their purpose, their gifts, however weak, however small.

That's why the church has to mix young and old and rich and poor and educated and uneducated all together in one body, not just in little separate churches where we go to church with people like us because we all have a place to learn from one another.

[20 : 39] Only, wrapped, bound together in love for one another however different we are, however strange we are, only then can we really grasp onto Christ and grow.

That's why we can't be solitary Christians and expect to grow. That's why if we want to grow we have to be willing to learn from those who aren't like us. And so we as a church must pray that we are bound together in love, real, self-giving love, so that we can see the good in others, so we can learn from each other, see what to learn and how to help one another.

as a teenager, I was a Christian in a school which I think probably had some other Christians but if it did I didn't know who they were. So basically I was the only Christian I knew as a teenager.

And like a lot of solitary people I thought I was marvelous, thought I was probably the second coming of one of the apostles I think. I liked to read my Bible, I read Christian books, I prayed, I learned a lot, it was good for me.

But it was when I first came to university and was in a little tiny Christian union with just a few other people but first tasted Christian community and Christian love, it was at that point that not only did I start to flower in my love for Christ, I realized just how weak my Christian life was.

[22 : 09] There were whole areas of my Christian life, whole areas of my whole life where I hadn't begun to consider what impact Jesus would have on me.

Certainly my love life, I hadn't thought what impact it would have on me until other people were around me both to say to me what was wrong with me but simply also to model it so I could see what the wisdom of Jesus Christ looked like in practice.

Now most of us have a little more community, thank goodness, than I grew up with and most of us get to taste that community a little. It is that that helps us learn and grow in wisdom and knowledge and come to that full confident assurance that Paul wants for us.

I pray that it will happen for each of us. So as a quick reminder, knowledge and wisdom are worth much hard work. They are found in Jesus Christ and him alone and we access them, we come to them through love for one another as Christians.

We will find strong confident Christian life as we work together, grow together, serve together. So let's seek to do that.

[23 : 30] Let's seek to encourage each other over coffee. Let's seek to pray for each other and love one another because there is so much to gain when we do. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus Christ, everything that we could possibly want is in you.

Everything we need is in you and we pray that you will give it to us. Bind us together with a supernatural love for one another that enables us to help and support and encourage each other to grow in you.

Amen.