

In Christ You Have Been Brought to Fullness

Colossians 2:6-23

A few weeks ago I received a phone call from a brother at church who was keen to catch up for a coffee when the restrictions lifted to enable us to do so. It was my first coffee catch up post lockdown and it was excellent. And if I could catch up the content of our conversation into a couple of questions, they would be this:

How do I know?

How do I grow?

How can I be sure I really am in Christ? How can I make progress in my faith? To use the theological terms the questions are: is *assurance* possible? And is *sanctification* possible?

And I suspect this brother is not alone. Actually, I know this brother is not alone. Not only because I hear these questions all the time in different forms, but because I ask these questions myself! Sometimes more than others, sure, but always sometimes. How can *I* know? How can *I* grow?

How would you answer those questions? What would you say to our brother, or what would you say to yourself?

Well, I think our passage for today in Colossians is a great help to us. For here, Paul the **pastor**, shows us what we *naturally* do to find assurance and change; he reveals to us why that *never works*; and finally he reminds us that what we really *need is Christ* – that the deeper we go with him, the stronger we will grow; and the more we strengthen our faith, the more we will overflow.

1. What we *naturally* do.

So firstly, this passage is like a mirror that shows us the natural tendency of our hearts in seeking after assurance and growth.

In a nutshell, we do the opposite of what Paul encourages us in verse 6. There we read;

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him.

Our natural movement, however, is to continue to live our lives in ourselves. As Paul continues, we naturally drift towards philosophies that depend upon “human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ”.

While we might cringe or even deride the obviously shallow stuff that fills self-help shelves, there is a sort of self-help Christianity that receives Jesus as Lord but then walks every day as if it was basically all up to us. As if Christ gets us started but then we need to add things on to really *know* and to really grow. For do you notice that all the examples given in this chapter are not things you would hear in the world out there, but things you are far more likely to hear in a church. These are the fine-sounding arguments of chapter 2 verse 5! They sound fine because they sound Christian, they have the *appearance of* wisdom as Paul will say later on. Whether it's religious traditions like the new moon festival and sabbath day in verse 16. Or religious experiences like those described in verse 18. Or religious rules and regulations like verse 21. We are prone to look for something extra. Something in ourselves that we can point to and say, “yes, I am the real deal.”

And so for us it could be our knowledge of the Bible, or our understanding of theology. It could be the fact that we belong to a particular church or tradition or denomination. We might say, "our preaching is solid", others might say, "our worship is vibrant." It could be the faithfulness of our political views or the fervency of our service. It could be the effectiveness of your ministry or even just your own feelings about God at any given moment. Whatever it is, the human heart has the remarkable capacity to latch onto anything other than Jesus as the reason for our hope, the foundation of our confidence, and the source of our growth.

Now, of course, the presenting danger here in this passage are teachers who will lead us away from Christ, who will judge us by the things that we do or don't do. But such teachings are dangerous because we deeply desire self-dependence, and we are so easily distracted from Christ, and are so quick to measure our Christian lives by our own knowledge and our own effort and our own experiences and our own obedience. And Paul says, don't let anyone judge you by these things. Don't let anyone disqualify you on these grounds. There's a warning here of course not to judge others by these things, but there's also a wonderful comfort: don't judge yourself by these measures!

Don't judge yourself by your own religiosity, by your own reason, by your own experience, or your own obedience. Because if you do, they will fail you. As Paul says, they will not lead you into freedom, they will take you *captive*.

2. Why it *never* works.

Which leads us onto our second point today: This natural movement towards trusting in ourselves; and these human philosophies that depend on our own human effort or achievement *never work*. And Paul is at pains to tell us why:

- 1) they are empty
- 2) We are dead.

Again and again Paul hammers home the emptiness of any philosophy that depends at all on human or worldly things rather than on Christ. He calls them hollow or deceptive philosophies in verse 8. He says that special religious traditions or festivals are actually mere shadows of reality. Overblown spiritual experiences he labels idle notions. Strict regulations are of *no value at all* in bringing about any real change in our hearts. And so consider those things which I listed before:

A perfectly orthodox theological system without Christ is empty.

Powerful and effective preaching without Christ is empty.

Being part of the right church or tradition without Christ is empty.

Profound spiritual experiences without Christ are empty.

Perfect church attendance without Christ is empty.

Strict practices and performance without Christ is empty.

Pointing to how many converts you have made without Christ is empty.

Anything that depends on our own efforts is hollow, a mere shadow. They will not lead to assurance, and they cannot make us more holy. Trusting in these things will either puff us up with a flimsy security, or they will pull us down into frustration and fruitlessness.

Depending on ourselves for assurance and growth is like eating only milky way chocolate bars and complaining that you're hungry. It's like drinking salt water and wondering why you're thirsty. It's like stapling oranges onto a withered tree and calling yourself a gardener. Or to use the Bible's much more shocking imagery, it's like putting make up on a corpse and expecting it to show signs of life.

This is the fact of the matter: Human philosophies are empty because humans are dead. We were, Paul says, *dead in our sins*. We are spiritually lifeless, and so we don't need life-hacks or pep-talks, we need resurrection. We need to go through death and into a new kind of life. A life that comes to us from *outside* ourselves and then transforms us from the inside out.

That's why all through the Bible, God never says to doubting people, "Actually, you're not as bad as you think you are! Just believe in yourself!"

No he always points them back to his character and his covenantal promises. He says "trust me!" For our doubts flood in the very moment we turn in on ourselves and lose sight the Lord.

And so it would be a disaster if I said to our dear brother:

Take heart, you've been to church for so many years, or look how generous you are, or if I pointed him to anything that he had done, or is doing, or could do.

3. What we really need.

What we need is to set before ourselves, and each other, the encouragement of verses 6 and 7:

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..

What we need is to give up our self-dependence and collapse into the arms of Christ. Instead of the cheap fast food of our own efforts we need to be nourished by Christ. Instead of stapling fruit onto a dead tree, we grow by tapping our roots deeper into Jesus.

Instead of anxiously trying to fill ourselves up, we need to draw upon the ocean of Christ's fullness. Instead of managing our external behaviours, we need to overflow from what is already given to us in the gospel.

We receive Jesus as Lord and then continue living our lives in *him*.

And so it shouldn't surprise us that right in the heart of our passage Paul is again proclaiming Christ. Even as he warns against the danger of other teaching, he draws out again the significance of who Jesus is and the new life that he brings.

And in verses 6-15 we find the answers to our questions:

How do we know? How do we grow?

Paul says that we know by looking to Jesus,

And we grow by living in Jesus.

In other words,

The foundation of our assurance is the finished work of Christ.

And the fountain of our progress is the fullness of Christ.

So First, notice how Paul sets before us the finished work of the cross. Here is this event staked within human history, that stands outside of ourselves. The cross is the place of full forgiveness of our sins, it's the complete cancellation of our condemnation, and the decisive defeat of our enemies.

There in *his* death, Jesus deals definitively with anything that could stand against us. Be it our own sin, or God's law, or the devil himself, Christ conquers all *for us* on the cross.

During our Christianity Explored course this year, one of the guys in the group asked how we could know that our sins really are forgiven. He wondered if we could be given a certificate that would assure us that our sins were really washed away. And there is something right in that: we need something beyond the testimony of our own feelings or even the strength of our faith as the foundation for our security. And the Bible's answer to us is that the cross is that certificate. It's not a piece of paper in our hands, it's so much better than that. It is the concrete expression of God's love and mercy and grace, a fixed moment in history that can never be snatched away. As Paul says, *he forgave us ALL our sins:*

having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

And so the movement of faith is one away from ourselves and our works, to this great work of God in Christ.

But as we look to Christ in faith, his death does not *remain outside of us*. By faith we are united with Christ in his death. We die with him, and then are raised with him into his new kind of resurrection life.

Verse 11 says that Christ's death is the fulfilment of the Old Testament sign of circumcision. Our old selves are cut away and we are marked as true children of God. But this is a circumcision achieved by God, as Christ's blood is shed not ours. And so it's a gift for men *and* women, for Jews *and* Gentiles.

Verse 12 explains how the New Testament sign of baptism teaches us the very same thing. We go down into death with Jesus and are raised with him into new life.

And so Paul can say with certainty, *you have been brought to fullness*. And God *made you alive* with Christ. And your whole self ruled by the flesh *has been put off*. Our relationship with God is not on a dimmer switch, fluctuating up and down based on our performance. Rather he *has rescued* us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the son he loves. In Christ the switch is firmly ON, and our whole life is flooded by his gracious light.

And so the foundation of our assurance is the finished work of Christ, received by the empty hands of faith, and made real to us as the Holy Spirit unites us with the Lord Jesus.

And the same is true for our growth in the Christian life. For the fountain of our progress is the fullness of Christ.

Over and against the hollow and deceptive and empty ways of the world, Paul presents Christ: *in Christ all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form*. Jesus is the Son and Image of God the Father. He's the creator and reconciler of the whole universe. As one theologian says: there is not a single square inch of creation over which Jesus Christ does not declare "mine." And as we've just seen, we have been brought to fullness by faith. This Christ is *in us!* (Mind blown)

And so there is no area of our lives that is outside of Christ's sphere of influence. And for every situation we face, he has the resources to help us. From loving your terrible teacher in a third period on a Wednesday at school, to resolving a fight with your best friend. From loving difficult people in your workplace to overcoming challenges in your marriage. From resisting those private sins which no one else will ever see, to publicly sharing your faith as you try to speak to people about Jesus. Christ has everything you need to faithfully serve him, and he is not a stingy giver. He even gives to us traditions like baptism and the Lord's supper as pictures of the gospel. And he gives us experiences in worshipping him that fill our hearts with peace and his Word. And he gives instruction and guidance as we will see in Colossians 3, so that we know what a life with Christ looks like.

And he gives us the dense and rich theology of Colossians 1 and 2. Not because Paul is some crusty theologian showing off how smart he is. But because Paul is a loving pastor, putting before his people, in full technicolour, what they most desperately need.

What we need is *Christ*, who comes to us clothed in all the glory of his gospel. The only sure foundation of our confidence and the only true fountain of progress.

And so Paul urges us to stay rooted in Christ. We aren't built up by adding extra things on, we grow by going deeper into what we already have. We don't become thankful, or loving, or gracious, or merciful, or joyful or anything else by sheer effort. Rather we overflow with these things, as we are strengthened in our faith.

We receive him as our Lord at the beginning our Christian lives. And then the whole Christian life is a continuing in him. It's walking each day *with Jesus*, moment-by-moment, trusting in and draw upon his unending supply. It's listening to him as he speaks in the scriptures, it's talking with him, opening our hearts to him in prayer, it's enjoying fellowship with his family in the church as we point each other to Christ.

It's a constant turning out from ourselves as we cling on to Christ for all he is worth. And it's not letting go until the day he returns and we finally know full confidence and complete transformation when we see our Lord face to face.

John Newton once wrote a letter to a group of elderly women who had asked him how they could grow as followers of Jesus. He wrote to them that the very best advice he could give them was that they keep looking to Jesus. He wrote: "The duty, the privilege, the safety, the unspeakable happiness, of a believer, are all comprised in that one sentence...*looking unto Jesus* is the object that melts the soul into love and gratitude."

That's what I want to say to our dear brother. It's what I want to say to myself every day. And it's God's word to us all today in Col 2:9-10:

in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.