Growing Up: First Steps

Colossians 1:1-14

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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 16 months ago this coming Saturday – which also happens to be my 34th birthday – my son was born. He came into the world in a rush, and he hasn’t slowed down since. He has only one speed – fast – and I don’t see that changing anytime soon. Jonathan constantly amazes me with his babbling, his excitement, his sweetness – just with everything that makes him *him*. Yet I think what excites me the most – and worries me the most – is that Jonathan is just getting started. There’s going to be a day when he stops babbling all the time and will start using words and sentences. Then I’d better watch out! There’s going to be a day when he is coordinated enough that he won’t fall over sideways just because he turns his head too quickly. There’s going to be a day when he can make rational decisions instead of thinking he should use his water cup as a stepping stool. But for all of that to happen, my son has to grow up a bit first.

 Growing up is part of life – in fact, almost no higher-developed animal, and certainly no human being, starts life with all the skills and abilities of a fully-fledged adult. Puppies stumble over themselves, kangaroos have to be carried in their mother’s pouch, and baby humans begin life in what my wife and I affectionately term “the meatloaf stage.” This is those wonderful first few months where your child basically lies there sleeping much of the time, and you can do things like actually eat a hot meal or put the dog outside without worrying that your child has knocked over a plantstand or climbed onto the sofa to jump off. But we can’t stay meatloaves forever. If we’re going to reach our full potential in life as human beings, it takes time. We have to grow up.

 The same is true for us as Christians. Just two weeks ago, we baptized two of our young people. In the past year, we’ve baptized 8 people at Grace Hills, and most if not all of us have been where these eight are now: we’ve been new Christians. We felt the joy and the nervousness of committing ourselves to Jesus Christ, we stood in front of this congregation – or another congregation – and said that Jesus was our Lord, and we publically became followers of Christ. We came to believe that, even though we were sinners, God had reached out to us through Jesus Christ to save us from our sin. We even trusted that Jesus would keep his promise from John 14: that someday, probably when we died but maybe before then if he came back before our death, he would take us to be with him in heaven. We had that basic level of faith, and it was glorious.

 But then…if you’re anything like me, at some point you asked yourself the question, “Now what?” What do we do between the time we come to faith in Jesus and the time we pass beyond this life to be with Jesus forever? Bishop N.T. Wright, a New Testament scholar and pastor in the Anglican church, ran into a young man named James asking just these questions a few years ago. James had come to faith in Jesus in a dramatic fashion, and his life had been turned around. But he started asking himself and others, “Am I going to be hanging around a few decades, waiting to die and go to heaven, and in the meantime use some of my spare time to persuade other people to do the same? Is that really it? Isn’t there anything else that happens after we believe and before we die and go to heaven?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 The answer for James, and for us, is yes, there is something else that happens between the time we believe and commit to Jesus, and the time when we go to be with Jesus. What happens is that we grow up. Over the years as followers of Christ, we learn what it means to be like Jesus, and then we try to be more like him. And over time, we do. But what does that mean? Where can we learn what it looks like to grow up in Christ?

 One place we can find some guidance for how to grow up as Christians is in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. The church in Colossae was, at the time Paul wrote this letter, a fairly young church. I don’t mean it was a young church the way Grace Hills is a young church. We’re about 12 years old as a congregation – but many of us have been Christians for a long, long time. Colossians was not just a new congregation – it was a new congregation full of new Christians. It reminds me of the churches I was able to help plant in Ghana a couple of years ago. We would go out into the villages to distribute mosquito nets, and while there, we’d plant a church. God was and is moving in a powerful way in Ghana, and in many of these churches dozens of people would come to faith for the first time. No one was already a Christian – so even the leaders of the churches were baby Christians. They had to grow up fast!

That’s like the Colossian church: it was full of new Christians, Christians who still needed to grow up in Christ. This is why Paul wrote this letter: to help these baby Christians grow up. Over the next few weeks, we’ll see some of the things he thought were most important for all Christians to know as they matured as the people of God. It starts in our passage today, in the very beginning of the letter.

 Paul starts the letter introducing himself to the church in Colossae and letting them know that he has heard good things about the congregation. Colossae was a town on the wane; it had been a textile town for centuries, but by the time of this letter, had lost business and population to other towns in the region. Paul’s friend, Epaphras, had come to the area and planted a church. The Colossian Christians had encountered the Gospel message about Jesus and responded enthusiastically. As Paul says, “we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The Colossians were experiencing the joys of faith in Christ for the first time, and it is starting to change them. Paul goes on to say that the gospel “has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The Colossians are taking their first steps into the Christian life; Paul’s heard about it from his friend Epaphras and applauds them.

 He wants to do more than applaud them, however. Paul believes that the Colossians are called to be more than just baby Christians. They are called to mature, to grow up in the faith, and to do that they need some help. And so, in the final few verses of our passage today, Paul outlines his prayer for the Colossians. It is a good prayer for us to hear as well, because it includes the basics that are needed to grow up in Christ.

 It starts for Paul with knowledge. He said a certain kind of knowledge is vital to the growing Christian…knowledge of the will of God. This, he says, will make it possible for the new Christians in Colossae – and all Christians – to “lead lives worthy of the Lord” and “bear fruit in every good work.” In short, knowing the will of God helps us to actually live like Christians and do the things Christians do. Faith, for Paul, is not passive, and it’s not static. It is a day-in, day-out kind of thing that makes a difference in the world through action. And what do we need to sustain faith over the long haul and do the things Jesus wants us to do? We need to know the will of God.

 I’m afraid that, all too often, we neglect the knowledge Paul advocates here. In today’s world, we seem to have an odd relationship with knowledge. We still hold slogans like “knowledge is power” and “the more you know” to be true and tend to want our children to pursue higher education, but we also make fun of “know-it-alls” and suspect so-called experts precisely because of their extensive knowledge. Not only that, we as Christians get our sources of knowledge all mixed up. I know Christians who let science and philosophy carry more weight with them than knowledge of the will of God. I also know Christians who let media pundits or political spin doctors carry more weight with them than knowledge of the will of God. And I know many Christians, including myself, who know the will of God, who know what Jesus would do, and then just don’t let it impact our daily lives or the actions we undertake. To us, as to the young Christians in Colossae, Paul would say, “Grow up! Start with knowing God’s will…and let that knowledge affect how you live and what you do.”

 The second element of Paul’s prayer for the growing Christians in Colossae is strength. “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Believe it or not, when we choose to follow Christ, we tap into the strongest power in the entire universe. The Scriptures tell us that the power of God created the world and everything in it. Stories from the Old Testament tell us of God’s power turning back the sun, creating a pathway through the sea, and withholding rain. The New Testament records instances of Jesus and his followers walking on water, feeding the multitudes, healing the sick, and even raising the dead. And all of this, we’re told, is due to one thing: the power of God.

 Yet despite the clear witness of Scripture, both to its ability to impact our world and our access to its presence in our lives, we are surprisingly hesitant to ask for God’s power to appear in our lives and work through us. Oh, we’ll ask for God’s power of healing to get rid of our friend’s cancer or clear our family member’s clogged arteries, but that’s about it. When was the last time we prayed for God’s power to change the hearts of those whose greed plunges millions into poverty and starvation? When was the last time we prayed for God’s power to overcome stubbornness and temptation so that broken families could become whole again? When was the last time we prayed for God’s power to overcome us with a vision for our church and a purpose for our lives? If the power of God can do the things we believe it did in Scripture, it can do all of this, and more besides. And so Paul prays that the Colossian Christians will receive the strength of God’s power – something we all need as well, if we are going to grow up in Christ.

 Finally, Paul prays that the Colossians will “be prepared to endure everything with patience.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Truth be told, we aren’t much for endurance. Endurance implies that something is going on that must be endured…and we don’t like to endure much. Other than the odd fitness guru amongst us, we don’t really go in for extended periods of physical trial. We tend to seek ways out of situations that make us uncomfortable, and difficult conversations are high on our list of things to avoid. We are impatient, wanting what we want right now, and enduring a period of time between the desire and the fulfillment of that desire is almost alien to us, if we have any control over the situation at all. Yet Paul knew that when followers of Jesus live like Christ lived, they will face times of trial. Difficulties will arise, uncomfortable conversations will happen, physical distress may come. Through those times, Paul prays that the Colossian Christians will endure – not just making it through, but pointing to the Lord whose joy and love have given them endurance for whatever may come. This, to, is part of growing up in Christ: being able to endure.

 No one becomes a mature follower of Jesus overnight. Paul didn’t, Peter didn’t, the Colossians didn’t, we don’t. But we are called to grow up in Christ…and to do so, we need to start somewhere. Paul outlines in our text today the first steps towards maturity in faith. These words are powerfully important for us, just as they were when Paul wrote them to the church in Colossae. So today, as we close, I want to pray for us that we will take these first steps towards growing up as Christians. May we be filled with the knowledge of God’s will…and act on it. May we be made strong with the strength of God’s glorious power…and invite God to use it. And may we be prepared by God to endure whatever comes our way…and not avoid it. If we do these three things, we are well on our way to becoming more than baby Christians. We are well on our way to being the people God calls us to be: mature followers of his Son, Jesus. Let us pray.

1. After You Believe, 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Colossians 1:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Colossians 1:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Colossians 1:11a [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Colossians 1:11b [↑](#footnote-ref-5)