

Sermon Series:

New Life in Christ

A study of the book of Colossians



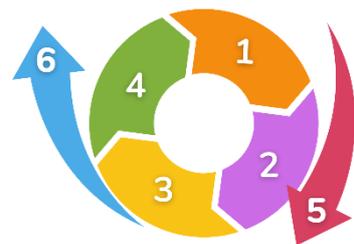
THE CYCLE OF GROWTH IN THE KINGDOM (Colossians 1:9-14; Exodus 6:4-6) Becky Douglass

This week, the Australian Open Tennis Tournament begins. Much planning has gone into it, especially with the restrictions and cautions which COVID-19 has brought. But even with great care being taken, a couple of the flights carried people who later tested positive for COVID-19 and so the whole planeload of competitors and support staff had to go into strict lockdown. The competitors were dismayed. Even though they arrived in Australia in peak condition, they knew that if they didn't get on a tennis court for two weeks, their fitness level and skills would deteriorate. Any athlete knows that you have to use it or lose it. An athlete has to be constantly training to stay at the level they are at and to keep up with the other competitors.

Last week Paul started His letter to the Colossians with thanksgiving to God –

*For we have heard of
your FAITH in Christ Jesus
and
your LOVE for all God's people*

But Paul is not happy for them to sit back and do nothing. Even though they are doing well, he knows that they need to keep learning and growing in their relationship with God. He now turns to praying for them and in his prayer, he sets out a cycle of growth that he desires to see in them.



1. Spiritual insight

*We ask God to give you
complete knowledge of his will
and to give you
spiritual wisdom
and
understanding*

Paul knows that we can cause ourselves to grow spiritually, this in something which God has to do in our lives – it is a gift of God. Paul prays that God will give them knowledge of God's will (a knowledge of God's plans and purposes in the world). This comes through wisdom (the ability to apply God's will to specific situations) and understanding (the ability to discern the truth). This wisdom and understanding must be spiritual in nature or "that which the Spirit

gives” as some translations put it. It is not about being particularly smart or a scholar, It is the spiritual insight which God gives us so that we can live as His people.

2. Honouring life

*Then
The way you live will always honour
and
please
the Lord*

As we come to know God’s will, our lives will align with it and reflect His goodness and love. When I think about honouring and pleasing the Lord, I think of Micah 6:8 which says: *“What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”* This is the way that Jesus lived when He was on earth. It is not merely following the rules – the Pharisees did that. It was an attitude of the heart which meant that all his actions came out of His love for God and for people. This is the kind of life God can use to accomplish His will.

3. Fruitful life

*and
your life will produce
every kind of good fruit*

When the Bible talks about lives producing fruit it is talking about two related ideas. Firstly, it refers to a life which produces godly character – the fruit of the Spirit – which lead to godly behaviour. Secondly, it refers to fruit as the spread of the Gospel with more and more people becoming Christians. Jesus links the two ideas when He says that *“people will see your good works and glorify your father in heaven”*. A fruitful life is one that God will use to accomplish His will on earth.

4. Growing relationship

*All the while
you will grow
as you learn to know God
better and better*

As God works in our lives to teach us His will and make us like Him, we will get to know Him better – our relationship will grow stronger and closer. Knowing God is not just about abstract truths and doctrine, it is a real relationship, a relationship which will grow and we let him into our lives.

This is cycle of growth, for as our relationship with God deepens, we will gain more spiritual insight which will make our lives more honouring to God and more fruitful and we will come to know Him better and The cycle goes on.

However, the cycle can get stuck and our growth will stop. This can happen in a couple of places. If our knowledge of God’s will becomes just academic knowledge and doesn’t change our heart, then it will not change our behaviour and we will not lead lives honouring and pleasing to the Lord. We must allow the Spirit to work God’s truth deep into our hearts. If our lives become just about trying to follow the rules and please God by our own efforts, then God is left out of the process and our relationship with Him will not grow. Finally, if our relationship with God is just about a warm happy feeling and we don’t engage with the truth

then we will not come to understand His will and live fruitful lives. And when difficult times come, and the warm fuzzies go, we will have nothing on which to base our lives.

But Paul isn't finished yet! He wants the Colossians, and us, to really understand that our growth as Christians and in our relationship with God is not something we do on our own. It is done in partnership with God himself. He goes on ...

5. God's glorious strength

*We also pray that
you will be strengthened with all his glorious power
so that
you will have all endurance
and
patience
you need*

The strength we need only comes from God. You can have a great windmill that looks amazing, but it is no use without the wind to make it turn. God is the one who causes us to understand God's will and apply it to our lives in ways that result in a fruitful life as God intends. Paul knows that this life will not always be easy and he specifically mentions that God's power results in endurance – dealing with the hard times – and patience – a positive demonstration of love towards people. In 2 Corinthians 6:4-7, Paul lists these as part of his credentials as an apostle. He says:

*... We ... **endure** troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food.*

*We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our **patience**, our kindness, ... our sincere love.*

6. Joyful thanksgiving

*May you be filled with joy,
always thanking the Father*

Our joy comes from seeing God at work in and through us and it overflows in thanksgiving back to God. However, it is easy to thank God when things are going well. How do we do this in the hard times? Where does the joy come from then? I believe that joy doesn't come from ignoring the pain but in experiencing God's presence and power in the pain. Even when we are going through difficult times, God is still with us and at work in our lives. When we look to God in thanksgiving, it is our confession of our trust in God. It is a way of saying, "I will trust you even when I don't understand, because I know you love me and you are at work – even in this situation." Thanksgiving gives us the opportunity to respond to God in trust and obedience.

One strong impression I take away from this description is that God is a generous giver! You see this in the adjectives in this passage: complete knowledge; every kind of good fruit; all His glorious power; all the endurance and patience you need; filled with joy. God has promised to give us everything we need to be His people.

However, Paul not finished yet! He moves from talking about their growth to remind them how they ended up in this relationship with Him in the first place. We are part of the Kingdom of His son through the sacrifice of His Son.

Our inheritance

*He has enabled you to share in the inheritance
that belongs to His people (saints)
who live in the light
not the kingdom of darkness
but
the Kingdom of His dear (beloved) Son*

An inheritance is not something that is earned. It comes because you are a member of the family. The inheritance of God's people is not something we earn, but something which God enables us gain. Paul then goes on to define who God's people are – they are the ones who live in the light where God is. God's people do not live in the kingdom of darkness – the darkness of sin and rebellion against God, but in the light of the Kingdom of God's beloved Son. Peter talks about this as well:

“You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Our Rescue

But how has God enabled us to move from the kingdom of God to the Kingdom of His Son? We certainly couldn't save ourselves. Paul then uses some very powerful verbs to tell the story of our rescue.

*For he has
rescued us ...
transferred us ...
His dear Son has:
purchased our freedom (redeemed)
forgave our sins*

I was reminded of some Pakistani friends of mine who have worked with the children in Pakistan's brick pits. Because Pakistan doesn't have social welfare, if you are poor, there is no safety net. If something goes wrong – crops fail or illness – and they can't pay their bills, they must borrow money. When they can't pay back the money, they are sold into slavery in the brick pits. It is hard manual labour and they whole family, even young children are required to work 12 hours a day. Supposedly they are working to pay off their debt, but the system is set up so that they will never be able to do this. The debts pass from parents to children and the family has no hope of ever escaping from this slavery. The only way they could escape this slavery would be if someone from outside the situation to pay off their debts, buy their freedom and set them free. But that wouldn't be enough because they would be free but have no way to live and they would soon be back in slavery again. So that person would need to not only rescue them, but also set them up with the land and house and animals, etc needed for them to make a living. They need a rescue and an inheritance.

Our reading from Exodus also tells a story of rescue and inheritance - that of the people of Israel. It is an account of God's promise to the Israelites when they were in slavery in Egypt.

*Therefore, say to the people of Israel:
I will free you from your oppression
rescue you from your slavery
redeem you with a powerful arm*

Do you notice the same words used? God has always been about saving His people. For the Israelites, He was saving them from physical slavery. For His people today, He is saving

them from slavery to the darkness of sin. God always takes the initiative on the behalf His people.

God goes on to make them His people and gives them an inheritance.

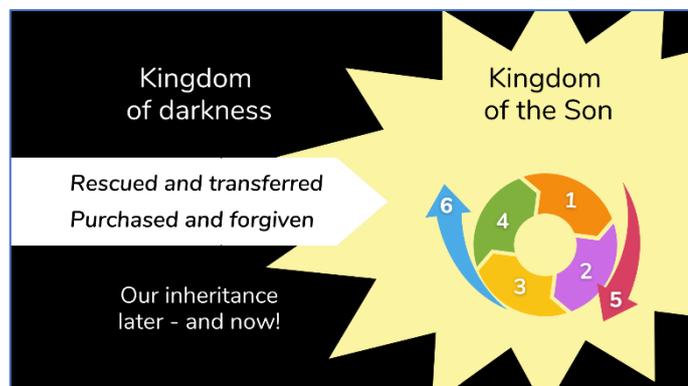
*I will claim you as my own people
be your God
bring you into the land
give it to you as your very own possession.*

In our culture we see an inheritance as something we only get in the future. Sometime we carry this over into our understanding of our spiritual inheritance. We believe that our inheritance is something we will have in heaven and we just have to endure life now. However, in the Bible, inheritance is more about a family identity that carries with it privileges and responsibilities in the present, as well as future benefits.

An example of this would be Prince Charles. Yes, he's waiting to be the king of England – that is his future - but that doesn't mean that he is just a commoner now. Right now he has tremendous privileges and responsibilities as part of the royal family. These give him a purpose now and prepare him for his future.

As Christians, we have a share in the inheritance of God's people. In the present, we have forgiveness of our sins and freedom from slavery to sin leading to a growing relationship with God. We also receive His power to enable us to live honouring and fruitful lives. This is not all our inheritance, but it is far more than just enduring until we die and go to heaven. It gives us a purpose and a value to our lives now.

Putting all of this into one diagram (because I love visuals!), it looks something like this. There are two kingdoms – the Kingdom of the Son and light and the kingdom of darkness and sin. The Son's kingdom is growing and will one day finally overcome the darkness completely. Now, both kingdoms exist and we can choose which kingdom we want to be a part of. If we turn to God, He will transfer us to the Kingdom of His



beloved Son and make us His people. As God's people, this is our inheritance – this is who we are. Within this new reality, God gives us all we need to grow as His people. Sometimes we will know the pain of darkness, but it can't ultimately hurt us because we are no longer enslaved to it. Instead, We are God's people, living under the gracious rule of Jesus, the Son.

It is a process to grow, to live into this new reality. We come to know God's will, it will change the way we live as we align ourselves with His good and loving character. Others will see us and be pointed to God and His salvation. Through all of this, we will come to know Him better and our relationship will be strengthened. This doesn't mean that life will have no difficulties. We are still living in a sinful and broken world that will hurt us. However, God is with us and we can trust Him. He will give us power to live through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As God gives, we respond – in thanksgiving and trust and obedience.