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Life in Christ

Colossians 1 v 21-23

Introduction

The other week my wife announced she had bought a new set of tongs for the kitchen. They had nice soft silicone grabbers and were generally better than the old metal ones we had before. However, when the dinner was out on the table she said to me "These tongs are rubbish! Look! They only open a couple of inches." This seemed a bit strange, and I said so. She had a closer look and discovered a metal tab at the joint. If you pull that the tongs open wide. "How was I supposed to know that!" She said, "They didn't come with any instructions".

Now that's quite rare these days. Just about everything we buy comes with instructions. Full of descriptions of how to use the product, they also often have a section on how not to use it. "Do not eat this product" is quite often in that list. And some of the high tech products have so many instructions that the instruction manual would be twice the size of the product. So instead they just give you a single sheet of paper that tells you how to view the instruction manual online.

It was a bit of a shock for us when we took home the most complicated piece of machinery found in anybody's home, only to find it came with no instructions at all. It was called a baby. It was remarkably cheap to acquire, but expensive to maintain. And we had to learn to keep her healthy and happy.

But how do you know if they're healthy and happy? Or even if they're still alive? Well there are subtle signs. Screaming was a good indicator that something was wrong. Other sounds were preferable, though sometimes just as loud. But we could also check her temperature, keep track of how much she was feeding (a lot), and watch her growing over the weeks and months. These are signs of life, aren't they?

There should also be signs of life in the Christian. When a person believes in Jesus, the Bible tells us they become a new creation: a new life. We start out our Christian lives as spiritual babies, and there should be signs of health and growth, just as in physical babies. Thankfully we do have an instruction manual for the Christian life.

Paul wrote the letter of Colossians to a new church. It was one he didn't know. He didn't start it, but he wanted to encourage them to live Christian lives among the non-Christian society they were living in, and to put their whole trust in Jesus. Being born again is a dramatic change, and he wanted them to understand what it meant. So we'll pick out a few verses in this letter and see what we can learn.

The Great Transformation

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

[Colossians 1 v 21-23]

One of the big things Paul wanted the Colossians to realise was the change in their relationship with God. They had been enemies, but now they were friends. Paul uses the word "reconciled" - a relationship that was broken has been mended. We were far apart - alienated. We were hostile in our mind and in our deeds. And Jesus, by his death, has brought us close, brought us together with God.

This is one of the signs of a healthy Christian life. There should be an obvious relationship. There were many Gods available in a place like Colossi, but they were remote, or severe, or capricious. Following them meant obeying many rules and carrying out rituals. Sometimes it seems like that's what Christians do. But it's not what it should be like.

If there is a relationship there should be time spent together. There should be communication. There should be memories. One of the things I do with my daughter when we spend time together is talk about the past times. Holidays, or trips, films we watched together, things that are part of a shared life. Can we say the same about God? Do we spend time with him? Communicate with him? Can we reminisce about times where he helped us, when he gave us encouragement, when he comforted us? There is life!

And Paul sees that this transformation isn't just a one-off thing, but something that is then lived. He expects the Colossians to "continue in faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel". Our salvation isn't dependent on us doing these things, but these things are evidence of our salvation.

The Great Transaction

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. 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.

[Colossians 2 v 13-15]

In chapter 1 Paul talked about reconciliation, which brought the Colossian Christians from being enemies of God to friends with God. It was a great transformation. In chapter 2 he addresses the Colossians directly again and talks about resurrection. And it's not about hope

for the future: he says it has already happened. Once they had been dead in their sins. Now they have been made alive.

Of course this isn't physical death and life, it's spiritual death and rebirth. But that doesn't make it any less real. What does it mean to be spiritually dead? Well in one sense it's the legal definition of the condemned man. You may have heard the expression "dead man walking", supposedly said of those who enter the section of a prison set aside for death row inmates. They may not yet be dead but they may as well be. There is no hope for them. Before we knew Jesus we were dead men walking, condemned and without hope. Then the great transaction occurred. Jesus cancelled the record of debt that stood against us. Our sins were all forgiven. And we were made alive.

What does life look like? We've thought about what it looks like for a baby. There is movement, there is warmth, there is appetite , there is growth. These things are true for the healthy Christian too.

At our Kids Club on Monday evenings we've been working through the book of Acts, following the early church. We have review charts to help the kids remember what they've learned so far and there's an interesting contrast in these charts. In the first half, the chart was of a building, where the foundation was Christ, and the rooms were different attributes that the Christian needs to grow and thrive: salvation, faith, obedience and so on. But for the second half there was a new chart: a boat. Here we are travelling, our destination is heaven and we need Jesus as our pilot, God's glory as our banner, and so on.

I thought this was a strange contrast. On one hand we are to be strong, founded on the truth, unmoving, and yet on the other we are constantly in motion, being steered towards our destination. But both of these are true. As Christians we should have sure foundations, and we should be building our lives on Christ. But on the other hand we are on a journey, constantly steering closer to Jesus.

If you've ever had a young relative that you haven't seen for a couple of years, I'm sure you've said the phrase "you've grown so much, look how big you are". It would be odd if they looked exactly the same. In the same way we should be able to look at our walk with Jesus today and compare it with a few years ago and say "I've grown".

The Great Transition

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

[Colossians 3 v 1-4]

We've had the great transformation, enemies to friends of God. We've had the great transaction, as Jesus paid for our sins and brought us from death to life. Now we have the

great transition, as Paul urges us to look away from the things of earth and seek after heavenly things.

One of the most famous transitions is in the film The Wizard of Oz. It was one of the first technicolor feature films, but the start of the story is filmed in black and white. It's when Dorothy's house is caught up in a whirlwind and drops down in the land of Oz, and she opens her door, that the colour bursts out of the screen. The transition is dramatic.

A couple of years ago my favourite band brought out a new song called More. The video for the song did the same transition as The Wizard of Oz. The first part is filmed in black and white, then it suddenly bursts into colour. But there's a more subtle transition that happens all the way through the song. The video starts in square format, and very gradually widens out. When the colour comes in it's widened out to 4 by 3, the shape of our old television screens. And by the end of the song it fills a modern 16 by 9 widescreen telly. And yet it's so subtle that you don't see it happening at first.

When we get saved there is often a dramatic change in our outlook. Our minds, which were fully set on earthly things, are now directed more towards heaven. But this redirection of our focus in life continues as we grow in Christ. It may happen slowly and subtly, but if we look back we should see that compared to a year ago, or ten years ago, we are more heavenly focussed than we were.

All Together Now

So if we are in Christ then we have been reconciled to God, we have been raised to new life and we have been redirected to a heavenly focus.

There has been a great transformation in us, because of the great transaction carried out by Christ, and we are experiencing a great transition as he shapes us and guides us.

What can you say about your life when you look back? Can you see that growth? Can you see those changes? Can you see movement?

And what about your church? Just as the individual Christian should be founded on Christ but growing and changing throughout their life, so our churches should be founded on the firm foundation of the gospel, but also growing and changing as we see ways in which as a body we can serve the Lord better.

It's hard to move a whole church though, isn't it? And maybe we're not sure that we should.

In 1930 the Indiana telephone exchange building, a seven story building with 600 employees connecting phone calls all day, was due for expansion. The firm thought about demolishing it and building a new building, but that would cut off the service for months. They decided on a unique solution. They jacked up the 11,000 ton building, and put rollers under it, then gradually moved and rotated it by 90 degrees over 34 days, with all the operators continuing to work inside and all the services maintained during the move.

What if we wanted to move this building? We'd have to lift it up first, wouldn't we. And then we could push at the walls to move it. But we'd all need to push in the one direction. It would

be no use if some were pushing at the back wall and some at the front. And I'd imagine there would be some who would sit in the middle saying the building was fine where it was.

Throughout the whole of this letter, Paul is urging the Colossians to learn, to grow, to move towards a better understanding of who Jesus is, and who they are in Jesus. What is the end point of that growth. He says it in chapter 4:

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

[Colossians 4 v 12]

That should be our hope and prayer as well, that we should become mature, fully assured, standing firm in all the will of God. A living, worshipping, serving church, whose banner is God's glory.