

Real Spiritual Life

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[0 : 0 0] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world is bearing fruit and increasing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.

He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in life.

[1 : 4 1] He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This is God's word, and we will be returning to that passage shortly, to open it up together, see what the Lord has to say to us through it and in it.

But for now, let us pray once again together, remembering this time particularly the needs of our world and our nation and our church at this time.

So let's join together in prayer once again. God, our Father, we thank you once again that we can come before you as children adopted into your family through Jesus.

We thank you that you welcome us, that you don't tolerate us, that you don't begrudge us, that you welcome us in your Son.

[2 : 5 5] We thank you that we can come before you with all our needs because you care for us. And so we come heavy, feeling the needs of our world just now.

Father, we look around and see such unrest. We see deep longing for justice in different ways. And Father, during this time, we pray that you would give us wisdom to know how we should live and respond.

We pray, as your word says, that you would help us to weep with those who weep over the injustices of this world. But we pray more than anything, Heavenly Father, that you would give us a longing for the day when Jesus comes again to set all things right.

And we pray, come, Lord Jesus, and make all things new. We think particularly, our Father, of the sufferings of your people around the world.

And we are sad to hear of the death of Christians in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Lord, we pray for those in that community who have lost loved ones, that you would comfort them and draw near to them during this time of loss.

[4 : 15] But Father, we pray that you would inspire your church by the power of your gospel, that you would remind your people of the certainty of your promises. And Father, in that land, that you would enable your people to be a bright light shining in a dark place.

We pray, Father, for those who you persecute, for those who have killed Christians, even in this past week, as the Lord Jesus teaches us. Father, we pray for them, that they would see the error of their ways and turn to you for forgiveness and find life.

Father, we pray to you for our own leaders in this country, for those in Holyrood and in Westminster, that you would give them immense wisdom for this troubled time.

Father, we pray that you would enable them to make decisions for the good of all people and govern wisely with good judgment.

We pray to you for their humility, that our leaders would recognize the limits of their authority, the limits of their power, and we'd even turn to you, who is sovereign.

[5 : 33] Father, remind us once again who is truly on the throne. Father, we thank you that you are in control and pray that you would remind us of that when we feel so helpless.

Father, we also pray for the church today. We thank you that you give us all that we need to keep walking with you and keep growing in Christ.

We thank you that you are with us in all our needs. And so we pray, Father, for those who are sick today, that you would bring healing and peace and comfort to them.

We remember those, Father, who are lonely and that you would draw near. We remember those who are facing times of sadness, perhaps sadness even known only to themselves, that you would be their comfort and the lifter of our head.

We pray for those struggling with particular sins and temptations, that you would be a refuge to us and a shield against the evil one.

[6 : 49] We pray now that you would enable us and help us to trust in you as we open your word together and pray that you would open our eyes, that we would see wonderful things in your word.

Be with us now, we pray. Our Father, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. And so I want to begin looking with you today at this letter in the New Testament that Paul wrote to a young church in a city called Colossae.

And I hope over the next few weeks to go through this letter with you. And so I would encourage you, if you can, over the next week or so, to maybe have a read through it.

It's a short letter, but it's a very powerful read because it's a letter that's written to give us courage and confidence in Jesus.

Paul wrote this letter so that we would stay rooted and keep being built up in Jesus. And so he shines a really bright light on Christ in this letter and shows us why he is so worthy of our worship and trust.

[8 : 07] Because the big question facing the Christians in Colossae was, is there something bigger and better out there for us that we don't have in Jesus Christ?

Now, I don't know if you have special strategies that you use for online shopping. Probably they've been improved over the last few months.

Well, a few months ago, I went in search of a set of hair clippers for my lockdown cut. And so I found what I thought was a decent set of clippers online. They seemed to be the real thing.

And they promised to do what I needed. But a month later, and they still hadn't arrived. Two months later, and I was still waiting.

And a few emails backwards and forwards confirmed my suspicion that I wasn't going to get what I had hoped for. You know, I thought I had found the real deal.

[9 : 07] But in the end, I was just left feeling let down. The thing that I put my hope in didn't deliver. And I was left thinking, if only I had been wiser or more discerning, maybe I wouldn't have missed out on the real thing.

It becomes clear throughout this letter, Colossians, that the Christians in Colossae found themselves in a similar position. Not, of course, with their online shopping, but in their relationship with God.

Not long before this letter was written, these folks had heard the good news of Jesus. They put their hope in him and a church was born. But roughly seven years later, the shine is wearing off.

Life has gone on. And now a new super spiritual clique has come to Colossae offering what they claimed was real spiritual life.

These young Christians were being told that they needed a spiritual upgrade. Christ was old news. And Paul picks up certain buzzwords like fullness and completeness, which this group used to describe what they said the church could only have if they had Christ plus rituals and rules.

[10 : 27] So these false teachers would have looked really super spiritual. They talked about visions. They lived a really strict lifestyle. And next to all of that, the ordinary, simple, steady lives of these faithful Christians would have looked a bit normal, even unspiritual.

How do you think that would have felt for the church in that city being told that they were ignorant and narrow-minded, told in not so many words that their quiet, faithful lives were not really worth it?

told that they were missing out on living their best life now? It would have left them wondering if perhaps their faith was too weak, their love was too shallow, their hope was perhaps in the wrong place altogether.

They would have been left with painful doubts over where they stood with God. Was the gospel really the whole story? Was Jesus really everything that he promised to be?

Did they really have real spiritual life? These are important questions still for us as Christians now.

[11 : 47] You're living in a society that often claims to offer a bigger, better, more beautiful life than we have in Christ. We might wonder at times in our heart of hearts, you know, I know Jesus is important, I know Jesus is necessary, but is Jesus really enough?

This is also a really important question. Whoever you are, even if you're not sure or you have real doubts about Jesus, your real spiritual life, it sounds to a lot of people today just like a contradiction, you know, real and spiritual just don't seem to go together.

You're either because you perhaps you think it's all bogus or because you think, you know, there are lots of ways to be a spiritual person. Either way, your real spirituality just doesn't exist, it's not out there.

Perhaps that's where you are right now. But whatever you believe about who we are, whether there's a God, and if so, who he is, what kind of reality we live in, none of us want to think that we've wasted our lives living a lie.

None of us want to buy into something fake. We want what's real. You know, a lot of people would say about themselves, I'm not religious, but I am spiritual.

[13 : 12] And that sounds very open. But even that phrase, it draws a line, doesn't it, between what you think isn't the real thing, that is being religious, and what you think is the real thing, being spiritual.

Even in our society of all faiths and none, we still have a gut instinct not to settle for something less than the real deal, less than real spiritual life.

And here, Paul shows us over the course of this letter where real spiritual life is found. And what we find here is that real life with God is actually far more grounded, far more real life than we often imagine.

Because Paul's secret to spiritual life is not mindfulness and meditation. It's not vague spiritual forces out there.

No, it's a person, a flesh and blood human being who is God himself. real spiritual life is found only in Jesus Christ.

[14 : 24] The very reason why Paul wrote this letter was to give us confidence that in Christ, God has given and continues to give everything we need for real spiritual life.

Christ is enough. And we see that straight away in the way that Paul prays for this church and calls us to pray too. So Paul starts this letter by giving thanks to God for what he has given.

So firstly, we thank God for giving real spiritual life. Paul begins in verse 3, we always thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you.

Now, I don't know about you, my own letter writing skills are pretty rusty. I can probably manage, you know, dear so-and-so, how are you? I am fine.

But Paul's opening line isn't like that, is it? It's bursting full of thankfulness for his family in Christ. You see, in verse 2, he calls them brothers and sisters in Christ because that is the kind of relationship that we have in Christ.

[15 : 37] God has adopted us into his family. Notice in verse 2, he also calls God our Father. The preacher Don Carson, he puts it really nicely when he says that biblical Christianity is not to be confused with a bit of ritual and a lot of rules.

Rather, it is associated with family relationship to the living God. Now, Paul has never been to Colossae. He didn't know these people personally.

He didn't have the benefit of Zoom. So how does he know that these faraway Christians really belong to the same family that he does? What we see is because he's heard that they share three giveaway traits of the true family of God.

verse 4, Paul says, he's always thanked God since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, the love you have for all the saints because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Faith, hope, and love. These are the vital signs of real spiritual life. We might think of faith, hope, and love as being a bit goody-gitty.

[16 : 54] You know, it's fine, but it's not really down to earth, not really for living real life. But actually, the presence of those vital signs in their lives were a very concrete sign to Paul of what was going on with them because this was a church that was under pressure to trade in their faith, hope, and love for spirituality on steroids, special knowledge, special experiences, and of course, a bit of ritual and a lot of rules.

Their walk with Christ was being looked down on by this new super-spiritual clique of false teachers. They were saying their faith in Christ was far too narrow.

Their love for all of God's people was far too broad. And their hope in the future that God promised was ridiculous when they could have it all now if only they would wise up and become truly spiritual.

In the eyes of this super-spiritual elite, the ordinary lives of faithful Christians was nothing to give thanks for.

I wonder if you've ever felt like that yourself, that your faith was too small, or your church is too ordinary, or God's promises were just too big and hard to take in, that ultimately it's not really all worth giving thanks for.

[18 : 29] Well, that is the red flag that Paul is concerned about here, that these brothers and sisters in Christ start to think less of their relationship with God because it all feels too normal and not spiritual enough.

Instead, Paul says that he pours out his heart to God in thanks for every one of them all the time because simply by that description of their faith, hope, and love, he recognizes in them the true family likeness.

It's as if he can go up to these people he's never met and say, I know your father, he must be God. I know your brother, he must be Jesus.

Not because he saw something out of this world in them, but because of the simple concrete change that God had worked in their lives that showed in faith, hope, and love.

Paul can see that God has given them real spiritual life in these vital signs and so he is unstoppably thankful to God for them.

[19 : 45] Being thankful is one of the lessons that Paul wants us to learn through this letter because thankfulness only really comes when we know we have something to give thanks for.

We are most thankful to God when we are satisfied in the complete gift that he has given us in Christ. So I wonder, are you thankful for the new life that God has given?

Do you recognize the signature of God's work in each other's lives? Faith, hope, and love. You see, it's so easy to take those signs for granted, isn't it, in people that we know well in a church that we're familiar with.

But faith, hope, and love show where there is a family relationship to the living God and they are clearly in you. I don't know lots of you personally.

I've never actually been to Aberdeen, believe it or not, but I did have the joy this week of reading your summer newsletter. Your faith in Christ, your love for one another, your hope in God's promises shine off the page just in the ordinary details of your life as a church.

[21 : 07] The time that you set aside for God's word in the week. The love that you show for each member of the family, especially those who are going on to new things and new places.

The desire that you have to keep Jesus at the heart of who you are and all that you do. Now, I can only read a report of that, but you see in real life what I can only see for now on a page.

So I hope that when you think and spend time with your church family, that you do recognize the faith, hope, and love that are in you.

I hope that when you pray for your church family, that you always give great thanks to God for his real work in you. Because we know, don't we, that it's not because we happen to be especially trusting or loving or optimistic people.

We know that we're often not like that in ourselves. But in Christ, God has given us new life, spiritual life, a walk with him as a gift.

[22 : 20] Please never think that your life in Christ is not worth giving thanks for, personally or collectively. But let us always give thanks to God for bringing us into his family.

That is his gracious gift to you. And that's not only true for yourselves in Aberdeen, that's true wherever the good news of Jesus has gone.

Paul goes on in verse 5 to say that their new life is down to this hope that they heard of in the gospel. He says, of this you've heard before in the word of truth, the gospel.

Now, just stepping back for a moment, I think this is really great for us to see right now, that the gospel is a message of hope.

Now, hope doesn't mean here wishful thinking or just a guess in the right direction. When Paul talks about hope, he's talking about something that we know is coming, like the tired coming in on the beach, or the dawn coming at the end of the night.

[23 : 30] In the same way, we know that Jesus is coming again to make all things new. He's certainly coming, but that day is not here yet.

That's what hope is. And it's such a timely reminder to us, a time when the future of our world is so clouded with uncertainty, and when it's so hard to see what there is to hope for, that the message of Christ is a message of certain hope.

Now, Paul explains this hope further as he goes on in his letter, but for now, I just want to encourage you, in a time that can seem pretty hopeless, and when it's difficult to know which promises to trust, please know that God gives us certain hope in Jesus, the hope of us and our world being made whole when Christ comes again.

It's a hope that won't let us down because the gospel is the word of truth. God's promises don't shift. And so, returning to the main thread of this letter, then, is this gospel, this word of hope, is this really the whole story?

Or is there more out there for us if we're in on the right secrets? You, this influential, super spiritual clique, claimed that you could have your best life now if you were in the know.

[25 : 04] You can imagine the kinds of doubts and perhaps shame these Christians might have felt at the thought that they have been taken in by something that was only half true or simplistic.

But Paul assures them that the gospel that they heard and trusted is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

How do we know? Because, Paul says in verse 6, in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you.

In short, it's like a good tree that you recognize is by its good fruit. If you've got a beautiful tree in your garden and it sends out shoots that pop up all over the grass, how do you know it's really the same tree and not just weeds?

Well, you know when the fruit comes. And in the same way, the true gospel is known by the real spiritual life that grows from it wherever it goes.

[26 : 13] is the same message that has worked so powerfully in your lives is also doing the same thing everywhere that it's been taken to heart. It creates that same family resemblance, faith, hope, and love, wherever it goes.

It's one of the great blessings that this time in lockdown has brought of partnerships like this. The culture of our churches might be different in some ways, but the character of our churches is not.

We could travel all around Scotland or even to every continent on earth and find the same faith, hope, and love growing because the same gospel has been heard there.

You've got a great example of this coming this evening when I understand David is going to be joining you all the way from Peru. What a testimony that is to the truth of the gospel that whether it's in Peru or Scotland or the BRC or China, the gospel creates a family that can be recognized anywhere on earth as the family of God.

The gospel is the real deal. It's the whole truth. It holds real hope. It gives real spiritual life.

[27 : 41] How do we know that? Because in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing. Gospel fruit that grows from gospel roots.

So thank God that this gospel is true and trustworthy. Thank God that the hope it gives us is not worthless but real. Again, our familiarity can often get in the way of seeing how extraordinary the gospel is.

We might feel at times like it's all too simple. Something as ordinary as speaking, something as basic as words, it doesn't seem very spiritual.

spiritual. If you're not a Christian listening in right now, it might even come across as a bit boring, a bit unspiritual. But please, don't overlook the fruit of God's real work in real people's lives in search of something that you think is bigger and better.

The family of God, it didn't come from nowhere. It's a family that came into being through God's message about his son, Jesus Christ.

[29 : 00] The vital signs are all there. And you can share this new life and be fully part of this family simply by putting your hope in Jesus.

Even if we have put our hope in Jesus and we're walking with him today, we may feel at times that like his word of truth and grace and hope is not enough.

We might sense that our faith, hope and love are weakening and we're not sure where to turn. We might be tempted to start living our best life now and stop waiting for Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, we are not whole yet, but the gospel is whole. people. And it's for that reason that our hearts should overflow with thanks to God.

We can give thanks for the gospel's truth, for God's grace to us in it, for the hope that we have in it. We can give thanks for the gospel's growth in our communities and all over the world.

[30 : 12] We give thanks ultimately for the one at the heart of the gospel, Jesus Christ. thanks. And it's as we give thanks to Christ in the gospel, that the gospel comes to mean more and more to us, that our love for Christ grows increasingly.

So thank God that he has given real spiritual life in his son and through the gospel. people. But Paul also goes on to ask for certain things from God for this church in Colossae.

In verse 9 he says, and so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you asking that you may be filled. So if first we thank God for giving real spiritual life, then secondly we need to ask God to fill us for real spiritual living.

So what is it then that Paul asks for this church family? Well, I wonder what you would ask for a church under pressure.

We would ask perhaps for protection, for peace, for an end to their troubles, all good things to ask God for. But in other words, I think we would tend to focus our prayers on their circumstances.

[31 : 38] But notice what Paul prays for this church here. Paul asks really for two things for these brothers and sisters. First, in verse 9, that you may be filled with knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

And second, in verse 11, may you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might. Paul asked God to give knowledge and power.

prayer. And these were the kinds of things that this super spiritual group of false teachers said that they could offer through their rituals and rules. So now did this church need to go searching for bigger and better things?

Was it that God had given them a new life to start with, but hadn't given them enough to carry on? Well, Paul says no. to be filled with all spiritual wisdom and all power from God, we need only asking.

It's not a secret. We don't need to go searching. God continues to give fully and freely in Christ all that we need for real spiritual living.

[32 : 54] He's given us the fullness of himself in the gospel, and he fills us out of his own fullness. Simply when we ask, there is no secret blessing given only to the few.

No, God gives all wisdom and all power to all who have set their trust in Christ. But we might wonder, does he really?

Do our lives really look like the lives of the wise and powerful? Do we really feel that we have life to the full?

What would that look like in our lives? The life of this church in Colossae, it wasn't high octane, it wasn't mysterious, it was nothing special.

It seemed ordinary, steady, simple. people. But that is exactly what wisdom and power from God are given to us for.

[33 : 56] It's so down to earth, it's so real. Paul teaches here that God gives us wisdom to keep growing and power to keep growing.

Firstly, then, what is wisdom for? Do you notice when Paul asks for wisdom in verse 9? He sort of draws a spiral staircase. First, he asks God to fill them with knowledge of his will, so that in verse 10 they would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, in turn, bearing fruit in every good work, and then all the way back around to increasing in the knowledge of God.

So, in Paul's mind, being filled with knowledge of God sets off this kind of never ending chain of knowing, living, and serving. Knowing, living, and serving, going round and round, but also all the while growing up and up in Christ.

It's a spiral staircase of growth in Jesus. But the mystery is that the great prize isn't found at the top of that staircase.

No, the great gift of wisdom is given at the bottom, and again, and each step of the way to keep us growing. God doesn't give us knowledge so that we will feel clever or in on the secret.

[35 : 24] No, he brings us to know him to teach us each day how to live in this world, how to walk worthy of him, how to work heartily for him, how to keep growing in our personal knowledge of him.

This is spiritual life for real life. We know in order to grow. So ask for wisdom to keep growing.

God gives it fully and freely to those who come to him. But secondly, then, what do we need power for? Paul says, may you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy.

Paul's prayer literally here is, may you be empowered with all power. It's power, power, power in proportion to God's own glorious power.

How much power is that? What kind of voltage are we talking about here? What Paul probably has in mind is what he describes in another letter as God's might, that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.

[36 : 45] The power that raised Jesus from death to life, that is the power God gives us when we ask him to strengthen us.

Resurrection power, resurrection life. But it's not power to make us invincible or untouchable by this world's problems.

No, God, he fills us with this strength so that we can carry on, keep going, power so that we can endure patiently and joyfully to press up in faith, hope, and love.

You might wonder, does it really take that much power for us to keep going? Does it take that much wisdom for us to keep growing? You can't we get by with less than that?

Well, over the past few months, we've all been through some really hard changes, some of us I'm sure more than others, but I'm sure too that all of us have found ourselves asking at certain points, where is the strength going to come from, for tomorrow, or even the next hour?

[38 : 02] Perhaps you feel your walk with Christ is empty and cold at times. Perhaps you feel God is distant and out of touch.

Perhaps you know that your living couldn't be described as worthy of Christ. Perhaps you can't see the fruit from your good work. Perhaps you've long reached the end of your patience.

Perhaps you've all but given up on joy. Perhaps you don't know how you're going to keep going at all. It's in those times when we feel and know our own emptiness that we know that nothing less is needed than for God to fill us out of his own fullness of wisdom and power.

Nothing less than this is needed for a life of faith, hope, and love. Nothing less is needed for a life fully pleasing to him.

We need nothing less than this. But gloriously, we need nothing more. Power to keep going. Wisdom to keep growing.

[39 : 19] living. This is real spiritual living. Not that we have it all together, but that we daily ask God to give us all that we need to really live.

It may sound too ordinary, but it is extraordinary. In Christ, the fullness of God is yours to ask for. You can search down a thousand rabbit holes, but you still won't find what God holds out for you freely and fully here in Jesus.

Jesus himself said, as we heard, all who came before me were thieves and robbers. I have come that they may have a life and habits of the full.

So Paul can't help but come back here to use thanks, a life of giving thanks to the Father for all that he's given us in his Son.

Because if our trust is in him, then will you look with me briefly at verse 12? God the Father has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

[40 : 36] Do you meet the conditions for receiving this inheritance? Well, if your trust is in Christ, then you do. if you are part of the family of God adopted by the Father, then who can deny you the family inheritance that is yours in his Son?

Today, you might feel like a rubbish Christian. There might be some sin playing on your mind, or perhaps you just feel finished, just worn out by the pressures of this world.

Perhaps today you don't feel worthy of belonging to God. But here is the whole truth. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

You are qualified because God himself has qualified you. You belong to God because God himself has taken you out of the household of darkness and brought you into the kingdom of his own beloved Son.

You are free from the guilt of your sin because God himself has forgiven you. Not because you were something special, but because in the gospel, God gave his Son so that in him we would have life to the full, real spiritual life, a real spiritual living.

[42 : 16] A life that isn't for the super spiritual elite, but for ordinary, struggling, sinful people like me and you. this is why Paul cannot stop giving thanks to God and calls us to give thanks all the time.

That is why Paul cannot stop asking and calls us to ask God for all that we need. It is all here for us in Jesus. So let us thank God for giving us real spiritual life and let us ask God to fill us for all that we need for real spiritual living.

Let's do that together now. Let's pray together. God, our Father, we thank you that in Jesus you have given us all that we need for a right relationship with you.

We thank you that indeed we have redemption, freedom, the forgiveness of our sins. We pray Lord God, Holy Spirit, that you would prevent us ever from losing sight of the wonder of your love, the greatness of your rescue of us.

We pray that you would help us to be thankful for your gospel. And we pray, Heavenly Father, that in this coming week you would fill us, each of us, with all knowledge of you, with all power from you, that we would continue to follow you in faith, hope, and love.

[44 : 00] Thank you for this church family. And thank you too for those who are listening, who don't yet know you. And Father, we pray that you would give the gift of life to them.

Give them eyes to see the Lord Jesus and all that is in him, for all he is one. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.