

God Gave the Growth

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[0 : 00] Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 3. Pastor Collins continuing is preaching through the book of 1 Corinthians and we come to chapter 3 tonight.

We're going to read verses 1 through 9. Listen to these ancient words that are ever true because they are the words of our God.

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.

And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos?

[1 : 17] What is Paul? Servants, through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. Let's hear the word preached. For several Sundays now, in the evening, we have been sticking to the same theme.

Because Paul has been sticking to the same theme here in 1 Corinthians. The unexpected, surprising wisdom of God. So many different ways that we have seen his wisdom on display.

In the message of the cross. In the recipients of that message, like us. In the messenger themselves. And also in the Holy Spirit, who works to give us understanding of that message of the cross.

[2 : 32] His work to illuminate the truth of God's word for us to have eyes to see. All of this, unexpected wisdom. It is not the wisdom of the world. In fact, it is foolishness in the world's eyes.

The natural person who has not been given eyes to see by the Spirit. That person scoffs. We heard it this morning. The scoffers who come.

They scoff at the message. They scoff at the people who receive the message. Scoff at the messenger who brings the message. Scoff at the thought that the Spirit of God gives us understanding of his word.

So why has Paul taken so much time to unpack and to explain and to showcase the wisdom of God for us?

Because we can so easily still be enticed by the foolishness of the world. We continue as Christians to fight remaining sin.

[3 : 31] We continue to fight against sinful desires to live and to think like the world. We've seen that happening in Corinth with these Christians.

Setting aside the wisdom of God and tempted to go back towards the foolishness of the world. To think like the world. To think like the natural person.

And how were they doing this? It was in their saying, I follow this man. I follow this other man. I follow Apollos. I follow Paul.

It was that problem of looking to human leaders and thinking in human ways for the praise of fellow human beings. That problem led Paul down this path for much of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2.

Because seeing and remembering and embracing the wisdom of God is the solution when we are tempted by the folly of the world. So now Paul has thoroughly washed us in God's wisdom for several weeks.

[4 : 37] And he circles back now to that problem he first brought up in chapter 1. He hasn't said much actually of following fellow human beings lately. And he's coming back to that.

And he's going to apply the wisdom of God very directly to that problem. And he does it like a good preacher by way of illustration. Paul is going to give us four illustrations here in chapter 3.

And we're going to look at the first two of those illustrations tonight. And in those illustrations, God is going to help us to see the difference between thinking like the foolish, worldly, natural person and thinking like the wise, godly, spiritual person.

That's a bit of a mouthful. Let's simplify it with a couple questions. We're going to answer two questions. What does it look like to be an infant in Christ? And what does it look like to be maturing in Christ?

Or growing up in Christ? So let's answer that first question together. And to do it, let's read those first four verses again. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

[5 : 52] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not merely being human? We need to be very clear right up front.

Paul is addressing Christians. Even as he uses terms that would characterize perhaps unbelievers. Terms like of the flesh, or your translation might say worldly.

Yet these are Christians. How do we know? Look at how Paul calls these people. Brothers, including sisters. Siblings in God's family.

That's what we are as Christians. We are together the children of God. So the immediate context tells us Paul is talking to Christians. The less immediate context also tells us that.

[6 : 58] If we recall what Paul said about these people back in chapter 1. He said, I give thanks to my God always for you, because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in Him.

Paul goes on to talk about the testimony of Christ that was confirmed among them. He also goes on to say that they are now waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not my Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ. This Jesus Christ is Paul's Lord. Jesus Christ is the Lord of these Corinthian believers as well.

And Paul is confident that God who is faithful to sustain these people will do it to the end. God doesn't sustain unbelievers. God sustains Christians.

Those like the Corinthians who were called into the fellowship of His Son. So overwhelming evidence that we see here. Paul is addressing Christians.

[8 : 02] But there is much remaining sin still to be dealt with. Paul is addressing these Christians, though these Christians are not acting very much like Christians at the present.

And that is producing this godly frustration in Paul. Let's remember, he was the one who brought the gospel to Corinth. And he was there for 18 months.

He was preaching. He was teaching. He was seeing God by the Spirit saving sinners and a church being formed there. And so Paul stayed for that year and a half helping this church of new Christians.

Those who were young in their faith. That's what he's referencing here in these verses when he's talking about the past. When he says, I couldn't address you as spiritual, but as worldly, as infants in Christ, needing milk and not solid food, for you weren't yet ready.

All of that is in reference to the past. Those 18 months that he was with them. When the church was made up of only new Christians. In that sense, it was understandable.

[9 : 09] Paul was having to camp on the basics of the faith. He was teaching and reteaching these simple, fundamental, foundational truths. He was giving them the commandments of God from God's Word and helping them to live in obedience to those commandments.

All of it understandable then. But not now. Now Paul has this godly exasperation. What progress has been made? You were not ready for solid food then.

You still are not ready now. Years later, you are still baby Christians. In the last five years, you should have progressed in the faith.

Grown in Christ. Matured. But you haven't. You are still babies. Kids, some of you are getting ready to go back to school.

Some of you are perhaps going to a school where you take a lunchbox with you. How would you like it if you're going into kindergarten and you open up your lunchbox and mom or dad has put just a bunch of Gerber baby food into your lunchbox?

[10:15] You think, what's going on here? I'm five years old. I shouldn't be eating Gerber baby food. Well, that's what the Corinthians were still doing. Eating their baby food.

Christians for years now. But still infants in Christ. They are Christians. It is possible to be a baby Christian.

What you can't be is what we would say is a carnal Christian. There's a big difference there. I think this teaching is less prevalent now than perhaps it once was.

We can be thankful for that. Perhaps it's just not as clearly taught now. We should be careful of that. But there was a time that people taught you could be a Christian and still look entirely like the world. You could have a lifestyle that looked no different from the lost. By all outward appearances, you could look just as much as the world does as an unbeliever. You could treat Jesus as your Savior, but not be so concerned with Him as your Lord.

[11:21] And they would say you are a carnal Christian. Carnal, meaning of the flesh, of sin. Now those who were teaching this weren't saying this was a good thing or a desirable thing, but they were saying, if you believe in Jesus, but you live entirely like the world, you can still be confident.

I'm going to go to heaven. You could still be confident. I'm saved. I'm a Christian. The problem is that a true Christian, one who has indeed been called by God, one who has been born again, one who has been converted, who has repented and believed, a true Christian, will bear fruit.

If there is no fruit in your life, then you should question, what is my relationship to God? Do I really know Him?

There is no such thing as a carnal Christian, a Christian who is defined by the flesh and its desires. If you are in Christ, you are a new creation.

If you are in Christ, God has given you new desires to obey Him. You now see the goodness of His commandments, and you want to walk in His ways. Now, you may not be far along in your walk with Christ.

[12:33] You may still be young in the faith, an infant in Christ, needing to mature, but there is fruit. Now, perhaps you have been a Christian for years, and you haven't matured, like some of these Corinthians.

How we need to hear Paul's words tonight. They're not here to make excuses for us, to minimize, and to make us to be complacent. His words leave no room for that.

They are a reprimand for us. They should make us uncomfortable. We should be experiencing godly sorrow if we're looking at our lives and saying, I haven't made progress in the Christian life. All of that is characteristic of a baby Christian, but not a carnal Christian. Someone that would be called a carnal Christian doesn't care. They hear Paul's words here, and they think, hmm, okay, guess I'm still just going to keep having my Gerber baby food for lunch.

But a true Christian, who is a baby yet, perhaps an infant in Christ, does care. Paul's words here wouldn't have been written. God would not have given them to us if they were to be to no effect.

[13:47] Now, these words are prodding us. Examine yourself. See where you lack. See where you are still thinking like the world. And then let's grow by the grace of God. Let's change by the grace of God.

Let's make progress by the grace of God. Paul expects his words to land for the Corinthians. We should also see these words land for us.

So perhaps some of us are baby Christians. These words should have an effect on us, an effect they wouldn't have on one who is not a Christian.

So if you have at all been familiar with this teaching of carnal Christianity, if it reached your ears, and perhaps you've lived your life believing, I can just get my foot in the door with Jesus, and then live however I'd like, and I'll be okay.

If that's what you've believed, you need to abandon that. You need to come to Christ, cry out to Him for mercy, perhaps even tonight, that He might save you from your sins and be Lord of your life.

[14:53] You have a new master in Christ. It's a package deal. Savior and Lord. So Paul's words here are for Christians, but Christians who need to grow.

Christians who have remaining sin and are slow to address it, and not seeing the severity of it, or perhaps not even seeing that sin at all on their radar. We have several teenagers in our church who

either recently have gotten their driver's license or who are in process of getting their driver's license.

So the rules of the road, safe driving techniques, are very much on their mind. Keep those hands at 10 and 2. Stay at least three seconds behind the car in front of you.

Turn on your blinker when you intend to change lanes. Lots of things that perhaps some of us who are more experienced with many, many years are like, oh, I haven't been doing some of those things in a little while. And always, before you make that lane change, glance over your shoulder. Why? Because we know we have blind spots even with our mirrors. As Christians, we can have blind spots too. We need those blind spots pointed out.

[16:05] And that is what Paul is doing here with the Corinthians. You think you are mature Corinthians, but you're still babies in your faith. That's why I'm talking to you the way that I am.

It's for your good. God, through Paul, wants them to grow. Parents expect the same from their children. If our kids still can't manage to chew solid food at age five, you can be sure those parents are intervening for the good of their children.

So Paul is reprimanding. He's correcting. He's intervening where there is stunted growth in this church. So stunted that these Christians really do resemble the world in ways.

So what is that? What does it look like for the Corinthians? What might it look like even for us to be worldly, to be acting merely human or as mere men, to be acting of the flesh?

Paul gets very practical here and he tells us jealousy and strife. That's what verse three says here in our text. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

[17:25] So conflict among us, bitterness, envy, backbiting, trying to one-up another brother or sister, looking out for ourselves and neglecting to love and encourage and build up the body.

Infants in Christ acting like toddlers in life. Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine. Fighting over these human leaders in those ways is what Paul is saying to the Corinthians.

That's how the worldliness was so obviously showing up in their church. So is it showing up in us at all? We may not have the same outward sin problems that the Corinthians had.

We may not have cliques in our church that are centered on human leaders. But how we need to be careful that the jealousy and strife that did show up in the Corinthian church, that sinful behavior, isn't festering in our hearts as sinful thoughts and motives and desires.

Maybe for some of us, the problem actually is we struggle with following human leaders. That's the temptation. So we need to fight that in very similar ways that the Corinthians needed to fight it.

[18:44] Because if we don't, that jealousy, that strife, it will eventually show up. What's festering in our hearts will come out. But maybe for others of us, the struggle with jealousy and strife doesn't show up in following human leaders.

Well, how does it show up in your life? How might the seeds of jealousy and strife still be in your heart? It might be in ways that seem small and insignificant, but if left unaddressed, and Satan loves it, if we leave that unaddressed, those seeds will grow.

Being critical, even if you don't say it out loud, but in your heart, being critical of a fellow brother or sister. Wanting earthly possessions that another Christian has.

Wanting some measure of success that you've seen in another Christian. Wanting even a depth of biblical knowledge and understanding you see in another Christian because you want other Christians to look at you and be impressed.

disagreeing with another brother or sister and ending that conversation completely unresolved, making no effort to be reconciled, just kind of sweeping it under the rug, keeping your distance from that person in the future.

[20:04] All kinds of ways that jealousy and strife can be simmering just below the surface. Seeds of that sin growing even when it can't yet be seen.

And that's certainly not the kind of growth that should be happening in the Christian life, but there is a kind of growth that should be. And that's where Paul turns his attention next.

From one illustration about babies to another illustration about crops. From answering the question what does it look like to be an infant in Christ to now answering the question what does it look like to be maturing or growing in Christ.

So let's see that in the second half of our passage. Beginning in verse 5, let's read these verses again. What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God gives the growth.

[21 : 10] He who plants and he who waters are one and each will receive his wages according to his labor. for we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

So in answering that first question about what does it look like to be an infant in Christ, Paul was very practical. He was looking at their behavior, he was pointing it out and saying, look at that jealousy and strife in your midst.

He's making us look closely at the sinful behaviors that are taking place. Look at how you are living with one another. Or perhaps not so much look how you are living with one another, but look at how you are living against one another.

You are looking like the world. But now in answering this second question here, we see that Paul employs a very different tactic in these verses.

He talks nothing of behavior. He talks nothing of conduct, of outward actions, of what we should or shouldn't do. He doesn't simply say, well, this is how you're acting, so if you're maturing, we'll just start doing this.

[22 : 12] You need to just be this way with each other. Instead, he takes aim at our minds, at our thinking, at our perspective. Those who are maturing in Christ think rightly about certain things.

They have a proper framework for viewing all of life. And that framework is this, seeing God's sovereign hand in all things.

seeing God ultimately does what he pleases to accomplish his purposes. And this proper framework, it really is the solution to the problem of jealousy and strife, to many problems that infants in Christ have.

The more that we see God, the more that we see God at work, the less that we will look like the world. Because the world sees nothing of God at work.

Let's think about this together as it relates to the Corinthians. The Corinthians were following human leaders and it was producing jealousy and strife.

[23 : 20] And why was it producing this jealousy and strife? Because they were failing to see the sovereign hand of God in the ministry of these godly men. They were looking to these human leaders and then putting them on this pedestal.

They were thinking these men to be great. They were thinking them to be strong and influential and worthy of praise. And Paul is saying, you have the wrong framework.

You're bringing the wrong framework in your evaluation of these men, even including himself.

That's not how you should see me. We are but servants through whom you believe.

Servants of God. Not superstar celebrity preachers. Servants. Servants used by God who were given an assignment by God to the task of preaching.

It's like Paul saying, I was just doing my duty. Nothing special to see here. We're just the messengers. We represent one far greater than us.

[24 : 26] So yes, Paul is saying, I planted. Yes, Apollos watered. I came and God used my preaching to bring about this church in Corinth.

And Apollos also came and he preached to you as well, watering you all the more with the word. And yes, we will be rewarded. Paul is going to get into that more in the next set of verses that we see.

But it was God's sovereign hand at work in all of this that brought about the most important part, the growth. You're following us. You're putting the emphasis on us because you're bringing this wrong framework to your life.

You're seeing it all wrong. You're missing God's sovereign hand. I'm nothing. Apollos is nothing. Only God who gives the growth is anything.

Stop following us. And see him. Do you have the right framework in life? One that sees the sovereign hand of God in all things.

[25 : 28] How important it is that we do because there's this wonderful trickle-down effect that it produces. Right perspective leads to right living. That's Paul's logic here in this passage.

It's as though he's saying to the Corinthians, your sinful behavior, all of that bickering and fighting, all of that conflict and strife over human leaders. It will melt away when you're rightly focused on God.

When you're humbling yourselves before him and you're seeing, and it's for the first, first and foremost, you're seeing his sovereign grace at work in your lives.

The messenger, like Paul and Apollos. The messenger belongs to God. The recipients of the message, like the Corinthians. The recipients of the message belong to God.

We owe our salvation to God's work, a work that very well came through faithful, godly messengers. To whom or to what do you attribute your salvation?

[26 : 35] Maybe you look to ordinary but godly people and elevate them. Maybe you look to yourself and elevate yourself. Either way, we have the wrong thinking. We are bringing the wrong framework.

We are failing to see the sovereign hand of God in our lives. Kind of like the servant of Elisha in 2 Kings 6. When the king of Syria was out to get Elisha.

He wanted to capture him and so he surrounded the city that Elisha was in by night hoping to surprise Elisha to catch him before he could escape. When morning came Elisha's young servant arose, went out and he found the city was surrounded by the Syrians.

He rushed back in and you can hear it in his voice the fear, alas my master, what shall we do? And Elisha replied, do not be afraid for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.

Then Elisha prayed and said, O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see. So the Lord opened his eyes of the young man and he saw and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

[27 : 55] The servant of Elisha couldn't see the sovereign hand of God. All he could see was what was visible to the naked eye, the enemies. He could only see what even the natural man could see.

He wasn't seeing from a spiritual perspective, so he needed God to give him that perspective, to open his eyes so that he could see the armies of heaven surrounding him, protecting him.

Are you like the servant of Elisha, seeing even what the world is able to see and seeing nothing more than what the world sees? The world obviously doesn't see God's sovereign hand.

the world refuses to see it. The world suppresses the truth of the word. The world doesn't want to see his activity.

The world doesn't want to see his working. And so an infant in Christ is like the world, slow to see God's work in their lives, slow to see God's work in salvation, and quick to attribute that salvation to someone or something else.

[29 : 06] Maybe other people. Maybe other circumstances. Maybe themselves. Do you want to be characterized by maturity in Christ or by immaturity?

God's word is saying the difference really is one of perspective. Do you have a perspective that overlooks and ignores what God is doing?

A quick to look at things from the human perspective that's shared by the world? Or do you have a perspective, a framework that sees and rejoices in and humbly acknowledges what God is doing?

To whom do you owe your salvation? From conversion to sanctification to one-day glorification, can it be explained by human logic or only by the miraculous work of God?

For Paul, he sees God's hand in everything in his own ministry. As the messenger, he belongs to God. He was sent by God. And the recipients of the message that he brought, the Corinthians, they belong to God too.

[30 : 13] They receive the message by God's grace. They're growing only by God's grace. So Paul is seeking to bring that proper framework to them. Do you see what God is doing?

Not negating our responsibility to obey, but seeing in all of it, God is at work giving the credit to him. How we need to look at life more and more with that same framework, with the eyeglasses of faith that see God's sovereign hand in all things.

So when you have a trial, a trouble in your life, what is your first reaction? it is easy to complain, it is easy to pity ourselves, but that's just how the world operates, isn't it?

And so a maturing Christian recognizes God is at work, God is up to something, God is sanctifying me. Painful as it may be, this is an opportunity to trust him, to rest in him, to rejoice in him, to depend on him.

When you encounter a trial, what is your first reaction? When you encounter success or blessing, what is your first reaction then?

[31 : 35] Do you pat yourself on the back? Do you think of yourself pretty impressive? Are you quick to tell others of your accomplishment? Or are you quick to give praise to God? Or are you

quick to marvel, wow, look at what God has done, to rejoice in the success that he has granted you?

In all things do you see the sovereign hand of God? If you are in Christ, you are God's field, you are God's workmanship, you are God's trophy of grace, and that gives you every reason to praise him. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we confess how tempted we are to see things merely a human perspective, how often we fail to acknowledge, to see, and to rejoice in what you are doing. Father, we pray that you would give us those eyes to see all the more, that we would look around at what you are doing and rejoice in you, that we would trust in you.

We pray, Father, that we would be putting sin to death and growing in righteousness and only doing it as we're also acknowledging the good work that you're doing in our hearts. Father, we cannot do this in our own strength, and so we plead with you to send your Spirit, that your Spirit might be at work in our hearts.

[33 : 06] Father, we pray that the Spirit would be giving us a greater and greater likeness to Christ, growing us in grace. we rejoice to know that it is your good pleasure to accomplish that work in us, that you love to grow your children, and so we pray, Father, that you would do that good in us for your glory and for our good.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.