

taking one step forward

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Scripture Passage Colossians 2:6-7

Allow me to take you on a short trip in your mind and imagination. We are standing in front of a dirty tenement building in Glasgow, a street called Onslow Drive, a doorway with a number 263. We walk upstairs to the second floor. There are no elevators and inside a small apartment which was traditionally called a room and kitchen, on the doorframe of the bedroom, you might still find some small marks unless someone has filled them in with polyfilla and painted over them.

Did you ever do that?

Every year on my birthday, I stood against that doorframe with my back straight against the wood and my dad marked my height. It was always stimulating to see how much I had grown.

We begin a new study series for this fall and it has a clear agenda. It will ask each one of us, how are we doing? Where do we need to challenge ourselves to be growing spiritually?

Lets agree. The only person who has arrived in life is Jesus. The rest of us are still on the journey and we need to ask ourselves with candid honesty, are we stuck? Are we slipping behind? Or are we moving forward?

The marvelous thing about the grace of God is this: It will meet us and accept us no matter where we are. No matter what we have done. It does not say, get to this place, to this level and then I will accept you. It meets us wherever we are.

But the next thing we learn about the grace of God is that it does not leave us there. It will push and pull us beyond where we are. Beyond being satisfied with the status quo in our lives and it will call us forward. Grace urges us on.

Phil 1:9

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight

Colossians

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,¹⁰so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God

2 Thess 1:3

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the

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love all of you have for one another is increasing.

There are many other verses that echo the same truth. Growing. Increasing. We are never static. Stuck in the same position.

The thrust of this fall series is to challenge us to see that no matter where we are in our spiritual pilgrimage, we can take at least one step forward. The next step for you may be baptism 2 weeks from now. Or perhaps growth in prayer. Or hearing God in his word. Or in gratitude. Or in giving. Some Sundays you may be challenged to come forward for prayer. Or go from here with a specific plan of action for the next week.

The issue is not how much we know. The issue is how much of what we know are we translating into the daily reality of our lives. Most of us already know things that we are not doing. We need to change that and put our feet on the ground and step forward.

First question: ARE WE ON THE RIGHT ROAD?

You know the saying maxim the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

So it is with the Christian life and pilgrimage. It begins with getting on the same road that Jesus is on.

IT IS A STEP THAT ENCOURAGES INVESTIGATION.

Jesus never called anyone under false pretenses. He always allows us to examine the evidence.

John 20:30-31

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Jesus invites us to examine the evidence about who he is in this remarkable book we call the Bible. When we talk about Jesus, we are not talking about some vague new age Christ consciousness. We are talking about the historical life of someone who lived and died and rose again. The historical foundations of the Christian faith are extremely solid.

We possess 4 outstanding documents which we call The Gospels written within decades of the

resurrection. All based on eye-witness accounts. We have over 4,000 greek manuscripts, and one of the best is only 300 years after the original manuscript.

IT IS A STEP THAT CALLS FOR REASON.

It is often thought and said that when you become a Christian, you give up your mind. Nothing could be further from the truth. Faith does not feed on thin air. It feeds on facts. It stands on solid ground of reason. It is not a giant leap into the dark.

Faith is not against reason, but it asks us to step beyond reason. Reason takes us to the edge of our knowledge and information, then faith stretches out its hand and invites us to step forward.

It is a matter of historical fact to say that Jesus died. It takes a step of faith to say that Jesus died for our sins.

God invites us to bring the very best of all that we are to know him, including our minds, to a reasonable and reasoned faith in Jesus Christ.

Augustine said, a Christian is a person who thinks in believing and who believes in thinking.

IT IS A STEP THAT DEMANDS A DECISION.

Whenever we say we are just going to go with the flow, we are letting people decide for us. But we must not. We cannot let people make up our minds about the most important decision we can make, which is who is Jesus Christ and what does his life mean?

3 areas of decision

1 We decide to repent

Repent = metanoia.

Repent means to change our way of thinking. To change the direction we are going in. When we follow Christ, we change our life and our lifestyle. An unrepentant Christian is a contradiction in terms.

2 We decide to believe

We may think that believing happens to us when we just sit and do nothing. Not at all. Believing is something that we decide to do. We stand in front of the evidence and we say, I will accept this.

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That is what Thomas did. He stood in front of the evidence of Jesus, hands and side with scars and said I believe.

When I was about 19 or so, came to a crisis of faith, is this true? I was not sure. I am the kind of person that requires intellectual integrity. So I went on a journey, took my faith apart and rebuilt it again and I was satisfied.

3 We decide to receive

We receive all that was done for us on the cross. We receive the forgiveness of God.

If you are not yet a believer, perhaps have sat in this church for years, perhaps parents come here, I would challenge you to consider are you examining the evidence? Investigating Jesus Christ? Or are you just waiting on some cosmic Gallup poll to see what happens on judgement day.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. So what will it mean to take that first step?

But we need to hear the other side of that saying, that first step may start the journey. But the purpose of that first step is the complete and total journey of a thousand miles, not just taking a few steps and then stopping.

Many of you have made that decision to follow Jesus. But the question is, what has happened since then? Where are you at?

I believe today that the church faces the tragedy of what I call Peter Pan Christians. Remember the little boy who never grew up. They are Christian adults who are trying to live on Sunday School faith. There is a huge difference between being childlike, and being childish.

I agonise for Christians whose faith is little more than tradition, following some rules instead of experiencing a living growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Christian faith and growth is not chronological. It does not depend on how many years you have been a Christian. You may say that you have been a Christian for 30 years. But ask, is it one year's supply of faith 30 times over? We learn that tragedy from the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. After 40 years God brought them back to the same place on the verge of

entering the promised land and said to them, now let's try this again.

It is relational. It depends on the vitality and health of the relationship.

People sometimes say they have lost their faith. It would be more accurate to say that we do not lose our faith, rather we never put our faith to work.

Faith is like a muscle, exercise it and it will become stronger. Let it lie unused and it will atrophy. Someone training to be a pianist, concert practices 8 or so hours a day. A marathon runner may run 15 or 20 miles in road training, and day by day they become stronger and better at their skill.

Nothing is more sad than someone who has been a Christian for 30 or 40 years trying to get by on the faith they first had when they were new Christians. That does not need to be. You can start this week to change that.

Jesus says, leave your nets. Leave what is familiar, safe, predictable, what you know how to do, and step forward into some new area of growth.

What might that be for you?

In 2 weeks, I will ask you to seriously consider the step of baptism. 2 young people will be baptised. Baptism is a step of obedience and growth. I believe it is a step we are called to take soon after we become Christians, and think seriously about this with me if it is the next step of obedience and we try to avoid it. If we think we can step around it rather than step into the waters of obedience, we may well find that the other steps of growth that lie beyond it are denied to us, or at the very least become more difficult. Understand me?

Other steps of growth we will look at over the weeks.

Getting into God's Word. This Sunday, new adult classes start. In the class I teach, we will start today to share what we would like to study from God's Word.

1 Peter 2:2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation

New little grandson. He is now twice his birth weight. He just eats, kicks his little legs, stretches.

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Prayer. Most of us would say that we need to more about prayer, and pray more.

We need the relationships in the church to grow, perhaps get into a small group.

We would like to live with more gratitude, and out of that to be more generous.

We would like to know more about sharing our faith, sharing the story of Jesus. We need to be less nervous and more open about our faith.

When we start relating our faith, what we believe, more to behaviour which is how we live, we will find ourselves quickly thrust into the arena which demands that our faith be on the growing edge just to survive.

If you honestly feel that your faith is static, stagnant and not growing, then I suggest to you that you need to start exercising it, putting it to work – real work.

Colossians 2:6-7.

6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

As you have received Christ, that's the first step.

Rooted in Him, a picture of a tree with strong and stable roots.

The problem sometimes is that some Christians and churches have been so long in the same place that they have grown roots. You can't move them for anything.

We simply do not grow when we keep doing what we already know how to do. That is not growth. That is repetition.

Growth comes as a result of exercising some muscles to move us beyond where we are, taking us out of our comfort zone.

Growth comes when we move beyond what we know how to do. We stretch. We move forward into some area where we have not gone before, perhaps into some new area of service. We try something we have not tried before, and fear slowly gives way to challenge, and challenge gives birth to change and growth and excitement.

Ask yourself, where do you start? What is already in your mind? Something God has planted in you. Start there.

You know me only a little. In many ways I am a timid person. I am actually scared of public speaking. I am often afraid of new experiences. I think that is true of many of us. And so we say I've never done that before and so we stay where it is safe.

BUT

I am more afraid of staying where it is safe. I am more afraid of staying with the status quo where it is safe and comfortable and missing out something that God wants me to experience. So I am willing to risk taking risks.

So one day God said to a man called Abraham, leave your country, your people and your father's household....

In other words, leave everything you have, what is familiar, what safe, where you know how things work, and go to the land that I will show you and I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and I will make your name great.

Everything that happened to Abraham and through him. All the people of God, was contingent upon that first word – **LEAVE!**

Jesus met several men one day. They were fishing. This is what they knew how to do. How they fed their families. They were probably pretty good at it. They did it the same way every day. And the first word of Jesus to them is **LEAVE**. Leave what you know how to do, what is safe, predictable, what is familiar, and step out into a new experience, come and follow me.

After the crucifixion, when Peter has had to face his deep personal failure, what does he do? Where does Jesus find him? Back fishing. He goes back to what is safe and familiar in his life. Jesus calls him out of that again.

In these weeks that lie before us this fall, may I encourage you, challenge you, some Sundays even bug you!, to let go of whatever is safe for you. Stretch forward. Don't just go through the motions and maintain the status quo.

Jesus and all he is and has done for us. Jesus is worth so much more than that.

So imagine if you could stand with your back against God's word, just as I stood with my back against that doorframe. And God in his grace

could measure us, and tell us how much we had grown.