

# WAITING IN JOY FOR CHRIST

*SERIES: WAITING FOR CHRIST*



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Colossians 1:9-14  
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Almost a year ago, a sixteen-year-old girl tried to do something remarkable. On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, Abby Sunderland started out on a voyage in an attempt to become the youngest person to sail around the world by herself without stopping. She left from San Diego on her forty foot boat with all the supplies she needed. Abby's brother, Zac, had previously set the record as the first person under eighteen to sail around the world on a solo voyage. But Abby had to show up her brother, so she attempted a non-stop journey at age sixteen. I had similar contests with my siblings growing up, but they weren't quite as epic as the Sunderlands.

So Abby set off, but her original plan didn't work out. She had to stop in South Africa to make some repairs on her sailboat. This ended her chances at making the journey non-stop. But she continued on, hoping that she could still be the youngest person to complete a trip around the world. But she would never finish that trip. On Thursday, June 10, her vessel was "dismasted" in the middle of the Indian Ocean and she set off two emergency beacons signaling a distress call.

For two days, her story was all over the news: "Teen sailor lost at sea." Everyone was worried about her. People criticized her parents for letting her go. It was the big story, but then a rescue vessel found her and let her parents know that she was safe and they were going to bring her home.

Think about Abby for a moment. Imagine that you are her, floating out on the Indian Ocean with a broken mast. You've activated your distress signals and then you wait. You wait for an entire day. The next day, a plane flies above you. Think about the relief that you feel. You manage to communicate with the plane and they tell you that help is on the way, but still you wait. You wait alone on the ocean, one more full day. Finally, the next morning you see a rescue vessel. What do you feel?

Today we're talking about joy. It's the second Sunday of Advent and the traditional theme of this week is joy. As we've been thinking about Advent, we've been focusing on the idea that this is a season of waiting for the return

of Christ. Remember: Advent is about the coming that is yet to come, not the coming that already came. We are waiting for Christ to return and complete what He began 2000 years ago.

Waiting isn't usually a joyful activity. We hate to wait. I hate to wait in traffic; I hate to wait for my turn in line; I hate to wait for my computer to boot up; I hate to wait for anything that I want now. Waiting is usually full of anxiety and uncertainty, but today we're talking about waiting joyfully. Is that even possible? How do we learn to wait for Christ joyfully?

After Abby was picked up by a rescue ship, it would still be another twelve days before she was reunited with any of her family members. How do you think she felt during those twelve days? Was she waiting with joy? How do you think she felt when she arrived back on land and her brother Zac was waiting for her?

To find out how to wait with joy, we're going to continue in our Advent series looking at the first chapter of Colossians. It just so happens, each of the Advent themes appear in the first part of Colossians in the right order. Last week we began our series by looking at the opening few verses in Colossians that feature hope as a prominent theme. Today we'll continue to look at what Paul says about joy. We'll finish our series in the rest of the book of Colossians in the spring.

Our passage this morning is Colossians 1:9-14. In this section, Paul continued to explain how he prayed for the Colossians. Last week we saw how he gave thanks for them. This week, we see how he asked for something. What he asked for was a critical part of them to experience joy, but that's not all. He asked for something that freed them up so they could have joy and then reminded them of something else that would make them joyful. As we look at this passage, I'm hoping that we'll see two things that allow us to experience joy as we wait for Christ.

## Receive God's Pleasure

We'll start by reading verses 9-12. This is Paul's request of God for the Colossians.

Colossians 9-12a:

**<sup>9</sup>For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. <sup>10</sup>And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, <sup>11</sup>being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully <sup>12</sup>giving thanks to the Father.**

This is Paul's prayer for the Colossians. He asked God for something very specific for these people. He asked that God would fill them with the "knowledge of His will," but what exactly is that? I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out God's will for my life. Should I go this direction or that direction? How should I spend my time? Who should I marry? What activities should my kids be involved with?

But when Paul talked about the Colossians being filled with the knowledge of God's will, it was something bigger. Something more cosmic than the decisions we make. That's why he said they needed spiritual wisdom to get there. There's a lot of similarity between the language that Paul used here and the language that he used in the first part of Ephesians. In Ephesians he gave a little more detail on what he meant by the will of God. In Ephesians 1:9 and 10 he said, "He made known to us the mystery of His will ... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

As I said last week, Colossians is one of the clearest and most powerful descriptions of who Christ is on a cosmic level. Next week we'll look at a great hymn about the cosmic Christ. In Ephesians we see that the mystery of God's will has to do with everything being brought together in Christ. So when Paul asked for the Colossians to be filled with the knowledge of God's will; he asked primarily that they would understand who Christ really is and what place He plays in the universe.

On Thursday morning of this week, I turned on my computer to continue working on my sermon and I was notified by the program that I use that my data file had become corrupt. I have a good backup system, so I wasn't too worried until I realized that my computer had recently been replaced and I didn't set it up correctly. My computer had saved the corrupted file on my desktop, but my program couldn't open it. I spent hours trying to find a way to get at the data that was inside because it was about two weeks of my work. I knew the data was there, I just couldn't get to it.

This is what the knowledge of God's will is like. It's a critical piece of data that changes everything for us. It's far more important than two weeks of work. If we could just get at this mystery of Christ, it would blow us away. We'd never be the same.

Paul said that he wanted the Colossians to be filled with this knowledge so their lives would look different. This knowledge isn't just about God—it helps us live differently toward God. It makes us able to live lives that are worthy of the Lord. Can you imagine that? Would you call your life worthy of the Lord? Paul added that it means we can please Him in every way. Would you say your life pleases God in every way? Can you even imagine that?

But Paul didn't pray for something that was completely out of reach. This is what's amazing about this passage. Paul said that when we really grasp who Christ is, our lives can please God.

When I was in high school, a few weeks after I got my driver's license, I drove a bunch of my friends to a concert. On the way home as we were all lined up trying to get out of the parking lot, I rear-ended the guy in front of me. It was my first accident and it felt like a huge deal to me. I remember how I felt driving home that night, I knew I had to tell my parents that I'd been in an accident. I felt awful as I waited to see my parents, because I knew that I had bad news to tell them. I didn't know exactly how they'd react. I didn't think they'd be too angry, but I knew they'd be disappointed. I dreaded having to tell them what happened.

I think that's the way most of us conceive of waiting for Christ. We know we've failed. We know we're a mess. So we wait for God. We know He won't be furious with us because we've been taught that His anger was spent on Christ at the cross. But we don't really think He'll be happy

with us either. We expect that we'll look at His face, see a tear of disappointment at all our many failures in life, and receive a half-hearted welcome from Him.

But that's a lie. The Bible talks about being welcomed into eternity with joy. It tells us about waiting for Christ's return with eager anticipation. Why? Because He is pleased with us! Not because we're perfect and not just because Christ died for our sins. Certainly, God accepts us on the basis of Christ's work for us. Paul prays for the Colossians that they might live a life that pleases God. So, then, it must be possible. Our first challenge this morning, then, is to receive God's pleasure and to believe that our lives can please Him. Isn't this one of the main things that makes it hard for us to have joy? The idea that God is always displeased with us? But as we look at this passage, we're going to see that our lives can be pleasing to God. What's left for us is to receive that pleasure. Receive God's pleasure.

One of the issues that came up for Abby Sunderland in the wake of her attempt to sail around the world is the role that her father played in that dream. Her parents were actually investigated by Child Protective Services to see whether they had acted responsibly in allowing their daughter to pursue this dream. Lots of people accused her father that this was his dream, not her dream. They claimed that this heroic effort of hers was nothing more than a brave little girl trying her best to please a demanding father.

Most of us have a pretty strong desire to please our parents. That's actually the way it is supposed to be. Can you imagine a world where kids didn't care at all about pleasing their parents? It would be complete chaos. My family is chaotic enough and my kids want to please me. I can't even imagine what it would be like if that were taken away. So we all have this innate desire to please our parents.

But sometimes we get stuck there. Our earthly parents are given to us to model God as our Heavenly Father. As we grow up, we're meant to orient our lives not around our earthly parents, but our Heavenly Father. That is whose pleasure we seek. He is the one we are living for. Making that transfer is difficult. We allow the voices of our parents to rule our lives and dictate our every decision, sometimes even after they've passed away.

I don't know what is true of Abby Sunderland and her father. But I know that a lot of us are trying desperately to live lives that are pleasing to a father that we think will never be happy with us. As I've studied this passage, it has

been really comforting to me, because I realize that I can receive God's pleasure. Paul listed four things that he said are part of pleasing God. And the good news is that they aren't as hard as we would have thought.

## Bearing Fruit

Paul's first item was "bearing fruit in every good work." The idea here is that something good is coming from our lives. We are replicating our lives into others. Our efforts are producing fruit. What I find comforting about this is that Paul talked about bearing fruit in every good work. Notice that it's not doing every good work. It's not that I have to be doing every good thing that there is to do. My call is not to fix the world. It's not even to take advantage of every single opportunity that presents itself to me. Thank God for that! When I think that way, it's easy to lose every last bit of joy because I am aware that every day there are opportunities I miss and I could always be doing more. With every person I talk to, I could be more loving, more sensitive, and more available. I'm always missing opportunities. There's this voice in my head that whispers to me, "you could be doing more," "you're not doing enough," "you missed that chance—what kind of person are you?"

I have some bad news for us. There are people in Toledo, Ohio who need help. I've spent some time in Toledo and I happen to know that there is great spiritual need there. There are families that are falling apart, people that need to know God, and people living on the streets. Here's the problem: we're not doing anything about it. PBC has no ministry outreach to Toledo, OH. What kind of a church are we? There are people in need in Toledo and we're just sitting here singing songs? How can we call ourselves Christians? How could God ever be pleased with us?

This is how a lot of us think. This passage reminds us to look for fruit on the trees that we've planted, not to focus on the bare ground that we didn't get to. Look for fruit on the trees we've planted. That doesn't mean that God will never lead us to plant more trees, but right now our call is to bear fruit in the good works we are doing.

When I have that perspective, I see God at work through me. I see fruit in my family. I see fruit in this church. I see fruit in my life. I also see fruit from your good works. I see how God is working through us, through you. Don't

focus on the opportunities you miss.

## Growing in the knowledge of God

The next thing Paul talked about was to grow in the knowledge of God. What a great cycle. We are filled with the knowledge of God's will so that we can grow in Him. That means this is a process. It's ongoing. I don't have to know it all—this is more about the trajectory of my life than the outcome.

We got a new kitten this week. Our house is up to 13 forms of life now. This kitten is tiny, but she's growing and every day she is getting bigger. That's what pleases God. It doesn't matter how mature we are, it doesn't matter how much Bible knowledge we have, it doesn't matter where we are. What is important is what direction we're headed in.

We're so prone to thinking that God is always dissatisfied with us—feeling like he can never be pleased with us. Many of us think that we can never do enough to please God. This usually leads to one of two things. Either we become the “good kid” or the “bad kid.” And neither option is all that good.

The “good kids” work themselves to the bone trying to please their parents. They are always frantically trying to do something big, something huge. Maybe this is what drove Abby Sunderland, who knows? But I know a lot of kids who just seem to be desperately trying to win their parent's approval. These kids aren't joyful. They're desperate.

The “bad kids” have given up pleasing their parents. You can tell they haven't stopped wanting their parents to be pleased with them; they've just given up on trying. They don't think they can even win, so they literally say, “to hell with it.”

A lot of us vacillate between being “good kids” and “bad kids” in our relationship with God. We try desperately to please Him on some days and saying “to hell with it” on others.

But there are other kids who just seem secure. These kids seem to know their parents are pleased with them. They do good things and they make some mistakes; sometimes they

make really big mistakes. But they have a kind of freedom and a kind of joy that seems to come from the knowledge that they are OK. That's what it looks like to be growing in the knowledge of God, knowing that our Father is pleased with our growth, not with our size. That's freedom.

One of the cool things to notice is that Paul used these same words a few verses earlier as he described the gospel. He said that the gospel was bearing fruit and growing throughout the world. Last week I pointed out that this is what people were originally meant to do; the gospel is bringing the world back to what God always wanted for it. Now we see that when we are filled with Christ, we do the same thing. We participate in this world being redeemed, being re-created into what it was meant to be in the first place.

## Being Strengthened

Paul said that pleasing God had to do with bearing fruit and growing. Then he said that knowledge of God's will leads to being strengthened. We get strong. This is powerful language: strengthened with all might and glory. God's people aren't wimps—they are strengthened with the very strength and glory of the God of the universe. Notice what kind of strength this is. It's not a strength to conquer. It's not an explosive strength. It's not a strength to do amazing things. It's the strength to endure with patience.

I watched the first *Superman* movie from 1978 with my kids recently. There's a scene when the boy Superman, as a small child, has just landed on earth he lifts an entire pickup truck off of his uncle as it threatens to crush him. That's the kind of strength I want.

But this is different. It's the strength to patiently endure and to wait. Isn't that what we're talking about here, during this season of advent? We're talking about learning to wait and waiting takes strength. It takes the strength to restrain ourselves from taking matters into our own hands. We need the strength to avoid impatience, the strength to endure, and the strength to know what God is doing in the future even when it doesn't look very promising. This strength comes from knowing the will of God. From knowing who Christ is. This is the strength we need.

Notice again that Paul didn't say that pleasing God involves being strong. Pleasing God is about being

strengthened. It's about the process. It's about getting stronger. That means wherever we are, however puny and impatient and unruly we are—we please God when we are in the process of getting stronger. Again, it's about the process, not reaching the goal.

## Joyfully giving thanks

So pleasing God is about bearing fruit, growing in the knowledge of God, and being strengthened. The last thing is the culmination. When all this is happening: we respond with what we're talking about this morning: joy. We joyfully give thanks. We are joyful because we are pleasing the one we're meant to please. No more worries about whether we're good enough, doing enough, or whether we'll measure up. We can please God. So we are joyful.

I know this is what I really long for in my relationship with God: to be able to know that my life pleases him and to stop worrying about whether I measure up. Not to vacillate between being a “good kid” and “bad kid,” but to have a sense of security, constancy, and integrity. In Paul's words, “To live a life worthy of the Lord” (v. 10). That is freeing to me. That allows me to receive God's pleasure. That's what I really want and that's what I want for us. For all of us to experience this freedom of living our lives in a way that God is pleased with us. That can allow us to wait joyfully for Christ to return.

## Receive God's Rescue

So Paul prays that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God's will and that filling culminates in their joyful thanks to him. Then he finishes the passage by reminding them of what God has done for them. This is the other side to their joy. It's like in the first part of the passage, he climbs a mountain with joy at the top and in the second part, he climbs back down the other side. One part leads to joy, another flows from joy. So let's read verses 12-14 to see what Paul reminds them of.

Colossians 1:12-14:

**<sup>12</sup>Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. <sup>13</sup>For he has rescued us from the dominion of**

**darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

What has God done for the Colossians? What has he done for us? He has rescued us. This is the message of the gospel as it applies to us individually. We have been rescued. God rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us into a new kingdom where he is pleased with us, where he has started a work of redemption that he will bring to completion in the future. This is what our God has done.

One of our problems is that this seems far away for a lot of us. That's the danger of being rescued—we're brought to a place of safety, our life is established on solid ground, and things start going a bit better for us. It's easy to forget that we were rescued. This can be especially hard if we grew up as a Christian. If we always knew God, it's hard to realize how dark the kingdom was that He rescued us from.

But we also live our lives in that domain of darkness and we're drawn in by its lies. It doesn't seem that bad. We can dabble in this, dabble in that. People seem to be doing fine without God. It's a good thing God is there to help us if things get really bad, but for the most part, we're OK on our own. Our eyes adjust to the darkness and we forget about the kingdom of light. If we're doing fine on our own, then God's rescue seems redundant if not annoying.

One of the common fights in my house is when one of my kids is trying to do something like set the table or zip up their jacket and their brother or sister helps them without being asked. Pretty much every day, we intervene in a “he helped me and I didn't want him to” situation. That's actually how most of us are. Don't you hate it when someone tries to help you do something that you'd really rather do on your own? Paul says that our joy is based on remembering that God rescued us. We're not thankful if we don't think we need to be rescued; we're just annoyed. So if this rescue is going to bring us joy, we need to receive it. Just as we receive God's pleasure, we need to receive God's rescue. Receive God's rescue.

Abby Sunderland set out on a boat to prove something; she wanted to demonstrate that she could do something. Whether she was trying to please her father or prove something to the world doesn't really matter. On January 23, she set sail from Marina del Rey: *The Marina of the King*. She left *The Marina of the King* to prove something;

she wanted to show the world who she was.

It doesn't matter whose voice plays in our head. It doesn't matter who we're trying to prove ourselves to: our father or mother, an old teacher, an old friend: it's all the same. Because it always leads us to set sail from *The Marina of our King* and go off on our own. It's always about us and about what we can do on our own.

This is why Paul said that we have been rescued from the dominion of darkness. Have you ever been in complete darkness? I don't mean a room with the lights turned out. I mean complete darkness. No lights anywhere. There's one room in our house that doesn't have any windows. So when my kids want to see something that glows in the dark or test out a flashlight, they go in there. But even that room isn't completely dark. Think about complete darkness where you really can't even see your hand in front of your face. It's terrifying, isn't it? To think that you have no idea what might be three feet away from you. You're completely vulnerable and hopeless.

This is what life is like apart from God. We have no hope, no chance at proving anything to anyone. When it all comes down to it, there really is no reason for anything apart from God. When I have moments of doubt, I realize that if God isn't real then everything is darkness. What is there that's left?

The name of Abby's boat that took her from Marina del Rey was *Wild Eyes*. What a fitting name. *Wild eyes* led Eve to see that God's forbidden fruit was "good for food and pleasing to the eye" (Genesis 3:6). And so she ate. I know about wild eyes. There was a season for me when my wild eyes led me into being trapped by pornography. My wild eyes led to overlook the good things God had given me and caused me to focus on what I wanted for myself. The truth is that all of us know about wild eyes. Eyes that lead us to compare ourselves to others, seek our own glory, and refuse to see other people because we're so consumed with proving ourselves to the world.

Abby's wild eyes led her to a place where she needed rescue. She couldn't rescue herself. She began a journey to prove to the world what she could do on her own and she ended up floating in the middle of the Indian Ocean waiting for a French fishing boat to rescue her. That boat finally picked her up and took her to an island called Reunion Island. This was where she would be reunited with her brother and eventually her whole family.

Can't you see that Abby's story is our story? When I heard her story, it almost seemed like the whole thing happened for a sermon illustration. I couldn't have made up better details myself. Paul says that God has rescued us and brought us into a new kingdom. That kingdom belongs to his Son. That's our brother. This is what we're doing during Advent: waiting to get to Reunion Island. Waiting for the kingdom of the Son that God loves.

This is where our passage comes full circle. I said that being filled with the knowledge of the will of God has something to do with Christ. Here's where it connects. When we understand that we are living in the kingdom of Christ and we know that we are one with Christ, then our lives please God. It's not about trying as hard as we can. It's not about solving the problems of the world; it's about knowing Christ, living in his kingdom, and being "in him." It's about having our lives wrapped up with his. God's will is that everything would come together in Christ. God's will for us is that we would live with him at our core. Then we naturally bear fruit. We naturally grow in our knowledge of God. We naturally get stronger and we're joyful. How could life get any better? Our Father is pleased with us and we're on our way to being reunited with our brother.

## Conclusion

It's a tough weight to prove yourself to the world. That's what Abby Sunderland discovered and it's the same burden that a lot of us carry around today. We're desperately trying to please a Heavenly Father whom we think can never be satisfied and we're prone to forgetting how much we need to be rescued from the darkness that doesn't seem so bad. That's no way to live. You can't have joy proving yourself. You can't have joy in the dark.

Today we've seen a different way. We've been reminded that our God has rescued us. We need to be rescued and God has done that. He's included us with his Son. And we've seen that our lives can be pleasing to God. Our Father doesn't push us to accomplish something huge before he'll be happy with us. He wants to see us bearing fruit in our works. He wants to see us growing in a relationship with him. He wants to see us getting stronger as his strength is lived out within us and he wants to hear us say, "thank you." He wants us to be joyful.

My goal this morning is not to load one more

expectation upon us. To say that on top of everything else we're supposed to be doing for God, now we have to be happy about it too. It's exactly the opposite. Most of us carry burdens far heavier than we're meant to carry, we take too much responsibility for fixing everything in our lives and in the world, and we're crushed by the conviction that God is always displeased with us. Take that away. Drop it off. Receive God's rescue. Receive God's pleasure. Go forth in joy.

## Interpretive Translation by Paul Taylor

Colossians 1:9-14:

*It's because of how strong your faith is that we can't stop praying for you. We're asking him to make you more and more aware of his grand plan for the world that can only be recognized and appreciated with spiritual eyes. When you have this awareness, your life measures up. You can please God with everything you do. Your good works will bring life to other people. You'll keep getting to know God better and better. You'll get stronger and stronger as God's infinite strength increases within you. That strength will allow you to go through hard times as you wait patiently. With all this happening, you'll be so excited to thank your Father for everything he's done.*

*After all, this is the Father who let you be part of his people in the kingdom filled with beautiful light. He reached into the darkness that used to trap you and rescued you. He included you right along with his own Son—the one he loves more than anything. His Son is the one that fixed your relationship with the Father by erasing the charges against you.*

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