

GROWING UP INTO CHRIST

Truth for a People of Love

TEXT: EPHESIANS 4:11-16 (ESV)



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Irrevocable Fact

Every page of the New Testament presumes one irrevocable fact: Jesus Christ is building His church on earth until the day He returns for her. Yes, people, locations and circumstances vary and change, but Jesus is preparing for Himself a bride, and we know her as the Church. (Eph 5:25-27, Rev 19:7)

The trouble is often earthbound creatures just can't see it until Christ shows it to us, and even then that's no guarantee we will be at peace with what He is doing. But this is never His fault or a mistake He is making. It is always a challenge for us to grow in our trust of Him and His leading in the face of uncertainty.

How do you handle uncertainty? Do you have a "go-to" response—despair, anxiety, detachment, busyness, or perhaps prayer? Many of you have shared some of your own uncertainty about what the Lord is doing in Oak Hills right now. And the odds are that for most of you, this is only one of several uncertainties in your life, and probably not even the biggest. And while I am unwaveringly convinced this season of transition is one way Christ is building this church, I want to confess my solidarity with those of you who struggle with a fear of the unknown. Sometimes I feel it too. The reality of being human is that we can neither see much less control how things will go.

But I believe in the goodness of God. I know He is building His church here and now. One way uncertainty strengthens us is by posing this question: Do you believe God works all things together for the good of those who love Him? His word says He does, (Rom 8:28) and not simply by working little miracles every time we get in a tough spot. God works all things together for the good of those who love Him often through long, deliberate purposes that develop over time. And the local church is one of those places where we see this most clearly. Let's see it as we read again of Christ's unwavering devotion to His Bride.

Ephesians 4:11-16

¹¹And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son

of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Building on a Solid Foundation

It is tempting to think the road the Lord means for us to walk is one that should come easy. When uncertain times come, we wonder where God is. But this view of God sees Him as a puppeteer, telling a story that should be empty of uncertainty and struggle, when we all know the story we're in is full of both. See how our text today describes one of the most common ways God provides for His people in the face of uncertainty. He gives His people various gifts and then tells them to live and walk together, using those individual gifts for the good of all.

The interweaving of these gifts makes the church strong. Some know how to preach. Some are gifted at explaining complex truths in easy-to-follow ways. Some have a nose for sniffing out deceitful schemes and cunning. We learn, we mature, we develop and use our gifts, we speak the truth in love, we resist craftiness and personality cults, and we take on growing up into Him who is our Head as our goal and mission together.

One of the most comforting things I have seen from God's word as I have studied it these past 8 years is how God calls His people to live and move and have our being in Him (Act 17:28) in ways that actually work in real life. Of course, we do live in a broken world that abounds with problems—many of which are in us. But God's counsel for our lives is not simply, "Do your best and when you get in a bind, I'll sweep in and work a miracle." God's instruction is to build our lives on His solid foundation, not on sand, so that when waves and wind beat against us, we aren't toppled. (Mt 7:24-27) When we know the foundation we're built on is strong, we don't need to know exactly what the coming waves will be like or how they'll hit us to know we'll be okay.

One of the ways Jesus meets our needs in the face of uncertainty is by giving us each other. The church is set apart by Christ for a purpose in this world, and because this is so, Paul says we need to continually seek maturity. Is maturity simply growing **OUT OF** bad habits and thinking or is it growing **INTO** something as well? The church Paul describes in this text is one that is growing into something. Paul says maturity is "growing up in every way into Him who is the Head, Christ." The Body submitted to the will of its Head, Christ, is not only useful, it is told it **WILL BE USED** not just reactively, but proactively! The church, its members joined and held together in Christ, will **nurture the earth** by bringing the light of truth into a dark world like a city set on a hill. There is no higher calling than this.

The Silver Chair

So God tells us how to live among each other in the face of uncertainty. For many, that part is easier to accept than the other reality we find in our text—which is that since we are not the head of our own Body, we are at the mercy and will of the One who is, Jesus Christ, and following Him requires trust. In the face of uncertainty it can be hard to trust anyone, even God. C.S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair*, from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, opens with a girl named Jill and a boy named Eustace running away from school bullies. In their attempt to escape, Eustace calls the name of Aslan, Lord of the magical land he'd visited before. And before they know it, they're standing on the highest cliff either of them had ever seen in Aslan's country.

Eustace is swept away off the edge of the cliff, leaving Jill alone and uncertain. She has never been in Narnia before. Suddenly, a great Lion appears and tells her if she is to be saved, she must follow him. Reluctantly, she follows at as safe a distance as she can manage. She grows thirsty as they come to a stream. She can almost taste the crystal clear water. But there's just one problem—the Lion has positioned himself between the girl and the river, and he's not moving. Then they have this exchange:

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion.

"I am dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

"May I... could I... would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. "Will you promise not to do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. "Do you eat girls?" she said.

"I have swallowed up girls & boys, women & men, kings & emperors, cities & realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

"I daren't come and drink," said Jill.

"Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

"Oh dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream," said the Lion.

Can you imagine the position Jill is in here? Only moments ago, her greatest fear focused on the threats of school-yard bullies. But all that is forgotten now in the presence of the Lion. If she is to have her thirst quenched, she'll have to drink from Aslan's stream—this one who has already told her He not only consumes children, but entire cities and realms. She's in a spot.

Jill cannot avoid the majestic One who tells her that her thirst can only be satisfied by drawing near to Him. Apart from Him, she will thirst. With Him, she'll find the water of life. But the Lion is calling her to walk right into a situation that might prove to be too much for her, as far as she's concerned. And He's not promising a particular outcome one way or another. Aslan is drawing Jill into His service and story, and her life depends on accepting His decency as she draws ever nearer to where He is.

This is what Christ does with His people. He draws us out to stand in places that are at the same time where He is and seemingly unsafe—but only inasmuch as we've decided in advance what safe should look like for us. I don't know the rest of my story. I don't know the rest of yours. But I know the One writing the Story is good, and at the end, everything shall be perfect. Still, all who are drawn into His story quickly realize they're in over their heads. What will you do in the face of uncertainty? Will you despair? How will you lead others?

The Simple Mistake of Despair

How do you respond when you feel in over your head—when you can't see what lies ahead of you? For those things you don't believe will affect you one way or another, maybe you don't give them a second thought. But the things you care for the most, you're prone to respond strongly about in the face of uncertainty. Whether it is our church, family, job, vehicle, 5 year plan or whatever else it might be, for some of us, if we can't see how something will hold together, we doubt it will.

This is called despair. I have too high a view of this congregation to believe my family's call to Nashville could send Oak Hills into despair, but I do recognize that transitions like this can certainly tempt many of us to at least entertain thoughts of despair.

Is despair even an honest reaction for a Christian? Consider what J.R.R. Tolkien scholar, Patrick Curry, wrote about despair, "Despair is for people who know, beyond any doubt, what the future is going to bring. Nobody is in that position. So despair is not only a kind of sin, theologically, but also a simple mistake, because nobody actually knows. In that sense there always is hope."

If we live in the Lord's country—which the Bible says we do, since it teaches us that Jesus is Lord over all Creation (Phil 2:10-11)—though we do not know what the future holds, we know the Lord over it works all things together for the good of those who love Him. (Rom 8:28) Our aim in life is not simply to avoid those who might harm us, but to embrace the call to follow the One who gives us life. Jesus never promised this would be easy or without risk. But He did Promise that He would provide all our needs according to His riches in glory. (Phil 4:19) And one of His greatest provisions for your life is the Body of Christ.

So the Body cares for its members by being just that—a body. While the members fail, the Head does not. He is the seat of wisdom and of judgment and the gates of hell will not prevail against what He means to use us for. And there is grace. We don't deserve salvation, but He gives it. We don't represent Him perfectly, but still He uses us to represent Him. He could have done this differently, but He didn't. This tells us He wants to use us for eternal things beyond our wildest imaginations—which in itself is grace.

So don't despair. You simply don't have enough information to despair in an honest way. But you have more than enough information to hope. The Maker of Heaven and Earth is the Head of His Church on earth. Draw near to Him. He is the water of life and there is no other stream. But He is good. And He is here. May we grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ.