

INTRODUCTION

I wonder if you have any New Year resolution in mind. This dog in the cartoon asked his buddy: “What exactly is a ‘New Year’s Resolution’?” His friend reply: “It’s a ‘to-do list’ for the first week of January.” Hope that your resolution does not last that short. Some people may want to exercise more, especially after feeling guilty of eating too much over the holidays. Perhaps you may have different plans. Some people may want to learn a new skill at work, spend more time with their family members or try out a new area of church ministry. Those are all very positive goals. Besides all those endeavors there is a common area for all the Christians to focus on. It is to get closer to God. Our new church theme for 2016 is “Rooted and Built up in Him, and Established in the Faith.” It is derived from Colossians 2:6-7. Let us read these two verses together. By proposing this theme the Elders are hoping that in the New Year we can all go back to the basics of Christian life and to have a yearning to walk in God’s Word. That begins with reading the Word of God. In the Chinese title of today’s message the meaning go one step further. Not only that we spend time to read the Word we should also memorize the Word.

Our message today will be centered on those two verses in Colossians. The Colossians church at that time was impacted by false teachings. People had confusion about the true identity of Jesus Christ being the one true God and the one true man. There was also influence by the pursuit of mysterious knowledge. Paul wrote this letter to straighten out the truth. In the letter he highlights the supremacy of Christ. This supreme God is above all else. But He willingly became a man like you and me and sacrificed Himself on the cross to reconcile us with God the Father. But that is only the starting point of Christian life. God wants us to build an intimate relationship with Him through reading His Word. If our mind is fully occupied by God’s Word it will affect our attitude, value system and decision making. God’s nature and character will flow out from our speech, deeds and inter-personal relationship. Therefore, my prayer for brothers and sisters in the New Year is that we will all yearn for God’s Word to foster our spiritual growth in Christ.

EXPLANATION

1. 領受神的話 Knowing the Word

In merely two short verses Paul summarizes the spiritual life of Christians from the beginning to their ongoing growth. The first step is a transition from unbelieve to believe. The starting point for any seeker is first to know the Word of God. Paul says in **verse 6**: So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him. Let us do a little Greek grammar analysis here. The verb “received” here is in its Aorist form. In general, this tense is to describe a one-time action. For example, if I say that most of us ate our breakfast before we left home this morning what I try to emphasize is that the eating process has been completed. Therefore, such description would not be accurate for those who carried your breakfast and continued to eat it in the car on your way to the church. Back to the verse. Therefore, receiving Christ is a one-time action. Notice the titles Paul uses to describe Jesus in this verse: He is “Christ Jesus and Lord.” By saying that He is Christ, it is to address His deity. He is 100 % God. The name Jesus

illustrates His humanity. He was also 100 % when He came to the earth. Then by referring Him as Lord, Paul highlights His sovereignty. He is the Master of the universe and the Master of our lives. This Christ Jesus and Lord desires to build an eternal relationship with us. How can a person enter into such relationship with God? It is through knowing God's Word. Paul puts in "as you were taught" in **verse 7**. Just like the verb "received" in the previous verse this verb "taught" is also in Aorist form. Therefore, a person can become a Christian only after he is taught the truth in the Bible. He can read the Bible himself, or someone shares the gospel with him. Paul also says in **Romans 10:17** that: Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. A person receiving Christ has to be a result of knowing God's Word.

Once I had an opportunity to work with brothers and sisters from another church. They split into teams to go out visiting people and share the gospel with them, just like what we do in our Mandarin E-Training ministry. After that, the teams gathered to share their experience. One team reported that it led a person to Christ. I told you about this before – I have been a Christian long enough and saw many "false conversions" that I usually do not get too excited on hearing that someone accepted Christ. I am not a pessimist by nature, but I just try to be cautious. I happened to know that person to whom the team shared the gospel. Therefore, I asked him what the team told him. He said: "One of the sisters told me how she accepted Christ, and how she experienced God's love in a unique way. Then she urged me to receive Christ because how blessed it would be to become a Christian." It would be unfair for me to judge the content of what that sister said. But my concern is that seemingly not much Bible truth was explained. He did not know why he had to accept Christ except because the sister told him that it was a good thing to do. I do not know about you but before I make a big purchase I would study the product and read some reviews first to see if it is worth the cost. If it is important to know a product before buying it how much more critical it would be to know what the decision is about, before committing your life to Jesus Christ? Brothers and sisters, our task is to share the gospel. We should not pressure people into accepting Christ as if we had sales quota to meet. Some Christians may say: "Just go ahead and accept Christ now. If you are not satisfied later you can change your mind." I confess that in the past I said the same thing too. Our task should be helping people know the gospel in God's Word. Whether or not a person would receive Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. 進深神的話 Growing in the Word

Paul's hope is that we will continue to walk in God's Word. Knowing God's Word is the entry point of our spiritual life. We need to continue to grow in the Word. Paul says in the first half of **verse 7** that we have to be "rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith." All three verbs here are in the passive participle form. The implication is that after we knew the Word and became a Christian it is God who causes spiritual growth in us. The verb rooted is in perfect tense. It refers to an action that was completed in the past but it triggered consequential result. A former seminary professor of mine used the illustration of slipping on ice to explain the essence of perfect tense. Once you skidded you will go on to glide uncontrollably. Once a Christian is rooted in Christ there will be ensuing growth. Then the other two verbs "built up" and "strengthened" are in present tense. One common usage of the present tense in Greek is to denote a repeated and habitual action. Therefore, as Christians, once we accepted Christ we have to continue to be built up in Christ and strengthened in the faith. An indispensable means for us to

be built up in Christ and strengthened in the faith is through God's Word. **1 Peter 2:2** reads: Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. Just like babies need milk to grow, Christians also need to feed on spiritual food, the Word of God, in order for our spiritual life to grow. In Psalm 19 we read earlier the psalmist tells us the benefits of God's Word in our life. **Verse 7** says: The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The word "revive" here is the same word in Psalm 23:3 when David says God restores our souls. So the idea is that God's Word replenishes the strength of a weary heart. Then **verse 8** adds : The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. God's Word can cheer up a heavy heart. It can also illuminate our eyes to help us make godly discernment in life.

If God's Word is so critical to our spiritual growth we should strive to feed on it. If we eat the right food then we will grow strong. I have two boys at home. Earlier on my wife pointed out a big difference between raising boys and girls. For girls you have to invest quite some money on making them look good. As they grow up gradually they are very conscious about what clothes to wear and what accessories to go with them. For typical boys they do not care much if their clothes are old or even have holes in them. For boys the money goes to their food. Not too long ago my older son realizes that steak is delicious. He inherits that from mom. Therefore, he keeps asking us to buy steak. The more children eat the more they will grow. However, the way they will grow depends on what they eat. There is a category of food called junk food that my boys love to eat, while they should try to avoid them. The same principle applies to our mind too. The question is, what kind of food your soul feeds on? If your mind is fully occupied with things like how to get rich quickly, how to enjoy life with your money, tabloids of this and that celebrity, etc. then how much appetite do you still have left for God's Word? Of course we all need to work, eat, rest and be aware of what happens around us. It boils down to a matter of priority. If you agree that growing in God's Word is important, then you will spare time to read it no matter how busy you are. Once a Christian leader in the yester-years said something that really pierces my heart. He woke up one day feeling burdensome of the many things he planned to do. He said to himself: "I am indeed very busy today I have better spend more time on prayer before I begin my day." He did not say that he had to dive into his to-do list so that he could get a sense of accomplishment when he checked things off the list one by one. He knew that he had to get close to God first. What about us? When things get piled up do you tend to skip your spiritual food and resort to a simple noodle-soup instead, or even skip God's Word altogether? You say: the Bible is so thick, how can I know where to start? We introduced the 2016 church Bible reading plan last week. In case you missed it let me summarize it again. We recommend brothers and sisters to follow the "Daily Walk with the Lord" to read the whole Bible once in this year. We can print out the reference materials and devotional questions for those who do not have access to a computer at home. If you prefer to receive the material via email we can send that to you. If you would like to use your cell phone or tablet to access the plan you can download the related App. The plan is so designed that it is one a sixth-day schedule from Monday to Friday, then you can pick to read on a Saturday or Sunday. We will start the plan from tomorrow. If you do not have any particular reading plan I encourage you to join us. There is an insert in the bulletin. I encourage you to fill it out if you have not done so last week. Besides reading the Bible we will start a Bible verse memorization plan too. As a start we will memorize two verses each month. If brothers and sisters believe that we should do more then we will increase it to four verses later in

the year. For this week and the next we will memorize Colossians 2:6-7. Shall we give it a try now?

3. 活出神的話 Showing the Word

We need to continue to walk in God's Word. We accept Christ after we knew God's Word. We feed on God's Word so that we will continue to grow. A positive sign of healthy growth is that God's Word can be showed through our life. At the end of **verse 7** Paul says that a healthy Christian life is characterized by "overflowing with thankfulness." Of all the godly virtues Paul could have chosen he highlighted thankfulness as a way for Christians to show that they are walking in God's Word. A Christian who shows a life of thankfulness to God is a person of humility. The focus of his life is God-centered, rather than self-centered. Moses warned the Israelites before they entered Canaan that they should not forget to give thanks to God for the abundance they would enjoy. He says in **Deuteronomy 8:12-14** that: **12** Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, **13** and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, **14** then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. How easily it is for us to forget our Lord when we are in a stage of prosperity? We do not need anyone to teach us to cry out to the Lord for help when we have a crisis over our immigration status, when we have a huge conflict with our spouse or when a doctor announces that we have a major disease. Please forgive me for being judgmental. I remember once a brother came to the church prayer meeting asking brothers and sisters to pray for his job search. Soon after that God opened a door and he found a job. But he never returned to the prayer meeting a second time. David reminds us in **Psalms 103:2** this way: Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. When we give thanks to God it helps humble our hearts. Hence, we will not take things for granted. When you get up in the morning thank God for still giving you breath of life. Every time you say grace for your meals sincerely offer your gratitude to the Lord, whether you have a big feast or simple food. When you arrive home after a long trip thanks for God's protection on the road. If you truly understand what grace is, then thanksgiving will no longer be an annual holiday but a daily habit.

When a person walks closely with God, not only that his heart will be overflowing with thankfulness in good times he can give thanks in adversity too. From the Old Testament let us jump to the New Testament and look at another example. In Acts 16 Paul and Silas faced persecution when they preached the gospel in Philippi. They were beaten and locked up in prison. How would you react in such circumstance? One choice would be to grumble before the Lord, lamenting: "Look at what I got for the sake of preaching the gospel? I may as well just quit!" Not so with Paul and Silas. **Acts 16:25** tells us: About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Next the Bible records that the ground shook, the prison doors were opened and even the chains on the inmates came loose. The point is not what happened when Paul and Silas praised God. It is the fact that even though those two leaders did not know what might happen to them they still chose to give thanks to God anyway. When we give thanks in hard time we admit that our sovereign God is still in control, despite our uncertainty about the future. We put our faith in Him who is working behind the scene to accomplish His will through our circumstances.

CONCLUSION

In the Colossians passage we study today God's command for Christians is to continue to live in Him. There is no other short-cut than to immerse ourselves in God's Word. The psalmist of Psalm 1 uses a vibrant tree to illustrate our Christian life. **Psalm 1:2-3** read: **2** But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. **3** He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. This is the kind of ever-growing Christian God wants every one of us to be. It is a life-long pursuit. It is never too late to start and it will never end.