

FLOURISH - Week 4

Monday, October 4

Every five years, engineers complete a massive project underwater at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. If you've driven over the bridge, you know what a beautiful and stunning engineering feat it is. The thing is that the bridge is never more secure than the foundations for the major two towers. The south tower alone has 125 thousand cubic yards of concrete, an immense pad plunging down into the bedrock. Then the tower rises 746 feet above the waterline and 500 feet above the roadway. That's something you can know for sure whenever you see an immense structure like a bridge or a building. Below the ground unseen is what makes it all possible, an immense foundation securing the structure to the earth. Now, our text for this week begins by explaining the foundation that supports us as we walk with God.

Paul explains it like this:

Colossians 2:6-7

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

That whole idea of being rooted and established is repeated through the letters of Paul.

Here's Ephesians 3:17:

...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love...

This is part of Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus. What does it mean? In our Flourish study we will spend some of our time thinking about how roots help secure the plant, and how they also provide a means of nourishment. Years ago, my younger brother, Brad, and I would spend time at the family cabin in North Carolina. One day we were hiking and by chance we came across a native Carolina ginseng plant. If you are not familiar with this plant, the roots are prized as a source of energy and, among other things, as an aphrodisiac. At the time, this root was selling for about \$150 a pound dried. Now, it is even more prized. We stumbled upon our first plant and learned the secret about where these plants like to grow and how to more easily spot them. The thing about this tiny mountain plant is that it looks much like so many of the other under-growth plants. It is easy to miss. But its roots are like those of none other. They go deep into the soil and spread out. The most valuable roots come to resemble a human being. What we came to realize through the years is how intricate and beautiful the root system is. The major tap root or main root sends out other arms and legs, that then send out their own arteries that are as small and thin as human hairs. The roots have the two purposes already mentioned. First, the root anchors the plant and keeps it secure. Then roots provide water and nourishment from the soil to provide the resources the plant needs to grow.

Now, think about how we are rooted and built up, or nourished, in Christ. First, Christ provides our connection to God, to God's ways, and to the work God is doing to redeem the world. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. We can trust him. As times change, we find our stability in Jesus. He is faithful and dependable. He provides us with a rooted security. We know that the love of Jesus for us will never fail, despite what seasons our lives go through. And, we will see many different seasons in our lives. Second, it is through the root system, through Christ, that we receive spiritual life, day in and day out. Christ constantly refreshes us with his kindness and gentleness. His love sustains us. That is the point of the prayer of Paul for the church in Ephesus. We are rooted and established in the resource of God's love for us. His love doesn't change with our success or failure, with our strength or our struggling. Jesus remains faithful to us to the end of the age when we will be gathered together in the presence of God.

Now, I want to go back to the foundation for the Golden Gate Bridge. The engineers send divers to inspect the immense concrete pads that establish the bridge. They scrape away barnacles and moss, and inspect the concrete for cracks and weaknesses by running their hands across it. They do this because they know the bridge cannot stand without a secure foundation. This is also true for our lives. Our busy, challenging lives require a secure and strong foundation, and that is found in Christ. Now, as I read about the bridge, I wondered how often we inspect the foundation of our lives.

Are we careful to build our lives on the truth of the gospel and the assurance of God's love for us in Christ?

Let's pray together:

Almighty God, we are all builders, working to build our lives. We cannot build well without a stable foundation in you. We know storms come, and the house, the life built on the sand, will not stand. Remind us this day that our hope is in you and your grace toward us in Christ. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, October 5

Years ago, my family was visiting a beach on the west coast of Florida. My kids were very young at the time. These were precious times for us because, as a young child, my mom took me to the beach almost every day. Also, at the time, we lived in New Jersey more than an hour drive from the beach. That day, we built sandcastles and hunted for seashells. Now, alongside the beach was an area with big rocky boulders going out further into the water. At some point, I decided to set off on my own to do a little exploring of this area. As I ventured out, Sandy yelled to me. She did this because she could tell that I did not know that my son was walking in my footsteps and following where I was going. It was safe for me, but very dangerous for him. Thinking back on this moment, by nature, our kids want to follow us. When they are young, they want to go where mom and dad are going.

Now, as Paul talks about our life in Christ, he urges us:

Colossians 2:6

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him...

Now, with all that Christ has done for us and that fact that our flourishing life is found in Jesus, we are to walk in him. To follow him in everything. That word "walk" is often used in this way. We speak of a walk of life or that way a person walks as their manner of life. The apostle John makes the statement even more direct in his letter:

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. -1 John 2:6

Of course, he means that we must come to live as Jesus lived. Why use that word walk? It is interesting that researchers have noticed children really do come to walk with the same or similar gait as their parents. This is for two reasons. The first is genetic. Children most often have the same body type as their parents, and people with the same body shape are more likely to walk the same way. But it is more than that. Environmental factors also emerge. For example, if parents dance with children at home, they will naturally pick up the step patterns of their parents. They will come to walk and be on their feet as their parents are. If their parents slump at the dinner table, the kids will learn to do that as well. We will learn life patterns from those around us. Yes, just as my son followed me at the beach, it is natural for them to learn life, including walking patterns from their parents or those closest to them. Now, think about this in our life with Christ. First, we do have a new identity in Christ we will be learning more about this week. But also, if we are looking to Jesus, following Jesus, we will learn to walk as Jesus walked. This is the way it worked in ancient Israel. If a student attached himself to a rabbi, he would follow that rabbi wherever he went. The goal was to learn the ways of the rabbi and to come to live as your rabbi lived. The idea was not only to learn his teaching, but to learn to do everything as your rabbi, your teacher, did. The only way you could accomplish this was to spend immense amounts of time with your teacher. In those days, you would literally see rabbis walking around with groups of young men following them and watching everything they did. This is what Jesus did with his disciples. The word disciple means "student" or "apprentice" or perhaps "understudy."

Now, Paul says that this is what we are to do with Jesus, to so study his life, to so follow him and learn his ways that we come to walk as Jesus did. We will come by this new life as children come to walk as their parents walk. We must follow Jesus around, study Jesus, and set out to do as Jesus did. This is how the Lordship of Christ is to work out in our lives. Having Jesus as Lord means not only that he is Lord or supreme in your life, but that you learn life from him. Now, the good news is that you have been given the Spirit of God to guide you in this process. The goal of the Spirit is to

lead you into truth and reveal to you the fullness of Christ. But, the following part, that is yours to do. Now, this is at the heart of the flourishing life. It is important to remember that this is not a work that we give to God, but the way we enjoy God and come to know him more fully. It all flows from the gospel and the fellowship with God that has been opened to us at the cross of Jesus. It really is pretty amazing that we can know the ways of Jesus and enjoy him in this way.

Let's pray together:

Lord God, we want to learn your moves. Dance with us so that we can learn to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. Thank you for drawing near to us, so that we can know and enjoy you. We pray for your peace today and the awareness of your presence. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, October 6

Ok. I admit it. I'm a Bono fan. His real name is Paul David Hewson, and he is the lead singer of the Irish band, U2. It's not just U2's music I enjoy. I like Bono's story. Bob Dylan said about Bono: *Spending time with Bono was like eating dinner on a train—feels like you're moving, going somewhere. Bono's got the soul of an ancient poet and you have to be careful around him. He can roar 'till the earth shakes. He's also a closet philosopher...talks about the rightness, the richness, glory, beauty, wonder and magnificence of America.* Through a series of crises in his life, he has come to a deep faith in Christ. He often articulates this faith using what is called the Lewis Trilemma. It is sometimes described as the "Lunatic, Liar, or Lord", or "Mad, Bad, or God" argument. Clearly, Bono has thought a lot about Jesus and the life of Jesus. He knows that Jesus is extraordinary, and that Jesus could not be mad or bad, but must be God.

Now, I mention Bono because of a teaching that Paul provides in this letter to the church in Colossae:

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

Paul warns the believers not to be drawn in by false teachings that were floating around at the time. We'll learn more about those teachings in the day ahead, but notice Paul mentions "the elemental spiritual forces of this world." What are these elemental spiritual forces? Well, first, the fact that they are elemental means that they seem to be wired into the nature of things, like the very elements themselves. This is the way the world works spiritually, like the way gravity works, for example. It just is, and this force is at work around us all the time. But, what is it? In the east, they call this force, karma. In Hinduism, karma means that *the sum of a person's actions in this and previous states of existence, decide their fate in future existences.* The short way of putting it is: what comes around goes around. You get what is coming to you. In a spiritual sense, if you do bad things, you have judgment you deserve that is coming to you in one way or another. You will ultimately get what you deserve. That is the way the universe works. This is the elemental spiritual force. It is what Adam and Eve were told in the Garden. If you break the rule of the garden, you will face the consequences. You're out. You're going to die. Paul says the thing about the dominant philosophy in our world is that it is built on this elemental spiritual force, the fact that it depends on you. If you are going to live a good life and flourish, well, it is ultimately up to you. You will get what you have coming to you. You have to build this life for yourself. Sadly, we also tend to fall into this. We tend to believe that God loves us to the degree we are being faithful, to the degree we deserve his love. We have a difficult time believing the message of grace is true. We think that we must be deserving, and we set out to earn God's favor in our lives.

Now, I want to return to Bono because he also wrestled with this idea of karma, and the elemental spiritual force at work in our world. What he discovered is that the gospel speaks a completely different word.

He said:

You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics; in physical laws every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm

absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that "as you reap, so you will sow" stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. But I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge...but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity...

Now, hearing Bono, he's onto something. From where he is he can see the power of this elemental spiritual force. He knows it is there and that the religions of the world are drawn into it. But he sees how grace interrupts it. This is what Paul is trying to teach the believers in Colossae to see. Our lives must be all of grace. The philosophies that fill our world are hollow—they are empty and do not provide what they promise in any lasting way, and they are deceptive—they draw us in and keep us from grace—and they can easily drive our lives. Grace changes everything. Grace doesn't say, your sins are going to haunt you and come back to you, and you will end up paying for them, getting what you deserve. Grace says your sins have been nailed to the cross. Grace says you are loved despite the mess you have made of your life. You are forgiven because Jesus has come and died for you. His love covers a multitude of sins.

Let's pray:

Faithful and loving God, we feel the pressure of having to prove ourselves because our world is all about earning and merit. We almost constantly measure our performance, wondering if we've done enough or how to make up for our missteps. Thank you for sending Jesus to redeem us, for interrupting judgment with your grace. Enable us to walk in your favor, trusting in the gospel. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, October 7

One of the last times my whole family was together with my parents and both my brothers and their spouses was a Caribbean cruise. The occasion was the 60th wedding anniversary for my parents. Yes, 60th. We met in south Florida and boarded our ship in Fort Lauderdale. But before we left for the cruise, actually just a few days before, we discovered an immense problem. My parents had lost their passports! Yes, they could go on the cruise, but they could not go ashore at any of the ports of call. That just would not do. So, within the scope of a day, I managed to get all the paperwork that was needed together, so that I could rush down to the government center and get their passports in person. That happened the day before we were scheduled to leave, just a few minutes before the Miami Passport office closed.

Now we have an interesting text for today that we will unpack both today and tomorrow:

Colossians 2:11-12

In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ,¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

We are in this section where Paul provides teaching to keep the church from being drawn into false and deceptive philosophies. Why would he use this time to tell them about their circumcision? What does this have to do with it? Let's go back to why God instituted circumcision and what it means. God called Abraham and told him that he would do a new work in Abraham's life. He would become the father of a new family founded on faith in God. His would live the life of promise and also be given a son of the promise.

Here was the Lord's command:

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come."¹⁰ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised..." Genesis 17:9-12

God placed Abraham under his promise, his covenant. The Lord told Abraham that the mark of his covenant was to be circumcision.

Now, my parents needed a passport for proper identification, so that the authorities in the countries we visited would know who they are and where they have their citizenship. On this basis they would be allowed to freely enter and exit the countries on our cruise itinerary. What scripture says is that the Lord commanded Abraham to bear a mark of identification showing that he and his son Isaac belonged to the Lord. The location of this sign was to remind him that all his offspring would also be part of this covenant that the Lord made with him. Paul tells the church in Colossae about this for two major reasons. First, their life in Christ is all based on God's promise, just as the covenant the Lord made with Abraham rested on God's promise to him. This is the nature of the grace we live in and the acceptance we have from God. It all comes from his promise. Second, just as circumcision was meant as a mark of identification, showing that we belong to the Lord, so we have a new identity in Christ. We also rest in God's promise for us. Again, it is all of grace. Now, you may ask: wasn't circumcision just for the men? There was no mark given to the women. That is true, and that was because the covenant God made with Abraham was to be passed along to one's blood family, the family led by the patriarch, in this case Abraham. But notice our verse from Colossians 2. It says: *when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism...Colossians 2:11-12.* Yes, our baptism accomplished the same thing that circumcision did for ancient Israel. It marks us as belonging to Christ. It is a sign that shows forth our identity as people redeemed by the blood of Christ. And baptism is not for males alone. It is for men and women, showing us that the covenant made through Jesus is extended into the world not by blood and natural birth, but by faith in Christ. That means it is open to everyone, not just to people in the line of Abraham. God has done a new thing in Christ. He has opened the way for anyone that calls on the name of the Lord to be saved and to receive the mark of the covenant.

Now, with those passports, my parents got off the ship in Haiti, in Jamaica, and in Mexico. They could prove their identity and enjoy the cruise. In Christ, our baptism makes it clear who we are and who we belong to. It reveals that we stand in the covenant promises of Jesus. Now, we need to be careful here. Our water baptism does not save us, but it is a sign showing forth what Christ has done to save us and bring us into the family of God. Paul reminds them of their baptism to remind them that what they have in Christ is all of grace. Let us rest in that today.

Let's pray:

El Shaddai, Almighty God, we find it hard to believe that you would enter into covenant with us, that you would make promises that you must keep. But it is your promises that keep us and provide for us a living hope, the assurance that we have life with you, both now and forever. Help us to remember that we belong to you, and that we have identification to prove it. Help us to enjoy the benefits of your love. In your name we pray. Amen.

Friday, October 8

We're picking up where we left off yesterday looking at circumcision. What do you most take pride in? Is it an achievement? Or perhaps the level of success you have reached in your career? Is it how good a person you have been across your life? As I was getting to know a new friend some years ago, he explained to me that, when he was growing up, his parents instilled in him the idea that their family was different from other families. His parents went to great lengths to teach their children that they did life differently than other families. They were distinctive. They were better. This refrain echoed through his childhood and into adulthood. This sense of superiority was deeply instilled, ingrained in him and his siblings. As you might imagine, this belief had a domino effect in his other relationships. His marriage, his friendships.

Now, here is our text for today:

Colossians 2:11-12

Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

This idea of circumcision that we looked at yesterday was deeply woven into the way the Jewish people looked at themselves and the world. It is true, they were a chosen people. God called them to become priests for the world, to carry his word and to show forth his character. But among the Jewish people, there was a deep and all-consuming pride that accompanied their calling. The sign of this status was circumcision. Now, it is true that the Lord commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and also Isaac his son. This mark would be carried forward through the generations as the mark of identification for the people chosen by God. But their status, that they had nothing to do with because remember God chose them, became a source of national and personal pride. They viewed everyone else as “uncircumcised,” unwashed and dirty. They drew strict lines between us and them. The clean and the unclean. God’s people and those outside the camp. Again, circumcision was the sign, the status sign for them. Now, even when the gospel went out into the world, the Jewish people, even those that became believers, had difficulty walking away from the pride they had in their position, in their circumcision. Two things resulted. First, after coming to faith, they were tempted to return to the keeping of the law as the measure of their life in God. Grace was difficult to appropriate given the pride they held in their status as circumcised people of God. This became a problem at the church in Colossae. The new believers were told that it was good to believe in Jesus, but the real purpose of the gospel was to improve their ability to keep God’s law. Life was all about the law, not about Jesus. This is why we hear Paul at this point talking about a circumcision not done with human hands, a real cleansing that is done by Jesus when we are identified with Jesus in baptism. The second problem was that the Jewish believers often pressured the new Gentile believers to become circumcised. This was the scandal that hit the church in Galatia. Doing this sent the signal that Jesus was not enough, and though the people had started their faith with Christ, they needed to add something to the gospel. Paul tells them that if they add anything to the gospel it is no longer the gospel.

Now, I want to go back to my friend. He told me about the pride that he was taught when he was growing up because, as an adult, he learned that it was not true. He really is no different, nor was his family different in any significant way. But the pride this created in him had hurt his relationships, and it also hurt him. He wanted me to know because he wanted me to be on the alert for any actions on his part that came from this misbelief. He wanted real friendship. Now, as I think about that, Paul is trying to keep the church focused on Jesus. Jesus is the source of the fullness of our new life in God. I need to return to the first questions of the day: what do you most take pride in? What about yourself most commends you? It may be the very thing that keeps you from seeing how much you need Jesus. This may be what stands in the way of you enjoying the grace of God, and also entering fully into community with others. Now, to live by this is what it means to live in the flesh, to live based on our performance rather than based on God’s grace and the love of Christ. Paul says that the person in the flesh, the person that built his or her own pride story, died with Christ and has been raised to a new life, raised from the dead. His encouragement is to plumb the depths of Christ, to enjoy the fullness of God’s grace and to enjoy the benefits of what Jesus has done for us. To be thankful.

Let’s pray:

O Lord, God, we come to you as people that are desperate to matter. We want our lives to matter. We want to matter to you. Show us today that our lives are all of grace. The fact that we live and breathe is a gift from your hand. And, that Christ has given us a place in your family, we know is all of grace. Fill us with gratitude today for your goodness. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, October 9

We lived in the New York metro area for 16 years and, having grown up in Florida and having spent most of my life here, there was so much I wanted to do. When you are in the northeast you feel like you are in the middle of the world. So much seems to happen there, that folks in the rest of the country can only see on TV. For example, the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, or the New York City Marathon, or the dropping of the ball in Times Square that marks the beginning of a new year. One of the very cool events of New York City was the ticker tape parade. Now, we don’t use ticker tape any longer but the idea remains. The New York Yankees win the World Series, which by the way does not have a chance of happening this year, but when they did, the city would come out for an immense party. There would a parade down Broadway. They filled the sky with tons of confetti. It was the way to celebrate and to trot out the victors and put an exclamation point on the

achievement. Well, we are not the first to come up with the idea. The Romans had their own ticker tape parade. It was called the triumph. It would be held following a major military victory. Here's what would happen. An immense procession would travel through the city to the temple at the capitol, and the whole city would show up to celebrate because it meant wealth and status for the empire. Their parade route was about two and a half miles long and, they would move so slowly and so many people passed by, it could take more than an entire day. It was pretty amazing. First came the captive leaders, allies, and soldiers (and sometimes their families), usually walking in chains. Their captured weapons, armor, gold, silver, statuary, and curious or exotic treasures were carted behind them, along with paintings, and models depicting significant places and episodes of the war. Then came the troops by rank and importance and even members of the senate, often with their families. The procession ended at the temple where sacrifices would be made, and then often the defeated were executed. All along the way, the soldiers and people yelled: *we triumphed, we won!* Now, with Jesus, they did not take him to Rome because he had no army. It wasn't a military victory for Rome. It was a simple execution.

But notice the language of our text today that Paul uses:
Colossians 2:13-15

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

When Paul thinks about the crucifixion of Jesus, he speaks of it as a procession of triumph. That must have been what the walk to the cross for Jesus seemed like. Jesus appeared to be the conquered king. He wore a crown of thorns, and the sign above his head read: King of the Jews. It all seemed tied up. Death won. Evil triumphed and was celebrating at the cross of Jesus. But Paul says: surprise! Actually, the opposite happened. Evil thought, by killing Jesus, his reign would be ended, his life snuffed out. The story would be over. Hell and death defeated and destroyed the holy One, God himself. But that's not the story at all. In the death of Jesus, God defeated the power of sin to hold us, the power of the law to condemn us. In his resurrection, he made a joke of earthly powers. They threw the worst they could at Jesus, and he rose from the dead. Paul calls it all a spectacle, saying that Jesus made a laughingstock of the power that would seek to control us. He put these powers to open shame. This is how Jesus leads in triumph. The powers of hell and death and the powers that seek to control our world and keep us living in darkness...they are defeated. In his death, he brings us forgiveness and life. He sets us free from sin and death. Now, as we read this, that is a parade that Jesus has already made you a part of. You are among the victors with him. You don't get to watch you. You are invited to join in the celebration. How do you do that? You get to live in the light of this victory every day. You live free from the condemnation of the law. Sin can no longer control your life. You can live your life in fellowship with God in Christ. You are forgiven and free. These are such powerful words to read. Jesus, at the cross, stood the story of our world on its head. It seems like spiritual judo. I am told the way judo works is that the moves of your opponents are turned around and used against them. Your attack is translated into your defeat. This is what happened to all the powers of death and the evil one. Jesus is the victor, and he shares his victory with us.

Let's pray:

Lord God and gracious Father, help us to keep our eyes focused on Jesus, the author, the pioneer and the finisher of our faith. Remind us that salvation is not ours to achieve but ours to enjoy. Give us joy in knowing you have saved us to the fullest possible extent in Christ. Help us to be thankful for all the Jesus has done. We pray in his name. Amen.