

Hebrews 5:7-10

“Obedience, Suffering & Being Made Mature”

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Pr Josh Anderson

Second Sunday in Easter

The portion of God’s word that is given for us today is Hebrews 5:7-10, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

I invite you to listen carefully now to God’s holy and inerrant Word.

*[7] In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. [8] Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. [9] And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, [10] being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

This morning I want to talk for a few minutes about maturity in the Christian life, because that’s one of the fundamental things this passage is about.

You see, often when we talk about the Christian faith we talk about in a pretty binary way - you're saved or you're not. You're in the kingdom of the beloved Son or you are still a participant in the kingdom of darkness. And of course there is truth to this, and the Bible does speak about salvation in this way sometimes.

But the Bible also has a whole category for the spiritual life, for those who are part of the kingdom of beloved Son, where distinctions between members of that kingdom are made, and in different places the Scriptures uses terms like wisdom and maturity to describe what is meant to be the trajectory for the life of every human person who lives in union with God.

Now these qualities of wisdom and maturity are especially discussed in that portion of the Bible we call "wisdom literature" -- the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes both explain in some detail what it means for us to grow in wisdom and maturity, and these themes are also described at length in many of the Psalms as well as the book of Job.

And here's the interesting thing. These parts of the scriptures -- Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, the Psalms -- talk about the spiritual life in ways that are not just binary, not just saved / not saved.

They talk about the spiritual life as though it is something that you are meant to grow up in, as though you are meant to grow in wisdom and maturity and holiness throughout your whole life as a Christian, until you become, as the first psalm puts it, *"like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season."*

These portions of the Scriptures speak as though the Christian life is one where you begin as an infant, spiritually speaking, but over time, through faith and obedience, you must grow wise and become mature.

And indeed, if you look at the narratives of the lives of saints in the Old Testament, this kind of growth in maturity and wisdom through obedience and faith over time is exactly what you see.

Consider for a moment the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Moses - the characters in the Pentateuch whose lives are described in the most detail.

In Genesis 12, Abraham takes a remarkable step of faith, leaving his homeland of Ur and going to the land of Canaan based on only God's promise.

He becomes a follower of the true God, but he is not yet fully mature or wise. He makes a number of mistakes along the way, most notably in taking Hagar into his bed in a disastrous attempt to produce the son God had promised him.

But then, after many trials, God finally commands Abraham in Genesis 22 to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. And, amazingly, Abraham obeys, in what becomes one of the paradigmatic examples of mature faith in all of the Scriptures.

The point is this - the Abraham we meet in Genesis 12 was not capable of the faith that he demonstrates in Genesis 22. He wasn't ready. He wasn't mature or wise enough. But over time, through obedience in the midst of suffering - particularly the suffering of infertility and impotence and being forced to wait for God to act, God makes Abraham mature.

The lives of Jacob, Joseph and Moses all take on a similar form. It is only after suffering for fourteen years at the hands of Laban that Jacob finally becomes mature and wise enough to wrestle with God himself at the ford of Jabbok.

It is only after being betrayed by his brothers and then suffering slavery, false accusations and imprisonment over many years that Joseph is elevated to Pharaoh's right hand to rule over Egypt. And it is only after he learns to rule a nation that Joseph is mature and wise enough to forgive his brothers their sin.

And it is only after Moses wanders in the wilderness for forty years, learning obedience to God's commands after missteps of his own that he is prepared, at the end of his life, as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, to deliver the greatest sermon ever composed in human history until Jesus' sermon on the mount finally surpasses it.

Make no mistake. The young, immature versions of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Moses would never have been able to offer their son as a sacrifice, wrestle with God in the night, forgive a horrific betrayal by their own flesh and blood or describe, in stirring terms, the beauty and goodness of God's covenant love.

Each of these men had to grow over the years, learning obedience through what they suffered in order to finally become wise and mature.

And here's where the rubber meets the road. What we see in the lives of Abraham and Jacob and Joseph and Moses is meant to be normative for each one of us. This kind of growth in wisdom and maturity and holiness should be true in your own life with Christ as well.

And I tell you, if you are fortunate enough to know a person like this, a person who has truly become mature and wise and holy and a veritable garden of the fruit of the Holy Spirit over the decades of their life as they have abided with Jesus, you know what I'm talking about.

Our current culture obsession with the beauty and strength of youth notwithstanding, I tell you friends, for my money there is nothing more glorious in all of creation than a Christian man or woman who is aged in years, and has become so mature and wise that the fruit of the Spirit is just pouring out of them.

If you're lucky, you've met at least a couple of Christians like this in your life.

I mean a man or a woman who is old and yet not bitter, who is aged but not afraid, and who has lived so closely in communion Jesus for so long that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control have just become more or less their natural way of inhabiting the world.

I mean, when you know a person like that, when you get to be in their presence, it is something that can change your life. Glory. That is what I am talking about.

And that is what we should want for ourselves. That, Scripturally speaking, is what we should want out of life.

I mean -- there are so many things we can orient our lives around: vocational success, fame, influence, money and whatever else you want to put on your list - but what I want is to be a man of wisdom and maturity and joy and peace and and faithfulness and gentleness and kindness forty years from now if the Lord lets me live that long. And I would suggest that is what you should want too. That is what you should long for you in your life, more than you long for anything else other than Jesus himself.

But how we get that? How do we become that kind of mature and wise person?

As in all things, our Lord Jesus goes before us and shows us the way, and that is just what our passage is about this morning.

In Hebrews 5:7-10, the writer to the Hebrews tells us how Jesus himself grew in wisdom and maturity, writing:

*[7] In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. [8] Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. [9] And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, [10] being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*

Now, at first glance, it may seem surprising to imagine that Jesus grew and matured in his life.

This, of course, is part of the mystery of the incarnation, and what it means to have a divine nature and a human nature united in one person.

According to his divine nature, of course, Jesus was always fully perfected from his moment of conception. But according to his human nature, Jesus grew and learned and matured just as any of us do.

And by grow and learn I don't just mean that Jesus learned to walk and learn to speak and learned to read - though he certainly learned all of those things just as we did. He also grew and learned in terms of wisdom and maturity.

Luke tells us this explicitly in his gospel, commenting twice in chapter 2: *"And the child [that is, Jesus] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom,"* and also *"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."*

Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. He grew in these things.

And how did he grow? The writer to the Hebrews tell us: *"Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect/mature, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him."*

Here, the apostle gives us the great secret of how it is that Jesus became mature, and how it is that we become mature as well.

*It is by learning to obey God in the context of suffering.*

If we look at the epistle of James, we find a very similar teaching regarding suffering there. In James 1, the apostle writes: *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds..."*

We might ask James - why should we be joyful in our trials, in our sufferings?

James tell us - it is because God is using them to make us mature: *"For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."*

The fascinating point that both these two apostles make is that it is actually in the context of suffering that our faith is tested and we learn, in new ways, to obey God.

I mean, it is one thing to obey God in times of prosperity, of course, when things are going well and life seems easy.

But it is quite another to obey God in the context of adversity and suffering, when trusting him and obeying him can often feel like we are being stripped of everything good in life.

The moment in Jesus' life that the writer to the Hebrews chooses to illustrate this point is when Jesus wrestled with his Father in prayer on the night before he died in the garden of Gethsemane.

At this point, Jesus knows that he will die in less than twenty-four hours. Judas has already gone out into the night and is betraying him to the chief priest and the rulers of Israel. Men with clubs and swords are coming for him even as he prays in the garden.

As the writer to the Hebrews describes it: “[7] *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.*”

It was there, in the garden, as he prayed with loud cries and tears, that Jesus learned obedience to his Father in a new way.

At every previous step in his life, of course, Jesus had obeyed his Father and lived a morally perfect life, but he had never before had to trust his Father *in this way*, in the face of not only physical suffering and death, but in the face of bearing the full curse of the sin of the human race.

In order to be made fully perfect, fully mature, in order to be designated the high priest, Jesus had to submit to his Father and obey him even when obedience and faith meant death.

And so Jesus prayed to his Father as we heard in Matthew earlier this morning, after many loud cries and tears: *“Not as I will, but as you will...your will be done.”*

And truly, as the writer to the Hebrews said, Jesus’ prayers were heard by his Father.

For though his Father did not spare him from death, he did deliver him from death’s power, raising him on the third day in glory and power and righteousness and designating his Son who had been made fully perfect through his obedience in suffering as our eternal high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

But what does this all have to do with us?

I think the answer lies in verse 9. In that verse, the Apostle says: *“And being made perfect, he [that is, Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.”*

Jesus became the source of eternal salvation to all who *obey* him. That’s what the Apostle says.

And it’s fascinating to me that he doesn’t say that Jesus became the source of salvation to all who had faith in him, although that is also most certainly true.

But here, in this context, where he is emphasizing the way in which Jesus had to learn obedience to his Father through suffering, the apostle says that the Risen Christ is the source of salvation to all who *obey him*.

What the Apostle is saying is that in order to abide with Jesus, in order to be caught up into the great story of Salvation through his death and resurrection, we must be those who obey Jesus.

And particularly, we must be those who learn what it means to obey Jesus in the context of our suffering even as he learned what it meant to obey his Father in the context of his own suffering.

And that should remind us of a mysterious saying that Jesus gave to his disciples shortly before his death in John 12.

There, in John 12, Jesus told his disciples, just days before he would die on a cross, *“If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”*

That's a verse that has stuck with me for decades. I've meditated on it again and again because I think in this short saying of Jesus is one of the most profound mysteries of what it means to be his disciple.

Because Jesus does *not* say, as we might expect: "Wherever my servant is, there I will be also," but rather, "*where I am, there will my servant be also.*"

And then, shortly after these words, where did Jesus go? He went to the cross.

And this means, of course, that the shape that your life must take if you are to be a faithful and obedient follower of Jesus is the same shape that his life took. It must take the shape of the cross.

Because wherever Jesus goes, that's where his servants must go. And Jesus went to Gethsemane, where he wrestled with his father and submitted to his will. And then he went to the cross where he obeyed his Father even unto death.

And if we are to obey Jesus, that is the pattern, the shape our lives must take as well.

Not just learning obedience to Jesus in prosperity. But learning obedience to Jesus through what we suffer. Because it is there, in that place, that we will be made mature.

As we close, I want to return briefly to that image of the mature and wise man or woman that I mentioned earlier.

Friends, when you think about that mature and wise man or woman who is full of the fruits of the Holy Spirit at the end of their life, do you know how it is that they became who they are?

I tell you, every person who is like that, who has become that kind of person, has known what it means to suffer. I can guarantee you that their life has not been what you or I would call easy.

And in the context of whatever difficult and even excruciating suffering Jesus called them into - whether that was the betrayal of someone they loved, or vocational frustration or sickness and pain, they learned what it meant to obey and to trust Jesus in that place and to submit to the path of the cross. I'm not saying they did it perfectly. Of course not.

But in that place of suffering and trial, where their faith was tested, they were steadfast. And slowly, through the pressure of time, through the pressure of the decades, like a diamond being formed deep beneath the earth, that Holy Spirit-inspired, abiding-in-Jesus obedient steadfastness had its full effect, and they became mature. And they became glorious.

This, beloved, is the way it works. There is no other way to become wise and mature and full of the Holy Spirit other than learning obedience through what we suffer.

You can ask Abraham. You can ask Jacob. You can ask Joseph. You can ask Moses. You can ask Jesus.

I promise you. The way of the cross is *not* the way of death. It is, inexplicably, in the economy of God, the way of life and glory and wisdom and maturity.

So do not lose heart, beloved. It is as you learn obedience in your suffering that you are made beautiful.

Because it is as you learn obedience in your suffering that you are being made like Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

