



How to Let the Word of Christ Richly Dwell Within You

Colossians 3:12-17

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I have been launched into this pulpit this morning with the beautiful songs and hymns and spiritual songs God has given us. Thank you, worship team. What a blessing to my own heart. We just sang, “God moves in a mysterious way.” God indeed does move in a mysterious way, doesn’t He? Sometimes the road God has us on is very clear and bright, and we can clearly see His hand at work in everything that comes our way. So then it’s easy to sing, “O God, we trust in You...” because things are going so well. And then there are times when the way seems dark and dim, and we’re asking, “God, where are You in all of this? Do I really trust in You in these times?”

A song like this reminds us that God’s love for us is unchanging, that He is a good God and that He always has our best interests in mind in every circumstance. So we must learn to say, “O God, we trust in You, even though Your ways are as high above us as the heavens are above the earth. You indeed know what is best for us.” As the hymn writer said, “For I know, whate’er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well.”

I’m going to take some opportunities to wax nostalgic this morning. My bride of 37 years and I, after 26 years of ministry here, are going to be moving on to continue whatever ministry God has for us—and particularly a ministry of influence to our children and grandchildren, before they get too old to listen to us. There are many directions I could have gone with this message. I started and stopped many times as I considered what I would talk about this morning. But I want to share with you my heart concerning the journey Toni and I have been on for the last two years as we’ve discussed our move. We weren’t exactly sure when our transition would happen, but finally in January we made the decision.

All of us go through significant crossroads in life. Many of you are going through these right now, or you’re anticipating them. If you’re a young person going into kindergarten or first grade, you’re thinking, “I’m going to school for the first time. This is huge. What’s it going to be like out there? Are they going to like me? Am I going to be popular?” Or maybe you’re an adolescent and you’re going into high school for the first time, and you’re thinking, “Am I going

to be accepted by my peer group? Am I going to be picked on? Am I going to make the team? Am I going to make the choir? What's going to happen this year?"

Or maybe you're going off to college and you're experiencing those unprecedented freedoms that college students have when they go away to college for the first time. This is the first opportunity you have to say, "Are my parents' values my values? Do I really believe what I've been taught all these years? Am I going to stand up for my faith? Am I going to be persecuted for my faith?" Or maybe you've met that special someone and you're going to be getting married this year. Going from singleness to being married is a significant crossroads.

Or maybe you're beginning a new career, and you're wondering, "Is this the career I'll be in for 26 years—or am I going to be doing it for just a year or two, and then what? I don't know?" It's huge.

Or maybe you're a parent, and you're watching your children go through some of these significant crossroads, and you're vicariously experiencing all these things I just mentioned with them. Or maybe your children have left home, and now you're in the "empty nest syndrome," as they call it. You're saying, "Now it's just us. How's our relationship? Are we going to be able to do this? It's been all about the kids for so long." Or you're going into retirement, and there is Medicare, Social Security and all those things. Maybe you're thinking about moving, or wondering if you'll need to keep working, or perhaps you'll be volunteering somewhere.

Then coupled with all of these natural crossroads that come to most of us, there are the unexpected crossroads—like the loss of a job. How are you going to deal with that? Or an unexpected illness that happens to you or to a close family member. Or a death in the family that just suddenly interrupts the natural flow of your life. Where do we go when we experience these changes to the regular routines of life, the rhythms to which we've become so accustomed—what one author calls the "liturgies that form the habits of life"? We've gone through a worship liturgy this morning, but we all have liturgies ourselves—daily patterns or weekly patterns—that form the habits of our lives.

Sometimes, all of a sudden, our accustomed habits are significantly interrupted—either by choice or by things beyond our control. I've been doing a lot of thinking these days about the spiritual power of habit. As my habits for the last 26 years are about to undergo a significant transformation—a "rehabilitation"—I'm pondering the opportunity this offers me. I can choose to get rid of some old habits and to put on some new.

This is the journey Toni and I have been on, and many of you have been on as well—or are on at this very moment. If God by His grace prolongs your life, this journey could be quite significant. I will mention just one example here in our church, that of Chip and Carol Myers.

When I first met them here, they told me they had been in the same church for 40 years before they moved here and now they were looking for a new church. I thought, “I’ve got to get to know these people. I want to learn from them.” I’ve learned a lot as I’ve worked with the Senior Fellowship in our church, because I’m now one of them. I want to learn from people who have been through or are going through this.

Having been asked by the elders to give a parting message, I want to share with you a work in progress—both in my life and in Toni’s—and how absolutely convinced we are that God in His faithfulness is ordaining every change. We sang earlier, “Be Still My Soul”—I’m glad they didn’t sing it right before I came up here, because that’s a very precious hymn to us. It’s actually our favorite hymn, the one Toni and I talked through before we came to this church in 1991. And it’s the hymn that’s going to send us out.

One line of this hymn says, “In every change, He faithful will remain.” In every change, in every crossroad—planned or unexpected—He faithful will remain. Do you believe that? We sing this, but do we believe what it is that we’re singing? Since the greater part of my adult life has dealt with music and music ministry, you should not be surprised to hear that music has had a very significant shaping influence on both my theology and on my practice and my habits.

So primarily this morning I want to direct your attention to Colossians 3:12-17. I’m not going to use the ESV translation this morning—I’ll use the New American Standard translation and I’ll explain why in a few moments. I’m going to end at the beginning and begin at the end. Okay? I’ll begin with Colossians 3:16-17: *“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”* You have been taught, and you have been admonished, with the songs that we have sung this morning. *“Singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”*

So the very first thing I want to share with you is this sense of what it means to let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you. Many of you who know me well, who may have been in a discipleship or work relationship with me, know that I have a Scripture memory book. This is actually my third copy, as the first two fell apart, and this too is falling apart. If I don’t care for it, the pages will fall out. But in it I’ve written the passages of Scripture that the Holy Spirit has prompted me to commit to memory.

I actually started doing this on a dare by someone who was in my small group—and I’m so glad we did that. The benefit to me over the years has been immense. It started as a blank book, but over the years I’ve filled it with memory verses. I don’t tell you this to brag about what a spiritual person I am. In fact, I began this practice because I felt my spiritual life was in severe

disarray, that I was lacking understanding and direction. I was wandering around, wondering what I was supposed to do—especially when I hit these significant crossroads in my own life. The only thing that gave me hope and focus was my regular feeding on the Word of God.

So I memorized out of the New American Standard version, which is why I'm using that version here this morning. I started before the ESV even came out. The first verses I put in my book had to do with the Word of God itself, to remind me why I was doing this memorizing. I wrote down verses like Hebrews 4:12, *"The word of God is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword...able to judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts."* So the Word of God is profitable for these things. And 2 Timothy 3:16, *"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."* These verses kept me reading and memorizing the Word of God.

Then I kept running into sin issues in my life, and I said, "I need help." The psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:11, *"Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You."* So I asked myself, "How am I sinning?" I found I was dealing with anger. What does God's Word have to say about anger? It's right here in my book. What does the Word of God have to say about sexual purity, or laziness, or selfishness, or pride—or what it means to be a good father and husband? What does it mean to be a good grandfather? I would just write these key verses in here.

Then there were theological issues for which I felt I needed clarity in my life—subjects like the sovereignty of God that we just sang about: "God moves in a mysterious way." Or the gospel itself. I wanted to be able to share the gospel with people, so I needed to have passages that describe and illustrate it. I wanted to know how the Holy Spirit works in my life. We all need to know the Word of God, and particularly the promises of God, so we can learn to trust Him. We sang this morning, "O God, I trust in You." But do I really? I want to be able to say, "Yeah, I really do trust in You!" But I don't always.

So I'm going to share just a few Scripture passages with you that have helped Toni and me on our journey over these last couple years to gain some direction and focus, bringing us to believe God is leading us to where we're going. For example, Joshua 1:8-9: *"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed,"* and then, *"for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."* We're going—and He's going with us. Praise God.

Psalm 37:4-5: *“Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He will do it.”*

Psalm 23. You all know it—the 23rd Psalm. Memorize that! Make sure you’re going over it in your life. *“The Lord is my Shepherd—I won’t need anything. He leads me beside the still waters. His rod and staff comfort me. He leads me through the valley of the shadow of death. His goodness and His mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”* What a promise!

Psalm 16:8 and 11: *“I have set the Lord continually before me, because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken....You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.”*

Then as I’ve grown older, Psalm 71:5-6, 17-18 became very precious to me:

O Lord God, You are my confidence from my youth. By You I have been sustained from my birth. You are He who took me from my mother’s womb; my praise is continually of You....O God, You have taught me from my youth, and I still declare Your wondrous deeds. And even when I’m old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come.

Then Ecclesiastes 3:1-3, 11. You all know this passage.

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven. A time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted....A time to tear down and a time to build up....He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart.

What a comfort to know that God is in control of every little thing that happens.

Isaiah 46:4: *“Even to your old age I will be the same, and even to your graying years I will bear you! I have done it, and I will carry you; and I will bear you and I will deliver you.”*

Jeremiah 29:11-13, another familiar passage: *“I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”* That passage really helped Toni when she first became a Christian: *“You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”* I had told her to pray. She didn’t believe in Jesus, but she did believe in the Old Testament God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So I said, “Pray to that God, and ask Him

to reveal that to you: you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”
And she found Him.

Then one last verse: 2 Corinthians 2:14-15. As we go off to South Carolina, the Apostle Paul says, *“But thanks be to God, who always leads in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.”* We smell good to other believers, and we stink to non-believers. We are a fragrance of Christ. Jesus had that fragrance so strongly that they killed Him for it.

So in my life, this has been one of the most significant ways that the Word of God has been richly dwelling within me, and I want to commend that to you. But going back to this primary passage, there’s not even a period in the sentence. It says, *“Teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”* So how do singing and music and song contribute to letting the Word of Christ richly dwell within you?

There is created within us, as human beings, a capacity for exuberant emotion—whether that’s easy for you to experience or not. So often in the Psalms we see David overflowing with exuberant praise to God. For example, just listen to Psalm 145:1-5:

I will extol You, my God, O King, and I will bless Your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of Your majesty and on Your wonderful works, I will meditate.

Now, honestly, how often does praise like that show up in your life—or mine? It’s throughout the Scriptures. God has put within us this visceral sense of Who He is that goes beyond the intellectual. It’s something in our gut that comes from our innermost being. It’s alluded to when we say in our worship, *“With heart and soul and mind and strength we serve and worship the King of Kings. Let all that is within me bless His holy name.”* So far, has all that is within you been blessing His holy name?

All this comes out in the form of spiritual affections, sometimes with tears. It’s hands raised to our God and most often manifested in the times that we sing. What happens when we sing? Think about it. Examine your own heart as I mention a few things here. God Himself has a passion for singing. Listen to Psalm 47:6-7: *“Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to*

our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a skillful psalm.”

In these two verses we’re commanded to sing praises five times!

All told, the Bible contains over 400 references to singing, with over 50 of them being direct commands to sing. If you open your Bible in the center, you’ll open up to the longest book—the book of Psalms. It’s a song book. It’s a singing book. In Colossian 3 we’re told to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs when we meet. So why don’t we just come and pray? Why don’t we do like a lot of people and just show up for the sermon? “Because after all, it’s just singing and I’m not sure if I really like all those songs anyway.” Why all this singing? And why words and music and not just words alone?

I’m going to give you three points to answer those questions.

First, singing can help us remember the words. We all know how much we can remember lyrics to “oldies but goodies” because of the songs that are attached to them. We can remember songs from our childhood. There are some Scripture memory programs that have been developed that put Scripture to music, so it’s easier to remember the Scripture.

Remember the first song in the Scripture? It’s a song Moses wrote. After the people of Israel went through the Red Sea and were delivered from the Egyptians, he wrote a song. He wanted people in the following generations to remember God’s faithfulness and power. I’m sure he put it to music, and he taught it to all the people of God. They learned it, and they sang, and they taught it to their children, and their children taught it to their children. We still have that song today. We don’t have the music, but we have the song.

Gordon Fee, a theologian, said, “Show me a church’s songs, and I will show you that church’s theology.” That is so true of this church. Every song that is sung here is thoughtfully put together and represents what this church teaches and preaches and strives to live out. Someone else has said, “If the teachings of your church were limited to just the songs you sing, how well taught would your people be?” I would say we are well taught here at New Covenant Bible Church, and I think you would all agree with me.

One final thought on this point. We all need and should seek to memorize songs. Choose songs that mean something to you, like “Be Still My Soul,” and purpose to memorize them. This is one of my favorite things about Pastor Sunday and I know you love this too. Every time he gets up and preaches, he bleeds hymns. He bleeds spiritual songs. Right? If you cut one wrist, it’s songs. If you cut the other wrist, it’s Bible. I mean, there are songs coming out of him, and my affections are raised by this. I am exhorted and taught by the songs he quotes from memory.

Number two, singing can help us engage emotionally with the words, as well as helping us remember them. Music is the language of emotion. It connects with our feelings. It affects us in unexpected and profound ways. Music makes it easier for our hearts to be involved in the text. Music actually directs our hearts. When we go to a movie, we almost never pay attention to the sound track, but it's there and it is purposeful. It's directing your heart. It's telling you what's coming up. It tells you how you're supposed to feel about what's going on in the movie at that moment, right? And it's happening to us without us even realizing it.

A fast song may be in a major key, like "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" It gives us a feeling of joy, as opposed to simply saying it without the music: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." Or consider a slow song in a minor key, like "O sacred head, now wounded." It makes us feel thoughtful and sad and pensive. Music helps us engage with the words. The mood of the music hopefully matches the words we are singing. It swells with the words to an appropriate climax, and then it resolves. Sing this with me. "I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind, but now I see." See how the music can add so much meaning?

Hundreds of years ago, Jonathan Edwards wrote in his Treatise on Religious Affections, "The duty of singing praises to God seems to be appointed wholly to excite and express religious affections. No other reason can be assigned why we should express ourselves to God in verse rather than prose, and to do it with music, but only that such is our nature and our frame—that these things have a tendency to move our affections." In other words, that's what music does. It affects our emotions. These are religious affections that point us to God in a way that's more than just cerebral. It's something that's coming from our hearts, our guts. Singing helps us ignite our passions for the things of God. And isn't God worthy of our highest and purest and strongest emotions?

Finally, number three: singing can help us use words to demonstrate and express our unity. So, singing helps us remember the words, it helps us engage emotionally—but both of these can take place privately. But this idea of using music to demonstrate our unity must be done together. We need one another. At sporting events, people will sing enthusiastically about how they're going to crush their opponent, right? Or in a restaurant, you can have a well-meaning but not very gifted waiter attempt to sing "Happy birthday" to an embarrassed customer. Then all of a sudden the whole restaurant joins in the singing. Have you ever experienced that?

Singing enables us to spend extended periods of time communicating the same thoughts, the same passions, the same intentions. This is what we do every Sunday morning. In a very real

way, this binds us together as brothers and sisters. God wants to hear from us. It is commanded of us to sing. The question is not, “Do I have a good voice?” The question is, “Do you have a song?” Sometimes we say, “Well, I don’t have a very good voice and I don’t want people to hear me.” Psalm 40:1-3 speaks of God’s salvation of us. *“I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm.”* Then listen to what he says next: *“He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear and will trust in the Lord.”*

So I ask you again, “Do you have a song?” If you are a believer, if you are His, God has given you a new song. He has put a new song in your mouth. Are you singing it? When we sang this morning, “Sing like never before, O my soul,” I was asking myself, “Can I actually sing this song like I’ve never sung it before?” I want to challenge myself to do that, because that’s what the words say.

Let me just briefly address the fact that some people do not sing because they do not prefer the style of music or the way it’s accompanied. We might say, “I love traditional music, but I’m not too crazy about the new songs that are coming out these days.” Or, “I love all those new songs, and the way we’re using the band instruments—but when we try to play those hymns with just a piano accompaniment like they’re written, I’m bored to tears. I just can’t get involved.”

There are some churches—and you know of some of these—that have gone so far as to have separate services: one for people who prefer traditional music and one for those who prefer the contemporary styles. While this may be well-intentioned, often this results in the creation of two separate churches. In other words, it divides the church. We must be clear that it is the gospel and not music that unites us.

Bob Kauflin, who was a worship leader at Sovereign Grace, said something that is one of my favorite quotes. He said, “It’s a shame that in many of our churches today, musical style has more power to divide us than the gospel has to unite us.” May that not be the case here, or in your own heart.

In closing, let me just quickly give you six practical ways to let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you—how the Spirit of God takes the Word of God and establishes and strengthens the people of God.

1. Personal daily time in God’s Word. You can’t let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you if you never open it up, or if you’re only opening it every once in a while.
2. Regular memorization of God’s Word. Don’t think you have to start with a book like mine. Start with a couple verses. Write them on a note pad. Review them while

you're driving to work in all that traffic. Hopefully you'll memorize it fast enough so you won't have to keep looking at it while you're driving. And let me tell you, this is a self-fulfilling thing. As you memorize passages of Scripture, God will give you opportunities to use them. He'll put you in situations where that verse will come to your mind and will be helpful to someone else. And you'll say, "Wow. If I hadn't memorized that, I would have missed that opportunity." So think about that.

3. Use a hymnal, song list or a computer app to become regularly acquainted with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. One of the things I have next to my Bible during my morning devotional—and Toni has one too—is an old hymnal. We actually have a collection of old hymnals. The one I'm using now is from 1935. Sometimes I run into a hymn I've never seen before, so I'll go through the words and try to sight-read the music. It's something that helps the Word of Christ to richly dwell within me, because these are things based on His words. So I'd encourage you to do that.
4. Regular deeply invested worship with God's people. Make sure you're here regularly and on time to sing the songs. God wants to hear from you and you miss out on a very important part of the service if you're not here to sing the songs—or if you're here and you're not singing.
5. One-to-one Bible reading. Couples, read together. Husbands, read with your wives and talk about what you've read. Parents, read with your children and talk about what you're reading. Get an accountability relationship. Meet with somebody. Call somebody on the phone, read over the phone, and just have a conversation about what you've read. I think we're going to start a program here at New Covenant on one-to-one Bible reading that will encourage you in doing these things.
6. Develop a vibrant, authentic prayer life, regularly praying back God's own Words to Him. Use the Word of God in your prayer life. So many of the prayers we pray are lifted from the Word of God. Show your dependence on God and God alone to do that work of transformation in your life.

I've got two closing words. First of all, I want to talk to those who are here today who do not know Christ, or who are not sure if they know Jesus Christ, or who have yet put their trust in Jesus and the salvation He has provided through His death on the cross for your sins. I want to leave the words of a song our choir sang years ago and we've sung many times in our services. My wife and I had our three sons sing this song at our 25th wedding anniversary when we

renewed our vows together. That was 12 years ago. The song is called, "Come To Jesus," written by Chris Rice. Let me share the words with you:

Weak and wounded sinner
Lost and left to die
O, raise your head, for love is passing by
Come to Jesus
Come to Jesus and live!

Now your burden's lifted
And carried far away
And precious blood has washed away the stain, so
Sing to Jesus
Sing to Jesus and live!

And like a newborn baby
Don't be afraid to crawl
And remember when you walk
Sometimes we fall...so
Fall on Jesus
Fall on Jesus and live!

O, and when the love spills over
And music fills the night
And when you can't contain your joy inside, then
Dance for Jesus
Dance for Jesus
Dance for Jesus and live!

Sometimes the way is lonely
And steep and filled with pain
So if your sky is dark and pours the rain, then
Cry to Jesus
Cry to Jesus and live!

And with your final heartbeat
Kiss the world goodbye
Then go in peace, and laugh on Glory's side, and
Fly to Jesus
Fly to Jesus
Fly to Jesus and live!

As the worship team comes up now, I'm going to say a few parting words to my church family, to my dear friends, those who have had such an amazing influence in my own life over these many years. You have walked with my family and myself through many of our significant crossroads, and you have given us the privilege of walking with you through many of your significant crossroads. You've seen my children do the same.

I'm going to pray my parting words to you. This is from Colossians 3, beginning in verse 12. Pray with me. So, my dear brothers and sisters...

...as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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