

Truth for Today

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Prayer for the Knowledge of God's Will - Colossians 1:9-13

Today's talk is about the prayer made by Paul for the Colossian church. It's the last in our series on Paul's Prison Prayers. First of all, let me read the main parts of it to you: *"We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth; as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, who also declared to us your love in the Spirit. For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light"*, Colossians 1:3-12.

Unlike Paul's personal prayers for the Philippians and the Ephesians, this is a group prayer by at least three Christians: Paul himself, Timothy and Epaphras. Neither Paul nor Timothy had met any of the Colossians, see 2:1. However, Epaphras was the founder of the Christian church at Colossae and so he knew them intimately. He had told his companions all about the reception of the Gospel at Colossae and its consequent fruit in the lives of these Colossian believers, as we have already noticed in 1:3-8. In fact, their faith in Christ Jesus and their love in the Spirit for all saints, was a cause of thanksgiving and a reason for this prayer for them, verse 9. But there was a more significant reason for this prayer. Epaphras himself knew their need of this very prayer. He himself had actually prayed for them in these terms in those prison prayer meetings at Rome. He, a true father and pastor in the faith, had fervently and feelingly beseeched God for them as we learn from 4:12: *"Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."* At this point I'm reminded of one of my own spiritual fathers who used to exhort us to "pray the kind of prayers that Paul prayed". He did this by asking why it is that we often concentrate on items such as health and physical comfort, etc., rather than the more important spiritual health issues mentioned in these prison prayers? We'll find that when we include spiritual items in our prayers, that we'll engage in the same kind of spiritual battles that Paul, Timothy and Epaphras encountered. They wrestled, they struggled, they combated, they really agonised, in their prayers for the Colossians, as is stated in 2:1 and 1:29 as well as in 4:12. They committed themselves to this great task, which is open to all believers of every age, of regular, consistent prayerful concern for fellow saints. Their prayers were both general and specific in nature, as is suggested by the use of the words "pray" and "desire", or "ask", respectively in verse 9.

The need to pray for the Colossians, the urgency of the prayer in terms of their situation, causes Paul, immediately after the greetings, to launch into it, as early as 1:3. This is unusual for him; his style is generally teaching, then prayer and/or exhortation. Perhaps I need to realise that I should pray earnestly for my listeners **before** I speak to them, as well as afterwards! However, the Colossians were in danger of practically moving from the all-sufficient Christ and this is really why Paul gives prayer the first priority. (Notice in the prayer the use of the words complete, full, all, every, to counteract this drift.)

But Paul commences his prayer with gratitude to God for the abundance of His grace shown to the Colossians and the evidences of true Christian growth amongst them. He was particularly thankful that Epaphras had faithfully declared the word of truth to them and that they had responded so appropriately to it, verses 3-8. These facts form the basis for subsequent items of concern. For, although the prayer commences at verse 3 with this note of thanksgiving, it isn't until verses 9-10 that these specific issues are mentioned. The prayer consists of a single desire: that the Colossians would be filled with the full knowledge of God's will, verse 9. This was required in order that they would walk, that is live, worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in every way, verse 10 (New International Version).

Let's now consider these two parts of the prayer in some detail.

What does it mean to be filled with the knowledge of God's will?

We can think of God's will at two levels. At the higher level, His will is both absolute and irresistible. Whatever God wills, He also ensures that it's carried out. He is able to "[work] all things according to the counsel of His will", Ephesians 1:11. Fundamentally, God's will is focused on Christ. "[God has] made known to us the mystery of His will...that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth - in Him", Ephesians 1:9-10. Paul appreciated the need for the Colossians to understand this great fact and their involvement in it. His personal prayer for them was: "I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge", Colossians 2:1-3.

However, in Paul's joint prayer with Timothy and Epaphras for the Colossians in 1:9, it's rather God's will for them at their level, that he is concerned about. Or to apply it today, it's God's will for me, what He wants from my life. That is, it's the practical, moral effect of understanding His supreme will, and applying it as I live as a Christian in the twenty-first century. According to Ephesians 5:14, I could be unaware of God's intentions for Christ, and be asleep to spiritual realities: "Therefore He says: 'Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.' See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is", Ephesians 5:14-17. Both the epistle to the Ephesians and the epistle to the Colossians describe in detail God's will for Christians at a very practical level. For example, in Colossians 3 and 4 Paul explains that God wants them to live differently from their fellow citizens. God has raised up Christ from the dead and seated Him at His own right hand, 3:1. Because Christians are associated with Christ where He is, God only wants to see what is of Him in our lives. We must put on the new man, that is, display the characteristics of Christ: forgive as He forgave; let Christ's peace rule our hearts; abide in Christ's word; and do all in the Lord's Name, 3:10-17. He is to be served in all spheres of life: in church, in the family, at work and out in the world, 3:16-4:6. Furthermore, at the end of his letter Paul reminds them that this was the intent of Epaphras' prayers for them: "Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God", 4:12. Notice the extent of Epaphras' requests – perfect or mature and not lacking in anything, not just some of God's will, but all of it! The idea of being complete is prominent in the letter to the Colossians and the word recurs in various forms throughout: 1:19 and 25; 2:2, 9-10; 4:12 and 17. Here in 1:9 it means **filled full** of the knowledge of God's will, like a vessel can be filled to the brim, so that there's no room left for anything else! We must live out God's will exactly and fully as He planned it for us. Obviously, we can only do this through the wisdom and understanding given by the Holy Spirit Himself! (Paul emphasised this because the Colossians were in danger of taking advice from Gnostics, people who thought they, and only they, had superior knowledge of spiritual things.) In the verses following those already quoted from Ephesians 5, believers are exhorted to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that they can be filled with God's will. This on-going process of being filled full is also clearly described in a personal and experiential way in Romans 12:2. The New International Version puts it: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will." (New International Version).

Living a life worthy of the Lord

Paul prays that the Colossians would walk worthy of the Lord. Walk infers something that's active, something that we do – that's why the New International Version translates it as living. Worthy of the Lord means of like value, or carrying the same weight, in God's estimation, as the life of the Lord Jesus Himself! In simple terms it means that everything I do in life must be such that everyone will say "he's a Christian", that is, "he's Christ-like"! I must live just like Jesus lived when He was here in this world: "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps", 1 Peter 2:21. Paul repeatedly insists that believers' lives reflect the Lord:

- our lives should be worthy of the gospel of Christ, Philippians 1:27. In Philippi there were some evident inconsistencies with this aim due to the disagreements within the church.
- our lives should be worthy of the Christian calling, Ephesians 4:1 and 4:17. It's described as a high, or heavenly calling, and a holy calling. This demands a high standard of living from those who are said to have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ!
- our lives should be worthy of saints, Romans 16:2. The name "saints" is applied to all believers and shows us that we have been set apart for God. Therefore we must be holy in every aspect of our lives. In Romans 16 it's about how believers receive each other into practical Christian fellowship.
- our lives should be worthy of God, 3 John 6 and 1 Thessalonians 2:12. This requirement is expanded upon in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, where Paul emphasises the need for purity and honesty in all our ways. In 5:18 He encourages believers to give thanks to God in every circumstance of life. It's in all the details of everyday living that we're to please God, the God who has called us to His own kingdom and glory!

Here, in this prayer for the Colossian believers, Paul continues that the objective is to please the Lord in every way, 1:9 (New International Version). Hebrews 11:5 quotes Genesis 5:24, and substitutes the word "pleased" for the word "walked", to testify that Enoch actually did this – he pleased God. He was pleasurable to God because he lived a godly life in a corrupt world.

In verses 10-12, the character of the believer's life or walk is described in four ways as being:

1. fruitful;
2. increasing;
3. strengthened; and
4. thankful.

Fruitful in every good work means that the character of my life should be so complete that I bring pleasure to God in everything I do. I can only do this if I abide in the true Vine, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, whose life was totally lived for the will of the Father who sent Him.

If I abide in Him, I'll be **increasing**, that is growing, in and by the knowledge of God. This is the way it all comes about. It's like the branches of the natural vine receiving sustenance from the plant itself.

I also need to be fortified for the many difficult experiences of Christian living. Christians are therefore **strengthened**, that's empowered, not to perform supernatural acts, but to endure life's trials. Spiritual strength is also required to enable believers to be longsuffering with people who prove to be contrary either to the Christian message, or to the Christian way of life. Paul recognises then that we need to be strengthened according to the manifested power of God's glory in order that we may exhibit these features, patience and longsuffering, with joy. It's above, and goes beyond, just putting up with adverse circumstances or difficult people!

Finally, the Christian life should be characterised by **thankfulness**. Specifically, we should be marked by giving thanks to the Father, the source of all of our blessings in Christ. Verse 12 explains the reason for responding to the Father with a deep sense of gratitude: "[He]...has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light." The amazing fact is that we share together the inheritance, the place of coming glory, in and with Christ, see Ephesians 1:11. The environment in which the saints participate is the light, the full and final revelation of the complete nature and character of God. Our ability to respond to the Father is that He has qualified, that's fully fitted, us for this position of glory with Christ. He did this when, by His grace, He rescued us from the control of Satan and brought us into the kingdom of the Son of His love. He conveyed us out of the domain of darkness and into the light, the new and eternal order of things. In this kingdom Jesus is Lord, and we must show this by our life style, walking worthy of Him!

At the end of verse 13, the prayer changes and rises from a petition into a contemplation of the One, this One who must have pre-eminence in all things. Here are some of the important things said about the Lord Jesus Christ in verses 14-21:

- He is the unique eternal Son of the Father. Most especially in these eternal, divine relationships, He is the Son of the Father's love, verse 13.
- He is also the Redeemer. Through His blood we have the forgiveness of sins, verse 14.
- He is the Image, that is the Complete Representation, of the invisible God, verse 15. Everything that man can ever know about God is found in the Son, and only through Him.
- He is the Firstborn over all creation, verse 15. He occupies the highest position.
- He is the Creator: "*for in Him all things...were created...all things have been created through Him and for Him*", verse 16 (New Revised Standard Version).
 - "in Him" – He is the great intelligent Designer of the creation
 - "by" or "through Him" – He is the active Agent for God, the One who brought all of the creation into being
 - "for Him" – He is the ultimate Reason for the creation, the Father's thoughts centre in His Son.
- He is both Superior to, and the Sustainer of, the creation, verse 17. He exists before all things, and in Him all things subsist, that is, continue by virtue of His faithfulness and power.
- He is the Head of the body, the church, verse 18. All believers are joined together in Him, and derive their spiritual life from Him.
- He is the Beginning of the new creation, verse 18. God starts anew with Him!

- He is the Firstborn out from among the dead, verse 18. He has the highest position in the sphere of resurrection.
- He is the One in whom the Fullness of God was pleased to dwell, verse 19. (Now in His ascended position at God's right hand, the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Him, 2:9.)
- He is the Reconciler of all things in heaven and earth because He made peace through the blood of His cross, verse 20.
- He has already reconciled believers to God and has presented them holy and blameless and above reproach in God's sight through His death, verse 21.

Now let's conclude this series of talks on these prison prayers by praying some of their salient points for each other.

God our Father we would pray for each other, for each and every believer, with the very requests that Paul prayed for those he wrote to at Philippi, Ephesus and Colossae. Give us discerning love to approve the excellent things of our faith. Open our eyes, the eyes of our hearts and give us spiritual enlightenment to know what is the hope of Your calling, the riches of Your glory of Your inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of Your power toward us who believe. Strengthen us by the Holy Spirit in our inner being so that Christ may take up His permanent dwelling in our hearts and so that we may understand all Your intentions for us as associated to Christ. Enable us to know Your will so that we might live lives worthy of the Lord Jesus Christ. We ask these things in His Name. Amen.

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