

Colossians #24 – Getting Much-Needed Wisdom

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Colossians GIW

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Thanks to God the Father through Him.

I want to say to begin with two things to you, visitors, and the first thing I want to say is that I didn't just pick this text because you happened to be here. As a matter of actual fact, we just reached this place in our exposition of this letter of Paul the apostle. In the second place I want to say that I'm not sorry it worked out that way, because I want you to hear what this text has to say. We've been going through this letter of Paul, which was written to this Colossian church because of the threat to that church from certain false teachers. Among the false teachings that they were bringing into this church were some remarkably similar things to what we are seeing in many of our churches today in America. One of them was an attempt to restore a kind of Old Testament ceremonialism. Many of the things out of the old tabernacle and temple were being restored. Another thing that these false teachers were introducing into the life of that Colossian church was a species of speculative theology. Not something taught in the word of God in plain language, but something that they had kind of worked out in their own fancy and their own minds. This is called mysticism, where you kind of work out your own ideas of things in the divine sphere, and in this instance it had to do with the worship of angels. Then finally in the third place, there was a kind of ascetic approach to holiness, and it's an interesting thing that we see that phenomenon sometimes today also. Last year at that conference down in Carolina, one of the people that I believe was really disturbed by some of the things he heard began to talk about the great asceticism of Mother Teresa.

Well, in this third chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians, he is giving us the antidote to this teaching, and the first thing that you have to have to withstand the avalanche of errors that the devil will bring upon you is union with Christ. That's absolutely essential. You have to be raised up with Christ, and you have to set your mind on things above and not on the things on the earth. Then when you have union with Christ and you are alive and raised up from the dead, then you have to go on and put off all of those habitual things that you associate with the old nature and the old life that you lived before that by putting on all of those things that God requires, and you'll notice in this passage that there is a repetition of this idea of putting off the old by putting on the new. And then he says, in order to do this, above all you have to have love, which is the bond of perfection, and you have to let the peace of God rule in your heart, to which also you were called in one

body, and you've got to be thankful. Now that means that there is a whole chain of things related to each other that we have to be busy with in the Christian life. We have to be putting on a many-sided life of Christian virtue in order to put off the old ways of the unregenerate man and the question is: how are you going to do this? And what do you need as the bottom line resource in order to know how to do this? Well, my friends, it's quite simple: you need wisdom.

Now, if you know anything about the Bible, you'll know that the Bible makes a distinction between mere knowledge and wisdom. Have you ever met somebody that seemed to know everything? I remember one minister that I knew quite well who was a kind of walking encyclopedia. He had knowledge oozing out the pores of his skin almost, but you know that man didn't always have wisdom. Wisdom is not merely knowledge, but it is also a sensitivity to the way in which God wants us to apply that knowledge in what we are doing and that's why Paul says, "What you people have to have in order to do all these other things is wisdom, and so I want to tell you," he says, "that you've got to let the word of Christ come in and live in you richly in all wisdom." And right there, you can see how far the modern church has moved away from the biblical idea of singing, because that's what this is about. You're supposed to let the word of Christ come in and dwell in you richly in all wisdom.

Many people today think the purpose of singing in the church of God is self-expression and for that very reason, for the past 100 years, the church has been filled more and more with a kind of sickly, sentimental kind of hymnology that ministers to the feelings that people have. But God does not tell us to sing in order that we might engage in self-expression, what he tells us to do is to sing in order to engage in a species of self-impression, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you in all wisdom richly." In other words, let the word of Christ come in. It's not what you have in you that needs to come out. It's what God has for you that needs to be brought in. And I want to ask you quite honestly: where would you look for the word of Christ if you wanted to find it? Now, where would you look? I would look in the Bible and I would not look anywhere else but in the Bible for the word of Christ, because I don't think you can find it anywhere else. We as children of the Protestant Reformation believe the Bible to be the only rule of our faith and practice. The only source of final, absolute, infallible, and authoritative truth is the Bible. So if you're going to let the word of Christ come in and dwell in your heart richly in all wisdom, I believe you're going to have to go to the Bible to get it.

Well, that's the first thing. The second thing is that he even tells us how to do it, for he says we are to do it as we teach and admonish one another in singing. In other words, the way to accomplish this very vital and urgent need of filling ourselves with wisdom, the wisdom of Christ, is to teach and admonish one another in singing. And right there again is one of the bottom line reasons why I believe we should sing the inspired Psalms of the Bible, because when I have somebody admonishing and teaching me, I would prefer that they would use something without errors, wouldn't you? Do you want to be taught and admonished by the word of man or the word of God? I want to be admonished all day long as long as it's God's word that's admonishing me. I want to be taught all day long as

long as it's God's word that is teaching me. And the only source of singing material that I know of that's without error is the book of Psalms.

If you say Fanny Crosby has some wonderful thoughts, I'm not going to argue with you. You're entitled to that opinion. But in the first place, the Lord God says women are not to teach the church of God and Fanny Crosby is a woman. And in the second place, she was not infallible, not inspired and not kept from all error. But David was, and Asaph was, and Moses was. And God not only inspired them to write the Psalms, he collected them and inscripturated them in an infallible and inerrant text so the church of God would have the means whereby to sing the praises of God.

You know, congregation, the thing that you repeat over and over and over again, those are the things that are going to stick with you to the day you die. Some of the things I memorized when I was younger, I wish I never had memorized them. I can't forget them and I wish I could. And some of the things that I did not learn as a child, I wish I had because I know if I had, I never would forget them. Now, there was a time in the Reformed churches of the world when the church almost had a memorized Psalter. Do you know that? They grew up on it, they were nurtured on it, and they died on it. They sang the Psalms till they were coming out their ears, as it were. They knew them because they were constantly repeated and that's exactly what our text is saying. If you want to let the word of Christ come in you and dwell in you richly, in all wisdom, so you've really got that, then you've got to teach and admonish one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

"Oh, yes," you say, "but that's not just Psalms, is it? It says Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, doesn't it?" Yes, it does. But do you know what the word "hymn" means in the Scriptures? Do you know what the word "song" means in the Scriptures? You see, a lot of our problem in understanding the Bible is that we use words the way we feel like using them and don't pay much attention to the Bible. I mentioned that down in Lemmon today. I said, "What does the word 'church' mean to most people?" It means building. Not one time in the entire Bible does the word "church" mean building and yet 99 out of 100 Americans use the word "church" for nothing other than building. See where the problem is? What is the church? "Well, it's that building up the street," that's what most people would say but that's not what it is according to the Bible. God says the church is the living body, the organism of the living body of believers in Christ.

Well, friends, it's exactly the same when it comes to the problem of hymns and songs because when Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians, the word "song" and the word "hymn" did not mean anything other than Psalm. You see, the Bible had been translated in Paul's day into the Greek language and so there in the synagogues of the ancient world where Paul always began his ministry, there was a Bible and that Bible was the Old Testament in the Greek language, and if you opened that Old Testament Bible in the Greek language and you started reading through the book of Psalms, "Whoa," you would say, "Hey, wait a minute, there's a hymn," because that's what it said right there in the Bible. And you'd say, "Whoa, wait a minute, I didn't know that and here is a song." Open your English Bible to Psalm 120 and you find the same phenomenon right in your own

English Bible. Psalm 120 is called the Song of Ascents and so is Psalm 121, 122, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, and there it ends. All of those are in the language of the Bible itself, songs.

You see, Paul didn't say, "Well, now you Colossians, you've got nothing to sing there. I want you to get busy and write yourself some songs and some hymns." He didn't say that. No, he says right away, "I want you to get busy letting the word of Christ come in and dwell in you richly, teaching, admonishing one another with the Psalms and the hymns and the songs, the pneumatic ones, that means inspired of the Spirit, the ones you've already got right there in the book of Psalms." It's the same phenomenon, friends, that you have when the Bible speaks of commandments, statutes, and judgments. When God tells us he wants us to honor his commandments, statutes, and judgments, do you think that one of those is divinely authoritative, inspired, and the other two man-made? Not on your life. They're all three terms in the Bible itself for God's legislation. And Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs are different designations for different kinds of compositions in the book of Psalms itself.

You know, one of the great principles of the Reformation is that we are to worship God only as he has commanded. I want to read you what our Reforming fathers had to say about this, and I'm quoting from the Westminster Confession, chapter 21, "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture." Go through any hymnbook that you can find, and you'll never find any hymn that even existed in the time of the Apostle Paul, except the ones that are in the Bible. That's what he told them to sing. Now listen to our Reforming fathers. What are the elements of worship that God has commanded? The reading of the Scriptures, the sound preaching and hearing of the word, due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments, singing of Psalms with grace in the heart, all are parts of the ordinary religious worship of God, and are to be used in a holy and religious manner. So that's the principle of our Reformed faith and there was a time when all of the great Reformation churches that went back in their spirit to Calvin and Knox and Zwingli, sang the Psalms of the Bible just exactly because of what this text teaches.

You know, this was debated in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church back in the early '40s. We didn't want to stay with the old Presbyterian hymnal so there was a blue-ribbon committee that was established to study this whole question. When all that work was finished, the chairman of that committee wrote an article in the Presbyterian Guardian, and he said something very significant. He said, "If somebody wants us to prove that God commands us to sing anything other than the Psalms, it is impossible." Now I know that I will hear somebody saying, "Yeah, but Paul really isn't talking in that verse there just about Sunday worship, is he? You can't really say that in the flow of this great passage, he's suddenly talking about a church service and saying, 'Now what you folks have to do when you come together in church is let the word of Christ dwell in you richly and admonish and teach each other and so on.'" No, of course not. He's talking about all of life. And you know it would do us all good if we were memorizing a Psalm when we

were doing the dishes, if we were playing a tape of one of the Psalms when we're driving down the road until we really learned it and got it into our hearts and minds thoroughly. If this is the rule for all of life, and I think that's really a fair interpretation of the passage, how much more then ought it to be observed in the church of God in our corporate worship, certainly in families also, yes, but especially in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now whenever you hear something like this, if you're not used to it, I know what the objection is that rises up in your heart because it used to arise in my own heart when I first studied this issue. It goes something like this, "Yes, but I love some of those hymns so much, I just can't give them up to sing those stodgy old Psalms. I can't do it." Well friends, if you think I was brought up on the Psalms, you're mistaken. If you think I prefer the Psalms because I like them better, you're mistaken about that. Do you want to know what my favorite hymn was before God pried me out of my rut? Here are the words, I'll give them to you, "Oh, that will be glory for me, glory for me, glory for me. When I shall look on his glorious face, that will be glory, glory for me." Are you shocked that G. I. Williamson could ever have sung that and loved it? But I did. But then God taught me that that was almost blasphemous. Glory for me when the chief end of man is to glorify God? I had to be humbled. I had to be lowered way down. And I had to realize that my place is to diminish self to the vanishing point in order that God alone may be glorified.

Well friends, that's why the Psalms have been losing out in the last century. Do you ever see what happens to a church when it starts to add hymns to the book of Psalms? Well, I'll tell you, two things happen: the Psalms get thinner and the hymns get thicker. Always happens. I've traced the history of many Reformed churches in North America and over and over and over that's the story, and the reason is because modern man is man-centered, not God-centered. That's the whole problem because the Psalms are God-centered. They don't pander to our sentimentality. They set before us the great God of the Bible and his holy will and precepts and that's not easy for anyone to adjust to. But if the church of God is ever going to recover its power as a mighty force for God in this world, there's hardly anything that it could ever do that would be more helpful to that end than going back to the songbook that God gave his church in the inspired book of Psalms.

Do you realize what it could do for you and your children if the church of God came back to this again? I had to go to New Zealand to learn this, but I sure learned it there. On a number of occasions, old grandparents came out from Holland to New Zealand to visit their children and grandchildren. On more than one occasion, the old father or grandfather or grandmother would get sick and die in a foreign land. And I can remember some of those old saints that died in a foreign land with nothing familiar in terms of country or surroundings, and do you know what I saw coming out of their hearts? It was the book of Psalms. One of those old saints told me that when he was a little boy going to the Christian school in Holland, every single week they had to learn another portion of the book of Psalms and by the time they were old people, they had it all inside of them. They knew it by heart. You could pick any Psalm you wanted to out of that Dutch Psalter and start singing it, and they knew it. They had put the word of Christ within themselves

richly, abundantly, and they had wisdom because they had it. And what a comfort it was to those dear old saints to have the word of God welling up out of their own hearts.

I want to ask you then, brothers and sisters, how do you feel about the precept that we should worship God the way he says and not the way we happen to like? Well, one of the things that he commands us to do is to teach and admonish one another in Psalms and hymns and songs pneumatic. That's what he tells us to do. And you know something? You've got to have grace in your hearts to do it. Don't miss that in the text. Singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. You know what grace is? It's an overwhelming sense of the unmerited favor of God. That's what it is. And when you see that you deserve nothing but his wrath and damnation, when you see that you are a big goose egg, a big zero, and he is everything, and yet has had mercy upon you, aren't you ready then to put away your pride and say, "Well, Lord, you tell me how to do it. You tell me what to do and I'll be more than willing to do it."

It's been a lonely pilgrimage for me because when I got out of seminary in 1952, very few people would even have patience to listen to something like this, let alone put it into practice. Things are better today. I'm amazed sometimes that the number of younger men, ministers around the country are concerned about this very principle, wanting to get back to God's way of worship. But for me, there's a rich dividend. Friends, when I come to the valley of the shadow of death, I believe by that time I will have sung the Psalms long enough that there's going to well up in my heart too the sure and certain precepts of the divine word of God that he gave us in the Holy Psalter, and I will have a sure anchor for my hope when that day comes. Echoing the words of the psalmist from Psalm 95, "O come and to Jehovah sing, let us our voices raise. In joyful songs let us the rock of our salvation praise. Before his presence let us come with praise and thankful voice. Let us sing Psalms to him with grace, with shouts. Let us rejoice." May God then himself bring conviction and persuasion. Amen.

Father in heaven, we pray that it might please You to bring the church of Jesus Christ again in these days in which we live, to realize the supremacy of the great songbook of the church of all ages that You have given us in the Bible, the one from which our Lord himself sang. O God, restore this once again in Your church and in the hearts of Your people, that we may be richly endowed with wisdom and may, O God, be able in all that we do to give glory to Your name in thankfulness for Your grace. This we ask for Jesus' sake only. Amen.