
Praying to Know God's Will

Priorities in Prayer

Colossians 1:9-14

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Introduction

In this series we are not attempting to develop a full-fledged, Biblical theology of prayer. That should entail looking at the concept of prayer and petitions before God in the Old Testament (which would include many if not most of the Psalms) and the pertinent texts in the Gospels. Instead, we are working through many New Testament texts from the apostle Paul in order to expand our understanding of what the apostle thought about prayer in how he prayed.

We desire to have the content of our praying shaped by the Bible. Our praying should not be so radically different from that which we read in the text, especially in the New Testament. And we desire that our attitude in praying be sharpened by the Bible. When we more fully understand what Paul prayed for and about, we hope that our praying, both its intensity and consistency will be increased as well.

In our series we now come to a prayer that is found in the introduction of Paul's letter to the Colossians. The city of Colossae was situated in a river valley in the province of Asia. It was 100 miles or so inland from Ephesus and at one time was a significant city in the region. By Paul's day it had lessened in importance but was still on a main trade route through the area. Paul himself had not been to the city but a church had been established there, likely by a convert of Paul named Epaphras. He was a Colossian native by what we read in Colossians 4:12, and was the source of the Gospel message for this region as seen in 1:7. Acts 19:8-10 refers to the region of Asia being evangelized during the time Paul was in Ephesus on his second journey recorded by Luke. This area was later known for its compromise of the Gospel and likely, even in Paul's time, the people of the area had been exposed to potential false teaching. From prison, in Rome after the events found in the close of the Book of Acts, Paul writes to encourage and instruct this group based on a report of their lives provided by Epaphras himself.

Prayer's Prelude (vs. 3-8)

Our text for this evening is Colossians 1:9-14, but as we begin let us read from verse 3 to verse 8.

*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,
since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus
and of the love that you have for all the saints,
because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*

*Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you,
as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—
as it also does among you,
since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,
just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.
He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf
and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

Connection to Life

The text we have before us is an intercessory prayer report. Paul is telling them what he is praying for in regards to their lives. But he does not do so in a vacuum. It is connected in the flow of the text and the thanksgiving-prayer unit typical of first-century and Pauline letters. His report is connected by “and so” referring to what he has said previously.

Paul firmly makes a connection to life as he prays for this people. He had been made aware of their growth in spiritual things and likely their recent struggles. In verse 3 he is thankful because of their continued faith in Christ and their evident love for one another. He reminds them that this faith and love is grounded in the hope brought by the truth of the gospel. He connects the problems and joys of life with the reality of the Gospel.

Too often we segment our lives between the secular and the sacred. We have “religious” problems and we have “practical” problems. This dichotomy does not exist for Paul; he will remind them (and us) that all that occurs has its cause and goal found in Christ. When we grasp this concept truly, our lives are never viewed from the same perspective again.

Context in living

His prayer though is not just connected to life, but finds its context in living. It is the report of their growth and “fruit bearing” that brings Paul’s response. His prayer springs from what he has heard about them, and is finding its effect in changing their lives. He reminds them that they are not alone in their advancement in the gospel, indeed throughout the “whole world” this growth is occurring. But Paul is focusing not on abstractions but upon a visible group of believers who need help and encouragement.

Again, ministry too often is structured in the abstract and theoretical. We need to balance our thinking to provide substantial background and resources to assist our understanding of life, but we should never allow our work to separate this from the practical.

Prayer's Plan (vs. 9)

This brings us to the report of the prayer itself. How Paul prays should be particularly instructive for our own praying. Paul has a plan in this prayer and we can see it in our observation of his intensity, his intention and his insight.

It's Intensity

...from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you...

Paul both here and in many other texts indicates that his praying was characterized with both regularity and urgency. He prayed with a measure of intensity. "Not ceasing" does not refer to some superhuman ability to maintain a "never-ending" prayer vigil, but instead describes the routine of Paul in his praying. It was a normal and expected part of his life and an intentional component of his ministry. Paul fixed a measure of urgency for the problems he encountered in his relationships with fellow believers. He understood that in the milieu of life, God uses the context of prayer to accomplish His purposes often in way we do not understand. Can our lives and ministries be described as including an intensity in our praying or has it become a customary decorum that is attached to provide a mere dramatic context for what is to follow!

It's Intention

...asking that you may be filled...

Paul does not often bring a "generic" prayer. He probably would not often be heard saying "I'll pray for you" with no intention about what he was going to pray for. His prayers were intentional and focused. In this context Paul wants the Colossian believers to know that Paul is specifically asking God to "fill them."

It's Insight

...with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...

And Paul's understanding of these people allows him a measure of spiritual insight to bring a specific, intentional prayer. He wants them to have an increase in their knowledge of God's will especially in respect to its use and application. Keep in mind for Paul, God's will is clearly understood in the context of the Scriptures and its portrayal of the story of redemption seen the Gospel. He is asking that an orientation and attitude toward the Scriptures would drive their thinking and decision-making for all of life.

This tells us two things. One, we need to "love and know" before we can adequately "speak and do" in our relationships with each other. That mnemonic we have learned from CCEF and use frequently here at The Chapel to assist us in our ministries should remind us of where to start in our work in the Gospel. And secondly, we should work hard in knowing our Scriptures well. We should never be satisfied in a superficial understanding of the Word, but should be engaging our minds and hearts to know and understand the character of God and his desires, because that is where wisdom for life is found.

Prayer's Purpose (vs. 10a)

Besides reporting his prayer to the Colossians, he also lets them in on why he finds this particular petition important. He lets them know the purpose of this prayer.

An Anchor

...so as to walk in a manner...

We almost gave this point away earlier. Paul knows that this filling will provide the anchoring point for their lives. It will allow them to walk in a specific manner and method. "Walking" is a word for describing our living by emphasizing its motion and movement. To walk requires you to look around, engage your surroundings and to respond to things outside of yourself. Being filled with the knowledge of God's will provides one with the where-with-all, the wisdom to engage this walk without stumbling.

An Aim

...worthy of the Lord fully pleasing to him...

But our walk is not a stroll with no purpose there is an aim that Paul points out for this walk of life. It is to be seen as worthy of the Lord. Note, the text does not say to become worthy of the Lord's favor but to be worthy of Him. We are called by his name, and have been giving a hope found in the Gospel of His son, can we be seen as living up to these expectations? Jesus was known to live a life under the will of the Father without fault. If we are "in Him" do we resemble Him?

Paul wants the Colossian believers to be so filled with the knowledge of God's will so that it will govern their beings such that Christ is evident and their position is obvious. These are great expectations! But Paul is able to ask God that it would be so. He did not tell them to "get on the stick" and shape up to make themselves worthy, he prays that God would orchestrate their desires and circumstances so that their walk would indeed be visible as "worthy."

To often our Christian lives are locked in a state of shambles. We often justify our attitudes and actions by falling back on the truth that we are but sinners. But as true as this is, it should not become an excuse for bringing reproach on the name of our Lord. We need to see a vision of his glory and then desire to know and apply his will so that we can be seen as truly one of his own.

Prayer's Program (vs. 10b-12a)

Worthiness of our calling in order to be pleasing to God is not left up to our own whims or imaginations. Paul goes on in this report to show them that being filled with the knowledge of his will gives them wisdom to be found worthy of their calling in specific areas.

In Action

...bearing fruit in every good work...

Our actions will have a quality that can be described as good. The results, the idea behind the metaphor of bearing fruit, will be seen and substantial. This does not mean immediate. Many of us know of stories where people have impacted one another with results that are not obvious until many years later. This idea should motivate us to continue in our efforts even when we see no effects. Worthiness is found in our working hard for the kingdom and its advance.

In Awareness

...and increasing in the knowledge of God...

We will increase in our awareness of his greatness and wonder. Do we see the circularity here? Being filled with the knowledge of His will brings about an increasing knowledge of himself. The more we strive to know him the more we will love him and want to know him more and better. Sitting back and not taking advantage of all the opportunities to grow in God's knowledge provided in the ministries at Clearcreek Chapel is evidence of not being filled and failing to walk worthy of this calling.

In Ability

...may you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy...

Working out this worthiness is also given its energy in recognizing that our ability comes from him. Our endurance and patience, in the midst of our busy-ness comes from him as well, but is also can be seen as evidence of our connection to this Gospel. Many of us know of individuals who seem to enter this walk with fervor and energy only to later succumb to the world once again. Endurance, perseverance, to use a more theologically charged word, is evidence of worthiness of our calling.

In Attitude

...giving thanks to the Father...

But even in the work, the attitude behind the work carries weight. God is pleased not in the mere exercise of "religion" but in the service and work and knowledge of those who do so from hearts that are bowing before him in humble gratitude, who live under their need of mercy and grace in each hour and each day

Prayer's Panorama (vs. 12b-14)

Paul, in using the stylistic conventions of his day does not lose the opportunity to bring worship into his presentations. He then concludes this report with a transition that leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the Gospel message and what it will mean to “know” God and his will. He in essence gives a more panoramic view of the specifics he has revealed in the petition.

Our destiny

...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light...

He highlights what we have said before, that the “worthiness” to enter in this relationship was provided by God himself and does not reside in our won merit. The Father has established our destiny by making us heirs in the promise of Christ and setting us aside to be in his special presence.

Our deliverance

...He has delivered us from the domain of darkness...

He then made possible our deliverance. No longer are we captives to the power of sin and death, but have been liberated to a new master to worship and serve.

Our deposit

...and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son...in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And then he re-deposited us in a new realm. He didn't recreate us to be neutral, to then be able to see the Gospel and perhaps respond to it afresh. Paul informs us that God places us under a new master in a new kingdom, the kingdom of His son, who secured the blessings of the Gospel in the work of the cross in paying for our sins. Paul then expands upon this even further as he then highlights the centrality of the Son in the next paragraph and will build upon this concept throughout the remainder of the letter.

This brings us to a close. What shall we do with Paul's prayer? Here are some lessons to refresh what we have learned.

Reflect and Respond

1. Worthiness should be a goal for living.

Because of our standing in the inheritance of Christ we should not be complacent in our spiritual growth and discipleship. Many in our tradition, because we do assert the work of God in initiating, completing and guarding our standing before Him, have a tendency to minimize the daily dependence upon the Gospel and our growing in the knowledge of God and His will.

2. There is content to our spirituality.

Indeed there is a “knowing” dimension to spirituality. Many have a concept of Christianity that is merely a warm feeling or excitable experience. For that experience to be real it must first be true. We must, let me stress the “must” spend time in the Scriptures both individually and corporately to know Him, his will and to empower the wise use of this knowledge daily.

3. There is a risk of failure.

There is an urgency in this growth, because if we are not filled with this knowledge it is likely we have not been qualified to receive this inheritance. Oh today may we examine our hearts to see if we are indeed living by the faith of the Son!

4. And lastly for tonight, there is utmost benefit to be in community.

Paul was addressing this petition to God on behalf of the Colossian community. Yes, it is composed of individuals, but the focus is on “them” as a unit. We need to be praying for not only our own spiritual knowledge and wisdom but for the growth of each other and all.

Let us close by praying aloud this prayer three times. First let us fill in the blank with “I.” We will appropriate this prayer of Paul for the Colossians as our own. But then let us look to our neighbor in our seats. Look face to face with someone else and then we will pray once again, filling in the name of the one near to you. And lastly, let us look to us corporately and once again rehearse these words filling in the blank with “Clearcreek Chapel” afterward the worship team will come.

Father, may _____ be filled with the knowledge of Your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that they may walk/live in a manner worthy of You, being completely pleasing to You, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in knowing You. Please, strengthen them with all power, according to Your glorious might so that they will endure and be patiently joyful, helping the, to give thanks to You, who has qualified them to share in our inheritance in light. (Colossians 1:9-14)

Foundation - the theological and Biblical basis for prayers
Frame – the situational, personal, missional, ministry context for the prayers
Features – what distinguishes that prayer from others and what makes it like other prayers
Focus – what is the main subject, main aim, primary requests, elements of praise.

Exposition

Praise (3-8)

Petition (9-14)

Reflect/Response

God centered/reflective praise.

Whole gospel orientation

Knowing God both cognitively and experientially

Divine empowerment

Eschatological orientation

1:9-14

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you,
asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,
fully pleasing to him,
bearing fruit in every good work
and increasing in the knowledge of God.

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might,
for all endurance and patience with joy,
giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,
in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

