

THANKSGIVING AND WRESTLING IN PRAYER

Studies in Colossians

Study 8

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O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever
(Psalm 136:1)

THANKFULNESS

The theme of thanksgiving and thankfulness continually breaks through in Paul's letter to the Colossians:

In our prayers for you **we always thank God**, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have 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 (Colossians 3:1–5).

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while **joyfully giving thanks** to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light (Colossians 1:11–12).

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, **abounding in thanksgiving** (Colossians 2:6–7).

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. **And be thankful**. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and **with gratitude in your hearts** sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks** to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:15–17).

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it **with thanksgiving** (Colossians 4:2).

ALERT IN PRAYER—WITH THANKSGIVING

Paul's call to keep alert is worth some pondering, for it alerts us to the importance of thanksgiving in prayer—prayer is no mere shopping list of requests:

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with **thanksgiving** (Colossians 4:2).

It has been said that a good test for where our worship life is at, is our degree of thankfulness. For at the heart of human sin, is the matter of ceasing to give thanks to God. In this act, senseless minds become darkened, and thinking becomes futile:

for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God **or give thanks** to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened (Romans 1:21).

P. T. Forsyth has expounded on this matter of thankfulness in prayer, as follows:

If our prayer reach or move Him it is because He first reached and moved us to pray. The prayer that reached heaven began there, when Christ went forth. It began when God turned to beseech us in Christ—in the appealing Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. The Spirit went out with the power and function in it to return with our soul. Our prayer is the answer to God's. Herein is prayer, not that we prayed Him, but that He first prayed us, in giving His Son to be a propitiation for us. The heart of the Atonement is prayer—Christ's great self-offering to God in the Eternal Spirit. The whole rhythm of Christ's soul, so to say, was Godhead going out and returning on itself. And so God stirs and inspires all prayer which finds and moves Him. His love provokes our sacred forwardness. He does not

compel us, but we cannot help it after that look, that tone, that turn of His. All say, 'I am yours if you will'; and when we will it is prayer. Any final glory of human success or destiny rises from man being God's continual creation, and destined by Him for Him. So we pray because we were made for prayer, and God draws us out by breathing Himself in.

We feel this especially as prayer passes upwards into praise. When the mercy we besought comes home to us its movement is reversed in us, and it returns upon itself as thanksgiving. 'Great blessings which are won with prayer are worn with thankfulness.' Praise is the converted consecration of the egoism that may have moved our prayer. Prayer may spring from self-love, and be so far natural; for nature is all of the craving and taking kind. But praise is supernatural. It is of pure grace. And it is a sign that the prayer was more than natural at heart. Spare some leisure, therefore, from petition for thanksgiving. If the Spirit move conspicuously to praise, it shows that He also moved latently the prayer, and that within nature is that which is above it. 'Prayer and thanks are like the double motion of the lungs; the air that is drawn in by prayer is breathed forth again by thanks.'¹

MODERN DAY TURKEY—AND SOME HISTORY

Secured in God's Covenant love for all of eternity, how vital life can be—knowing Jesus Christ, and his vast and gracious Lordship over Creation. *All things have been created through him and for him* (Colossians 1:16b). That includes us, and modern day Turkey. Grace, through the death and resurrection of Jesus is such good news.

Since God has acted decisively in Christ Jesus for the blessing and benefit of the human race, it is troubling to consider that in the region of modern day Turkey—where Colossae and Ephesus once had a major role in the life of the Christian church (leaving the legacy of this letter)—so few know and worship Christ as Lord.² At one time—300 years after Christianity began—it was a global hub of church government.

I am disturbed in my spirit when I contemplate the wonderful forward movements of Christian faith into the hearts and lives of communities and nations, and then compare them with the times of decline, the failure of churches, and the decimation and the destruction of gospel-centred communities. No wonder Paul was urgent that false teaching be recognised and rejected. He was aware of the dynamics of the battle.

Tensions between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Western Christian church have their roots in the days of Constantine, when the city of **Byzantium** became the New Rome. This city was named **Constantinople** in 326AD. Today, under the sway of Islam it is called **Istanbul**, and is the world's fourth largest city. O how Kingdoms rise and fall.³ Over 1000 years ago, a Russian delegation, under orders from Prince Vladimir, investigated the possibilities in worshipping One God. When quickly dissatisfied with the worship of Muslims, of the Romans, Jews, and Greeks, they visited Constantinople in about 987AD, and found that the Byzantine worship was 'the most beautiful in the world'. They adopted Eastern Orthodoxy as Russia's official religion—amidst, we need to note, the usual complex mixture of political motivation.

Some recent changes within this nation, Turkey, alert us to points for prayer:

Turkey's Ottoman Empire became 'for centuries the guardian of all the holy places of Islam and its chief protagonist'. Since the sweeping reforms of the 1920's, Turkey has officially been a secular state. There is however a fault line of tension between Islamists and secularists. Constitutional

¹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*, NCPI, Blackwood, (1916) 2008, pp. 14–15.

² 'Turkish and Kurdish believers probably numbered around 10 in 1960. This number rose to around 4,000 by 2010'. See Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, WEC International, 7th ed., 2010, p. 831.

³ The popular song *Istanbul not Constantinople* says, *Even old New York, was once New Amsterdam!*

guarantee of religious freedom has not been fully upheld. Recent deaths threats and murders of Christians highlight the present reality and severity of persecution and the likelihood of more to come. The EU ruling against including religion on Turkish identity cards may help prevent discrimination against Christians.⁴

In a recent prayer newsletter from Turkey, an Australian woman ministering there among the people confirmed that there are currently only 3,500 believers in a nation of 75 million. It is difficult to comprehend that where Paul preached, nearby in Ephesus, and where the Colossians once lived this is 'still one of the most unreached nations in the world'. How might we assist in the work of the gospel, there?

LOVE INCLUDES THANKFULNESS AND WRESTLING IN PRAYER

Paul's letter to the Colossians contains much wisdom not only for the way to go about community living, but in order to 'make the word of God fully known' (Col. 1:25). While wrestling in prayer with love an ongoing *note of thankfulness* is so important:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:12–17).

Ultimately the love of God our Father, in his Son, the humble suffering Jesus—the Cosmic Christ of the Cross—shall be triumphant across the universe, and God will be all in all. The way forward for Christian people is to ever live in and proclaim, or bear witness to this redemptive, suffering love of God. We do well both to contemplate, and emulate the struggle and prayer life of Paul, and the wrestling of Epaphras:

For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:1–3).

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis (Col. 4:2–13).

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1Thessalonians 5:16–18).

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God (Philippians 4:6).

Thankfulness is a crucial component in life, for all who experience God's mercy:

As he [Jesus] entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the

⁴ Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, WEC International, 7th edition, 2010, pp. 830–1.

other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well' (Luke 19:12–19).

A POEM: 'GIVE ME MY DUE'

Give me my due, I pray you.
My eyes dart restlessly,
Ever and anon,
Across the audience wide of every man,
The whole world, so to speak.

Give me my due; laboured
I have, Incessant from my birth,
Seeking to please my parents,
Impress my family,
And draw praise from my teachers.
I am the man who works,
Seeking the praise of men.

Receiving this praise—
As I do on occasions great—
I am filled with gratitude.
Should they not praise me, though,
I feel the steely edge of bitterness
Cutting within my soul.
My face as adamant,
I am all hard within.

Why should I covet praise?
Why should I seek the plaudits
Of men and God? I answer,
'Nothing so assuring is,
So reassuring, in a world
With all competing for assurance
In the praise of men and God.'

How frail we are! How insecure!
Be there one critic, one despiser
And our world turns grey.
We miss encouragement, its warmth,
The stimulus of others' worship,
And the need of us by men.
We need this need
Else pointless were our days,
And our spirits dulled.

Could we but the vision see,
Climb one high peak,
And look across times vista
To penetrate eternity—
Then we might understand

We need no praise, no gratitude;
Nor covet the plaudits of men,
Or seek to satisfy the Deity
Whose image true we had not seen—
'Til it became in Christ.

There is no need to walk in fear,
To covet men's approving thoughts,
Nor watch their actions with anxiety.
For God is God, and history is His,
And we His children born of dust and Cross,
May settle into love with Him,
Through Word and Spirit, Son and Life.
We have no need to covet praise
Nor grovel for acceptance by the world.

Give Him His due, I pray you
For He has voided work
That justifies the man,
That bids him slave to justify
The actions of his living.
How deeply anxious is the heart
That lives to please both men and God
But never can succeed. How frail
And pitiful the plea to be received
By men and God.

Without this labour
God Himself receives.
Without this toil
He gives His rest to hearts of men.
Labour He did through Cross and Tomb
To make the work complete,
Emancipate the slaves,
And set the debtors free.

If this be true, then labour's vain,
Except it be the work of gratitude.
Come wind, come time, come troubles too,
Our labour is from love
For love; not to receive
The warming plaudits
Or the passing praise,
But love to serve the Serving God
And live within the Father.