A Prayer for God’s People

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Preacher: David Court

[0:00] Let's read God's Word together from Colossians chapter 1, verses 9 to 14. This is God's Holy Word.

Well, we turn this evening back to Colossians chapter 1 and to look at those verses that Corrie read for us a moment or two ago. Elephants never forget. It's a well-known saying. Perhaps the strangest thing about those words is that they are in fact true. Apparently, elephants do indeed have incredible memories. For example, they can keep track of the occasion of up to about 30 members of their herd at any one time. They're a long-lived species, and their good memory for places and terrain is of vital importance for the survival of the herd. It must be true. I read it in Wikipedia. Now, I don't know if anyone has ever before likened the Apostle Paul to an elephant, but if not, we're breaking new ground this evening. Because like the elephant, Paul did not forget.

In particular, he did not forget people. He had a great memory for the people of God. And Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica. He tells them in chapter 1 verse 2, we always remember you when we pray. And we see something similar here in this opening chapter of Colossians. Verse 3 of chapter 1, we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. And here in verse 9, and so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you. Paul, it seems, didn't forget people, and he didn't forget to pray for them. He was committed to persistent and persevering prayer for others. And his example, I think, presents a huge challenge to our own prayer lives. And so, what we have before us this evening in these verses is a prayer of Paul, a prayer for the Colossians, a prayer for God's people. And it's helpful, I think, to note what he prays for, what he asks for, what he longs to see in the lives of these Colossian believers.

We remember from last week, this was a church that was being influenced by false teaching, and there was the danger that rather than the gospel, rather than Christ remaining at the center of their life and worship and witness, it was being displaced by other forms of teaching.

So, notice with me, if you will, three things that we see in this, a prayer for God's people this evening. And the first thing I think we notice is that in verse 9, it's a prayer asking for knowledge, wisdom, wisdom, and understanding. This is the central request of Paul's prayer, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. What is Paul asking here? What is he referring to? Now, often when we think of God's will, we think about His will for our lives. We think about our circumstances and our life choices. Shall I apply for this job? Should I marry this person? Where should I live? This is not what Paul is referring to here. He's speaking here really about the gospel itself and the great future hope it holds before us. He's alluding to God's great purposes of grace for His people and for the world. It's the big picture that Paul has in mind here.

[5:12] As we were reminded last week, the Colossians had come to faith through receiving the gospel message, and now Paul asks that their knowledge and their understanding of that gospel would be expanded.

God has made known His will. He has revealed His purpose through the Scriptures, through Christ, through His apostles. He has made things plain to us in the message of the gospel. It is a revelation of God's grace and love for sinners. And so, Paul is praying that their understanding of God's plan and purpose in the gospel would grow and deepen. And the reason for that, as we shall see, is that the whole of the Christian life flows out of this gospel. Paul's desire is that the Colossians would be filled with this gospel knowledge in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Now, that word spiritual here is not a reference to some kind of vague mystical feeling. That's often how that might be understood in our culture. But what Paul is speaking about here is the work of the Holy Spirit, because it's the Spirit

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Himself who brings wisdom and understanding to God's people. We are to be a people whose thinking, whose mindset is continually shaped by the Word of God, illumined by the Spirit of God, and transformed by the gospel of God. And there's a real danger today, as there was in ancient Colossae, that we are duped and deceived by all manner of worldviews that are circulating in our culture, where people move away from the gospel and the centrality of our Lord Jesus Christ, then be assured, confusion will abound, and immaturity will result. There's a famous quote of Tim Keller. I believe this is an approved quote from Corey, so I think I'll be okay. He writes, We never get beyond the gospel in our Christian life to something more advanced. The gospel is not the first step in a stairway of truths. It's more like a hub in the wheel of truth. The gospel is not just the ABCs of Christianity, but it's the A—I was going to say Z, but I can't make myself say that—but it's the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we all make progress in the kingdom. Martin Luther, another famous quote, The truth of the gospel is the principal article of all Christian doctrine. Most necessary is it that we know this article well. Teach it to others and beat it into their heads continually. The gospel that justifies is also the gospel that sanctifies. It's the way of growth and renewal in the Christian life. Quoting Keller again, It's the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power through every barrier. And Paul is praying here that the Colossians would grow in their understanding of the gospel, its fullness, and that that would powerfully impact their lives. We've been praying as a church in this past week. What for? For gospel renewal. And the gospel does that renewing work in us as we understand it in all its truth, in all its grace, in all its glory. So, the key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal and revival is this continual rediscovery of the gospel. We need to see and understand and feel more of its truth and power in our lives. Now, this knowledge and understanding of God's will in the gospel that Paul's praise for here is not knowledge for the sake of it. It's the kind of knowledge, wisdom, understanding that will issue in changed, transformed lives. And that brings us, I think, to the second thing I want to highlight here. Paul prays here not only for gospel understanding, but for gospel living. It's a prayer, you'll notice in verses 10 and 11, looking for godliness, fruitfulness, and resilience. What will it mean for us to be filled with the knowledge of God's will in Jesus Christ? It means we will be a certain kind of people. We will be changed. We will no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world. We will be different because the gospel brings deep and profound change. And this is what Paul is looking for in the lives of these Colossian believers. He's looking for three things. For godliness, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him. Verse 10, he's looking for lives that would reflect love for and worship of the Lord. Paul's words here are very similar. There are strong connections between Colossians and Ephesians, very similar words to those we find at the beginning of [10:54] Ephesians 4, where Paul says, I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. He doesn't mean living in such a way as to make ourselves worthy of the Lord. He doesn't mean living to earn our way into God's favor. He's referring to that way of life that flows out of the grace that we've already received in the gospel. It's a life that shows His worth and that we belong to Him.

Many years ago when I was at school, 20 years ago or whatever it was, I can't remember, if we were going on a school trip or if we were representing the school, you know, football team or whatever it might have been at some event, we always had the same talk from whoever the teacher was. So we were exhorted not to disgrace and dishonor the good name and reputation of the school.

I'm not sure our school had a great reputation, but anyway. Well, as Christians, if I put it this way, we belong in the school of Christ and we bear His name through baptism and we need to live to honor Him. We need to live lives worthy of the Lord. More than that, we need to live lives that are fully pleasing to Him. No longer living simply to please ourselves, even to please others. Our primary motivation is to please the Lord Himself. That's the great desire of the Christian, to live a life that brings pleasure to God. Sometimes there are those who appear to embrace the Christian faith for self-serving reasons, and they very quickly find that it doesn't work because self-pleasing Christianity is never and can never be satisfying. We only find satisfaction when we're set free to live for God and not for self. And so the Christian life is not to be understood as some kind of crushing, oppressive burden or some great long list of rules and regulations. It's to be a pleasure and a delight.

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We are to give Christ pleasure by the way that we live and conduct ourselves. We are to delight ourselves in the Lord because it's not about what pleases us. It's all about what pleases Him. Our lives are orientated towards Him. Christ is now at the center. We aim to give Him pleasure. To God be the glory, great things He has done, says the old hymn. We're to be taken up with Him. [13:52] He must come first. We must be less concerned about what we think of ourselves or even about what others think of us, and more concerned about what the Lord thinks. And that should be true in the lives that we lead in the worship that we offer. I don't know if I quoted this before. I think Anne Ortlund wrote a book on worship some years ago entitled Up With Worship. In the book, she describes a proper attitude to worship in these terms. Lord, this church service is for you. I am here to give you pleasure.

Godliness. Godliness. Lives worthy of the Lord, looking to please Him. But not just godliness here, also fruitfulness, again in verse 10, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. You might remember last week in the previous verses, Paul spoke there about the gospel bearing fruit and growing in verse 6. This is what the life-giving seed of the gospel does. It bears fruit and grows amongst those who receive it by faith. The underlying principle here, growth and maturity.

Our lives are to bear fruit for God. Just as a healthy tree bears its fruit in due season, so the Christian is to bear fruit for God in every good work. We're not to, I think, see ourselves as a bunch of do-gooders, but rather as those who take pleasure in pleasing God. And good fruit is the inevitable result of that. And those fruitful good works are to be accompanied here by a growing knowledge of God. Not just knowing things about God, not just packing our minds with information, but knowing Him. That's the language of intimacy. Remember Jesus' words in John 17, this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. And surely this is both its deepest pleasure and its greatest blessing. The Christian life is not something static, it's dynamic.

And knowing God is at the heart of everything for the Christian and for the church. And it seems that Paul is expecting growth in the lives of these Colossian believers. He's looking for maturity. He's looking for development. He doesn't want them to remain in the same place spiritually. He wants them to become more and more like Jesus Christ. That's ultimately what it means to be fruitful. Maturity, fruitfulness is likeness to Jesus. A fruitful people are growing in their knowledge of God and likeness to Jesus. Are we bearing fruit? Are we growing as Christians? Are we still growing?

If maturity in the Christian life is being more like Jesus, then that tells us what immaturity is like. It's becoming less like Jesus. And we become less like Him when we act selfishly. We become less like Him when we're full of our own pride. We become less like Him when we refuse to love and serve others.

[17:16] What do we sometimes say to people who are behaving in an immature, a childish manner? We tell them, you need to grow up or you're at your age. Paul tells the Christians in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 14, verse 20, Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature, be grown up. So, Paul's looking for godliness. He's looking for fruitfulness. He's also looking here for resilience. Verse 11, be strengthened with all power according to His glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy. So, Paul isn't praying for God's mighty power to be known in some kind of miraculous works and healings. He's praying that the Colossians will know God's power in keeping them moving forward in the Christian life with patience and joy.

He desires that they will be able to stand in the day of testing and trial, that they would be able to cope with the many stresses and strains of living for God in a pagan world. That word for endurance often tied to circumstances. The word patience more often than not relates to people. We endure circumstances and we are patient with people. And you'll notice that the strength of resilience comes from God. And you'll notice how Paul piles up the words so that we, you know, we don't miss the point. Strength, power, might, glory. This resilience is nothing to do with a kind of stoicism or a stiff upper lip. It comes from God, and it's characterized by joy. Because to endure with joy is a mark of God's grace. That we're growing in our knowledge of God, our understanding of His will. And surely that is one of the great needs, isn't it, in our own day and age, that we would continue to stand and persevere for God, that we would keep the faith. God's power is at work within us, making us a resilient people, able to stand in those days when the enemy comes in like a flood, a people who will not crumble at the first sign of opposition, a people who will not throw in the towel

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despite the blows of the evil one. And perhaps to some of you here, that appears somewhat unambitious, maybe even a somewhat mundane goal, just to remain standing, just to keep going, just to stay the course, just to endure.
Maybe when I was younger, I thought that too. But as the years have passed, I've come to recognize that this indeed is a vital aspiration. For tragically, I have seen many fall by the wayside and fail to endure.
So here we have a prayer for knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, and a prayer looking for godliness and fruitfulness and resilience. And then thirdly, you'll notice here, there's a prayer. Here's a prayer rooted in thanksgiving for God's salvation. We have this wonderful couple of verses here at the end of the end of the section, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints and light. He's delivered us from the domain of darkness, transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. To endure, to maintain our Christian convictions. We need strength. And Paul, you see here, returns to that note of thankfulness that we considered last week, and something that we're going to see as we move through the letter. And simply put, the Christian life is a life of gratitude to God. We're to be a thankful people. Why? Because of all that He has done for us in the gospel.
[21:40] Because of all that we have received through the Lord Jesus Christ. Because God has been so wonderfully good to us. What has He done to inspire such gratitude? Well, Paul spells it out in these verses. Three key words, you'll notice there, used all in the past tense. He qualified us. He delivered us. He transferred us.

And Paul is speaking here about being moved, really, from one realm of existence to another. It's a fundamental way in which the New Testament speaks about salvation. So, he's thankful that he has qualified them, qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints and light. Now, perhaps some of you here know what it is to be disqualified from something. Maybe in some athletic contest, maybe from driving.
Perhaps you didn't meet certain criteria. Maybe your eyesight didn't make the grade. And then you can argue with it, with the government or with the officials. But if you don't meet the required standard, you're disqualified. You're out. That's it. You're excluded. You can no longer participate. And as sinful human beings, we've all been disqualified. We've all been excluded from God's presence. We've all been left out in the dark. All of us don't make the grade. We failed the test. We don't make the necessary criteria. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And yet the good news is this, that through faith in Jesus, we are qualified. We're allowed in. We belong.
[23:28] How can it be? It's because Jesus met all the necessary conditions and criteria on our behalf. He lived a life that we could never live. He fulfilled all righteousness. And He did it for us.

There is no hope in ourselves. There is no hope in our own righteousness. There is no hope in our own morality or good works. But in the gospel, a perfect righteousness is offered to us.
The record of Jesus' faithful life is credited to us, imputed to us. The obedience, His obedience to God the Father becomes ours. We are clothed in His righteousness, perfect. And so in the gospel, it's not only that Jesus removes the stain of our sin and guilt, cleansing us by His blood. He not only takes something from us, He gives something to us. His own perfect righteousness. He qualifies the disqualified. And friends, if that is not a cause for praise and thanksgiving, I do not know what is.
Notice here that the language of sharing and inheritance is mentioned. That's rooted in the Old Testament. The promised land, the tribes of Israel were allotted a share in the land. And Paul really takes that imagery here and applies it to our place in the new heavens and earth. Most, perhaps, maybe not all, but perhaps most of them, the Colossian Christians were Gentiles, alienated and estranged from God. No share in God's kingdom. Strangers to the promise.
But now through the gospel, the door had been opened, and through faith in Jesus Christ, they had been qualified to share in that heavenly inheritance. They were qualified. They were delivered. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness, verse 13, rescued us from the power, the rule of this dark world. And darkness, of course, a powerful metaphor for ignorance, blindness, and inability to see reality. We sometimes speak of people being in the dark about something. It means they're ignorant. They don't know what's going on.
[25:53] And Paul speaks here about being delivered from the domain or dominion of darkness. He's talking about a realm, a kingdom, where darkness rules over people's lives. People are lost in this dark world, in the grip of darkness. The darkness is not only out there, it's in here. It's invaded all our lives.

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We need to be brought out into the light. I like old films. Black and white, the better. That's the… And David Lean's film adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel, Great Expectations, is a, in my view, is a great film. Released in 1946. That was even before my time. Stars John Mills, Alec Guinness, Gene Simmons, Finley Curry. It's a wonderful piece of cinema. And in the climactic scene of the film, and some ancient people here may remember this, Pip returns to Miss Havisham's house, and he meets Estella again. And in the scene, he goes upstairs to a main room where it is, as it has been for years and years and years, dark and dingy. All the windows are boarded up. It's a place of real decay and darkness. And he speaks to Estella, and he tells her, he says, you must leave this house. It's a dead house. Nothing can live here. I have come to let in the sunlight. And then he proceeds dramatically to tear down the shutters and the boards over the windows and pull back the curtains, and he opens up the windows. And the light floods in and exposes all the dust and the decay and banishes the darkness. And then he takes Estella by the hand, and he says to her, come with me out into the sunlight. And friends, that is exactly what Jesus says to us in the gospel. He says, leave this dark realm. It is dead. Nothing can live here.
Take my hand and come with me into the light. Jesus delivers us from the domain of darkness and brings us into his kingdom. Thankful that he has qualified them, delivered them.
Also here, you'll notice, transferred them, verses 13 and 14. Transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. That transfer imagery, very significant in the New Testament. Fundamental contrast between these two realms.
One, the old realm of Adam, characterized, as I've said, by darkness and despair and death. This is the world apart from Jesus Christ. This is where we languish without him. But by God's grace, he transfers us out of that old realm, brings us into a new realm where Christ is Lord and where he rules. And instead of darkness, there is light. Instead of despair, there's hope. Instead of death, there is life. There is life. And Paul tells us here, if we're Christian believers, we've been transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
[29:34] Again, the background here, that of the Old Testament, the exodus and return from exile. C.S. Lewis was once on an Any Questions type radio program where he was asked this question, Professor Lewis, what can Jesus Christ give me that no one else can give me? I want the answer in just one word. And without hesitating, Lewis simply said, forgiveness. The great need of all human beings.

The forgiveness of sins. And this is what only Jesus can bring us. What a contrast that is with other religious systems in our world today, with Hinduism and its iron law of karma, where your sins will inevitably catch up with you, when there's no escape for a never-ending cycle of punishment and retribution. Or with Islam and its symbol of the scales. Allah the judge weighs your good deeds and acts of righteousness on one hand, on one side, and your evil and wrong deeds on the other. Friends, the great symbol of the Christian faith. It's not a set of scales. It's a cross.
Remember how Jesus described the very purpose of His death. This is my blood poured out for what? The forgiveness of sins. Do you know that forgiveness this evening? It is to be redeemed. It is to be liberated. As Corey mentioned earlier, we have a number of copies available.
Colin and Mary Peckham's account of the Lewis revival, 1949 through 1952, entitled Sounds from Heaven. It's a collection, really, of 24 testimonies of people converted during that period. One of them was a man, and I met him and knew him, Kenneth McDonald. He was known as Kenny Ban. He was 29 years of age.
He was a heavy drinker. When he attended a meeting at his aunt's house in Garibald State Point, and Duncan Campbell was preaching on Jesus' words, I am the way. And that evening, God met with Kenny. He came to Christ, and he was saved. He was transferred from one realm to the other.
[32:14] And he wrote, and he writes this in the book there. He says this, I never, ever looked back. God saved me that night in the house, and he will never hear the end of it.

I will praise him throughout eternity for his patience and grace with a sinner like me. I've never lost what he gave me that night. And friends, that's what it means to have a life rooted in thanksgiving. God saved me, and he will never hear the end of it.
Because that experience of Christian salvation, of God's forgiveness, is something we never, ever get over.
Those elephants that I spoke of earlier, their great memories allow them to survive and thrive in their environment. Are we going to survive where God has placed us? We need to make sure that we do not forget to pray and to call on the name of the Lord, that we might grow in our knowledge of

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his will and his gospel, and so become a godly, fruitful, resilient, and ever thankful people. Let's pray together.
Amen. Well, we pray that we might, all of us here might experience something of your grace and mercy towards us in Jesus Christ. Lord, may you help us to grow in our knowledge of your will in the gospel.
[34:10] We ask, Lord, that your gospel would indeed renew us, revitalize us, reorientate our lives, shape our way of living, that we might live not for ourselves, but for you, the living and eternal God.

And we pray, our God and Father, that our experience of your grace would be deep and true, and that we would always be thankful, that we would never, ever get over it. And we pray these things in Jesus' name and for your glory. Amen.

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