

2. Praying for Understanding

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn in our Bibles to Paul's letter to the Colossians, and you'll find this on page 983 in our big hardback Bibles, page 983.

I'm going to read the same passage as we had last week, but we shall be looking a little bit further down the passage. So I'll read from verse 1 down to verse 14 of Colossians chapter 1.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy, our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father.

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 truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing.

[1 : 08] 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. 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.

Amen. Now, we're continuing with our series from this first chapter of Colossians, and I'm calling this series, Paul Teaches the Church How to Pray.

[2 : 32] And when I put it like that, Paul teaching the church how to pray, I'm aware that he's not consciously teaching the Colossians the art of prayer in this chapter. He's not saying to the Colossian Christians, this is how to pray.

He's not doing as Jesus did when he said to his disciples, when you pray, say, our Father who art in heaven, and so on. So Paul is not teaching prayer like that. But in these verses, he's showing the Colossians how he prays for them, in what terms he prays for them.

And in doing this, he gives us a model for our praying, and we do well to follow his example and to learn from him. Paul is modeling prayer here for us, and his model prayers have been a source of great instruction and encouragement for the churches of the last 20 centuries.

Now, if you were here last week, you'll remember that we looked at verses 3 to 8, where Paul expresses his thankfulness to God. Do you remember verse 3? We always thank God.

And Paul thanks God in that passage for the existence of the church in Colossae, this smallish city set in the Roman province of Asia Minor.

[3 : 44] So he thanks God for the church. He thanks God for the conversion of these Colossians to Christ, and for the way in which the gospel, as he puts it in verse 6, has been bearing fruit and growing in the whole world.

We noticed last week how Paul's praying, both here and elsewhere, is always steeped in thankfulness. Now, if you look at the very last verse of the letter, turn over the page to chapter 4, verse 18, and thinking about thankfulness, look at Paul's position there.

He says in chapter 4, verse 18, Remember my chains. In other words, he was in prison when he writes. A Roman prison in the first century AD was much harsher than a British prison today.

Paul was literally in chains. And yet he's so thankful. If I had been in chains in that prison, I guess I would have been tempted to complain bitterly about the food, the damp, the cold, the rats, and the absence of a decent cake of coal tar soap.

But Paul was filled with thankfulness for God's mercies. Now, that's a model for us to follow in our own praying. Thankful, even in desperate circumstances. Well, now today, I want to take only one verse, and that is verse 9.

[5 : 02] And so, from the day we heard, the day we heard of your conversion, 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.

Now, the sentence goes on, you'll see, into verse 10, and I'm hoping I could pick that up next week. But for today, we'll just look at verse 9 and see what kind of model Paul gives us for our praying here.

I want us to try to understand what Paul means when he says, filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Now, let's notice two things by way of a preliminary. First, Paul prays for the Christians in Colossae. Now, that's not to say that he never prayed for the people who were not Christians. He may well have prayed for the conversion of more of the Colossians.

But he doesn't tell us that that's what he did. His prayer was for the Christians and for their strengthening. And in that respect, Paul exactly follows the example of the Lord Jesus.

[6 : 08] Do you remember Jesus' words in his great prayer recorded in John chapter 17, when he prays to God the Father on the evening before his crucifixion? He said to the Father, I'm not praying for the world, in other words, the non-Christian world, but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

Now, the Lord Jesus was concerned for the world, for the non-Christian world. He loved the world deeply. But he prayed for his disciples. And Paul does the same thing here in Colossians chapter 1. And let's notice, secondly, that Paul prays for them without ceasing. Verse 9, From the day we heard about you, we have not ceased to pray for you. Now, this is not the vain repetition of pagan prayers that Jesus warns his disciples against in Matthew chapter 6.

This is what the loving Christian does for those that he's really concerned about. We can be sure that Paul did not woodenly just repeat exactly the same words and phrases every day as he prays for other Christians.

I think we can be sure that Paul actually said in his prayers far more than the few words he records for us here in verses 9 to 12. But he's encouraging the Colossian Christians by telling them that he is regularly and frequently praying for them.

[7 : 29] And in the same way, it's a good thing for us to tell our Christian friends that they are often in our prayers. As long as they are in our prayers. We mustn't tell them we're praying for them if we're not. But it's good to encourage people like that.

All right, well, let's turn to the main thing. What does Paul ask for as he prays for the Colossians? Well, there he tells them in the second half of verse 9. Asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

So Paul is praying, dear God and Father, help them to know your will. Now, let me ask a question. If a Christian friend comes to you one day and says to you, will you pray for me that I may know the will of God for my life?

What kind of request is that request? It may well be that your Christian friend wants to know how to make a particular decision. Should he sell his house and buy a new one?

Should he move from one place to another or from one church to another? If it's a young person who asks that question, it may well be a question about whom to marry or what kind of career to follow.

[8 : 40] Now, we live in an age where the horoscope has a lot of power. People claim out in the world to be secularist and rationalist and anti-supernaturalist and all that kind of thing.

But we know that many of them read the horoscopes in the newspapers and magazines because they're looking for help. They want to meet a special person or be guided to some special opportunity.

Now, Christian people know perfectly well that these horoscopes are foolish nonsense. And yet, something of the horoscope mentality seems to have crept into the thinking even of Christians.

So, some Christians seeking guidance for their lives may even have adopted the method of letting the Bible fall open at random and reading the first verse that their eye falls upon.

Have you ever done that? Perhaps the Lord will guide me like this. I'll just let the Bible fall open and I'll see what the Lord says to me. I read it and it says, Judas went out and hanged himself.

[9 : 43] Oh, that can't be right. I'll try again. Go and do thou likewise. Oh, no, that can't be right either. Now, I'm being ridiculous for the sake of making the point.

But I think we can be certain that when Paul writes in verse 9 of our passage that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will, he was not talking about those life decisions.

Important though they are. He was asking that the Colossian Christians should be filled with a growing understanding of the wonderful changed life and lifestyle that marks all true Christians as they get to know the Lord better and understand the desires of God's heart for all his people.

The will of God is expressed by God to all of us on every page of the Bible. So as we read the Bible repeatedly during our lives and as we come to understand its implications better, we are learning what God's will for our life and our thinking and our conduct is.

Now, let me open up a little further what Paul means by being filled with the knowledge of God's will. Perhaps you turn with me just a page or two on to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, page 987.

[11 : 07] 1 Thessalonians 4 and verse 3. You'll see that Paul has something to say about God's will in that verse. Chapter 4, verse 3. For this is the will of God. Now that makes us prick up our ears, doesn't it?

This is the will of God. Your sanctification. That you abstain from sexual immorality, etc. So God's will for the Thessalonians is for their sanctification, which means their progressive growth in living and wanting to live a holy life.

Paul then gives a specific instance. He talks about sexual godliness, about chastity and self-control, which is an important part of living life God's way. But the point is that Paul is teaching the Thessalonians that the will of God is that they should grow in holiness, grow in this very distinctive and different lifestyle, which is lived in sharp contrast with the surrounding pagan culture.

So the will of God is that Christians grow more holy and more Christ-like. Now picture again your Christian friend coming to you and saying, I want to know the Lord's will for my life.

Why not turn him to 1 Thessalonians 4 verse 3 and say to him, let's read this together. This is the will of God for your life and my life, your sanctification.

[12 : 27] He says, I don't mean that. All I want to know is whether I should move to Bishop Briggs or Pollock Shores. But stick to your guns and keep his nose in 1 Thessalonians 4 verse 3.

And he may begin to see that the will of God for his life is a much bigger and much more wonderful thing than he has realized. Let's look at another passage.

The very next chapter, 1 Thessalonians 5 verses 16 to 18. Three short verses. Chapter 5, 16 to 18. Rejoice always.

Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. The will of God. So God's will for the Thessalonians and for us today, according to those verses, is that we rejoice always.

What did John McEnroe say? You cannot be serious. Rejoice always. Is Paul serious? Yes, Paul is serious. Rejoice always.

[13 : 29] Because even when life is at its toughest and bleakest, there's always so much to rejoice over. Paul was rejoicing when he was in prison. Then verse 17.

Pray without ceasing. Now, that cannot mean be actively, consciously praying for 24 hours a day.

We can't do that. We've got to sleep. We've got to work and go to Tesco's and all the rest of it.

What Paul means there is be a person who prays and develops lifelong habits of regular prayer.

And then verse 18. Give thanks in all circumstances.

Even in prison. Even in hospital. Even on your deathbed. Especially on your deathbed. Because there is always so much to be thankful for.

And why rejoice always? Why pray without ceasing? Why give thanks in all circumstances? Paul tells us. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

[14 : 29] Joyful, prayerful, thankful. That is God's will for all Christians everywhere. So, friends, let me give you a permission. If you catch me whinging, complaining, or moaning about my lot in life, oh dear, life is so hard, come up to me and say, Edward, have you forgotten what God's will is for your life?

Joyful, brother. Prayerful and thankful. That is God's will for your life. 1 Thessalonians 5.18. Now, with that in mind, let's turn back to Colossians 1 and verse 9.

When Paul prays that the Colossians should be filled with the knowledge of God's will, he's praying that they should aim for holiness or sanctification.

He's praying that they should learn to be joyful and prayerful and thankful. But that's only a, that's just the tip of the iceberg. Those are just a handful of examples. What Paul means is that the Colossians should come to know as much as they possibly can about the will of God and how to follow it and obey it.

Now, let's notice an important word in the middle of verse 9. Filled. Asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will.

[15:42] Now, filling takes time. Let me give an example. I know that most of us take showers these days. But just think back a decade or two or three to the time when we all had baths.

Do you remember that antique object? The bathtub? You used to put the plug in, switch on the hot tap, test the temperature, switch on the cold tap.

Not too much cold. And then, when you'd done all that, you had to wait, didn't you? Three or four or five minutes until there was enough filling of the bath. And then you could get in, add the radox and relax.

But the filling takes time, doesn't it? You can't go from empty to full in two seconds. It's surely the same with Christians and the knowledge of God's will.

It takes time for our hearts and minds to be filled with the knowledge of his will. And how does this filling take place? There is only one way.

[16:46] Only one way. And that is, as we take in the Bible into our systems, into our very minds and hearts, what you and I desperately need, what all our fellow church members across the world desperately need, is to be regular, serious readers and students of the Bible.

I don't mean students in an academic sense, but students in the sense that we're willing to take time to read, to meditate over, and to think through the implications of Bible passage after Bible passage.

Now, here's a quotation, which I'm sure most of you could fill out. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Now, that verse doesn't say that we don't need bread. The Lord knows we need our bread. We need our daily food. But that verse is teaching that if we're really going to live life, to live life in the will of God, we need, as well as our bread, every word, every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

The whole Bible, therefore, from Genesis to Revelation, is our necessary nourishment. We're not just bodies that need food. We're hearts and souls and minds as well, which need nourishment.

[18:06] And isn't it true that many Christians these days are half starved, and their souls are thin and meager because they're not taking their regular Bible nourishment.

And that's why their knowledge of God becomes frail and uncertain. But friends, it's never too late to start. So do let me encourage you, if you've never yet got into the habit of regular, unhurried Bible reading, why not start tomorrow?

Go to your kitchen table, or perhaps to a comfortable armchair in the sitting room, and open your Bible with exactly the same attitude as a hungry man has when he sits down to his dinner.

What you need is nourishment. And there's only one place to get it. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And the Bible becomes not only the food for our souls, it also becomes our delight. Jeremiah the prophet wrote, he was speaking to God, I found your words, and I ate them.

[19:13] Not just read them, I ate them. And they became to me my joy and the delight of my heart. But there's no need for us to be thin and frail in our souls, when the source of strength, joy, and nourishment is here in the hands of each one of us.

Now back to verse 9 in chapter 1. This is how Paul is praying for his young Christian friends at Colossae. He asks that they be filled with the knowledge of God's will.

But Paul adds another phrase there. In all spiritual wisdom and understanding. What he means is that when Christians are filled with the knowledge of God's will, they will grow in God-given wisdom and understanding.

So getting to know the will of God is not just some mental exercise, like learning mathematics or chemistry. It shows up in a new ability to live life wisely in all its practical details.

This wisdom and understanding of verse 9 means knowing how to live our lives. How to deal with work and money and colleagues and our families.

[20 : 22] And yes, indeed, questions about whom to marry and where to live and what job to apply for as well. Wisdom in the Bible, just think of the book of Proverbs, is not something airy-fairy.

It's very practical. It's about how to make good decisions, how to get along with people, how to conduct yourself in the many different relationships that we all have. It's about how to live a balanced, mature, sane kind of life.

A life that is unafraid and purposeful and makes a real contribution to both the church and the wider society that we live in. So how do people grow into that kind of maturity and sanity?

By being increasingly filled with the knowledge of God. And how are they to be filled with the knowledge of God? By regularly feeding on the words of God as they read their Bibles.

Now this is how we can pray for our Christian friends. It's striking how Paul says nothing about the kinds of things that we often pray for at our church prayer meetings.

[21 : 27] You know the kind of prayer that's sometimes prayed? Dear Lord, please help young Stephen to pass his driving test. Dear Lord, please help young Amanda to find a job in the bank.

Well, yes, the Lord is not unconcerned about that kind of thing. Nothing is too small or insignificant to pray about. But we need to learn from Paul what is really important as we pray for our Christian friends.

If we follow this model of Paul's prayer life, our praying will become very different. Now this verse 9 will help me greatly to pray for my own growing children.

I have two teenage daughters. The younger one is still at school. The older one has just started at university a couple of months ago. And all of us know what a minefield is out there in our schools and universities.

Destructive, godless values are thrusting themselves at our young people left, right and center. So how will this verse 9 help me to pray for my daughters? What shall I ask for?

[22 : 28] Lord, please help my girls with their exams to get a grade 1. Lord, please help them to pass their driving tests. Lord, please spare them a lot of pain when they go to the dentist.

Do they exist? No. I need to ask the Lord to fill them with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

So I need to pray something like this. Lord, teach my girls to love you and to banish idols from their hearts. Lord, teach my girls to honor your name and to be willing to defend your truth and your gospel tenaciously when they're challenged.

Teach my girls, Lord, to honor their parents. You might think there's a selfish motive in that. But it's not really quite what I mean.

I'm thinking of the commandments, aren't I? Lord, teach them to respect other people deeply and never to think murderous thoughts. Teach them to respect other people's property and money, not to steal.

[23 : 28] Teach them, Lord, to hate adultery and every form of sexual immorality and to be willing to defend chastity and marriage at school and university. Teach them to be deeply honest and truthful and not to smear other people's reputations.

Teach them, Lord, not to be eaten up by the covetous desire to possess more things. Teach them, Lord, to love your commandments and to understand them deeply. Fill them with the knowledge of your good and perfect will.

I'm just using my own daughters as a kind of concrete example. Many of you have children or grandchildren. And if you don't have a family, you have many Christian friends. Paul is teaching us here how to pray for other Christians, our Christian friends and other Christians that we don't know. And this verse 9 of Colossians chapter 1, if we take it to heart and think through its implications, it will revolutionize the way that we pray.

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.

[24 : 40] And let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. Dear God, our Father, we thank you so much for the treasures of truth, knowledge, wisdom, how to live life wisely, carefully, boldly, joyfully, that you give us in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

And we pray that you will deepen in our hearts the desire for regular, nourishing, feeding upon your wonderful teaching. And we pray that you will help us, each of us, wherever we're up to in the Christian life at the moment, to be increasingly filled with the knowledge of your goodwill for our lives, your goodwill for the church.

And help us, we pray, to be men and women of prayer who learn how to pray in the way that the Apostle Paul teaches us. And all these things we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.