

3. Praying for Power

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Date: 20 November 2013

Preacher: Edward Lobb

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

I'm reading the same passage that we've had the last couple of weeks, and we'll have it again next week because we're just looking at a short passage, a few verses from Colossians chapter 1. So I'll read from verse 1 to verse 14, and the verses that we're concentrating on today are verses 10 and 11.

So Colossians chapter 1, verse 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, 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.

[1 : 2 4] 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. And may God's blessing rest upon this reading. Well, friends, we continue, as it were, to sit today at the feet of our teacher, the Apostle Paul, so as to learn from his example how to pray for other people, and that is specifically for other Christians. We saw last week that Paul, here in Colossians 1, is not in any formal way teaching the Colossians how to pray, not in the way that Jesus, for example, said to his disciples, when you pray, say, our Father in heaven. It's not teaching prayer in quite that sense.

But in verses 9 to 14 of this chapter, he tells them in what terms he is praying for them. Now, here we are, some 2,000 years later, and we are able, as it were, to eavesdrop on Paul.

Reading these verses is almost like sitting quietly in Paul's room as he kneels and prays out loud for his Christian friends in Colossae. We're being allowed to listen in to him as he prays for the Colossians. And in listening to his prayer, we're given wonderful encouragement to pray for our Christian friends in the same way and along the same lines. Of course, we all need training in prayer, lifelong.

We need a prayer coach. Do you remember how you first prayed as a very young child? Probably something like this. God bless mommy. God bless daddy. God bless Sophie, my little sister. God bless Butch, the rabbit.

[4 : 02] Amen. That's how we started, wasn't it? Real prayers, but simple prayers. Now, in Colossians chapter 1, Paul expands our vocabulary and our understanding enormously. He helps us to grow up further as people of prayer. Now, we saw a fortnight ago that Paul starts his prayers, virtually always starts his prayers, with a great sense of thankfulness. Look back to verse 3. We always thank God when we pray for you.

Then last week, we studied verse 9 and saw that Paul was asking God that the Colossians should be filled with the knowledge of his will. And we learned from that phrase that the heart of true prayer for other Christians is not so much that we should pray for particular blessings for them or particular things. Though, of course, it's perfectly all right to pray for blessings and things, but that's not the heart of how Paul prays for his friends. His big concern in verse 9 is that they should come to know the will of God and, of course, follow it and obey it. And I made the point last week that there's only one way in which we come to know his will, and that is by our regular, frequent, hungry reading of the Bible, which is the source of our true knowledge of what he wants, of his will. Now, you'll see that verse 9 ends with a comma. And it's only as we read on into verse 10 and beyond that we see more clearly what Paul means by Christians being filled with the knowledge of God's will. How is that filling going to show itself? How is it going to be experienced by ordinary Christians? Well, what I'd like to do this afternoon is to take just verses 10 and 11 so that we can see what a life looks like which is being filled with the knowledge of the will of God.

And I want to set out Paul's thinking under two headings. First, Paul prays for a fruitful outward life, and secondly, Paul prays for a growing inward strength for the Colossian Christians.

First, then, he prays for a fruitful outward life in verse 10. Let's look at verse 10. The prominent idea in verse 10 is that the Colossians should walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. And that is going to show itself in three ways, which are unpacked in verse 10. But the dominant idea is that the Colossians, as they are filled with the knowledge of God's will, should walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

Now, that word walk in the Bible doesn't mean exactly what you and I normally mean by it, which is putting one foot after the other as we go up the street. In the Bible, walk has a rather bigger sense of how you do life. Your walk in Bible language is your lifestyle, your manner, your attitude, your normal habitual behavior and practice, the kind of figure that you cut in front of your friends and colleagues. So what is Paul praying for here in verse 10? That the Colossians should walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. By the Lord, he means the Lord Jesus. Now, if that is not a high standard, I'm a Dutchman.

[7 : 23] How can anybody negotiate all the twists and turns of life in a manner worthy of the Lord? It seems beyond the reach of any sinner. And yet Paul prays for this because he knows that the Lord is able to change any human being out of all recognition, transforming even the most godless and despairing people into men and women who reflect the nature of Christ himself. Now, let's just think for a moment of what you might call the five most significant areas of our lives. First, money. How do I walk in a manner worthy of the Lord with regard to money? What do I do with my money? I may have very little money. I may have quite a lot of money. But do I honor the Lord? Do I walk in a manner worthy of the Lord in the way that I use it?

Then think of family. Family at home, so to speak. Brothers and sisters and parents, children. When they look at the way that I behave towards them and the way that I treat them, are they aware that the characteristics of the Lord are shaping my behavior? Thirdly, my leisure time. Is there anything I do in my leisure time that might grieve the Lord Jesus? Or do I use my free time in wholesome, constructive, Christ-honoring pursuits? Fourth, church. How do I relate to my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Do I love them and cherish them and help them and support them? Or am I sometimes a bit like an old grizzly bear towards them, growling and snapping? Grrr. Have you ever heard that in church? Is my concern to help them and support them? Or am I really more concerned that they should help me and support me?

Which way does that equation run? Then think of work. What do my workmates and my colleagues notice about the way I live? Am I a breath of fresh air in my place of work? Do my colleagues notice that I commend my Savior by being thoroughly honest, hardworking, and cheerful? Now, friends, when we think of these five areas of our life, money, family, leisure time, church, and work, we must think it is impossible for any human being, especially a grumpy and rather gloomy piece of work like me, it's impossible to honor Christ and walk in a way that is worthy of him. And yet, have we not all met Christian people over the years who shine for Christ? We've seen with our own eyes that it's possible to walk in a manner worthy of him. So let's not despair. The truth is about each one of us that he is not finished with us yet. Now, let's see how Paul unpacks this idea of walking in a manner worthy of the Lord. In verse 10, he does it in three different ways. First, fully pleasing to him.

Paul prays that his friends should live a life that pleases the Lord Jesus. Now, this idea of pleasing the Lord Jesus is quite a prominent one in Paul's letters, and it occurs several times.

[10:36] So in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul writes, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. He means at home in the body or away with the Lord, but our aim is to please him. In 2 Timothy 2, he writes, no soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. Now, this desire to please the Lord is a great incentive to godly living. Think of yourself first thing in the morning. Think of yourself as you were a few hours ago when you got out of bed. What happens when you get up? You stagger down to breakfast. You take your coffee and your Scots porridge oats. I hope you take your porridge oats. And as you gradually come to, it takes me at least half an hour to come to, but as you gradually come to, as you, so to speak, wake up and smell the coffee, you're able to say to the Lord Jesus, whatever else I do or don't do today, Lord, please help me to please you, to live close to you, to love the things that you love, and to hate the things that you hate.

So pleasing the Lord, learning to please him. Then secondly, says Paul, bearing fruit in every good work. Now, to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord must show itself in fruitfulness. Real Christian life will inevitably bear fruit. Some Christians, of course, prove to be much more fruitful than others, and that's inevitable. In fact, Jesus himself tells us that it's going to be like that. Remember how he says in his famous parable of the sower or the soils, that the seed of the word of God falls into the good soil and it brings forth fruit. But in some parts of the good soil, it's 30 times over, some parts 60 times, some parts 100. There's going to be variety. So we mustn't worry or feel jealous if we see another Christian whose life seems much more fruitful than ours. What does Paul mean then in verse 10 by every good work? Well, he doesn't specify, but work surely must involve productive and costly effort.

And in Paul's thinking, it's likely to be such things as caring for those who are in need, giving financial support to the work of the gospel, giving hospitality and love to other Christians, and being willing in a hundred different ways to roll up our sleeves and break sweat, and to put time and energy into what the Lord's church is doing. It might even include things like cleaning toilets or clearing mice out of the church kitchen. Not that there's ever a mouse in our church kitchen down here. I'm quite certain about that, but I am talking about some church kitchens, probably down in England. Now, thirdly, we're still in verse 10. Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord involves increasing in the knowledge of God. Now, isn't that a lovely phrase, increasing in the knowledge of God? Not just the knowledge of God, but increasing in the knowledge of God. Paul is implying there that our hearts and minds still have a lot of empty space that is not yet filled.

Think of your mind as a computer which is able to store a great deal more knowledge than has already been put into its files. We have hundreds of files, empty files in our hearts and minds, and they're waiting to be filled with a greater knowledge of God. Do you know how in years gone by, many of you will remember this, but in years gone by, Christian people would often say, I came to know the Lord in such and such a year and in such and such a place. And that was a shorthand way of saying, I became a Christian or I became a believer at such and such a time. But it was a slightly odd phrase to use because it almost suggested that when you became a Christian, you came to know the Lord fully and instantly the moment you were saved. A person might say, I came to know the Lord in 1968. But it might have been more accurate to say, I was converted or born again in 1968. That's when I began to know the Lord, but I'm still getting to know him better and better. And in Paul's phrase, I need to keep on increasing in the knowledge of God. Of course, we don't know him fully yet. But Paul's prayer is that Christians should continually increase in the knowledge of God so that day by day, week by week, we get to know him better and better.

Isn't that a lovely prospect to think that our knowledge of him can keep on growing? Let me draw a parallel. I'm an Englishman. I've been living in Scotland for eight or nine years now, but I've loved Scotland ever since I first came here. I stood on the battlements of Stirling Castle and looked out over the highlands. I thought I was a youngster then. I thought I must get to know this beautiful country. And I've been here eight years. And I sometimes look at the map of Scotland and I think to myself, I don't know more than about two percent of this beautiful country yet.

[15 : 44] There's still so much more to explore. It's a bit like that here. Paul's heart's desire is for the Colossians to explore this great range of territory, which is the knowledge of God.

Do you remember Jesus's wonderful prayer in John's Gospel, chapter 17, praying to God the Father? And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

To know God and to know the Lord Jesus, that's what eternal life consists of. No knowledge is more wonderful or more valuable than to know God. So let's pray for each other that we will increase in the knowledge of God. So in Paul's thinking here, walking in a manner worthy of the Lord means a life that is fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God. That's Paul's prayer for a fruitful outward life. Now secondly, in verse 11, Paul also prays for a growing inward strength. Let me read verse 11 again. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.

Now that verse will not engage our minds at all, unless we think of ourselves as weak people. Anybody who regards himself as Mr. Tough and Mr. Resilient, anyone who fancies himself as a kind of Sylvester Stallone in the character of Rocky the Invincible Boxer, anybody like that will not want to linger on verse 11 because he will think, this is surely not for me. But most of us are so aware of our frailty. Physically, we know how fragile we are. Even the fittest rugby players get carried off the pitch at regular intervals because somebody runs into their knee or their collarbone. Physically, we're very frail. We know that. Emotionally, most of us are on roller coasters, aren't we?

Intellectually, we're quite a long way behind Einstein. And morally, we may have high ideals, but very often we fall painfully short of them. Paul knew what people were like. He knew his own heart.

[18 : 05] And that's why he prayed that the Colossian Christians should be strengthened with all power. And what does Paul mean by all power? The next phrase helps us to see. It's the power that accords with God's glorious might. Now, it's difficult to describe the glorious might of God because there's nothing on earth that remotely compares with it. You just think of the most powerful things that you can think of on earth. The power of wind and water on a stormy day. The power of an elephant as it pushes over a big tree. Or the power of a huge crane as it lifts a tremendously heavy block of concrete on a building site. These are very powerful things to look at, but they're teeny tiny compared with the power that made the stars and the solar systems.

And yet, Paul tells us in a different place in his letters how he thinks of the power of God. Just turn with me, if you will, a few pages back to Ephesians chapter 1 and verses 19 and 20.

Just three or four pages back. Ephesians 1, 19. I'll just read 19 and 20. And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might, that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places. So when Paul thinks of power and might, he thinks of the power that raised Jesus from the dead and placed him, not merely back into life on earth, but exalted him up into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. And this power, as Ephesians 1, verse 19 puts it, is the power that is at work towards us who believe. Now we can be sure that the power that raised Jesus from the dead is the power that will raise all Christians from the dead in due time.

So Paul is praying, back to Colossians 1, he's praying for power of this kind to be given to the Colossian Christians, to strengthen them. Now friends, here is a significant question.

What do Christians need this kind of power for? What do Christians need to be inwardly strengthened for? What would your answer be? To preach the gospel? To plant churches? To care for the needy?

[20 : 36] To evangelize the young? To go abroad as missionaries? Well, yes, those are all very important things that Christians do and need to do. They lie at the heart of Christian work. But if you look carefully at verse 11, you'll see that Paul says something rather different. Let me read the verse again.

May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for... For what? For all endurance and patience with joy. Now don't you think that is remarkable? You and I need all the power and glorious might of God, the very power that raised Jesus from the dead so that we can keep going as Christians, so that we can endure. Now if that's the case, if we need the power and glorious might of God to strengthen us, it shows us what a difficult thing it is, humanly speaking, to endure as a Christian with patience and joy right through to the end of life. It helps to explain why some people drop out of the race before they get to the end. The going becomes so tough, they feel battered and bruised by opposition. They suffer traumatic setbacks, bereavements and disappointments and failures.

They perhaps wonder if God has deserted them and can no longer be trusted. Now just think of Paul himself and what he went through. Beaten, stoned, whipped, imprisoned for long periods several times.

Five times, he tells us in 2 Corinthians, he received the 39 lashes at the hands of the Jews. He was shipwrecked at least three times. He was hated for his gospel work because the gospel so deeply challenged both the values of the pagan Roman Empire and the corrupt Judaism of the first century AD. I haven't suffered a 100th part of what Paul suffered. I have never even once been slapped in the face because of the gospel. Not once. Paul understood how he needed all the power of God.

If he was to endure with patience and joy right through to the end. It is a challenge, friends, isn't it? It's a big challenge to endure as a patient, joyful, active, serving Christian. All of us will be tempted to drop out of the race. The temptations will come in many different forms.

[23 : 12] For some, there will be the opposition of friends and family and colleagues. For others, the exacting demands of Christian ministry. For others, perhaps an overwhelming sinful temptation. But Paul knows that all power, see that phrase? All power, according to the glorious might of God, is available to us to enable us to endure with patience and joy so that with our dying breath, we're still able to say, I love the Lord Jesus. Wouldn't that be a good last sentence to utter? I love the Lord Jesus.

For a good book on endurance with joy, do read Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, if you never have. I read it 40 odd years ago, and I read it again last year, and I was so pleased to reread it.

It's a book about Christian endurance, and the main character journeys to the celestial city, and he's beset with all manner of temptations and testings all the way through. And eventually, by the grace of God and by the power of God, he gets there, enduring with patience and joy.

Well, friends, let's allow Paul, our teacher, to show us this further lesson in how to pray for other Christians, how to pray for the church. As we pray for others, let's pray for a fruitful outward life, walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, and let's pray for a growing inward strength so that we can, by God's power, endure everything that the world, the flesh, and the devil will throw at us, because, having endured everything by the power of God, we shall finally be reunited with each other and with the Lord, and we shall feast together in the kingdom of God, in the presence of our Lord Jesus. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Our dear Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your willingness and your ability to sustain your servants right to the end of our life on earth.

We think of the way that you sustained Paul, and while we are so grateful for his example, the praise goes to you, because it was you who taught him and equipped him and gave him the strength to do everything that he did. And we know that that same power is available to us today.

[25 : 40] So please bless us and give us the joy and the patience in endurance that we so much need. And we ask that our life may increasingly be lived in a manner that is worthy of our Lord Jesus.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.