

Colossians 1:9-14
December 13, 2009

The apostle Paul has been imprisoned for proclaiming the Gospel

- We can read about this from Acts 21-28

While Paul is in prison, he begins to think back upon the churches that he had ministered to

- He begins thinking of the work that the Lord had accomplished there
- The Lord had given Paul an extremely fruitful ministry in various places during his missionary journeys

In Acts 19:10, we read that “**all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks**”

- That is an incredible statement, isn't it?

Paul enjoyed an amazingly fruitful time in Ephesus for nearly three years (Acts 19:1-10)

- In this span of time, Dr. Luke could affirm that “**all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord**”

We have looked at some Pauline prayers in the books of Philippians, Ephesians, and 1 Thessalonians

I have mentioned before that there are four “prison epistles” that were written around the same time with similar circumstances

- Ephesians, Philippians, Philemon, and Colossians

So it shouldn't surprise us to see some commonalities between these four books

- We have seen some of those common themes in the prayers in Ephesians 1 & 3 and Philippians 1

Paul loved these people dearly and prayed fervently for them

- He knew that he had a spiritual investment in the souls of these believers
- You might say that he was their spiritual father in the faith, having led them to faith in Christ

But this morning, we will see another side of the apostle Paul

- Let's turn to Colossians 1

Now Paul is still in that Roman prison

- The same prison cell from which he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon

But there is a glaring difference between the prayers in Ephesians and Philippians and this one in Colossians

- Paul is now praying for believers that he has never met

Let's look at 2:1, “**For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face**”

There is no record in the book of Acts that Paul ever visited this area¹

- There is no mention of Paul establishing a church in this region

The Gospel had come to these Christians through Epaphras

- Not much is known about this man

¹ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur NT Commentary, Colossians & Philemon*, 6.

It seems that he was from the area around Colossae

- Look at 4:12, “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers”

It would make sense that Epaphras would labor “earnestly for you in his prayers” if he was the human vessel through which the Gospel came

Look at Colossians 1:6-8 as Paul talks about how the Gospel “has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as *it has been doing* in you also since the day you heard *of it* and understood the grace of God in truth; ⁷ just as you learned *it* from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.”

- These Christians had first heard the Gospel from Epaphras

I don't know about you, but this is highly challenging

- Paul is writing a letter to a group of Christians that he hasn't even met
 - o He has had no contact with them personally
 - o He has had no part in their spiritual formation

Not only does he write an epistle to them

- But he also prays for them

If you find it difficult to pray for those that you know personally, I can almost guarantee that your prayers for those that you don't know are almost non-existent

- Yet that was not the case for Paul

We find that Paul opens up this epistle with a reference to thanksgiving (1:3)

- This is quite common for Paul

Consider these passages

- Rom 1:8
- 1 Cor 1:4
- 2 Cor 1:11
- Eph 1:16
- Phil 1:3
- Col 1:3
- 1 Thess 1:2
- 2 Thess 1:3
- 1 Tim 1:12
- 2 Tim 1:3
- Philemon 4
 - o *There are only two of the 13 Pauline epistles that do not begin with a note of thanksgiving*
 - o *Galatians and Titus*

Also note the repeated emphasis on prayers as Paul opens his epistles

- Rom 1:10
- 2 Cor 1:11
- Eph 1:16
- Phil 1:4
- Col 1:3
- 1 Thess 1:2
- 2 Thess 1:11

- 1 Tim 2:1
- 2 Tim 1:3
- Philemon 4
 - o *There are only three of the 13 Pauline epistles that do not begin with a note of prayer*
 - o *1 Corinthians, Galatians, and Titus*

This note of thanksgiving and prayer is a characteristic of how Paul opens his epistles

- It is a challenge to us to make sure that our prayers also include this note of thanksgiving in the context of prayer

Let's look at this portion of God's Word in Colossians 1

- The request (1:9)
- The reason (1:10a)
- The results (1:10b-12a)
- The rejoicing (1:12b-14)

Let's read Colossians 1:9-14

I. The request (1:9)

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask

In light of the report that Epaphras has brought to Paul, the apostle prays for these believers "since the day we heard of it"

- Once again, this is a group of believers that Paul has never met

Paul says that he and Timothy (1:1), along with Epaphras, "have not ceased to pray for you and to ask"

- He indicates that his prayers have been constant and steady

Paul would tell the Thessalonian believers to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17)

- He was certainly practicing what he taught

Let's back up for a second

- From the brief report that we have from the first part of chapter one, what is the condition of the flock in Colossae?

It certainly seems that things are going quite well

- Paul writes of
 - o their "faith in Christ Jesus" (1:4a)
 - o their "love...for all the saints" (1:4b)
 - o their "hope" in the Gospel (1:5a)
 - o the work of the Gospel which has born fruit and increased in the lives of these believers (1:5b-6)
 - o their "love in the Spirit" (1:8)

There are no negative marks or comments

- Only positive remarks

So why does the apostle Paul commit to unceasing prayer for a group of believers who are growing and bearing fruit?

- Simple!
- He wants them to grow even more (cf. 1 Thess 4:1, 10)
- He desires for God to produce even more fruit in their lives
- He doesn't want them to become complacent or satisfied

We are sometimes accustomed to praying *more* when things are bad

- When things are going well, we tend to pray *less*

Not so with Paul

- He was committed to praying in good times and in bad

The Text says that Paul has not ceased to “pray” and “ask”

- These are two synonyms for prayer

“pray” is a more generic term, encompassing a broader perspective of prayer²

- It implies petitioning a Deity

“ask” is a more specific term, encompassing a narrower perspective of prayer

- It implies making humble, definite requests

Both by generic and specific prayers, Paul and Timothy were interceding for these believers

- Where they had specific items for which to pray, they did so
- Where they lacked specific information for which to pray, they prayed more generically

that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

The specific request that Paul and Timothy were praying is given in the last part of 1:9, “that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”

At first glance, we see that phrase, “the knowledge of His will”

- The famous question, “What is God’s will for my life?” comes to mind

The Bible doesn’t address every single decision that we will ever face

- Do I buy a Ford, Honda, or Toyota?
- Do I buy a red, blue, or green polo shirt?
- Which house do I buy?
- What career path do I follow?

The Bible doesn’t give exact, specific answers for those questions

- We can follow basic principles
- But the specifics are oftentimes left out

What is the will of God?

- Not just for you or me
- But for all humanity

² William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Colossians*, 56.

It is God's will for us to be:³

- **Saved** – “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9)
- **Sanctified** – “For this is the will of God, your sanctification; *that is*, that you abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thess 4:3)
- **Submissive** – “Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.¹⁵ For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet 2:13-15)
- **Spirit-filled** – “So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:17-18)
- **Suffering** – “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Pet 4:19)
- **Thankful** – “in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:18)

These are the six (6) areas that God's Word addresses in terms of God's will

- Granted, that does not over every specific nuance of every single decision
- But these six principles cover the major areas that would come about in the lives of believers

If we are

- Saved
- Spirit-filled
- Being sanctified
- Submissive to the governing authorities
- Willing to suffer
- And giving thanks

Then we can know that we are living a life that is obedient

- A life that pleases God

If I could summarize what Paul is trying to pray, it would be this

- *To know God's will is to obey God's Word*

Knowing the will of God for our lives is not some mystical experience whereby we rely upon circumstances, people, and God “speaking” through prayer

I am not sure how many of you are familiar with the *Experiencing God* course written by Henry Blackaby

- One of the “seven realities of Experiencing God” – as written by Blackaby – is “*God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.*”⁴

According to Blackaby, God speaks through four (4) means

- The Bible
- Prayer
- Circumstances
- The church

³ MacArthur, 29.

⁴ http://swcbc.org/exp_god_wk.html

The reality of this approach is that it leads to mysticism

- It puts prayer, circumstances, and the Church on the same level as the Word of God!

God does not speak through prayer, circumstances, or the Church

- He speaks through His written Word

This takes us back to Paul's prayer for these believers to be "be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding"

The apostle wants them to be "filled" with the knowledge of His will

- When Mary poured the perfume on the feet of Christ, "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (John 12:3)
- When Christ told His disciples of His impending death, sorrow "filled" their hearts (John 16:6)
- Satan "filled" the heart of Ananias (Acts 5:3)
- "the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52)
- The heart of an unbeliever is "filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice" (Rom 1:29)
- "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18)

To be "filled" means to be controlled

- It is an external source or person acting upon us

The apostle Paul asks that we might be controlled, dictated by, and under the influence of "the knowledge of His will"

The word here for "knowledge" is not simply the pursuit of facts

- The Colossians were being influenced by some who thought that the highest end of life was a certain, "higher" knowledge

Paul counters that by reinforcing the fact that knowledge is not an end in itself

- It is a means to a greater end
- We will see that next week

This "knowledge" is a deep, thorough knowledge

- It is a true and right comprehension of Biblical facts

This is an experiential knowledge

- Not a theoretical knowledge

The apostle Paul writes to young Timothy and talks about some who are "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim 3:7)

- Sure, they are packing their minds full of "stuff" and facts
- But they are not "able" to come to the "knowledge of the truth"

The only way that we can attain to this "knowledge" is through salvation

- Earlier in 2 Timothy, Paul tells his young protégé, "with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim 2:25)

The knowledge of God's will is accompanied by "spiritual wisdom and understanding"

- Spiritual wisdom and understanding are the means by which God fills us with His will⁵
- Both of these synonyms are "spiritual" – they have their source in the Holy Spirit

The Colossians were being tempted by those who were equating a relationship with God down to a set of facts or "higher knowledge"

- But such knowledge is not the end-all

Paul prays that this knowledge of God's will would lead to "spiritual wisdom and understanding"

- This is where facts become personalized
- This is where the rubber meets the road
- This is where truths are applied

Wisdom is the skill by which we live a life that is pleasing to God

- The skill by which we personally and intently apply God's Word to our lives

Solomon wrote, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:7)

- The proper knowledge must begin with a right understanding and fear of God

We may pride ourselves on our knowledge of God's Word

- But are we progressing on to "spiritual wisdom and understanding"?
- How do you know if you are doing this?

Next week, we will unveil how we can tell if we have merely knowledge or if we truly have wisdom

- We will also see what a life that truly pleases God looks like
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Many people are confused about what God wants them to do

- What is God's will for my life?

From my limited perspective, I have seen some people become so distracted with the lesser important issues instead of focusing on the greater issues

They ask, "Who does God want me to marry?"

- God wants them to be the right person instead of trying to find the right person

They ask, "What career path does God want me to take?"

- God wants them to follow Him, and He will make that person's path straight

Once again, I think we can become so temporal and earthly-minded when it comes to God's will

- Marriage
- Cars
- Houses
- Jobs

Without making things overly simplified, God wants His children to obey His Word

The more we are reading the Word, the more we are exposed to God's will

- To be filled with the Scriptures is to be filled with the Spirit

⁵ D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 102.