

## Chapter 6 - The Content of a Challenging Prayer

### Colossians 1:3–20 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup> which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, <sup>7</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf <sup>8</sup> and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. <sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. <sup>13</sup> He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. <sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

### Lessons from the Setting of the Prayer

1. Paul prays for Christians he has never met personally
  - He says, "*since the day we heard about you*, we have not stopped praying for you." (V.9)
  - Unlike the previous prayers we've seen, where Paul was writing to Christians he knew and loved, these people are known only by word from Epaphras, and yet, he has added them to his constant prayer list.
  - **Have you expanded your prayer list to go beyond your immediate circles? How can we do this without just praying in generalities?**
2. Paul prays unceasingly

- He says, "since the day we heard about you, *we have not stopped praying for you.*" (V.9)
  - We talked a little about this last week. This doesn't mean that he was always in a constant mystical state, or that he was exaggerating. It means he set aside regular times for prayer throughout the day and that when he did, the Colossians were among those he prayed for.
  - There is a lesson here - there are some things that we should not stop praying for. Prayer is God's appointed means for appropriating the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus. Since many of those blessings we need again and again, it is appropriate that we constantly ask for them.
3. Paul links prayers of thanksgiving to prayers of petition.
- The kinds of things that Paul thanks God for - those things we read in verses 3-7, these are the very things for which Paul asks.
  - While we often pray for needs that arise - whether illness, financial pressure, moral failure, dissensions in the church, a difficult decision, tensions in the family, etc. This is good and we should be taking these things to God.
  - However, Paul's example is also constancy in prayer for ongoing concerns. Carson writes: "If we pray only at those times, we are overlooking a great lesson from the Apostle's prayer life. The frequency with which he links his thanksgiving for signs of grace in the lives of believers, cannot be accidental. When Paul learns of the work of God in some church, he gives thanks; then he prays for still more of the same..." (100)
  - **We need to ask ourselves, do we seriously pray for going concerns as well?**

### Lessons from the Content of the Prayer (1:9-14)

Now we must ask, what are the things that he constantly prays for the Colossians?

1. Paul asks God to fill believers with the knowledge of his will
  - He says, "we have not stopped praying for you and asking God *to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*" (V.9)
  - **What does he mean here by the will of God?**
  - The common approach is for us to speak of the Lord's will in terms of God's will for my vocation, or my life, or some choice I have to make. However, this self-centered view of God's will is not the dominant way that the Scripture uses it.
  - Consider Psalm 143:10 - "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground." Carson writes: "To do the will of God in this passage is virtually synonymous with obeying what God has mandated. What God

has mandated is his will; our responsibility is to do it. The psalmist does not here encourage us to find God's will, for he assumes it is already known. Rather, he is concerned with performance of that will...It is folly to pretend to seek God's will for your life, in terms of a marriage partner or some form of Christian vocation, when there is no deep desire to pursue God's will as he has already kindly revealed." (101-102)

- **What does he mean here by phrase "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding?"**
- The preposition "in" or "through" here should be understood in the sense of "consists of" - that is, the knowledge or perception of God's will consists of spiritual wisdom and understanding. Knowledge of God's will is not just an understanding of doctrine (though it requires that), but consists of wisdom (knowing how to live) and spiritual understanding.
- This is dearly needed by the Colossians, who faced the pressures and temptations of syncretism and pluralism in their day, and it is just as relevant a need in ours. Carson writes: "It is to our great shame if we have not constantly been praying along these lines. Few needs more urgently demand our intercession before our merciful heavenly Father than this one. The rapid growth of many churches in, say, sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America, as humbling and thrilling as it may be, will be jeopardized unless it is accompanied by a deepening knowledge of God's will. An in the Western world...the knowledge of God declines while fascination with techniques and fads increases. Are these not reasons to join Paul in his prayer that God might fill believers with the knowledge of his will?" (104)

2. The purpose of Paul's petition is that believers might be utterly pleasing to the Lord Jesus.

- He says, "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way." (V.10)
  - What does it mean to live a life worthy of Lord? - to please Jesus in every way.
  - Carson draws a lesson from a shame culture to tease out what this means.  
**Does anyone know what a shame culture is?**
  - In a shame culture, people are taught they must be worthy of their family's name, worthy of their country, worthy of their heritage, as opposed to the West where stubborn independence is often applauded and idolized.
  - Most cultures of the first century were more like a shame culture. Here Paul

is drawing on this, not to call the Colossians to live worthy of the church family but to live worthy of the Lord. Not to do so would bring shame upon the Lord. Paul's motives in this are that they might please Jesus in every way.

- He writes, "In thought, word, and deed, in action and reaction, I must be asking myself, "What would Jesus have me do? What is speech or conduct worthy of him? What sort of speech or conduct in this context should I avoid, simply because it would shame him? What would please him the most?"
- **If our aim is to be pleasing to the Lord Jesus, what are some concrete things to be praying for in your life?**

3. Paul sketches, in terms of four characteristics, what a life pleasing to the Lord looks like.

- Christians bear fruit in every good work.
  - Eph 2:10 - "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."
  - The result of being filled with the knowledge of God and living a life pleasing to him is bearing fruit.
  - John 15:1-8 - *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love."*
- Christians grow in the knowledge of God.
  - Earlier he had prayed that they would be filled with the knowledge of God that they would live a life worthy of the Lord, but now he describes that life as one characterized by growth in the knowledge of God. **What gives here?**

- As we are filled with the knowledge of God, we are expected to walk in obedience according to the wisdom we have been given and further wisdom is contingent on obedience.
- Another way of saying this is as Jesus does in John 7:17 - "*If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.*"
- Carson writes: "To learn something of God's will and to use such knowledge to live a life worthy of the Master and utterly pleasing to him is to engage in the business of obedience. But as you get busy in the business of obedience, you get to know God better. That in turn impels you to more obedience, which in turn opens up new vistas in the knowledge of God and his will. Of course, as you knowledge of God and his will improves, you are driven to greater obedience. Such obedience is one point of access to greater knowledge of God; and on, and on, and on...."
- Christians are strengthened so as to display great endurance and patience.
  - He says, "*May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,*" (v.11)
  - The power and might that he calls on and prays for is the power of Christ's resurrection - this power is manifest in the Christian, first and foremost, in their endurance and patience.
  - **What is great endurance and patience?**
  - These are the virtues that, by God's Spirit, enable the believer to survive much affliction with joy and trust in God. When these are on display in the believer, Jesus is pleased.
- Christians joyfully give thanks to the Father.
  - "*giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*" (V.12)
  - Carson writes: "What Paul is saying is that to live a life worthy of Jesus Christ is to overflow with joyful thanksgiving in the light of the salvation we have received at his hand. If we have been transferred out of the dominion of darkness and into the kingdom of the Son beloved by God, our only appropriate response is joyful gratitude."
- **What connection do joyful thanksgiving and faithful endurance have with prayer?**