

Thanksgiving and Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, thanks so much for your word, the Bible, and we thank you that you continue to speak to us through it. And what you have to say to us is still very much relevant for us today. And so, Father, we pray that you would give us ears to hear and minds to understand, and give us also hearts that would seek to live out what you tell us, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, today we're beginning a new series in looking at the letter of Colossians, the letter that Paul wrote to the church in Colossae. And he begins with a prayer. So I thought I'd begin this morning with a couple of prayers.

The first one is one that my kids have prayed. As you know, a little while ago, Michelle went overseas to visit her brother in Sweden. And in the kindness of a few people at church, they gave us meals, but occasionally I had to cook.

One time, what I cooked, well, let's just say it tasted better than it looked. And so when the kids saw it, one of them said they wanted to say grace, and they prayed, Dear God, please let not this food kill us.

Amen. Thanks. Thanks a lot. But some other prayers that I've seen, they're on the screen. So this little kid, God, I'd like to live 900 years like the guys in the Bible.

[1 : 1 7] Love, Chris. Or the next one from Joyce. Dear God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce. And the next one.

Dear God, please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year. Poor Peter's had a rough time with Dennis, it seems. Now, apart from being mildly amusing, these prayers actually show us what matters to these children, whether a puppy or sending Dennis away.

And that's often the way with prayer, isn't it? We pray for the things that matter most to us, the things that concern us. And as we look at Paul's thanksgiving and prayer for the Colossians this morning, we'll see something of Paul's concern for them.

Paul's priority for them. And I take it, God's priority for them. Since these words are also the words, inspired words of God. But before we get to Paul's thanksgiving and prayer, let me give you some brief background.

So on the next slide is a map of modern day Turkey. And Colossae was a city in Turkey where the red dot is. So that's where it was located. And next door to another city called Laodicea.

[2 : 3 0] And it was about 150 kilometers away from the city of Ephesus, where Paul spent two years preaching the gospel, the news about Jesus. And it seems a man called Epaphras, who was from Colossae, traveled to Ephesus and heard Paul preach about Jesus.

And Epaphras became a Christian. And then he went back home to Colossae and told others about Jesus. And they became Christians. And so started the Colossian church.

Now, when this letter is written, some time has passed since that church began. And the letter is written. And now it seems Epaphras is with Paul, who is under house arrest in Rome.

And Epaphras tells Paul that his home church back in Colossae is being pressured to follow Jesus, plus other teachings, plus other traditions and other philosophies, as though Jesus is not enough.

So Paul writes this letter so that they may know the truth, that if you have Jesus, you have everything you need to be right with God. And so they ought to stick with Jesus and not be carried away by some other teachings.

[3 : 42] I think the key summary verses for the whole letter are chapter 2, verse 6. So it's on the right-hand side of your Bibles there. Chapter 2, verse 6 to kind of the first bit of verse 10, really.

These are the key verses. He summarizes the letter. He says, See what Paul is saying?

He's saying, guys, just as you became Christians and received Christ as Lord, so stick with Christ and Christ alone. Just as you became to believe in Jesus, so continue to live in him or literally walk in him.

Hence the graphic on the screen. Don't be carried away by these other teachings because you have been given fullness in Christ. You don't need anything else to be right with God.

You've got Jesus and that is all you need, which is pretty encouraging in itself when you think about it. And we'll think about it in the coming weeks. But this morning, we're going to start with Paul's thanksgiving and prayer, having looked at what the whole letter is about.

[5 : 16] So let's pick it up at point one in your outlines and we'll pick it up at verse three in your Bibles. Paul says, We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.

Why? Well, verse four, Because we've heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people. Paul begins by thanking God for the Colossians.

Why? Well, because he has heard about their faith in Jesus and their love for God's people. Now, it's interesting. He doesn't just thank God for their faith. After all, faith in Jesus, belief or trust, they're all the same thing.

That's what makes us a Christian if we believe in Jesus. So why does he include love? Well, it could be just that the fact that they love, you know, God's people. Or I think it's because their love shows their faith in Jesus is genuine.

Remember what Jesus himself said, By this shall all people know that you are my disciples if you love one another. And so their love shows their faith is genuine, that they are true disciples of Christ.

[6 : 24] Which is why it's so great to see people here at HCD when you love and care for one another and support one another. Because you show that your faith in Christ is genuine, just as the Colossians showed their faith in Christ is genuine.

And so Paul thanks God for their faith and love. But how have they come to faith and love? How has this happened? We know from verse seven that Epaphras had something to do with it.

So was it just because Epaphras was a great preacher that they became Christians? Well, no. Rather, verse five. The faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you through Epaphras.

See, in verse five, Paul says their faith and love spring from the hope that the gospel gives. In other words, it's not Epaphras who is the key determining factor.

Well, it's the true message of the gospel as opposed to any deceptive philosophy. It's the gospel and the hope it offers that bore the fruit of faith and love in them. You see, hope here refers to our heavenly inheritance.

[7 : 36] Verse five says it is stored up for you in heaven. Verse 12, we'll call it an inheritance. And so when they heard the gospel message about Jesus, how by God's grace, Jesus died for them to pay for their sins, rose again and offers certain hope of heaven for all who believe.

When they heard and understood that message, it prompted them to believe. It produced the fruit of faith and love. In fact, it's kind of what happened to me when I became a Christian, actually.

I grew up in a Christian family. I went to church and Sunday school every week. My favorite part of church, the end. And so while I had some sort of, you know, God was there, mom and dad talk about God and Jesus, I was never really interested in God or Jesus.

I found that the preachers were boring and went on forever. God has a sense of humor. Look what I'm doing now. Well, hopefully I'm not boring. Anyway, one day a guest preacher came to our church and asked us a question that I didn't like my answer to.

He said, if you die tonight, are you certain that you'd go to heaven? And I thought I should be being at church so much, but I wasn't. I wasn't exactly sure. And so I sat up and listened really for the first time and heard how Jesus paid, died to pay for my sins, rose again.

[8 : 54] And if we believe in him, we can be guaranteed of heavenly inheritance. We have a certain hope. So I remember going home that night and my brother, who I shared a room with, was asleep on the bunk low.

And I prayed and committed my life to Jesus. You see, I heard the gospel and the hope it brings, and it sprung or led to faith and even love.

I tried to love my little brother more. It was not always successful. But you see, that's how the hope in the gospel leads to faith and love. That's how the gospel bore the fruit of faith and love in the lives of the Colossians.

But it's not just their lives. It's lives all over the world. Have a look at verse 6. He says, In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. You see, it's not as though there was something in the water at Colossae that caused them to become Christians.

[10 : 01] It wasn't as though Epaphras was a particularly great preacher. No, it was the gospel. It was hearing the news, the gospel, about Jesus. That's what was causing people to believe throughout the world.

And it's this same gospel that continues to bear fruit in the lives of people around the world today. A few weeks ago, I mentioned here that we should pray for the Chinese baptism service that was happening that day because there was 15 people who had become Christians and were being baptized, which was great.

But I got it wrong. I'm sorry. It was 30 people. And some of them went back to China to share the gospel. I'll take Greg Sheridan, who writes for the Australian newspaper.

Last month, 5th of June, I think it was, he admitted that while churches in Australia are facing a rise in secularism, and we know that all too well in Victoria, he said, and I quote, all over Africa, Asia, and much of South America, religion, including Christianity, is booming, he said, his words.

Take Andrew and Helen, some of our link missionaries. We prayed not too long ago for a Muslim who'd become a Christian through their ministry. Or the Knights in Port Headlands, some other link missionaries of ours.

[11 : 09] Again, praying for a man, a husband, whom I've met before, actually, who'd recently become a Christian. You see, whether it's Asia, Africa, South America, the Middle East, or far northwestern Australia, the gospel message about Jesus is bearing the fruit of faith and love.

And so it's the gospel message we need to keep promoting. It's the gospel message that we need to financially keep supporting. It's the gospel message we need to keep speaking as we have opportunities.

It's the gospel ministry that is to be the priority of our church. For it's the gospel of Jesus that bears fruit. It's interesting, by the way, that in Colossians, there are a number of echoes of Genesis.

So next week, in verse 15 and 16, it talks about Jesus being the image of God and being there at creation. Later on in chapter 3, it'll talk about us being renewed in the image of our creator.

And even today, the gospel picks up language of being fruitful and multiplying throughout the world. Hence the first reading. You see, in Genesis, we are created in the image of God.

[12 : 21] And we're told to be fruitful and increase to fill the earth so that God's image will be reflected throughout the earth. But as humanity was fruitful in number, sin came, of course.

And so it marred God's image throughout the earth. But now the gospel is being fruitful and multiplying throughout the world and recreating us in the likeness of Christ, in God's image, so that God's image might still fill the earth as he always intended.

This is why Paul thanks God for their faith and love for the gospel that has borne fruit in their lives. And now he prays that it might continue to bear fruit in their lives.

He prays that they might continue to grow like Jesus. So it brings us to point 2, verse 9. He says, For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you.

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord Jesus and please him in every way.

[13 : 32] You know, reflect his likeness, in other words. Paul prays here that they might be filled or immersed, saturated with the knowledge of God's will. But wisdom and understanding.

Now when Paul speaks about the knowledge of God's will here, he's not so much talking about knowing God's will for how much super we need to retire, or what school to send the kids to, where to go on holidays, which footy team will win the premiership.

Although it's nice to know those sort of details, wouldn't it? It'd be nice to know those. However, I suspect even if God told us those specifics, we'd still try and negotiate something different. Oh, can we go there instead, God?

Oh, please don't make Collingwood win the premiership again. Sorry, James. But a knowledge of God's will is really about knowing what God has done and is doing through the gospel.

For God's will and plans have always had Jesus at the center. So take the next slide from Ephesians. We read this in Ephesians 1. Paul writes, God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he set forth in Christ.

[14 : 40] What is this will? This plan to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, Christ. God's will is to bring all things together under Christ.

You see, Jesus is at the center of God's plan, his will. And in Jesus, we see a picture of God's will for our lives, that God is making us like Jesus. And later in Colossians 2, verse 3, we read that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Jesus.

You see, God's will is wrapped up in Christ. That's who the Spirit points us to. And so to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, with all wisdom and understanding, is to know more and more what God is doing through Christ.

And saving us and helping us live like him. Put simply, it's being filled with this. The Bible. Because this is where we find God's will for us in Christ.

It's about being saturated with Scripture, because Scripture is where we read about what God is doing for us through Christ. And why does he pray this for them?

[15 : 47] Well, verse 10, so that they may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way. I was speaking with someone from our church recently who noticed that their Bible reading had dropped off.

And as their Bible reading had dropped off, so had their patience with their family and their worry about work had increased. Now, this person does a lot of driving for work. And so they decided to, you know, it's hard to find time to read the Bible.

I'm going to listen to the Bible in the car. Brilliant. And as they listened to the Scriptures, they were reminded of God's will for them in Christ. They were reminded that what Jesus said about not worrying, but seeking first Christ's kingdom.

And he encouraged them to live a life worthy of the Lord. It changed his perspective. And I know many of you read the Bible regularly so that you can know God's will, which is terrific.

But I also know that it's one of those things that can be a struggle for most people, actually. So if you need help reading the Bible so you can be filled with God's will, then let me know.

[16 : 53] Email me and I can recommend some resources. But Paul prayed that they would be filled with God's will, knowledge of God's will in Christ, not just so they knew stuff, but so that they would live like Christ.

So they could live a life worthy of the Lord who died for them. And Paul unpacks what this worthy life looks like. He mentions four things. First, it means bearing the fruit of good work.

So the rest of verse 10, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way. And then bearing fruit in every good work and continuing to grow in the knowledge of God.

We don't just learn a bit about God and then stop. We continue to grow. Of course, it's all easier said than done. And so we also to rely on God's strength. Verse 11, being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, so that you may have great endurance and patience.

You see, living a life worthy of the Lord means bearing the fruit of good works, means continue to grow in our knowledge of God. And it means relying on God's strength to help us to pray for help, to persevere and to endure.

[18 : 02] And fourthly, it means giving thanks for what God has done. Verse 12, he says, Now, these are extraordinary verses.

For they remind us of where we once were. To use the language of Star Wars, we were all once on the dark side of the force.

But it was real and scary. And because of our sin, we had no right to share in the heavenly inheritance with God's people. But rather, we had every right to go to hell.

But God has rescued us from the darkness and brought us into the kingdom of light, into Christ's kingdom. And God has qualified us, given us the right to have a share of that kingdom, our heavenly inheritance.

How? Through Jesus, who died for us. Verse 14 puts it, Now, is that not worth giving God thanks for?

[19 : 25] And if you are here this morning, and you want to be qualified to share in the heavenly inheritance, if you want to know for certain that question that the preacher asked me, if you died tonight, are you sure you'd go to heaven?

If you want to be certain, then you need to do what the Colossians did. You need to believe in Jesus. Have faith in him. And for us who have, well, I started by saying that our prayers reveal something of our priorities.

What matters most to us? What concerns us? I mean, some people say they don't have time to pray. But if something really important comes up, then they make time to pray, don't they? Our prayers often reflect our priorities.

And I wonder if our prayers reflect the same priorities as Paul for the Colossians. Or more importantly, as God for us. You see, Paul could have prayed for the Colossians' health or financial situation.

I mean, at this time in history, the city of Colossae was in decline, which meant businesses were not doing well. But Paul didn't pray for those things. Instead, he prayed that they might be saturated with the knowledge of God's will in Christ.

[20 : 33] So that they might live lives worthy of Christ who died for them and rescued them from the dominion of darkness. That they might live lives that bear fruit and grow in knowledge. That they might live lives that rely on God's strength to persevere.

That they might live lives that give thanks to the Father. Now, why did Paul pray these things? Well, because these things are what matter most.

Especially in a world which was pressuring them, as it pressures us today, to follow other things instead of Christ alone. These things matter most because following Christ or not is the difference between a heavenly inheritance or not.

So Paul prays these things for them. Now, of course, don't mishear me. The Bible tells us to pray for everything that concerns us. Jobs, family, health issues.

I mentioned about a month ago before I went on leave that I was praying for my father who was told that he might have cancer. And the results have come back and it's all clear.

[21 : 35] Praise God. But Paul's prayer reveals his priority or rather God's priority for them, for us. And that priority is to be filled with the knowledge of God's will in Christ so that we can live lives worthy of the Lord Jesus who died for us.

This is God's priority for us. And if it is, then this is what we ought to include in our prayers for ourselves and each other, for our children and grandchildren, for our nieces and nephews, for our friends and our church.

I mean, Holy Trinity is known not just for studying the Bible, but it's also known as a pretty prayerful church. And it's great to see so many people praying for one another in the morning services.

There's what's called a prayer circle. They send an email around and you've got people praying for things. They're right and center. And it's encouraging. And we want that to continue. We need to keep praying for each other with whatever issues we're facing, whether it be work or health and so on.

But above all, above all, we need to keep praying that we as a church will be filled with the knowledge of God's will in Christ. Not just so that we know stuff and have a reputation for knowing stuff, but so that we'll be a church that lives lives worthy of Jesus who died for us.

[22 : 51] A while ago, a Christian man I knew of found out that he had an aggressive cancer and he wrote an email to his young adult children. He said, And then he added, Here is a man whose priorities reflected Paul's or other gods here.

And so while he rightly prayed for his health, he prayed above all for what matters most. To keep trusting God. To keep living a life worthy of the Lord Jesus through whom God has rescued us.

And that even despite his cancer, that he would keep giving thanks to God for Jesus. Let's pray that we would do the same. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this opening thanksgiving and prayer of Paul's.

We thank you that it reminds us about the gospel that bears fruit, not only in our lives, but all around the world. And Father, we thank you also for the reminder of what matters most.

Father, help us to be prayerful about and to make efforts towards being filled with your will. To know what you want for us in life by reading the Bible.

[24 : 33] So that we together can live lives worthy of the Lord Jesus who died for us and was raised again. Father, we ask these things in his name. Amen.