

“Prayer for the Church”
Colossians 1:9-14 (NRSV)

Have any of you ever **prayed for someone** and seen a miraculous answer? I can still vividly remember praying as a teenager, along with others in my home church in Ottawa, Ontario, for a young man who was suffering from a badly bleeding stomach ulcer. He was not expected to live. But the bleeding stopped and he became well again. I don't know whether the young man ever became a believer – he wasn't one at the time, much to the disappointment of his devout parents – but God answered our prayers. This story unforgettably affirmed for me the power of fervent intercessory prayer.

Motivated by stories like this, we naturally ask, **how are we to pray for the church** and the members of Christ's Body? A classic answer is provided by Paul in the introductory lines of his letter to the Colossians, because they contain his own fervent intercession for that distant little church.

In the opening lines of the letter, recorded in verse 1-8, Paul celebrated the miracle of this little church's existence in the Lycus River Valley. Predictably, this overflowed in prayer, which began in verse 9. His prayer is a beautifully constructed tapestry, which offers **a perfect model for our own intercessory prayers**. His example tells us how we may pray for the increasing knowledge and then for the ongoing conduct of the church.

1. A prayer for increasing knowledge (Col. 1:9).

It is true that we can never know enough. As a wise English poet, **Alexander Pope**, once said, “A little learning is a dangerous thing.” We must always learn more. It is significant that Paul prayed for the increase of the Colossians' knowledge because they were under siege by people who were telling them they needed more of a certain kind of knowledge. The Gnostics were teaching that Jesus Christ was a good place to begin, but there was so much more that they could know and experience if only they would incorporate the Gnostic system of passwords, rites and initiations. Their superior, know-it-all air was intimidating, and some of the Colossian Christians were made to feel they were lacking in knowledge. They must have wondered whether the Gnostic knowledge was worth acquiring.

So, in his prayer for the Colossians, Paul also wanted them to **know more**. But he wanted them to learn more about **the true gospel**. He wanted them

to “be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (1:9). The knowledge for which Paul prayed for his fellow believers was set in bold contrast to that of the Gnostics. Each of them used different Greek words for “**knowledge.**” Ironically, the Gnostics characterized their understanding of knowledge with the simple word, “**gnosis**” -- even though their idea of knowledge was highly complicated. Paul used the more complex term for knowledge, “**epignosis**” -- a word that suggested a more complete or “full knowledge.” And he added, it ought to be apostolic “**spiritual wisdom and understanding**” rather than some newly minted, although intriguing, Gnostic mumbo-jumbo.

In essence, while the Gnostics wanted their converts to become experts in certain esoteric experiences and practices, Paul wanted the Colossians to **grow in their understanding of Jesus Christ.** He wanted them to know that Jesus Christ “is the image of the invisible God”; “in him all fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:15, 19). He wanted them to know that Jesus Christ “is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have the first place in everything” (1:18). He wanted them to know that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:2). “No greater claims were ever made for Christ; and no greater claims can ever be made” (**William Barclay**, p. 115). Paul also went out of his way to stress the part that Jesus Christ played in creation. By him, he told the Colossians, “all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible” (1:16); “he is before all things and in him all things hold together” (1:17). For Paul, the Son was the Father’s instrument in the creation of the universe. Yet, at the same time, Paul went out of his way to stress the real humanity of Jesus Christ. It was “in his fleshly body” that he did his redeeming work (1:22). “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (2:9). For all his deity, Jesus Christ was really and truly human flesh and blood. Thinking the body to be evil, this the Gnostics could not abide.

Here in Paul’s Colossian prayer, when he wrote, “we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,” he was using language of great intensity, for he knew that correct spiritual knowledge is foundational to a sound and fruitful Christian life (Eduard Lohse, p. 25). God puts no premium on ignorance.

The Bible teacher, **Warren Wiersbe**, said he once heard a preacher say, “I didn’t never go to school. I’m jest a ignerant Christian and I’m glad I is!” To which Wiersbe replied, “A [person] does not have to go to school to gain spiritual intelligence, but neither should he [or she] magnify his [or her] ignerance” (Be Complete, 1981, p. 35). Spiritual knowledge comes through prayerful and careful Bible study and the work of the Holy Spirit. This produces a **Christian mind**, for which, in fact, Paul is praying – a mind, as **Harry Blamires** has said, which is trained to handle life within a framework constructed of “Christian presuppositions” which can deal with secular controversies and enable Christian practice in one’s daily actions and activities (The Christian Mind, 1963, p. 43). It is this mind, this knowledge, which God blesses.

Typically, when we pray, we pray for ourselves or for others, for physical and social well being. But to these prayers, Paul adds his own prayer for **spiritual growth**. Further, as Paul himself demonstrated in his own life, we ought also to be part of the answer to our own prayers. Every believer should be reading and meditating on God’s Word. The very blood we bleed ought to be, as **Charles Spurgeon** once said, “bibline.” Every believer should be able to filter his/her culture’s seductive so-called “knowledge” (gnosis) through the grid of God’s “full knowledge” (epignosis).

2. A prayer for good conduct (Col. 1:10-14).

Why do we pray this prayer for spiritual growth? Not that we may become spiritual snobs (as the Gnostics were) but **so that we may live converted and changed lives**. We pray this prayer said Paul, “so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God” (1:10).

The Hebrews saw an absolute connection between **knowledge and conduct**. From their perspective, a person didn’t know anything unless he or she put it into practice. This is the head-heart connection from which all authentic Christianity springs. **True spiritual knowledge means action!**

Leading lives worthy of the Lord will, in fact, “bear fruit in every good work” (1:10). Such lives will abound in the fruit of the Spirit, which Paul elsewhere describes as including, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23a).

Interestingly enough, such a fruitful and dynamic connection between knowledge and action will result in **greater growth in one's knowledge**. One begets the other in a delectable upward spiral: the more one knows Jesus Christ, the more one wishes to serve him; the more one serves him, the more one will learn and know about him. So it goes onwards and upwards! While he was on earth with his disciples, Jesus himself made it clear that doing the Father's will makes possible the reception of knowledge of God: "Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God ..." (Jn. 7:17). This mutual cause-and-effect relationship between knowing and doing is one of the fundamental laws of spiritual growth. It is one of the secrets of every spiritual renewal movement in the history of the church.

The next clause which describes Paul's prayer for the church occupies the whole of verse 11: "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience ..." (1:11). Paul not only wants the Colossian Christians to be **knowledgeable** in their faith and **fruitful** in their lives; he also wants them to be **strong and enduring** in the challenges they most certainly face.

One of the great challenges for the Colossian Christians, as for us today, is **faithfulness**. Would they hang in there with this little church? Would they make the most of a challenging situation? Would they endure and turn it into something better? There were for them, as there are for us, many tempting calls to join this or that, say, "livelier, "more interesting" or more popular Gnostic church. Paul wanted the Colossian Christians to be steadfast. The kind of steadfastness Paul had in mind was the kind that "enables one to hold one's position in battle" (Lohse, p. 30). He saw faithfulness in terms of **a battle**. He had in mind the outside forces in the Lycus Valley, which were trying to destroy the struggling, newly planted Christian church. Paul was praying that they would stand ... endure ... persevere ... remain steadfast ... stay at it.

Sir Winston Churchill was invited back to his alma mater, Harrow School, to address the students near the end of his storied life of public service, which included guiding Britain through her darkest and finest hours during the Second World War. When the five-foot, five-inch bulldog of a man took the platform, everyone waited breathlessly upon his words – and they would never forget what he said that day – "Never give up. Never give up! Never!

Never! Never!” With that he sat down. Paul would have liked that, especially in regard to the gospel and to faithfulness in one’s church.

To “**endurance**” Paul added “**patience**”, or as the Greek more literally says, “**longsuffering**.” “Endurance” is in reference to adverse circumstances, whereas “patience” is in reference to difficult people (Ralph P. Martin, 1978, p. 53)! Paul was praying that the Colossian church would have a longsuffering, patient spirit as they related to one another and to those outside their church. Possessing “endurance” does not mean one will succeed in “patience.” **Moses** endured in his titanic struggle with Pharaoh in Egypt, but his patience with the children of Israel failed at Kadesh, and he lost his right to enter into the Promised Land (Num. 20).

How beautiful “**endurance**” and “**patience**” are when they are wedded together in our life. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul lists them as the marks of a true minister of Jesus Christ (6:4-6). Most who are privileged to minister in Christ’s name, are humbled by Paul’s reminder. These characteristics existed perfectly in our Lord Jesus himself, who remained steadfast to the end and who was longsuffering with everyone. But it is not always that way in us. Therefore Paul knew that the combination of such qualities could only come about by being “made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power.” This is the way we must pray for our brothers and sisters: “Lord give them perseverance in difficulties and patience with people.”

The church with “endurance” and “patience” is a great church. It is a church that leads a life “worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as [it bears] fruit in every good work....”

How else can we “live lives worthy of the Lord?” By always **giving thanks**, as verse 12 says: “... giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.” This is the summit of Paul’s prayer. We cannot live lives worthy of the Lord without **constantly giving joyous thanks**, as the Greek participle implies.

Many years ago, **Northwestern University** had a lifesaving team that looked out for passengers in trouble on Lake Michigan boats. On September 8, 1860 the Lady Elgin foundered near the campus, and one of the NU students named **Edward Spencer** personally rescued 17 people. The exposure he suffered from that episode permanently damaged his health.

Some years later when died, it was noted that not one of the 17 people he had saved ever came to acknowledge his contribution to saving their life. Yet what he had accomplished “was hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). God knew what he did. God would never forget. What we have seen God do in the lives of others will never be for nothing.

Believers who live lives worthy of Christ **constantly give thanks to God**, first for their own salvation, and then also for the salvation of others in which they have been privileged to have had a part as they have pointed the way to Christ. So, too, Paul thanks God for “the inheritance of the saints in the light” that the Colossians received from God and from those who first brought them the message of the gospel. He then goes on to add, it is something they ought to celebrate with him, as their lives have been “rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:13).

It is no little thing to be “**rescued from darkness**” and brought into “the inheritance of the saints in the light.” Knowing Christ brings light into one’s life; it brings insight into what life is all about, what’s important, what’s good, what’s lasting. People know where they are and they’re going. And it is a complete transformation; being “**transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son**” is like being lifted up from one community and being deported to a completely different realm. “In the ancient world, when one empire won a victory over another, it was the custom to take the population of a defeated country and to transfer them, lock, stock and barrel to some other land” (Barclay, p. 133). But this is a happier, more promising transfer. **Canadian immigrants know what it’s like**: now there’s hope, now there’s a future. Whether by choice or by circumstances beyond their control, most immigrants are very happy to be transferred to Canada, a rich and safe land of great diversity and opportunity. That’s what it’s like to be “transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son.”

There is “redemption and forgiveness of sins”; we’ve been purchased from the slave market; and, our sins have been sent away. And, now, there are wonderful new opportunities beckoning for witness to Christ and service.

Interceding for other Christians is of the greatest importance. When God calls his people to pray and they obey, things happen: to God, to us, to those for whom we pray.

Amen

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