

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians III

Colossians 1:9-14

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Colossians, chapter 1. We continue our study in Paul's great Epistle to the Colossians. We will read beginning in verse 9 through verse 15, although we will concentrate on verses 9 through 14. Hear now the Word of God:

Colossians 1:9-15

And thus ends this reading of God's holy word, may He add his blessing to it. Let's look to him in prayer:

Our Lord, we cheerfully acknowledge that this is your Word. We come to sit under its teaching. Not the words of men, not the thoughts of men, certainly not the cleverness of speech, but the very word of God. And so we ask that You would enable us to come with interest, and with understanding to the Word. Captivate us by this word of Your servant, Paul. Cause us to understand it, and then, O God, by the Spirit apply it to our hearts, for we know this word is meant for our profit in instruction, in training, in correction, in being built up in righteousness. So do that great work in us, by Your spirit, in accordance with Your Word, for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

When we began our study, we said that the Apostle Paul was writing to these Colossian Christians, acknowledging that they had come into contact with a sort of false teaching. New teachers, a visiting group of teachers, or lay folks had come to this particular congregation and they had said, 'what Epaphras had taught you at first is good, but what we've got is better. We'll give to you a deeper realization of spiritual experience. We'll give you a fullness of faith which you've never seen before. We'll give you a deeper knowledge of God, We'll give you a greater experience of His power if you'll only follow us in these rituals and speculative beliefs which we are going to teach to you, which Epaphras never did tell you about.' And we saw when we first began our study in verses 1 and 2, that even in his greeting the Apostle Paul begins to undercut the teaching of these false prophets. Even in his greeting he expresses the fact that these Christians have received the fullness of the gifts of God in the spirit, that they are equipped

by God, that they have heard the faith once delivered.

Last week as we looked at verses 3 through 8, we saw him give a testimony to just how faithful Epaphras had been. Paul says, 'he was a faithful minister, he didn't tell you only part of the story, he gave you the whole story. Surely, yes, you'll grow. Surely, yes, you'll increase in faith, but it's not because Epaphras hasn't told you everything. It's because you're going to grow in what he's already told you. You're going to grow in the very same gospel that Epaphras has already preached to you, Not a different gospel, Not a supplement to that gospel, But in that very same gospel.' And the Apostle Paul in that passage that we looked at last week actually commends the believers, and he says,

'look, God is already at work in you, Let me prove it to you. I can see the graces of faith and love and hope already growing in you. In fact, when Epaphras came to visit me here in prison, he told me about the faith and the hope and the love which was growing in the church at Colosse. That's proof that God is at work.' And the Apostle Paul said, 'look, those things don't come naturally.' We may think it's natural to believe, natural to love, natural to hope. Paul knew better. Paul knew that you really can't do those things the way God intended them to be done unless the Holy Spirit is at work in your life, and the Apostle Paul says, 'I've heard of what is happening in your lives. That is evidence that God is at work.'

And now, today, the Apostle Paul gives us his prayer in response to that report from Epaphras. Throughout Paul's writing, you will hear him or see him give you an outline of his prayer line. Sometimes he actually gives you the prayer that he's been praying for you. Other times he gives you a report of the prayer that he's been praying for you. Sometimes he gives a request about what he wants you to pray of him. Here, he gives an outline of his prayer for the Colossians, and I'd like to point to you today four great truths that we learn in this passage. There are so many more, but I've got to restrict myself, lest we completely run over.

I. Every spiritual work is a motivation to prayer

First of all, I want you to look with me at verse 9. Here the Apostle says this, "for this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will." The Apostle says, 'when I heard the report from Epaphras, about what was happening in your midst, about how the Holy Spirit was working in your lives, about the graces that He had implanted, your faith, your love, your hope. We immediately started praying. We immediately engaged in a continuous round of prayer for you.' Now that may seem to be a rather strange response. but there's a great principle in that, my friends, and the principle is this: Every spiritual work is a motivation to prayer, not a discouragement of it. Every spiritual work, that is every work done by the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, is a motivation, is an encouragement for us to pray for them, not a discouragement.

You see, so often our prayer is in response to disaster, or affliction, or difficulty, and, of course, that's entirely appropriate. There's no better place to go than to God when things are going wrong. There's no better place to go than the shelter of the wings of the Almighty when we're in an hour of need. But, Paul's logic also drove him to prayer when he saw God at work. And that's very important for us, because we don't tend to think that way. Normally, when things are going well, we are tempted not to pray, to put it on autopilot, to let God handle it, to presume on his blessings, to cease to pray faithfully for ourselves and for our brothers and sisters. But not so Paul. That wasn't his spiritual logic. His spiritual logic said, 'God is at work, that must be a reminder to me to go to Him in prayer and ask Him to continue that work and increase that work. This is such an important principle, my friends, because those of us who have learned the Reformed Faith and know of God's initiative and salvation in God's doctrine of grace are sometimes tempted to think, 'well if God is taking the initiative, why should I bother praying?' That's never Paul's logic. When Paul sees God at work, that is an impetus to prayer. Why? Because Paul knows that prayer is the instrument which God has ordained to bless His people through.

And so the old Puritans used to say, "When God is preparing to bless His people, He sets them a praying." When God is preparing to do a great work in His people's midst, He puts it on their hearts to pray for Him to do a great work in their midst. And so their prayers at God's initiative become an instrument of God's blessing in their situation. Paul knows when he sees God at work, that that's a sign that he needs to go to prayer. How encouraging it is to see Paul's example. Is this what we ourselves follow?

When we see God at work in our midst, do we become complacent in prayer, or do we implore Him all the more to continue and increase the work that He's doing? Paul's example for us reminds us that we must attend to prayer, not only in the hard times, but especially in the times where spiritual work is going on, that the work of the spirit might continue and increase.

That's the first principle we see in this passage. Now let's look at the content of the prayer. Paul begins by giving thanks. He begins by announcing this prayer. He begins by telling them of how continued his prayer has been for them, and then he tells them what he's praying for them. In particular, we see three things that the Apostle Paul is praying for and those are the remainder of the main points that I'd like to look at today. The first thing that he says, that he prays for, is this, that they would be filled with a true knowledge. Now you remember the new teachers, these visiting scholars, these false prophets, had been telling the Colossians that they could give them a knowledge of God that they had never attained before. They could give them a deeper, a higher, a broader, a more profound experience of the knowledge of God. Now the Apostle Paul isn't unconcerned that these Colossians grow in the knowledge of God and so his very first petition is: I'm praying that you will be filled with the knowledge of God;

But not a knowledge that they want you to have .A knowledge which is in accordance with the Word of God, which is a practical knowledge, which impacts your daily living, and which bears fruit. That's the kind of knowledge that I want you to grow in.

Let's look at what the Apostle Paul says for a few moments. Look at verse 9, he says, "we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Paul wants them to increase in the knowledge of God, but he wants the knowledge of God which is consistent with the gospel that's already been preached. He wants a knowledge of God which is biblical. He wants a knowledge of God which is not merely abstract or speculative, but which has practical content to it, and he wants a knowledge of God which bears fruit. In fact, we may ask, 'How do you tell the difference between this false knowledge of God that's being set forth by the false teachers, and the true knowledge which the Apostle Paul wants these believers to be filled with?' It's very easy. You look at the nature of the knowledge, the roots of the knowledge, and the fruits of the knowledge. Look, the false teacher's knowledge is a speculative knowledge. We don't know exactly what sort of knowledge they were purveying, but if it's anything like the type of teaching which prevailed in the Mediterranean world a few generations later, it was a speculative knowledge that only a few people had. Only those who were initiated in the rights could know this knowledge. It was a speculative, hidden, secret knowledge. In contrast, the Apostle Paul says, 'The knowledge I want you to have is a practical grasp of the will of God.' Look what he says, "That you might be filled with the knowledge of His will." Not some abstract or speculative knowledge that only a few have, but a knowledge of His will as He's revealed Himself in the Word. I want you to know His will.

Then, not only is there a distinction between the nature of the knowledge, that is the false knowledge which is speculative, and the true knowledge which is a practical knowledge, a practical grasp of God and His will, but there's a difference between the roots of these knowledge. The false knowledge does not come from the Bible. We've already said that was a mixture of different types of beliefs, a little bit of Jewish belief thrown in, a little bit of pagan belief thrown in, but it didn't come exclusively from the Scriptures.

In contrast, the true knowledge of which Paul speaks is biblical truth. It is in accord with the Scriptures and it flows from the revelation of God in the Scripture. And so the origins or roots of these two knowledges are different. Not only is their nature different, but their origins are different. One is unbiblical, or extra-biblical, the other is biblical in its origin.

Thirdly, the fruits of these two different knowledges are different. The false knowledge either bears no fruit or it bears bad fruit. Now, that may seem somewhat contradictory because we all bear fruit of one sort or another, but let me explain what I'm driving at there. When I say it bears no fruit, I mean this:

Very often the type of knowledge that was purveyed by these types of teachers had no practical significance other than to set you apart from other people in some sort of a secret club. You knew certain things that nobody else knew, and that was it. It didn't impact the way you lived, it didn't impact the way you related to your families, your wives, your children, anybody in the community. It was just something you knew, and the Apostle Paul said, 'that's not Christ's knowledge.' Christ's knowledge of God is different than that. It impacts the way you live, and, on the other hand, sometimes this fruit, the fruit of the false teaching, led to actual wrong behavior amongst Christians. Like a false buffeting of the body or a false denial of the fact that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, or a false aspersion on material things, or some other form like this. So, the false knowledge leads to fruits of either no fruit or bad fruit, whereas Paul says, 'the true knowledge bears good fruit.' Right standard, right motivation, right aim of life, all of these things flow from a true knowledge of God, and the Apostle Paul says, 'I pray that you will be filled with this practical knowledge of the will of God, a knowledge that leads to all spiritual wisdom and understanding.' The kind of knowledge that Paul is talking about is character transforming knowledge. Paul is not trying to create eggheads, nor is he trying to create a spiritual clique. He's trying to challenge these Colossians in a knowledge which will transform what they are. They can't stay the same once they've had an experience of this knowledge. The wisdom and the understanding that he speaks of represents that settled condition of a spiritually enlightened mind. Wisdom is a work of the Spirit in us. You can't get wisdom in the biblical sense from being a very profound, rational thinker who can study all sorts of things in the empirical world and make deductions from them. Wisdom is a work of the Spirit in us, and understanding is the application of that spiritual wisdom to the practical situations of our daily lives. And the Apostle Paul says, 'that's the kind of knowledge I want you to be filled with.' Not some airy, very speculative theoretical theory that comes from somewhere apart from the word of God. I want you to be filled with the knowledge of God which transforms your character and leads to wisdom and understanding.

Notice his specific fruits that he wants to see from this knowledge of God in verse 10: "so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work." Three things you see, he says, result from this kind of knowledge of God. When you are filled with this kind of knowledge of God, you walk in a manner worthy of your Lord, you seek to please God, and you bear fruit. Let's look at each of those things.

When the Apostle Paul speaks of walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, he's speaking of the standard of our behavior. We are to emulate our Savior. We are to walk like Him as He did in the world, in faithfulness to God, in love to men, quietly honoring God in all His works and ways, walking in accordance with His word, blessing those who curse us. All these things are part of the standard that Paul expects to flow from a true knowledge of God. A person who has true knowledge of God walks worthily of the Lord, walks in a manner worthy of his

Lord.

II. Filled with TRUE KNOWLEDGE

Secondly, the Apostle Paul says that those who have true knowledge of God are going to desire to please God, to please Him in all respects. Their motivation for behavior is out of a sincere and appropriate desire to please God. I'm a typical first-born child. I like to please my parents, and the worst thing they could have ever done to me in discipline would have been to look at me and say, "Ligon, your behavior has truly disappointed us." Those words laid on my heart like a stone because I loved my parents, I had a good relationship with them, and I wanted nothing more than to please them. The Apostle Paul wants us to have that attitude towards our heavenly Father, to desire, earnestly, not slavishly, but earnestly to please Him, and to gain pleasure from pleasing Him. You remember Eric Liddel in *Chariots of Fire*, when he tells his sister one of the reasons why he runs: "I run because when I run, I feel His pleasure?" What's Eric Liddel saying? When he runs to the glory of God, he knows the pleasure of God. God takes pleasure in it because he desires to please God, and he says that there's no feeling like that in the world, to know that the Lord accepts my offering to Him. And Paul says that's how I want you to live: 'I want you to have a knowledge that leads you to desire to please God, not slavishly, but enthusiastically.'

Finally, he says the true knowledge of God of which I speak bears fruit in every good work. It's not fruitless. There are good fruits which result from it; love to God, love to neighbor, self-denial, sacrificial love. All those things are entailed when the believer has this type of knowledge, and so the Apostle Paul says, 'I'm praying that you will have that kind of knowledge.'

Now, there are many obvious applications of that truth to us, and I would simply remind you of a few of the struggles we have with knowledge today. There are many professing Christians in the church today who have absolutely no desire for knowledge. They want absolutely no knowledge of God, no knowledge of His Scripture. They want to go through the motions and they want to be left alone. Obviously, if that's the case, something is wrong. Something's wrong in us if we have no desire for the knowledge of God or knowledge about Him, because the Apostle Paul says, 'I'm praying that you Christians will have that.' On the other hand, there are some Christians who want to bypass knowledge and they want an experience. They want an experience of God without the hard work of knowing His Word and the hard work of relating to Him in accordance with His Word. They seek experiences, so in their minds the weirder the experience, the more real it is. The weirder the experience, the more spiritual it is. The weirder the experience the more knowledge they think they have. But the Apostle Paul says, 'No, no, I want you to know God in accordance with His will, and that knowledge will flow forth in a life which is worthy of the Savior, in a life which desires to please the Savior, and in a life that bears fruit.'

There are, of course, others who want to know notions, they want to know teachings, but there is no practical implication of those things in their lives. They want to know about God, but they never come to know Him. We, in a place where teaching is stressed, must be on guard that we never let our knowledge about God hang in the air, but that it is rooted in practical Christ living. We must remember Paul's great dictum that truth is unto godliness, that the knowledge of God is not so that we can go home and impress our friends with what we learn in Sunday School, it's so that we can become more like Christ and can better carry out God's directives to us and experience truth for the purpose of promoting godliness. All those things we must remember in light of Paul's words about true knowledge.

III. Filled with REAL POWER

The third thing I would point to, in addition to every spiritual work being a motivation to prayer, in addition to Paul's call, or a prayer for our being filled with knowledge, is that he prays that we will be filled with power. In verse 11 the Apostle Paul also asks that we would be strengthened with all power. Remember again, these false teachers at Colosse had said, 'Not only will we give you a deeper knowledge, 'we'll give you a deeper, a more profound experience of the power of God than you've ever had before. We can manifest the power of God to you in a way that you've never seen it before, if you'll go through these rituals, if you will attain to these secret teachings that we offer.' And so the Apostle Paul again prays that the Colossians would be strengthened with real spiritual power, real divine power. He asks, in fact, that they would be strengthened with all power in accordance with His glorious might. You know that the word "glory" was a substitute word that the Jewish people often used for "God" Himself. They used reverential titles for God. They would not speak the name of God out of reverence for Him and attempting to avoid a breaking of the third commandment, and so they came up with all sorts of circumlocutions, little words that they would substitute for God, and "the glory" was one of them. When they would refer to "the glory" they were referring to God, and Paul says, "I'm praying that you would be strengthened with all power in accordance with His glorious might." Paul is hinting at the might, the power, the strength which resides in the Almighty Himself, he's saying to these Colossians, 'I'm praying that you will be filled with the power of God Himself. You've already tasted of the power of God. I'm desiring that it would increase in your midst.' It's so important to note again that Paul is pointing to a power outside of the Colossians. It's not a power within the Colossians that he's praying to be increased, it's a power which comes from God and which God implants in us and strengthens us with.

This power again, according to Paul, produces three things. It's not a power for the sake of thrills. It's a power which produces certain realities in our lives, and Paul lists three of them. Again, verse 11: "for the attaining of all steadfastness

and patience,” and, depending on how you translate, “joy” Let's look at these three things. First, steadfastness or endurance. Paul says, ‘I'm praying for a power in you which produces endurance. Endurance is that quality of steady persistence whereby a person is able to continue until they reach the goal. Many of you ladies have been objects of that persistence, as a young man has courted you and sought your hand in marriage, and he may have had to be very persistent before you were convinced that he was really the one for you, but he stayed to the end. Persevering in his goals and aims, Paul is praying for a spiritual endurance that these Colossians would continue on in the faith. They were going to have to live in very difficult times. Paul's death in the mid 60's would set off a wave of deaths in the Christian community. Perhaps many of these Colossians would be called on to give their lives for the faith. He prays for them, power that would give them endurance.

Secondly, notice, he also prays that they would have patience, or long-suffering. That is the virtue of a quiet spirit in the face of provocation or trial or tribulation, that they would be able to have the Spirit of Christ, who was able to pray to His heavenly Father, “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.” Paul says, ‘that's what I want the power to produce in you: Endurance, long-suffering, patience. That's what I want the power of God to produce in you. Not just a raw power which gives you some sort of an experience that other people haven't had, but a power which empowers your Christian life.’ And finally, he says, ‘I desire it to be a power that produces joy.’ For the Christian does not go through these life experiences simply with our teeth gritted, nor do we go through it impassively, without any feeling. Paul's not saying, ‘I want you to go through those things and never, ever, ever struggle with it. I want you to go through these difficulties and never, ever, ever sorrow at your trials.’ No, Paul is saying, ‘I know that you're going to be downcast, but even in your downcastness, I want you to experience joy, and the only way your are going to experience joy in the midst of your endurance, in the midst of your patience, is if the Holy Spirit is at work in you in accordance with the power of God.’ Isn't it a beautiful phrase to be used? “I'm praying for you to be strengthened with all power in accordance with His glorious might.” If a rich man gives you of his money, he may not be giving you very much. A multi-millionaire could give you of his money and only give you a hundred dollars, but if a rich man gave you in accordance with his wealth, you would be in for a big treat. Now the Apostle Paul is saying, ‘God is going to give you this power in accordance with His glorious might.’ That's how powerful the power of God is going to be. We, in our own Christian experiences know how powerful that power must be in order to endure some of the things that God calls on us to deal with. I want to remind you that today there are all sorts of sheisters in the world; in the business world, in the educational world, and elsewhere who are attempting to tell you that you can become a successful person if you'll simply tap into the power within. They say that's what you need to transform your life, the power within. My friends, what Paul is saying is exactly opposite of that. He is saying, until you realize that there is no power within and you start to seek the power above, until hen you will never know true power. Seek the power

outside yourself, because in God's economy, our weakness is made strong by His strength, because His strength is perfected in our weakness. John Owen said many, many years ago, "We have no power from God unless we live in the persuasion that we have none of our own." We have no power from God unless we live in the persuasion that we have none of our own, because this power to live, this power to endure, this power to be joyous, this power to be patient comes from outside of us. It's not a power which is naturally within us, or a power which is merely untapped, or unrealized, or needing to being awakened or unlocked. It's a power which comes from God himself and the Apostle Paul says, 'I'm praying that for you. That's the kind of power I want you to have, not this airy-fairy knowledge, not this airy-fairy power that's spoken of by the false teacher, but real power which helps you where you are.

IV. Moved to THANKSGIVING

And finally Paul says this, and this is the fourth thing, in verse 12, "giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints." I don't know whether that's Paul saying, 'I'm giving thanks,' or whether Paul is saying, 'I want you to give thanks,' but it really doesn't matter because I want you to note that from verses 9 to 11, the Apostle Paul is constantly saying, 'you, you, you.' I want this for you. I'm praying this for you. When he gets to verse 12, the language turns to 'us.' Paul is getting ready to recount the things which are true about all believers; that we share in the inheritance of the saints, that we have been delivered from the domains of darkness, that we have been transferred into the kingdom of Sons, that we have redemption and forgiveness of sin, and Paul can't possibly say 'you' in that context. He has to say 'we.' He has to say 'us.' Remember, Paul knew what it was to be lost and he knew what it was to be found, and Paul can't possibly say 'you were lost and you were found.' He has to say 'we were lost and we were found.' It's 'us' and so it leads to 'us' giving thanks and that's the last thing I'd like to point to.

Paul gives thanks for God having qualified us for His inheritance. In other words, he says, 'all the conditions have been met which entitle us to a full standing as the children of God. That's been done for us.' And he goes on to say, "and God has rescued us from the domain of darkness." It's so important for us to remember in our forgiveness we're not simply pardoned by the dominion of sin being broken in our experience. God both pardons and He breaks the dominion of sin. We have been taken out from under the domain of the kingdom of darkness, and we have been placed in the kingdom of His Son. Paul uses a beautiful phrase. It's translated in our passage, "His beloved Son," but it literally reads "the Son of His love." That's the kingdom you've been placed in. You've been placed in the kingdom of the Son of His love. That's where He's put you, and the Apostle Paul lays all those truths before the Colossians. How in the world could anything else be more appealing, be more glorious, than this which Paul is praying for? Let me ask you this: Is this how you're praying for one another? Are

you praying that your brothers and sisters in Christ here at First Presbyterian Church would be filled with that kind of knowledge, that kind of power, and would overflow with this kind of thanksgiving? This is what God desires for us. Do you desire the kind of knowledge that Paul is speaking about today? If you don't, my friend, something's awry, something needs to be checked, something needs to be changed. Perhaps you need to avail yourself the first time to Christ. And here Paul, in this thanksgiving, sums up all of what God has done for us in Christ. And he holds it up before us and he's going to meditate on it for the next several verses. So we've only touched the tip of the iceberg here. And he says this is more glorious than anything that anyone could ever offer to you. Never accept a substitute. O my friends, may God make that so in your life. Let's pray.

O God, we pray that You would bless Your Word. Work in us this knowledge and this power , and we'll give You all the thanksgiving. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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