

A prayer for gospel growth

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[0 : 00] Let's ask the author of these scriptures to help us and then we'll get into it. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I pray that you would speak to us today.

! Last week, I said what we give thanks for reveals what we treasure.

That is, we don't thank God for things we consider trivial, but only what we consider valuable. And today, I want to suggest something similar about prayer.

What we pray for reveals what we are really aiming for. It reveals what we are really after. So let me ask you, what do you pray most for?

If you are a Christian, I assume you pray. But what do your prayers usually focus on? If you are like me, I imagine you usually pray for your immediate needs.

[1 : 20] You pray for your circumstances, you pray for certain outcomes, you pray for good health, for success in exams or work, for a relationship to come true, for relief from certain struggles or suffering.

That's what we all pray for, right? And let me be clear, it is not wrong to ask for these things. But let's pause for a moment and reflect as honestly as we can.

Why do we pray those prayers? What do our most common prayer requests reveal about our true aims in life?

Do we pray these things because what we are chasing above all is simply our own comfort, our own convenience, our own gratification?

Well, what if God wants us to aim for something far bigger than simply our comfort and convenience? Today, that's what God is inviting us to.

[2 : 30] A bigger aim, a bigger goal, a bigger purpose. And the way he does it is through this prayer of Paul for the Colossians. We're going to explore this prayer in some detail today, but as you heard it being read, I wonder if you've noticed already how big and daring Paul's prayer actually is.

For one thing, did you notice how comprehensive his language is? Let me just show you.

In verse 9, Paul prays that they would be filled with not just a little, but all wisdom and understanding. In verse 10, he prays that they would bear fruit in not just some, but every good work.

In verse 11, he asks not just for endurance and patience, but great endurance and patience. So clearly, he's not praying small.

He's not praying safe. He's got something far bigger in mind. And this is even more astounding once we consider the larger context.

[3 : 43] You see, when do we usually pray most fervently? My guess is when there is some desperate need, some financial burden, some relational tension, some unexpected situation.

But notice, what causes Paul to keep getting on his knees? The beginning of verse 9 tells us. For this reason.

So that means, Paul prays 1 verse 9 to 14 because of 1 verse 3 to 8. And what's happening in 1 verse 3 to 8?

We saw it last week, didn't we? Paul is thanking God for these Colossian Christians who are filled with faith and love and gospel hope.

So that means, Paul isn't praying because something's gone wrong. He's praying because something's going right. He sees fruit in their lives, and yet that drives him to pray even more for them.

[5 : 00] And that is so different from how we often think about prayer, isn't it? Imagine if I came up to you today and said, let's pray for Joshua.

And you say, sure. But what are we praying for? Is he okay? Is he sick? And I say, well, nothing's wrong with Joshua actually.

He's doing pretty well spiritually. And your first instinct might then be to look at me and say, oh, then why are we praying for him? But Paul's reply to that will be, why not?

If someone is being faithful and loving and hopeful, why can't we still pray for even more faith and more love and more hope?

Why can't we ask for even more of God's strength and wisdom and joy? Just because we're going well. Because Paul says we've got a really big aim in mind.

[6 : 07] If we are Christians, verse 10, our ultimate goal in life is to live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way. And if that is our big aim, then why wouldn't we keep asking God for all his gifts and resources and supplies to achieve that purpose?

So today, let's follow Paul's lead. Let's aim higher. Let's aim to please God more and more. And let's pray bigger.

Let's ask God for more and more. Let's ask God for more. Not because we are lacking something, which is what the false teachers at Colossae were implying.

But because although in Christ we have everything, we still are not living in light of all that we've received in Christ.

Let's not think that just because we have the gospel, we can switch on the spiritual autopilot. For Paul may be the enemy of spiritual counterfeits, but he is certainly not the enemy of spiritual progress.

[7 : 28] But what are we asking for? More of if our aim is to please God more and more. Well, Paul's prayer today will provide the roadmap.

Paul will show us today that if we want to live God-pleasing lives, then firstly, we should ask to grasp the gospel more and more.

And secondly, we should ask to walk worthy of our Lord more and more. So let's take the time to explore these two requests now.

Firstly, let's ask to grasp the gospel more and more. Look at verse 9. 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's the first request Paul makes. And when you think about it, that makes sense, doesn't it? If I wanted to please my wife on her birthday, then it helps to know what she wants.

[8 : 38] It helps to know that she wants Japanese food or a break from the kids. Otherwise, if I just give her a Star Wars Lego set, let's just say she might not be pleased.

And so if I want to live a life pleasing to God, it makes sense to know what he wants. It makes sense to know his will.

But let's slow down and ask, what does that mean? What does it mean to know God's will? You see, it's common, isn't it, that whenever we see that phrase, God's will, in the Bible, we automatically assume that must mean God's will for me.

So we think that this is all about trying to discern who God wants me to marry or what job I should take or which course I should study or perhaps on a micro level, what food God thinks I should eat today or what clothes I should wear.

We think that Paul is praying that God will reveal some hidden secret he has yet to disclose to us with regards to my future or my vocation or my needs.

[10 : 06] Now, of course, it is a good thing to pray for God's guidance on big decisions like university applications, jobs, marriages, housing needs.

But if we think that is what God's will boils down to, we are really just showing how self-centered we are. Because God's will here isn't about the specific guidance we want for our lives, but about what he desires, which he has already made perfectly clear in the scriptures.

So what has God already made clear to us? Here is a sampling on the screen. 1 Thessalonians 4 verse 3. It is God's will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid sexual immorality.

Or 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 16 to 18. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Or, if you want an Old Testament example, here is Micah 6 verse 8. And what does the Lord require of you? That's just another way of asking what is the Lord's will?

[11 : 29] To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. That's what God's will is.

These are the things that please him. And these are the things he has already told us in the scriptures. And Paul is praying that we'll be so captivated by what delights God, like justice and mercy and humility.

That we will do everything we can to make our lives the very thing that brings him joy.

And actually, what helps us most to know how to delight God is the desire to grasp the gospel more and more.

Why do I say that? Well, because of verse 9 again. Notice that Paul doesn't just ask us to be filled with the knowledge of his will, but for understanding and wisdom that the Spirit gives.

[12:41] So, what is that all about? Well, in the book of Colossians, wisdom and understanding are closely linked with Christ and the gospel.

Take Colossians 2, verse 2 to 3, for example. Now, according to these verses, where is wisdom and knowledge to be found? Answer, Christ himself.

You can see that at the end of the verse. In fact, that is precisely why we pursue full understanding so that we can truly know our amazing Savior and his incredible work more deeply.

Or come back with me to 1, verse 6 and 7 from last week. What is it that the Colossian Christians have already learned and understood those words again? Answer, God's grace.

It's the gospel. And there are a few more examples like that all over Colossians. And so, given the very close link between wisdom, understanding, understanding, and the gospel in this letter, that's why we can say what Paul is really asking for in verse 9 is that we will grasp the gospel more and more.

[14:04] For as we grasp the gospel more and more, we'll see more and more how to live our lives in the light of Christ.

Let me give you an example. Let's imagine you are Euodia, one of the women Paul names in his letter to the Philippians.

You're a Christian, but you are currently having a dispute with a fellow Christian, Syntyche. And Paul is writing to you and pleading with you two to reconcile and be of the same mind in the Lord. And how does Paul persuade you to do that? Answer, by gospel theology. Paul says to you, hey, Euodia, let me remind you of this doctrine that we believe in.

It's called the incarnation. That is Jesus, right? And he's the son of God. He's equal to God. By the way, that is the doctrine of the Trinity.

[15:14] But did you notice how this person who is in very essence God acted? He became human. He decided to make himself a servant.

He relinquished his reputation. He humbled himself. In fact, he humbled himself all the way to the cross. That is the gospel in action.

So, Euodia, why don't you view your dispute through the lens of the gospel? If Jesus had this mindset of putting the interests of others above himself, how might that begin to shape your mindset?

How might that begin to help you understand what God's will is in this situation? how might that help you begin to take action that will please God?

Do you see? If Euodia can grasp the gospel, not just as some abstract information, but with wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, that will lead her to be of the same mind with her sister in Christ.

[16:35] That will lead her not just to understand, but to fulfill God's will, and so please him. And so today, if we want to live God-pleasing lives, let us not be shy to ask to be filled with the knowledge of his will.

Let us strive to grasp the gospel more and more. After all, if God needs to fill us, that must mean we are not full yet, right?

We haven't yet taken hold of all that God has given us. So let's fill our hearts and our minds with the word of the gospel. For what you fill your hearts and minds with, fills your lives.

So, if you are filling your hearts and minds with a constant flow of research about becoming financially independent and articles about investments and how to retire early, that is going to control your schedule.

That is going to influence your relationships. Or if you fill your hearts and minds with particular K-dramas and social media, their outlook on life is eventually going to become your outlook on life.

[17 : 56] what you fill your hearts and minds with, fills your lives. So, today, are we asking God that he might fill us with the knowledge of the riches of his gospel?

Are we spending enough time with him so that he can do so? If not, then let's not be surprised if we find it difficult to live a life pleasing to the Lord.

And let's not be afraid to go deeper theologically. After all, isn't that essentially what Paul is praying for in verse 9? Now, I know the word theology can sound intimidating.

It conjures up images of big words and dusty textbooks. But at its heart, theology simply means knowing God truly so that we can live for him rightly.

One pastor from centuries ago even called theology the science of living blessedly forever. In other words, good theology isn't abstract.

[19 : 06] It is intensely practical. So, while it might sound humble to say, oh, I don't need theology, I just need Jesus, ironically, that mindset can lead us away from the real Jesus without a growing spirit shaped understanding of who God is and what he desires, we risk reshaping God in our own image.

But Paul is praying for the opposite, that we would be shaped by truth, by the knowledge of God's will, not by our own preferences. He's praying that we'll grow in maturity, discernment and obedience.

In short, Paul is praying we would have good theology. So, let's ask for that, let's strive for that, whether it's through reading thoughtful books, listening to sound teaching, or attending classes that stretch our minds and stir our hearts.

Don't be afraid of theology. Embrace it because it leads to a fuller, deeper, more joyful walk with Christ. Let what we know of Jesus keep growing so that it can feel more of my entire being.

So, that's the first thing to ask for. But, perhaps, understandably, you're still wondering, can I also ask for something more concrete? Is there anything else?

[20 : 46] that brings us to the second thing we can ask for today. Secondly, let's ask to walk worthy of our Lord more and more.

In the remaining verses, Paul is actually going to paint a vision of what a God-pleasing life looks like. And guess what? A God-pleasing life is an ordinary one.

You see, that phrase, live a life, that you see in your NIV, is actually more literally translated with the word walk.

So, for example, the ESV will translate this verse as, so you may walk worthy, walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. And walking is a common biblical metaphor which simply refers to our everyday life.

life, it is the daily movements and actions and choices and words that we speak. So, Paul is asking that as we carry on with our everyday activities, we will please God.

[21 : 59] That's the idea. So, that means a God-pleasing life isn't necessarily one where you must become a missionary or a pastor or something like that you can please God in the daily rhythms of your life.

And Paul mentions three characteristics in particular that marks such a life. It is a life that will be striving for fruit-bearing growth, that's verse 10, a life that will be strengthened to endure, that's verse 11, and a life that will be shaped by gospel gratitude, that's verses 12 to 14.

That's how we walk worthy of our Lord. So, let's think about each one of them. Here is characteristic number one, striving for fruit-bearing growth.

What exactly does Paul have in mind here? Well, perhaps the best illustration is simply to watch an apple tree bearing fruit.

So, I found a video online and that's what we're going to watch now, and as we watch, I want you to just imagine you are the tree. So, Sam, can you put on the video now?

[23 : 21] Now, wasn't it satisfying to watch those apples slowly mature and ripen? And the video took one minute 43 seconds, but, you know, it's actually months and years.

And how satisfying it must have been for the people who ate it. And that is exactly what Paul is getting at. A God-pleasing life is one in which we will slowly mature in such a way as to be intensely satisfying to God and to others because it is all about doing good to others.

that's what the fruit is. It's good works. But what kind of good works are we talking about exactly? Colossians 3 will provide us with a fuller description when we get there in a month or so.

But in summary, it is the compassion, the kindness, the patience, the forbearance, and the honour we show one another in every sphere of our lives.

it's the way we treat the waiters at the Kopitiam, it's the way we drive our cars, it's the way we encourage a struggling friend with scripture, it's the way we offer our time to babysit for a tired young parent, it's the way we pray regularly for someone even though they don't know it, it's the way we volunteer for a behind the scenes job and church, that is all fruit.

[24 : 59] fruit. But notice that the fruit bearing is linked with an increasing knowledge of God. A fruit bearing life is a growing life.

The two go together. For an apple tree to bear fruit, the fruit must grow. So to bear fruit, we need to pursue growth. So that means a God-pleasing life can never be a complacent life.

sometimes it's easy to get to a point where we think, well, I've done enough. Isn't it? So sometimes we might get to a point in our career where maybe we're not the boss or the most senior management, but the middle management position we're in is comfortable enough, and we say, that's enough.

Let me just relax and close from here on in. Or we say, well, I've given decades in service, so now I'm retired, I don't need to do anything.

But if we apply that kind of logic to the Christian life, Paul actually says it is not pleasing to God. Because what pleases God is continued growth in the knowledge of God.

[26 : 17] So it is almost like we have a kind of cycle going on. As we grow in knowing God more, we can bear more fruit. But as we bear more fruit, we find ourselves striving to know God even more.

So, when we pray, sure, pray for our situations. But let's not stop there. Let's pray for fruit. Let's pray for faithfulness and godliness regardless of the outcome.

Let's pray we will still pursue good works even if we fail the exam or don't get that promotion or our friends or our parents or our kids are being grumpy with us.

And yes, that will be hard, which brings us to characteristic number two of a God pleasing life, being strengthened for endurance, being strengthened for endurance.

That is Paul's prayer request in verse 11. Now, notice, Paul doesn't ask to be strong. He asks to be strengthened.

[27 : 32] What's the difference? Well, that implies we are not strong in ourselves, doesn't it? We have to be strengthened by someone else, someone who is strong.

And of course, that's God. did you notice all the different ways Paul stresses how strong he is in verse 11? He's the one who strengthens us with all power.

It is through his glorious might we can keep going. The endurance and patience we can receive from him is a great one. And that, by the way, is what God's strength is being used for.

Not to perform miracles or something like that. Rather, the power of God in our life is seen in a continued trust in God over the long haul through the ups and downs of life.

And when I ponder this verse, I can't help but think of Adoniram Jackson. Jackson, if you don't know, lived around 250 years ago. And he was sent to the unreached people of Burma, now called Myanmar.

[28 : 50] He was a pioneer missionary during a time when missions were not encouraged so it was very difficult for him to even get off the ground. But eventually he did reach his destination but then it became difficult to get an audience.

Still, he kept at it. He learned the language, got to know the people, studied the area and yet after six long years, his efforts still bore no fruit.

Not one convert. What patience and endurance that must have taken. Can you imagine laboring for six years and not seeing any fruit to your labor?

And then finally, one day, someone did trust Christ. Someone did get baptized. Finally! lead. And yet, this actually invited further persecution.

In addition, he lost two wives to illness as well as some of his children. And I might be getting this fact wrong but I'm not sure if the guy who converted persevered.

[30 : 05] But Judson did. He stayed on and kept going. at this point, you have to ask, how is that possible? What's going on?

The answer is verse 11. Here is someone pouring out his life to please God and being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that he might have great endurance and patience.

And by the way, his endurance is why we have Christians in Myanmar today. And if we want to live God-pleasing lives, that's what we need to keep asking for over and over again.

We need God's help. We need God's power. After all, the longer you live, the more troubles you will encounter. Whether that's ill health or work difficulties or parenting pressures, maybe even financial hardship.

And it is in those times when it will be the easiest word of need to say, let's forget all this stuff about living a Christ-worthy life. Let's just concentrate on my comfort and my convenience and my gratification.

[31 : 25] That's why we need to be strengthened again and again. So that even in the face of all kinds of trials, we can still bear fruit in every good work.

And that's also why we need characteristic number three of a God-pleasing life, shaped by gospel gratitude. Shaped by gospel gratitude.

You see, if we want to walk worthy of our Lord more and more, we need to know more and more why our Lord God is so worthy.

And He is worthy, isn't He? Just look at verses 12 to 14 and let's compare ourselves to Him. We couldn't qualify ourselves to belong to God's kingdom, but He qualified us.

We couldn't rescue ourselves from the grip of darkness, but He rescued us. We couldn't forgive our own sins, but He forgave us. We couldn't transfer ourselves into the kingdom of His Son, but He brought us in and made us heirs and friends.

[32 : 40] All this is from Him. All of it is grace. Later on in 2 verse 18, Paul will mention false teachers who were implying the Colossian believers were disqualified or because they haven't had certain spiritual experiences or followed their practices.

But Paul says no. If you are in Christ, you are fully qualified, fully forgiven, fully included.

And when we grasp that, how can we not overflow with thanks? And isn't that a word some of us need to hear today? Because sometimes if we are honest, we can feel a bit like a second class Christian.

We compare ourselves to others and can't help but feel that the size of our fruit is smaller. Maybe we're not as patient, not as disciplined, or not as theologically sharp, but Paul reminds us it is not your fruit that qualifies you, but Christ.

He's the reason you're in his kingdom. He's the reason you're eligible to receive every blessing from God. So that is what Paul prays for, prays that we'll keep at the forefront of our hearts and our minds.

[34 : 09] He prays that we will know God above all as our Father, who gives freely, whether that's the knowledge of his will, wisdom and understanding, endurance and patience, rescue and redemption from sin, qualification and transference into his kingdom.

Meditate on this and gratitude will flow. And that will cause us to want to walk worthy of our Lord more and more.

So let's ask for gospel gratitude. So as we wrap up, let me ask us to consider two things. first, consider what we are aiming for. Are we simply aiming for the same things the world aims for? Comfort? Convenience? Status? Security? Well, why not aim for something far bigger to live lives that are pleasing to the Lord?

[35 : 19] Why not make it your purpose so that people, when they see your lives, they can see Jesus in your life? In the way you use your money, what you prioritize for your kids, what you use your studies or your retirement for?

For when you think about it, here's the amazing thing. Paul is saying it is possible to please the Lord. So why not make this our aim?

And then second, consider what we're praying for. What are you praying for yourself and for others? Is it for fruit?

Is it to do good to others? Is it that you'll be content in Christ even when everything seems to be falling apart? Well, remember, what we pray for reveals what we are truly aiming for?

And if we sense today that there is a gap, well then, shall we pray for God to fill us with the knowledge of his will, to grasp his gospel more and more, so that we will walk more and more closely with the Lord?

[36 : 38] Let's pray for that now. Heavenly Father, as we come before you this morning, all we really want to do right now is just echo the words of Paul in this passage.

We ask that you will fill us with the knowledge of your will, through the wisdom and all the wisdom and understanding that your spirit gives, so that we might live a life worthy of you, to please you in every way, to bear fruit in every good work, to grow in the knowledge of you, to be strengthened with your power, that we might have great endurance and patience and to constantly give thanks after thanks to you for all that you have done for us.
We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.