

Colossians 1. 9-14. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 9 September 2012.

Our Bible reading for this morning comes from Colossians 1, commencing at verse 9

For this reason, since the day we heard of it, we do not cease to pray and make request for you, that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to walk worthily of the Lord so as to please Him in every way, *bearing fruit* in every good work, and *increasing* in the knowledge of God; *empowered* with all power, according to the might of His glory, to all endurance and longsuffering with joy; *giving thanks* to the Father, who *has made us fit* to share the inheritance of the saints in light; who *delivered us* out of the domain of darkness, and *transferred us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love; in whom we have *redemption, the forgiveness of sins* ...

As in the case of Paul's other recorded prayers, whether for churches or for individuals, his requests for the saints at Colossae weren't general and vague but were specific and definite, focusing on spiritual blessings rather than on material or physical matters. This prayer is set apart from Paul's other recorded prayers only in that, in this case, those for whom the apostle prayed were not known to him personally. They had never seen his face, nor he theirs.¹ And already we learn the privilege – and duty – of intercessory prayer on behalf of those whom we have never met but of whom we have heard.² And Paul knew well the value of the prayers of those who were some distance away.³

The news report brought by Epaphras stimulated Paul, and doubtless Timothy,⁴ not only to thanksgiving, but to fervent and regular intercession for the believers ... 'For this reason' referring back not only to the love mentioned immediately before, but to all the evidences of God's grace in the lives of the Colossians described earlier.⁵

We can hardly miss noticing that the words, 'since the day we heard', echo the similar expression in verse 6, 'since the day you heard'. For just as the Colossians had earlier heard good things (*very good things*) from Epaphras,⁶ so now Paul and Timothy have heard good things about the Colossians from the same source.⁷

'Since the day' the Colossians had heard from Epaphras the gospel of God's grace, that message had borne fruit and increased among them.⁸ Now, 'since the day' Paul and Timothy heard from Epaphras of the Colossians' faith, love and hope,⁹ they had been praying for them constantly that the Colossians might *continue* to bear fruit and to increase - 'bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God'.¹⁰

The apostle's words, 'we do not cease to pray ... for you' classes him and Timothy with godly Samuel of old, who is on record as having assured a sinful but repentant Israel, 'far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you'.¹¹ Clearly, when Paul spoke of 'not ceasing to pray', he did not mean that he prayed for them every second without stopping. I know of no one who was busier and more active in God's service than this man.¹² But he did mean that, when he prayed – and that was often – he always included them ... as in fact he did many others.¹³ Such a man has every right therefore to exhort *them* later, 'Continue steadfastly in prayer'.¹⁴

The apostle prayed specifically that God (who he does not even need to name¹⁵) would grant them the full and exact knowledge of His will. And I note in passing that 'knowledge' forms an important element in the opening prayer in each of the epistles which Paul wrote about this time.¹⁶

I take God's will mentioned here to refer, not to His eternal purpose now made known through Christ and the gospel,¹⁷ but, in this context, to His will for our conduct and behaviour as Christians ... to that 'will of God' which we are to obey and which is aimed at regulating our walk for Him. In practice, this would mean for you and me this morning our obtaining a deep and thorough knowledge of God's will as finally and fully revealed to us in His word. And there God has set out in some detail how His will translates into our everyday lives ... including – by way of example only – being filled with His Spirit and submitting to each other,¹⁸ living sanctified¹⁹ and thankful²⁰ lives, and obeying the law of the land so as to avoid any unnecessary criticism.²¹

But to fully grasp how God's will relates to any given situation requires, as Paul notes, 'spiritual wisdom and understanding' ... the first word 'wisdom' is indeed one of the key words of his letter²² – and stands over against the so-called 'wisdom' of which the false teachers boasted but which was in reality only 'an appearance' – a 'wisdom' in word only – which brought men into bondage to man-made ordinances.²³

I take the second word 'understanding' to be the practical application of 'wisdom' to specific cases and situations which we face.

And I note that, in effect, Paul and Timothy were joining forces with Epaphras, who himself was praying that his brethren at Colossae should 'stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God'.²⁴

The apostle makes it clear that the knowledge of God's will is not conveyed as an end in itself. It is made known with a practical purpose ... to influence my conduct. In the words of our Lord Jesus, 'If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them'.²⁵

In this case, the object of God making known His will is that the believer should thereby 'walk worthy of the Lord'.

In one sense, of course, none of us will ever fully attain *that* standard, any more than we will ever truly 'walk worthy of God',²⁶ or 'worthy of *our calling*'²⁷ ... than we will ever truly conduct ourselves in a manner 'worthy of *the gospel of Christ*'²⁸ ... but to walk in these ways must ever remain the goal for each of us.

I understand that the expression 'worthy of God' occurs in many ancient inscriptions throughout Asia, telling one and all that the pagan priests were expected to act in a manner appropriate to their priesthood – to act 'worthy of the god' in whose temple they served.²⁹

I hardly need to say that, if the pagan world of the day appreciated the importance of men worshipping and acting in a manner worthy of the deities they professed to serve, how much more should those of us who profess to worship and serve the living Lord.

Such a 'worthy' walk, we are assured by Paul, will secure the Lord's approval ... will 'please Him in every way'. In one of his earlier epistles, the apostle reminded the Thessalonians that he had taught them how they 'ought to walk and to please God'.³⁰ And it goes without saying that the man who taught others to live in such a way should have first adopted that ambition for himself.³¹

The apostle next spells out for his readers precisely what is involved in walking worthy of the Lord and in pleasing Him in all things. He lists four items, two in verse 10 ('bearing fruit' and 'increasing'), one in verse 11 ('empowered'), and one in verse 12 ('giving thanks') – all of which he speaks of as present, ongoing activities.³²

First, he speaks of 'bearing fruit' and of 'increasing'. This combination recalls his earlier words of thanksgiving in connection with the onward advance of the gospel – including at Colossae.³³ Previously, the gospel had been 'bearing fruit' and 'increasing' among them. Now Paul prays that they (the gospel's 'fruit' and 'increase') will themselves 'bear fruit' and 'increase' ... 'bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God'.

We know that 'bearing fruit in every good work' is certainly one way to please the Lord. For it is recorded of Him – of the One who could say, 'I do always the things that please Him (the Father, that is)'³⁴ – it is recorded of Him that *He* 'went about doing good'.³⁵

Before they were converted, the Colossians had expressed their alienation from God and enmity towards Him by 'doing *evil works*'.³⁶ But now they express their ambition to please the Lord by producing a harvest and crop of *good works*.

Once they had 'walked' in 'sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness'.³⁷ Now they desire to 'walk worthy of the Lord'.

'And increasing in the knowledge of God' is Paul's second component of the Christian's 'worthy walk'. Earlier he had spoken of their knowledge of God's grace,³⁸ and of God's will.³⁹ Now he speaks of their increasing knowledge of God Himself. The knowledge of God which Paul has in view here is both personal and practical. It is not that they would know more *about* God, but that they would know *Him* better – and that progressively.

The third component of the Christian's 'worthy walk' occupies verse 11. Paul prays that his readers will be endowed, not here with knowledge, but with power – and he emphasises his point by using the same word as both a noun and a verb – literally 'powered with all power'. And here lies the secret of how conduct worthy of the Lord is to be achieved. The standards of such a walk are incredibly high – far higher than those demanded by the false teachers – and nothing short of God's almighty power at work within the Colossians would prove sufficient for the task.

Well did David once pray for himself in his hour of need, 'O Lord ... give your strength to your servant'.⁴⁰ This now Paul prays for the Colossian believers. And I note that the measure of the supply of God's power is not their (or our) need, but it is 'according to the might of His glory' – according to the might which is characteristic of God's own glory.

And it is indeed that 'might (the same word) of God's strength, which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places' ... it is that 'might' which is the measure of 'the excelling greatness of God's power' which is made available to us who believe.⁴¹

Most certainly, such power was more than adequate for the Colossians' every need.

We often associate the thought of God's glorious power with His performing some great and spectacular feat or miracle – parting the waters of the Red Sea, shutting up heaven for three and a half years, saving 3,000 people at one go, raising the dead, and so on.

But note that the emphasis here is on Christian character and qualities – on endurance, longsuffering and joy. Nor is this the only time that the apostle links such qualities with the mighty power of God and of His Spirit. I think of his expressed desires for the believers both at Rome and at Ephesus: 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope',⁴² and 'I bow my knees to the Father ... that He may grant you ... to be strengthened with power by His Spirit in the inner man'.⁴³

And Paul's prayer is that nothing short of that power will nerve the believers to all endurance under affliction and to all long-suffering under provocation ... accompanied not with either complaining or grim-faced resignation, but with a joy which is altogether independent both of circumstances and of people. For the two words Paul uses – 'endurance' and 'longsuffering' – are best distinguished as referring to adverse circumstances and to awkward people respectively. Paul prayed that the Colossians would have the grace of 'endurance' to cope with difficult circumstances and the grace of 'longsuffering' to cope with difficult people.

The difference of meaning in the two words can perhaps best be seen in their opposites. 'Endurance' is the perseverance and steadfastness which does not easily succumb in the face of trial and disappointment. 'Longsuffering' is the self-restraint and self-control which does not hastily retaliate in the face of injury and of provocation.⁴⁴

With God's help, the Christian both *bears up* under trying circumstances and *bears with* upsettingly tiresome people.

I was reading only this past week about Ruth Bell Graham, the late wife of Billy Graham. Apparently, many years ago she saw a roadside sign which read, 'End of Construction—Thank you for your patience'. Smiling, she remarked at the time that she wanted those words on her gravestone. After her death in June 2007, her request was carried out. And, along with the Chinese character for righteousness (Mrs. Graham was born in China), her gravestone bears the words that made her smile ... 'End of Construction—Thank you for your patience'.⁴⁵ That use of the word 'patience' matches very well the meaning of the word 'longsuffering' used by Paul. Although I suspect that Ruth Graham needed far less 'longsuffering' on the part of others than I do!

We find the fourth – and final – component of the Christian's 'worthy walk' in verse 12 ... 'giving thanks'.

If God's action towards us is characterised by grace – and it is⁴⁶ – our response to Him should be characterised by gratitude.⁴⁷ Nothing less is fitting for those who have, in turn, been fitted to have a share in the inheritance of the saints!

The expression, 'to share the inheritance of the saints', projects us back into the Book of Joshua, which records for us the allotment of the land of Canaan between the various tribes of Israel as their inheritance.

But although already made fit ... qualified, if you like ... to share in the inheritance, our full enjoyment of that inheritance lies yet in the future. We give thanks, Paul says, 'to the Father', and it is, we know, 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' who has 'begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading, reserved *in heaven*' for us.⁴⁸

Our inheritance, that is, belongs to a higher plane and another dimension to that bestowed upon the nation of Israel – 'the good land which the Lord your God is giving you', in the words of Moses, 'for an inheritance',⁴⁹ ... 'Your land', in the words of Solomon's great prayer, 'which you have given to your people for an inheritance'.⁵⁰

And our inheritance, thank God, differs radically from theirs.

One meaning of the Greek word 'to corrupt' is to lay waste, to ravage.⁵¹ And many times the land which was Israel's inheritance has been trampled and devastated ... in Bible days alone by successive waves of foreign armies – Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman. But we are assured that our inheritance will never be ravaged – it is 'incorruptible'.

From the very beginning, God warned His people to take care that they did nothing to 'defile' His land.⁵² And yet, as noted by their prophets, they did just that.⁵³ But we are assured that our inheritance will never be defiled.

And it is, we are told, 'unfading'. Its beauty, that is, will not fade.⁵⁴ Ah, but many times the beauty of Israel's land 'faded' – marred and blasted by famine, drought and pestilence – usually as the direct result of the people's

sins.⁵⁵ But we are assured that the beauty of our inheritance will never be tarnished – that it is a place of unfading glory.

What a relief – what a joy – to know that no foe will ever invade and destroy ... no sin will ever defile and pollute ... no scourge will ever mar and spoil ... the inheritance which the Father has qualified us to share!

But, though we now share ‘the inheritance ... (which is) in light’, before we were saved we belonged to the domain⁵⁶ of darkness ... where evil powers rule and where Satan’s authority is exercised. But, praise His name, in the words of our Lord Jesus Himself, our Gentile eyes have been opened, and we have turned ‘from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God’.⁵⁷

And not only so, but the One who rescued us from the jurisdiction and tyranny of the devil – from thralldom in the devil’s rebel kingdom⁵⁸ – He has ‘transferred’ us (has ‘transported’ us) into a far more wonderful kingdom ... that of ‘the Son of His love’ ... the kingdom of Him who is both the Object and the manifestation of the Father’s boundless love.

The word rendered ‘transferred’ was used in the ancient world to describe the deporting of the people of a conquered nation to the land of the victor. For example, Flavius Josephus recorded that the great Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser ‘transported’ the inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel ‘into his own kingdom’.⁵⁹

But, unlike the Israelites, we have been ‘transferred’, not from liberty into slavery, but from slavery into liberty.

Indeed, it is possible that the apostle had another historical incident in mind ... one much nearer to home for the original readers of his letter. For some two hundred years before he wrote, a Greek king, Antiochus the Great, for his own reasons, transferred two thousand Jewish families from Babylon to the land of Phrygia,⁶⁰ of which the city of Colossae formed part. But even the Colossians’ native Phrygia couldn’t hold a candle to the kingdom into which God had transported them ... the kingdom of Him who had purchased their freedom and forgiveness at the price of His own blood ... at the price of His own life.

Let us give thanks to the Father ...

Footnotes

¹ Col. 2. 1.

² Col. 1. 4, 8.

³ 'You also joining in helping us *through your prayers*', 2 Cor. 1. 11; 'I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance *through your prayers*', Phil. 1. 19; 'Prepare me a lodging; for I hope that *through your prayers* I shall be given to you', Philem. 22.

⁴ Col 1. 1.

⁵ Col. 1. 3-8.

⁶ Col. 1. 6-7.

⁷ Col. 1. 4, 8.

⁸ Col. 1. 5-7.

⁹ Col. 1. 4-5.

¹⁰ Col. 1. 10.

¹¹ 1 Sam. 12. 23.

¹² 2 Cor. 11. 23-28.

¹³ Rom. 1. 8-9; Eph. 1. 15-16; Phil. 1. 4; 1 Thess. 1. 2-4; 2 Tim. 1. 3; Phm. 4.

¹⁴ Col. 4. 2. The similar exhortation in Romans 12. 12 looks back to Paul's example in Romans 1. 8-9.

¹⁵ Col. 1. 9; 'His will'.

¹⁶ Eph. 1. 17; Phil. 1. 9; Col. 1. 9-10; Philemon 6.

¹⁷ As in Eph. 1. 5, 9, 11.

¹⁸ Eph. 5. 17-21.

¹⁹ 1 Thess. 4. 3.

²⁰ 1 Thess. 5. 17.

²¹ 1 Pet. 2. 13-15.

²² Col. 1. 9, 28; 2. 3, 23; 3. 16; 4. 5.

²³ Col. 2. 20-23.

²⁴ Col. 4. 12.

²⁵ John 13. 17.

²⁶ 1 Thess. 2. 12.

²⁷ Eph. 4. 1.

²⁸ Phil. 1. 27.

²⁹ Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary, and Craig S. Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary, Colossians 1. 10. 'The phrase ... "worthy of God" is a formula of a type appearing on inscriptions in the province of Asia', F. F. Bruce, 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians' (New International Commentary of the New Testament). See instances cited of inscriptions at Pergamus in 'Bible Studies', Adolf Deissmann, page 248.

³⁰ 1 Thess. 4. 1.

³¹ 'We are ambitious ... to be well-pleasing to Him', 2 Cor. 5. 9.

³² They are listed as four present participles.

³³ Col. 1. 5-6.

³⁴ John 8. 29.

³⁵ Acts 10. 38.

³⁶ Col. 1. 21.

³⁷ Col. 3. 7.

³⁸ Col. 1. 6.

³⁹ Col. 1. 9.

⁴⁰ Psa. 86. 1, 16.

⁴¹ Eph. 1. 19-20.

⁴² Rom. 15. 13.

⁴³ Eph. 3. 16.

⁴⁴ As a *generalisation*, endurance has to do with circumstances, while long-suffering has to do with people ... but see James 5. 7-8; and cf. LXX of Isa. 57. 15.

⁴⁵ See ... <http://odb.org/2008/09/14/end-of-construction/>

⁴⁶ Col. 1. 6.

⁴⁷ This epistle is filled with thankfulness. See 1. 3; 12; 2. 7; 3. 15-17; 4. 2.

⁴⁸ 1 Pet. 1. 3-4.

⁴⁹ Deut. 4. 21. See also :

De 4:38 driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as at this day;

De 15:4 But there will be no poor among you (for the Lord will bless you in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess),

De 19:10 lest innocent blood be shed in your land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, and so the guilt of bloodshed be upon you.

De 20:16 But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes,

De 21:23 his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.

De 24:4 then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt upon the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.

De 25:19 Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies round about, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.

De 26:1 When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it ...

⁵⁰ 1 Kings 8. 36.

⁵¹ See, for example, 1 Chron. 20. 1.

⁵² Lev. 18. 25-28; Num. 35. 33-34; Deut. 21. 23.

⁵³ Jer. 2. 7; 3. 2; 16. 18; Ezek. 36. 16-18.

⁵⁴ See, 'the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and *its beauty perishes*. So also will the rich man *fade away* in the midst of his ways', James 1. 11.

⁵⁵ See Jer. 12. 4, 10-11.

⁵⁶ "The power of darkness" ... is a Hebraic expression to be understood as "the domain of evil powers", Ralph P. Martin, the article *Reconciliation and Forgiveness in the Letter to the Colossians* in 'Reconciliation and Hope. New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L.L. Morris on his 60th Birthday', The Paternoster Press, 1974. pp. 104-124.

⁵⁷ Acts 26. 18.

⁵⁸ Matt. 12. 36; Luke 11. 18.

⁵⁹ 'The king of Assyria, whose name was Tiglath-Pileser, when he had made an expedition against the Israelites, and had overrun all the land of Gilead, and the region beyond Jordan, and the adjoining country, which is called Galilee, and Kadesh, and Hazor, he made the inhabitants prisoners, *and transported them into his own kingdom*', Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book IX, Chapter XI, Paragraph 1.

⁶⁰ 'He commanded Zenxis, the general of his forces, and his most intimate friend, to send some of our nation out of Babylon *into Phrygia*. The epistle was this ... Having been informed that a sedition is arisen in Lydia and Phrygia, I thought that matter required great care; and upon advising with my friends what was fit to be done, it has been thought proper to remove two thousand families of Jews, with their effects, out of Mesopotamia and Babylon...', Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book XII, Chapter III, Paragraph 4.