

## Prayers

### To God

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for we can have confidence in You. You have our best interests at heart, even though we do not fully understand how and why our lives unfold as they do. Give us the courage to hand our problems over to You, O Lord, and trust that all things will work together for good; and when we cannot see how this can possibly be so, surprise us by the miracles of Your grace and compassion. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for Your care: **AMEN**

### For myself

Weekly theme: Clothes

*Praise the Lord for His provision, and as you do so, let your heart become aware of the clothes you have that perhaps are unworthy of your call, in wear or in fashion. Get rid of them.*

### For others

*Pray for the state of the international police, and their efforts in such matters as human trafficking, pornography and internet fraud, which most people do not want to have to think about. Pray that those involved will not become victims themselves of such evil behaviour and activity.*

## Meditation

When everything happens around me all too fast,  
Lord Jesus, slow me down.

When everything I see appears in chaos and disorder,  
Lord Jesus, bring me peace.

When everything challenges what I think to the core,  
Lord Jesus, grant me perspective.

When everything I come across is incomprehensible,  
Lord Jesus, give me understanding.

When everything around appears to be out of control,  
Lord Jesus, keep my faith secure.

When everything I do meets opposition from others,

Lord Jesus, give me courage.

When everything in this world denies all that I believe,  
Lord Jesus, show me love.

For You are the Master of all things, the great organiser,  
Lord Jesus, we place our hope in You.

## Bible Passage

### ***Colossians 1:9-14***

<sup>9</sup> For this reason, from the day we heard of it, we have not stopped praying and interceding for you, so that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup> conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Lord in order to meet His approval, being fruitful in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God.

<sup>11</sup> May you be made strong with all power according to the supreme might of His Glory, so that you may have endurance and patience in all circumstances, <sup>12</sup> joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has made you able to take your share in the inheritance of the saints in the Light, <sup>13</sup> for He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of His dearly loved Son <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

## Review

Paul had already told the Colossian church that he prayed for them with great fervour (1:3) and after his opening word of introduction (1:3-8) he now told them about this prayer. It was not a prayer full of personal feeling because Paul did not know the people he was addressing, but it was a prayer of great spiritual intensity and power. It meant everything to Paul to know that the Gospel he preached had been carried by others to new places and that other churches had been founded (in this case, by Epaphras, see 1:7), and the power of this prayer is testimony to his passion for the Gospel and its growth. Paul not only asked God to bless the young church with knowledge and spiritual wisdom (1:9) which would lead to 'being fruitful' (1:10), he taught them, within the prayer, some of the important and powerful truths of the Gospel concerning salvation and redemption (1:13,14). His prayer was also designed to encourage the church; he says, for example, 'may you be made strong with all power ...' (1:11), and he demonstrates a considerable level of pastoral care and concern for all the Christians in Colossae.

Paul could have written to address the particular problems of the Colossians immediately. He did this in other letters (see Gal. 1:6f. and 2 Cor.1:3f.), but in this letter he took some time to do this, eventually speaking about specific problems in the second chapter (see 2:8f.). But because Paul wrote to encourage people he did not know, his words have easily reached beyond the time of the Colossians and touched the lives of countless millions of people of later times who have found real inspiration from his words. I recall attending a conference in my youth in which we were required to memorise the 'Authorised' version of this text as a reminder of the Gospel heritage in which we stand. It has stayed with me a long time!

This prayer is packed with memorable ideas and phrases. The connection between the 'knowledge' of God and living 'in a manner worthy of the Lord' (1:9,10) which itself leads to further 'knowledge of the Lord' (1:10), for example, is a powerful reminder of the way in which a disciple can grow in the things of God. The prayer is also full of confidence, for Paul was trying to say to his readers that if they stuck to the core beliefs they had been taught by Epaphras they would not go wrong; and he called on the Lord to make them strong 'with all power according to the supreme might of His glory' so that they could endure any problems and difficult situations they faced (1:11), and thus ensure their place in the inheritance of God's people (1:12). The words of this prayer now build up God's people as they are read.

There is a great deal for us to discover within this prayer. Nearly every commentary on this passage of Scripture has lengthy discussions about the meaning of each sentence and phrase, but there is a way for us to let this passage come alive for us and allow the Lord to speak His truth to us in a personal and direct way; and that is to remember that this is a prayer of blessing. The true Good News of God is always a blessing to the soul; not a burden or an intellectual 'mountain to climb'; and if we read this text as Paul's blessing of the Colossian church together with an affirmation of the truth of the Gospel, then we will not go far wrong.

## Going Deeper

Within this passage is a memorable fourfold guide to Christian discipleship which is well worth looking at in more depth. This fascinating pattern of teaching within Paul's prayer is in the middle of the text and is surrounded by his initial prayer for 'knowledge', and the final affirmation of the Gospel truth of redemption (1:14).

### ***The opening prayer***

There is a sense of excitement in Paul's prayer as it begins in verse 9; he declares that ever since he heard that the Colossian church had been founded he prayed for them fervently; for this was evidence of the sovereign power of God at work in the world. All too often today, we say to each other 'I'm praying for you', and we offer little more than a few hasty thoughts to God when we are able to give it time. Here, though, is a prayer of substance which is rich in meaning because it has been prayed many times. One of the features of such prayer is that because it has been repeated; it is refined, and therefore expresses far more than casual thoughts about faith, good wishes and simple requests, which are what we present to God too often today, even in church services. It has depth.

Paul begins his prayer by asking that the new Christians 'be filled with the knowledge of His will' (1:9). This may be surprising to us, as we might think that new Christians should be built up in faith, or even the good deeds of faith, but Paul focusses on knowledge. He is not 'anti-knowledge' as are many Christians today, and for good reasons. If someone becomes a Christian and has come to know Jesus as their Saviour, then their first need is to get to know much more about Jesus. By growing through knowledge, a young Christian will then be built up in 'spiritual wisdom' (1:9). Paul does not explain here how a young Christian does this, but from his letters generally, we know this meant a combination of getting to know God's Word (the Old Testament), encouragement in all forms of prayer, and mentoring in faith by those with more experience. These are the general principles that lie behind the advice he gives in the two letters to Timothy, for example. Another way of describing this important knowledge and 'spiritual wisdom' is to think of it as 'discernment', which is the knowledge of what is right and wrong. This is the hallmark of one who has found faith in God through Jesus, having found the true source of the knowledge of good and evil in Jesus Christ which replaces the false knowledge of good and evil characterised by sin and the 'Fall' (Gen 3:1f.).

After this fascinating beginning, Paul's prayer teaches that such a start to the Christian life would lead to four things; worthy conduct (1:10), being fruitful (1:10), being made strong (1:11) and giving thanks in all circumstances (1:11,12). This is a powerful exposition of the path of discipleship.

### ***The path of discipleship***

The first consequence of being filled with the knowledge of God subsequent to conversion and the first step on the path of discipleship, is described by Paul as 'worthy conduct' (1:10), but he does not mean this in a general earthly sense. He emphasises that worthy conduct is behaviour that meets God's standards, not human standards; 'in a manner worthy of the Lord in order to meet His approval' (1:10). This is easy to say, but hard to do, for the great temptation we all face is to be concerned about what other people think of us. Even those who claim outwardly that they don't mind what people think of them will often live a life designed to please someone else, but not God. This is not Christian discipleship, for we must seek God's approval alone, and God's requirements are nothing if they are not moral (1:10); we cannot escape the moral consequences of the call to follow Christ!

The second consequence of the life of faith and the second step on this path of discipleship is 'being fruitful ... and growing' (1:10). There is a long history of the word 'fruitful' in the Bible going back to the ancient Covenant promises God made to Abraham. He was to become 'fruitful' by having descendants who would populate the world with God's people, who would then be a blessing to the whole world (Gen 12:2,3; 15:1-6; 17:1f.). Israel was herself described as a vine, but unfortunately, most of the Old Testament tells us of the inability of the vine to 'bear fruit' (see Isaiah 5:1-10), and Israel ultimately failed to be a blessing to the world, spiritually or morally. Being fruitful for the Lord is not success as the world understands it, the fruit that God is interested in is the 'fruit of repentance' (Matt 3:8) by which people respond to the Gospel, and this is what he looks for in us. Fascinatingly, the next step of discipleship which is placed alongside this goal is 'growing in the knowledge of God' (1:10). This establishes a clear cycle between verses 9 and 10. The more we are fruitful in evangelistic endeavour, the more we will come to know of God, and the more we know of God the more fruitful we will be in evangelistic endeavour (etc.)!

The third consequence of Paul's prayer and the third step on the path of discipleship is to 'be made strong with all his power ...' (1:11). Paul usually talks of power in two senses; firstly that of God's power to call and equip (see 1 Tim 1:12 and 2 Cor 12:9) and secondly the indwelling of His Spirit by which He enables His people to do His work in the world (see Eph 1:18,19, e.g.); and it is this indwelling power which is meant here. The source of this indwelling strength is identified by Paul as the 'supreme might of His Glory' (1:11). The Glory of God is the revelation of His nature, His being and His presence, and is the only true source of power in the world. Of course, we experience the Glory of God in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, but God always chooses to reveal Himself and His Glory so that He can help us in the midst of our difficulties; as Paul says; 'so that you have endurance and patience in all circumstances'. It is surely true that if we know God's presence with us then we can keep going through almost anything.

The fourth step of discipleship in this text is that of giving thanks. Some versions of the Bible link the 'giving thanks' (which in the Greek comes at the end of verse 11 but refers to verse 12) with the previous phrase about endurance and patience, as if Paul were wanting to tell us to 'give thanks in all circumstances'. This is his teaching elsewhere (1 Thess 5:18f.) but it is not true of this passage. Here, 'joyful thanks' is the characteristic of disciples who have grown in the knowledge and experience of God, and know that they have a share 'in the inheritance of the saints ...' (1:12). There is a process of growth through these four steps of discipleship in this prayer and the pinnacle of it is the great gift of being able to be so confident of one's place in God's plan that this fact radiates in observable 'joy'. Joy, of course, is not an emotion which we can keep to ourselves, such as being 'happy'; joy is

something that is found in company with others (here, the 'inheritance of the saints') and must be shared. The joy of faith which we find in God is therefore something we express through worship, or within the fellowship of believers. True Godly joy expressed in thanksgiving is a mark of real discipleship.

### ***The Gospel***

This whole great prayer of Paul ends with a wonderfully succinct explanation of the Gospel in which Paul uses passionate words which make it even more memorable (1:13,14). He speaks of our being transferred out of the 'domain of darkness' to the 'Kingdom of His dearly loved Son'. For Paul, the 'domain' of darkness is not like a 'place' from which we are rescued. This is his language for the realm of authority within which all who do not know God exist. Without knowledge of the Creator, the world exists in the grip of the evil which engulfed it at the 'Fall' (Gen. 3), and Paul understood this grip as Satan's authority over the world, as did Jesus (John 12:31) and described it metaphorically as 'darkness' (as did Jesus, see Matt 6:23).

The work of God was of course to rescue humanity from the grip of evil and to establish a means of salvation through the 'Kingdom of His dearly loved Son' (1:13). This phrase is rare in the Bible, as we normally hear of the 'Kingdom of God' or the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. However, this does reflect Paul's teaching elsewhere that until the Lord comes again in glory, God's Kingdom on this earth belongs to Jesus, and He hands it over to the Father at the End of Time when all 'dominions lie under his feet' (1 Cor 15:25f.).

The last verse of Paul's prayer summarises the Gospel in terms of Jesus' work of 'redemption', which in this text means something more like 'liberation', for the forgiveness of our sins (1:14) is the fundamental work by which God liberates the human soul, and this deliverance is won for us through the death of Jesus on the Cross. We will learn more about this later in the letter.

## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***Mature Faith***

It is possible that the sequence of discipleship steps which we have looked at in this study is one in which each step depends upon what has gone before. For example, we can conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Lord (1:10) when we have developed our knowledge of Him (1:9) and matured in spiritual wisdom (by reading the Bible, praying etc.). Then, we can be fruitful in our work for Him when we have learned to live in a worthy manner (1:10). Next, we can live by God's power revealed in His Glory (1:11) as the Lord uses us fruitfully in the work of the Gospel (fruitfulness – 1:10). Lastly, as all these things take place in our lives, we can give thanks (1:12), for this is our inheritance of faith!

#### ***Building up the faith***

The Bible has many lists, and it is not always easy to see how the different elements of these lists go together. However, because 'building up' is also a very common theme in the New Testament, it is always worth looking to see if each item in the list adds upon what went before, and this appears to be true in this passage here. I often have reason to ask myself why it is that so many Christians, particularly in the Western world, appear to have problems maintaining their faith. I am convinced that too many have a faith which consists of snippets of the Gospel truth interacting in an almost random manner. God is a God of order not of chaos (Gen 1:1-3), and if we ensure that our faith starts with Jesus, and is built up using Scriptural models such as this which have a clear sequence which says 'make sure you are

confident with this first, and then that ... etc.', then we might see more Christian maturity in our midst. There are other good models of discipleship in the New Testament, and they all point us in the same direction; but this pattern in Colossians is a particularly useful tool for learning about discipleship, even though it comes from within a prayer!

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- Read this passage carefully, and make sure that you understand the discipleship that it represents. There are clear guidelines to Christian discipleship that will bless us if we can identify them and apply them, but we will need to work at them first!
- Pray for those who find it hard to be blessed, because they do not feel themselves to be worthy of blessing.

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Which of the four aspects of discipleship mentioned in this prayer of Paul for the Colossians is something you feel is true of your life?
2. Which of the four aspects of discipleship is something you feel is not true of your life?
3. Discuss within your group what you think is meant by the last two verses of this prayer.

## **Final Prayer**

Bring us to that place of contentment, Lord God, where all that happens to us begins to make sense, and we can perceive Your hand at work within our lives. Even if we only catch a glimpse of all You are doing, may we rejoice to know You have included us in Your eternal plan. Thank You, Lord God: AMEN