

# God's Desire for His People

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*How Paul Prayed*

**Text: Colossians 1:9-12**

## **Paul's Intercessory Prayer Report**

“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that

you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

May you be (being) strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,

giving thanks to the Father,

who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,

in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (ESV)

## **Introduction:**

In the present passage Paul moves from giving thanks for the work that God is doing among the Colossians to telling them how he is praying for them. This is one of several intercessory prayer reports that we find in Paul's epistles. These are significant passages because they tell us how Paul prayed. It is obvious from the fact that he often emphasizes that he is continually praying for the churches to whom he is writing that prayer was central to his ministry on their behalf. He believed that through his prayers God's power and transforming grace were activated, that churches thrived and grew spiritually because he prayed. Thus prayer was central to all that he did.

It is also obvious in reading these intercessory prayers or prayer reports that Paul's prayers were significantly different from much of the prayer that we are accustomed to. He almost never prays for the alteration of circumstances, but as he does in this prayer, prays that God would empower us to endure our circumstances with patience and joy. He seems little

concerned with present material needs; food, shelter, health, but is focused on spiritual apprehension and growth. His great desire is that we might know and do the will of God so that when we are called to give an account to Christ we will not be embarrassed. Thus he prays not so much in light of the present day, but in light of the final day. Paul prays as he lives with an eternal perspective. His great desire for himself and for all believers is that we might fulfill our calling.

Finally it is worth noting that Paul's prayers are in line with God's desires. He never needs to preface them with: "if it be thy will". Paul knows what God wants and prays: "thy will be done". Therefore his prayers not only give us insight into how he prayed, but they also teach us what God desires for his people, his church. There is near perfect harmony between Paul's teaching and his praying. This is demonstrated in Ephesians 1:3-23. In verses 1-14 he tells us about all the riches and blessings that we have received in Christ, then in verses 15 -23 he prays that God would grant unto us a "spirit of wisdom and revelation", that "the eyes of our heart might be enlightened ", so that we might come to understand and appropriated all of the hope and riches and power that we have received in Christ.

It is from this perspective that I want us to look at these verses, not so much asking the question: "how did Paul pray?" hence "how should we pray?" But rather we will ask this question of the text: "What is God's desire for his people?" What does God want for us to become? Can we extract from this prayer a portrait of what we should look like as God's people, as the church of Jesus Christ? If we come away from the study of this text with a clear image of what God wants us to be then we will be able, ourselves, to pray and to work toward that end.

All of us have most likely experienced the frustration of having worked in vain, because we misunderstood what was expected of us. None of us, I am sure, want to be embarrassed at the judgment seat of Christ because we labored in vain. Now Paul assures us that "Our labor, in the Lord is not in vain" (I Corinthians 15:58), but we must be sure that our labor is indeed, "in the Lord", that is the labor to which he has called us, and not a labor of our own hands that in the end will not be accepted.

## **Preliminary Observation**

Before taking up the question of the day: "What does God want us to be?", I would like to make one general observation about this text which is true of many New Testament texts. This text is primarily addressed to a church as a church, and not to Christians as individuals. As contemporary American Christians we have a tendency to read it as addressed to us personally.

Now, of course it does have implications for each one of us personally, and each of us must act individually upon what it says, but Paul is speaking to the church, or more precisely a church as a group. It is the church, as the church, that is his concern. We tend to miss this point for two reasons, the first is grammatical, and the second is sociological.

Since modern English makes no distinction between the second person singular and plural, that is “you” as a single individual, and “you” as a group of individuals, people often read biblical texts that are clearly addressed to “you” as a group as addressed to “you” as an individual. This is one advantage of the older translations which date from a time when that distinction was still made. “Thee”, “Thou”, “Thy”, and “Thine”, are not just quaint and archaic English words, but rather, they are what was the second person singular. They have now completely dropped out of English usage except for prayer, and the majority of English speaking people are not even aware that there ever was a difference between the English second person singular and plural. Simply put, this means that if you are reading the King James Version of the Bible and it says “you”, it always means you plural, you as a group, and never you as an individual. If it is you as an individual, then the text will use the old second personal singular as when Nathan says to David: “Thou art the man”, or when Paul says to Timothy: “I charge thee before God”.

The sociological reason is that we, as a people, emphasize the individual much more than the people of the first century to whom Paul was writing. This is a difficult concept for us to grasp, because, culturally, it is so much a part of who we are. We tend to perceive ourselves as individuals, rather than as members of a unit. This is even true within a unit as basic as the family. This would have not been the case in the first century, as it is not the case in many contemporary cultures where individuals see themselves primarily as members of the units to which they belong and only secondarily as individuals.

The reason I am emphasizing this is because God’s way of achieving his work in our lives, and in the world, is primarily through the church. In other words, you cannot become what God intends for you to become outside of the body of Christ, the church. Therefore, when Paul prays, he prays for the church. It is together as a group that we progress. We need one another. This is God’s way. Let me illustrate the point I am making by contrasting the words of two songs. Many people see their lives, even their lives as Christians reflected in the words:

“You’ve got to walk that lonesome valley,

You’ve got to walk it by yourself,

Nobody else can walk it for you,

You’ve got to walk it by yourself.”

Now, that song is not in our hymnbooks, and rightly so, because it does not reflect the reality of the Christian life. Here is a hymn that is in our hymn books, and that does reflect the point I am trying to make:

“Come we that love the Lord, and let our joys be known.

Join in a song with sweet accord, join in a song with sweet accord,

And thus surround the throne, and thus surround the throne.

We’re marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion

We’re marching upward to Zion, that beautiful city of God.”

In the opening chapter of *The Four Loves*, called, “Likings and Loves for the Subhuman”, C. S. Lewis makes the point that nature does not teach. Contrary to what some think, he says, while there may be some benefits to be derived from being alone with nature, it will not bring us into conformity with the will of God. It will not sanctify us. Towards the end of his argument he makes the following statement:

“. . . Nature cannot satisfy the desires she arouses nor answer theological questions nor sanctify us. Our real journey to God involves constantly turning our backs on her; passing from the dawn-lit fields into some poky little church, or (it might be) going to work in an East End parish. But the love of her has been an invaluable, for some people, and indispensable initiation.” (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, p. 39)

It is about ourselves as a “poky little church” that I want us to think. For it is, remember, through “poky little churches” that God is doing his work in the world. The reason for this is obvious when we remember one basic fact. God’s work in us, his work of sanctification, is primarily about love. What God wants to do in us and among us is to perfect his love in us. Now love always has to have an object. Therefore we are called to “love one another” as Christ has loved us. Jesus said that is his new commandment, his great commandment. It is, of course impossible to “love one another” if there is no other. But a church is God’s family, where we are bound together in a covenantal relationship with a commitment to love one another, to allow God’s love to be perfected in us. When that happens, then the world sees our love for one another, and it knows that it is a divine gift and they are convinced that our message is true and they are won over by the Gospel. It is the church that preaches the gospel, and the great apologetic for the gospel is the love that is demonstrated in the church.

So let us now return to our question: “What does God desire for us?” For us as his church, his people existing in this place at this time seeking to bear witness to the revelation that he has given in Jesus Christ.

Now we could spend a lot of time dissecting this text. It is, as is often the case with Paul, somewhat difficult grammatically. When we have done all of the necessary analysis we can say that what Paul prays for and what God desires is:

- That we might be able to discern God's will
- That we might have the power to perform it

These are the two major requests of the prayer. Let us consider them in order.

## Discerning God's Will

Paul prays that "we might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding." Remember our key verse: "In whom (i.e. Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). Remember that the Colossians were being enticed to seek wisdom and knowledge elsewhere other than in Christ, they were being told that "full" knowledge was only to be had through things to which they had not yet been initiated. Remember that Paul is writing to tell them that they had received all of God's "fullness", that is the full measure of all that God had for them, in Jesus Christ, and that it would be foolish for them to look elsewhere, other than in Christ.

So Paul prays and God desires that we might be filled with the knowledge of his will. We should observe that if it is God's desire that we know his will, then, he has not hidden it from us as some imagine. Stated otherwise, the will of God is not difficult to know. It is God desire that we know it. As Moses says in Deuteronomy 30:11-14

"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. "

God has given us the Scriptures, He has given us a revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, and he has given us to Holy Spirit to teach us and to guide us into truth. He has not hidden his will on the other side of the ocean, nor kept it concealed in heaven. Jesus tells us to "seek and we will find, knock and it will be opened, ask and it will be given to us." "We have not because we ask not, and we ask and do not receive", says James because "we ask for the wrong reasons, to satisfy our own desires" (James 4:3). The great hindrance to knowing and

doing the will of God is self-will. The great aids to knowing and doing God's will are trusting faith and willing obedience.

"If we walk with the Lord in the light of his will, what a glory he sheds on our way,  
While we do his good will, he abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey."

## Empowered to do God's Will

The second great thing for which Paul prays, and which God desires for us, his Church, is that we might have the power to do his will. We must never make the mistake of thinking that we are capable of doing God's will in our own strength. God not only must show us what he wants, he must enable us to do it. So Paul prays that we might be "strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness" (Colossians 1:11).

The source of that strength is God's grace. Thus Paul exhorts Timothy: "Be empowered by the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (II Timothy 2:1). God's way is always "by grace through faith". We cannot justify ourselves, it is God who justifies. When we discern his will, by faith we do what he commands, all the while acknowledging that "except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain which build it" (Psalm 127:1). We trust God to by his grace to empower our faithful obedience so that we might be truly "fruitful in every good work."

This is what God wants us, his church, to be; a people that seeks his will and does it; that seeks his power and experiences it; a people through whom he may communicate his grace. We may see ourselves as a "poky little church", but God sees us as "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a people of his own; that we should show forth the praises of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9). When we remember this high calling and seek God and his will as we should, we transcend ourselves and become a people through whom God accomplishes his work in the world, but when we forget our high calling we quickly revert to normal human banality and become a hollow caricature of what God intended for us to be.

