

Paul's Prayers: Understanding God's Will

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[0 : 00] Well, I want to welcome you, echo Aaron's welcome to you today. It's great to have you gathered here as we are listening in on what Paul is praying for, for the church.

And we're in a series of three prayers, three sermons, three Sundays, where we're hearing about really what God's priorities are for the church.

What does God want for the church? Because Paul's prayers are echoing what God's working is in the lives of the gatherings of God's people like ours.

And this letter to the Colossians is a wonderful book. We're sort of just jumping in and jumping out of it because next week we're into Philippians. But it's a letter that's written to a church that is really growing.

It's growing in a lot of different ways and especially in their knowledge of God and in their love for each other as well. And when I read this passage and reading through Colossians, I thought a bit about a striking feature of Vancouver.

[1 : 09] And you're probably well aware of a number of surveys that have been done about people in Vancouver and what our life is like here. And in one survey by the Vancouver Foundation, the community leaders and different charity groups really came to a conclusion that the number one issue in Vancouver wasn't poverty or homelessness.

It was isolation and disconnection. And this is not unusual in cities right now and in rural areas.

There's a professor at the University of Chicago, Professor Cassioppo.

And he said that one of the things that we've seen is a movement away in our culture from concern for others. And he said that economics basically says that you should be more concerned with your own short-term interests.

And he believes that there's more division in society and more segmentation. And he's somebody who is a leading expert on the health effects of loneliness.

He talks about the physical and the mental effects that loneliness has in our society. And in our Bible reading, Paul writes that the very opposite of isolation and disconnection is happening in the church plants around the city of Colossae.

[2 : 36] He is deeply thankful because they are deeply connected to God and they are finding that they are deeply connected to one another. He talks about this love for the saints that they are actually known for.

There's a movement there towards concern for one another. They're sacrificially loving each other because they're gripped by this good news of Jesus that they've heard.

And so Paul puts it this way when he starts talking about what his prayers are like. He says in verse 3, We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.

Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. That sounds a bit familiar.

This is what Paul was praying about last week as well in the letter to Ephesus. He is grateful because there is this certainty in the lives of the Colossian people that because of Jesus' sacrifice, they will one day live with God, our heavenly Father, in this immense gathering of others who know him and love him.

[3 : 52] They know, this is the hope of heaven, that they will enjoy him forever in the new heaven and the new earth where creation and in fact all relationships will be restored.

Where sin is forgiven. Where there is nothing hurtful. Even death has been banished. It is a place of the healing of all that is wrong in our world and in our lives.

And Paul says at the end of verse 5 that of this hope, this hope of heaven, you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel. And so you see, the gospel of Jesus is about hope.

The gospel is Jesus Christ and he brings hope, this powerful hope into people's lives. A hope that actually changes really radically the way people think and what they do.

And that's because the gospel, and I think this is a good definition of what the gospel does. The gospel is this message of promises from God. And it's offered to people who will stop hoping in the promises of the world and begin hoping in the promises of God.

[5 : 10] This is what happens with the work of the gospel. There's a transfer of where our hopes are placed in. And that makes a big change.

The world in Colossae and in Hierapolis and Laodicea in this area offered a great deal of hope, of its own hope.

It was a fertile area on a major trade route. It was secure. It was a wealthy area. People were sexually free. There was a real sense of well-being there.

And that was their hope. But when Epaphras came and spoke of Jesus, there was this change. They transferred their hope to the promise of God from those promises that the world was offering. And the result was real growth, a real change in their lives. They loved differently in real practical ways. They wanted what God wanted. They loved what God loves.

[6 : 14] And the interesting thing historically, we hear from Roman historians that in the 60s, shortly after Paul was writing this letter, just a few years after, there was a series of severe earthquakes in the Lycus Valley in that area.

And all of those towns were damaged severely sometimes. And you have to wonder if many people's livelihoods, the things that they placed their hope in, the wealth, the relationships, were literally shaken completely.

And we know now that those towns do not exist because of those earthquakes. But the very nature of the gospel is to bring eternal, solid, lasting change through this real and certain hope to everyone who embraces it, who understands it.

The way Paul says it in verse 6, he says, Indeed, the whole world, in the whole world, it, this gospel, is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

You see what he's saying here is that that gospel brings change so that there's fruit in people's lives. There's growth in their lives as well.

[7 : 33] And the most prominent fruit we see in this church, in this letter, is love. It is a Christ-shaped love that actually characterizes that church.

It's seen in the fruits of people's lives in that church. I think that one of the strengths of St. John's, and we've talked about this a lot in our vision process, is that we really teach and we study the grace of God in truth.

We do it faithfully. We try to do it clearly. And this is something that we are probably known for at St. John's. But we must know also that our hearing and our studying that gospel must never be simply an intellectually satisfying exercise, you know, something that is an academic work.

The nature of the gospel is that when we know and understand it, we will bear fruit. And that the most conspicuous fruit will be this love that we're hearing about from Paul.

We will care for each other in costly ways. It's the most obvious sign that we have transferred our hope from the promises of the world to the promises of God.

[8 : 53] And so I think that for us this morning, if we are to bear fruit, there is a call for each of us to direct our attention of our mind every day to the promises of God.

In all humility, we're called as we listen to sermons, as we read the Bible, to ask the Holy Spirit to help you to see the wonder of what those promises are.

And as Peter says in his letter, 1 Peter, we're called to set our hope on the grace that is coming to you in the revelation of Jesus Christ, in the promises of God.

Set your mind on those things. Because by the grace of God, this will result in the visible fruit of love, according to what Paul is saying here. And here's what it looks like in the Bible.

You know, if you want to sort of flesh out what does love look like. It means that we will be more patient and more kind as we set our hope on those promises.

[9 : 55] As we will be less jealous, less boastful, less arrogant, less rude. We will not seek our own advancement, but we'll strive to do to others what we would have them do to us.

We will not be so irritable. Paul mentions that in 1 Corinthians 13. We won't be so prone to keep an account of wrongs and to return evil for evil. We'll be inclined to bear all things and endure all things

for the sake of our neighbors.

We'll not speak about our neighbors' faults without first going to our neighbor about them, Jesus tells us. We will return good for evil and use our free time not to sort of maximize these fleeting comforts that we can place our hope in, but instead seek ways to be a blessing to the lost and to the suffering.

Love means that we will more and more, our whole lives will take on an overflowing and other-directed spirit. This love that's described in the Bible will transform your family.

It transforms churches. And as Jesus says, the world will see your good deeds, and he will give glory to your Father who is in heaven. And so really, there is no better evangelism we see in the Bible in all the world than a church that has a hope in God that is so strong that they gladly deny themselves in order to meet the needs of others.

[11 : 27] This is a gift to the world. And when I think of the gospel love, when I think of this kind of description of how love is defined in the Bible, I feel very inadequate with much room to grow.

I think the fruit in my life is not what it should be. It can grow. And I think we all feel that way, at least from time to time. The Colossians also had a lot of growing to do, even though they were known for that love.

This letter is about prayer for growth, that every Christian needs to grow in their following after Jesus. Paul knows this.

He knows that sin is still at work in us. And that's why the second part of our reading turns to praying for our needs, our deep needs in our heart.

He asked God to work in specific ways. Look at verse 9. Paul says, I think that's an incredible prayer.

[12 : 49] And it's a prayer to pray for one another. It's a prayer that God is working out in our lives. Paul continually prays for these people he's never met because he knows they need God's grace to keep walking in this way.

We all do. He knows God alone can fill them with this knowledge of God's will. Paul wants all of God's truth to so fill their hearts that they will walk in Jesus, that their lives will be cross-shaped because of this hope that's in them and that the world will see it.

One of the things that's an interesting facet of ministry is that, at St. John's anyway, you do a number of interviews. And so I've interviewed numerous people from the front, but I often, in fact, I hardly ever get interviewed myself.

Now, I, the first Sunday that I was here many years ago, when I started my job at St. John's, I was interviewed by David Short. And he asked me lots of questions about my ministry and my past, what my hopes were, what direction I was going to take.

And you know how David interviews is that there's always a curveball thrown in there from time to time. And I was waiting for it because somebody said it would happen. Well, it didn't until the last question.

[14 : 17] And Dave asked me, what do you want written on your tombstone? That's a good question. I don't know if you think about that very much. Aaron, do you know what you want on your tombstone?

Let me out. Let me out. That would be good. I should have thought of that one.

But I think there's a very useful one here, a very helpful one. This verse might be the one. It's a life verse. To say that she or he walked in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.

That's a verse to actually define your life. Because that's the full and joy-filled life that blesses the world. To walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.

And it's what the whole letter to Colossae, and in fact, all of his letters come down to. He's always calling them to walk the talk. And the talk is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[15 : 30] It is the good news. He himself is the talk that we are walking. And so what does it look like to walk that pleasing life? Well, Paul finishes that prayer by telling us.

There are four aspects to it. Look at verse 10. And they happen very briefly here. But they're very, very important. Look at verse 10. It says there, So as to walk in a manner worthy, fully pleasing to him, and then defining it.

First of all, bearing fruit in every good work. Well, we know through that prayer that God wants evidence of his hope in you.

He wants evidence of the grace that he has poured out on you. And that's what fruit is. It is evidence of what you are.

A sinner saved by grace. Our neighbors to the left of us have a tree. And that tree has grown in the last six years since we've been in this house.

[16:34] And now it hangs over our yard. And we never knew what kind of tree it was. It was beautiful in the spring. Lots of blossoms and things on it. But we always sort of wondered what kind of fruit tree is it.

You know, is it an apple? Is it a peach? Is it a cherry? You know, what is it? Well, finally this past year, and it must have been a good year for fruit, I was walking in the late summer at that corner of the yard, and there's this big purple plum.

And I thought, well, who brought this here? It was one of the boys eating a plum or something. And then realized that that came from that tree. And of course, finally we knew it was a plum tree.

Now this is true of our own lives as well, that our good works identify who we are. They are the fruit that identify who we are.

That we have had grace poured out on us in Jesus Christ, that our hope is placed in Him. And so when you love because you were loved first, you serve because Christ served you and gave His life as a ransom for you.

[17:41] You forgive in love because you have been forgiven by Jesus' loving work on the cross. You speak of what you know of Jesus because He has spoken to your heart.

He has called you by name with words, and He has revealed Himself to you. So you see, the normal way that God's amazing grace, that we'll be singing about shortly, the way that that grace works in our life is by good works.

It is by this fruit that we see of the gospel. Now there's many things we could say about good works, but I think it's very important to know that they advance the cause of Christ.

And they actually destroy the works of Satan. I don't know if you ever thought about good works that way. They build up what Satan would tear down. They bring healing to those things that would cause pain and distress.

It comes against the works of darkness very, very powerfully are good works. And not only that, but they are the means of God's grace breaking into the world. Now I don't know if you thought about this, but good works also affect you in a blessed way.

[18:54] Because when you bear fruit in good works, the second thing that Paul prays for happens. We know God better. Look at the second aspect there right away at verse 10 again.

Not only bearing fruit, but increasing in the knowledge of God. You see, good works and the knowledge of God are very closely related here. It's always true that when you obey God, you actually know Him better.

You are brought close to God's heart when you do His will, because you are loving what He loves. You are doing what He wills. And you are living in the way He created for you.

You know, there's that marvelous verse in Ephesians that says that we are God's workmanship, His masterpiece, something that He is forming. Created for, beforehand, that we should walk in good works.

We are created in Christ Jesus for good works. You see, He's saying that His hands are forming you as you obey Him. We know Him in clear ways and deep ways as we walk in His ways, as we do these good works we're called to.

[20:05] We were created in Christ Jesus for that. And then thirdly, God knows that we can't possibly live in this way, with this good fruit in our life, knowing Him, increasing our knowledge of God, without the power of the Holy Spirit.

So look at verse 11. Paul prays that the Colossian church and you will be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.

This is quite a prayer. Paul is praying that God will pour His glorious power, His might, on you and me individually and on this church. So often we think, we actually ignore the power of God.

We want to live as though it does not exist, and that our power is all that is important. I think it was a good question put by the trustee that you had mentioned last week, after God had provided for us, through the generosity of His people, for the finances of ministry.

You know, the question was, what do we pray for next? What do we pray for next? It's a really good question, because this is what God is wanting for us.

[21 : 22] This is what Paul prays for us, that God's power will be poured out on us. And notice that the Colossians, for the Colossians, Paul prays especially that God's power will enable them to endure and to be patient.

And that, and what this means clearly, is that there were tough trials. There was oppositions to walking in a manner worthy of the Lord. And it didn't come just through the world, although that was there in their culture.

It came through false teachers within that church who had come in. So it was a bit like swimming upstream, going against the current of the thinking of the world.

And I have this picture, as I think of them and us, of a salmon going up to spawning grounds against a rushing river.

Of course, we have lots of that in B.C. It takes tremendous strength and stamina to make it to these spawning grounds. And of course, they die in the end. They are completely spent in getting there.

[22 : 24] But Paul says that you will know the glorious power of God, His energy working in you, as you walk against the current, as you hold out against evil, which is what endurance is, and as you press forward with the hope He has given you, which is what patience is.

So instead of death that the salmon face, He has real life ahead for us. And we experience God and His mighty working in our lives.

And Paul says we know joy in that power, in that endurance and patience. We know His joy because we experience the Holy Spirit and His gifts for Him as we endure and as we patiently serve Him.

It made a huge impression on me when I was at that conference in Nairobi to see the joy in the lives of Anglicans there from different parts of the world who were suffering real hardship.

They were knowing God and His mighty power in desperate human weakness and vulnerability.

There was a joy in experiencing that power in hardship.

[23 : 35] And finally, Paul prays that they would not only have a pleasing, they would have a pleasing life not only through a life of bearing fruit and growing and knowing God, being strengthened by His power, but also that they would walk this walk with gratitude.

That is the nature of walking a life that is worthy of God. It is to have a life of thanksgiving. And so he says, if you look at verse 12, and we close with it, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in life.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness. He's transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son in whom we have redemption to forgiveness of sins. Well, there is ground for continuing thanksgiving and praise every day.

This wonderful gift, this foundational thing of our relationship with God and each other restored. It is, there is this constant reality of the forgiveness of sins.

And Paul reminds us, it doesn't just mean that our sins have been canceled, that we are forgiven. It also means He transfers us into His kingdom. We are freed into a completely new life.

[24 : 55] We're qualified to live with Him and He with us forever. What an amazing gift this is. We can never take it for granted. It is the reason, it is the reason for us to be continually thankful.

when I was at my first church on the Sunshine Coast, I was there for eight years. And I did lots of driving along the Sunshine Coast and I'm kayaking and saw it every day.

And every day, I was just amazed, almost shocked at the beauty of the scenery all along that coast. And during my eight years, I was as amazed by that scenery the first day as I was the last day that I was there.

And it's because there was always new aspects. There was always, there was different lighting of the same spectacular views. And it was amazing to see it. And I think the forgiveness of sins is the same for us.

There are so many beautiful aspects of this glorious gift of grace. So much to wonder at about being transferred from darkness to light. From the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of the power and the love of Christ.

[26 : 09] To the light of Jesus Christ. So as we close this sermon, as we walk away from Paul's prayers and take them on ourselves, may we always give thanks for that gift.

Because it strengthens our life together. It strengthens our ability to bless the world around us if we are a thankful congregation. That's what Paul's praying for here. And I think that our gratitude is a real barometer as to how our maturity is in Christ.

It's a barometer about how much we are growing in Him. In Jesus, God has brought to us the deepest connection we can imagine. Our new life with Him and with one another. There's an internal belonging to Him and to His people. It's a gift to a world that is isolated and disconnected from God. And a world that often experiences real loneliness. Something that we've experienced from time to time as well. And so may we bless and love the world and one another as we walk in a manner that is pleasing to God.

[27 : 14] Bearing fruit. Knowing God better and better. Really knowing the strength of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. giving thanks at all times because of the gift of being brought into the very kingdom of Jesus Christ.

To Him we give glory and praise forever and ever. Amen.