

# Asking God for Gospel Growth

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Date: 16 September 2018

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Turn with me in your Bible to Colossians chapter 1. If you're looking in one of the few Bibles, it's page 983. Why don't we stand this morning as we read the Scripture?

This morning we're looking at Paul's prayer for the Colossians, and which also expresses God's desire for us as a body of believers. Colossians 1, starting at verse 9, let's read together. 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 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. Amen. You may be seated.

Amen. So, we're looking at Paul's prayer for the Colossians. Now, as we've said, the church in Colossae was a group of people that Paul had never met, but he knew about them because one of his co-workers, Epaphras, had brought the gospel to them. Most likely, Epaphras himself had come to faith when Paul was ministering for two years in Ephesus. Ephesus was about a hundred miles away, but it was a central city in that region. Epaphras then most likely went back to Colossae, where he was from, went to two other cities in that same valley, preached about Jesus, helped with the beginnings of the churches there.

But when Paul wrote this letter, the church in Colossae had only existed for at most five or so years. There are sort of two main theories of when Paul might have written Colossians. Some people think Colossians was written while Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus around 57 AD. That would have been only a year or two at most after the church began. Other people think that Colossians was written when Paul was under house arrest in Rome around 61-62 AD. But that is the latest that Paul could have written this letter because right around that time, in the early 60s AD, we can't be sure of the exact date, the city of Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake. So, regardless of exactly how the time works out, Paul was writing this letter to a group of new Christian believers. They had been following Jesus for a few years at most. And so, Paul's prayer this morning is his prayer for a group of people who are just starting out on the journey of following Jesus. Now, in Paul's time, it was customary to begin a letter like this with a brief prayer or wish for the recipient's good health. But Paul's prayer is not just a polite custom or a routine gesture. Verse 9 begins, he says, from the day we heard, that is from the day we heard about you, from the day that we heard that you had received the gospel and turned to Jesus in faith and have hope and love through Him, we have not stopped praying for you.

[ 3 : 34 ] Think of that. Paul, for several months or even a few years, Paul has been praying consistently for a group of Christians that he has never even met in person. And Paul's prayer here is a comprehensive and thoughtful and heartfelt plea for the spiritual growth and health of the church in Colossae. Before he instructs them, before he exhorts them, he prays for them. And I think Paul's prayer has something for each of us wherever we are along the journey of following Jesus. If you're a new believer, like the Christians in Colossae that Paul was praying for, this prayer lays out a vision for how you should be praying and striving to grow as a follower of Jesus. If you've been a believer for many years now, this prayer is a good diagnostic tool. In other words, as we walk through it, I want you to think about where you were five or ten years ago, spiritually speaking, in your relationship with God.

Compare yourself five or ten years ago to today and ask yourself, do I see any growth in the ways that Paul is talking about? You might be encouraged.

Sometimes we need to look back a few years to see some of the ways that God has been growing us. Or you might be challenged to address an area that you've neglected or even regressed in.

Or maybe you're a Christian leader like Paul. None of us are apostles, but if you're an elder, if you're a small group leader, if you're a parent raising children who profess faith in Jesus, or even if you don't have a formal church leadership role, but you're intentionally seeking to help other Christians grow in their faith, let Paul's prayer become your prayer for everyone who is under your spiritual care. You know, sometimes we don't quite know what to pray for each other. And this prayer gives us a good place to start. You can pray this for any other Christian. You can even pray this prayer for Christians that you've never even met but have only heard about far away. Or maybe you're not yet a Christian. Maybe you're just exploring Christianity. If that's you, this is a glimpse of the path that God desires for you should you become a follower of Jesus. Because becoming a Christian is not the end of a journey. It's the beginning of a lifelong walk with Jesus. So, there's something for every one of us wherever we are in this prayer.

Now, Paul's prayer for the Colossians and God's desire for us is that we grow in four ways. First, in verse 9, we'll see that God's desire is that we grow in fuller knowledge. Second, in verse 10, that we grow in a worthy walk. Third, in verse 11, that we grow in empowered endurance. And four, in verses 12 through 14, that we grow in joyful gratitude. So, we'll take each of those areas in turn as we go along. So, first, a fuller knowledge.

[ 6 : 33 ] Verse 9, Paul prays that they may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Now, before we delve into that, you might notice that Paul uses three words here that mean pretty much the same thing. Knowledge, wisdom, understanding. And if you look down at verse 11, he does the same thing with power, strengthened, power, might. Now, when Paul does this in Colossians, his purpose is not to emphasize the finer distinctions between these words. Rather, he's piling on synonyms as a way of driving his point home in an emotionally heightened way. Now, Paul does this a lot in Colossians and even more in Ephesians because this form of rhetoric resonated with people in that region called Asia Minor where Ephesus and Colossae were located.

People and speakers there liked colorful, evocative, even exaggerated language. And notice how often Paul uses the word all in just these few verses. In all spiritual wisdom and understanding, fully pleasing to Him, same word, in all pleasing to Him, in every or in all good work, with all power, for all endurance. Paul's painting a grand picture with bold strokes. But if you compare Paul's letters and also his speeches recorded in Acts, you might notice that Paul doesn't always use the same kind of rhetoric. He doesn't always speak or write in the exact same style. In Romans, for example, Paul sounds much more like a lawyer, standing in court, arguing his case, answering potential objections, and concluding with a verdict. Why? Because that's the style that communicated well in Rome.

Many Romans criticized the style that was popular in Asia Minor. They thought it was too emotional and too over the top. And the people in Asia Minor didn't really like the Roman lawyer speak. That didn't really move them. But Paul didn't take sides in these sort of partisan debates about style.

He, as a cross-cultural evangelist and teacher, was flexible. He recognized the values of different styles, and he varied his style in writing and speaking in order to communicate his message faithfully and effectively to different groups of hearers. But getting back to the text, Paul prayed that the Colossian Christians who had already come to know God through Christ would grow in the knowledge of God's will. And that's God's desire for all of us who know Christ as Savior and Lord, that we grow to a fuller knowledge of Him. Proverbs 2, verse 6 says, For the Lord gives wisdom, and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

The book of James says, If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God. So that's God's desire for us to grow in our knowledge. Now think about it, think about it this way. When a baby's born into a family, she is fully part of that family.

[ 9 : 40 ] Right? There is nothing else that a little baby has to do to prove herself or to achieve her status or to earn her place in that family. And in the same way, the Bible says that when we're born again, when we come to believe in Jesus and belong to God's family through Christ, we belong to God fully and completely. God is now our Heavenly Father. Jesus Christ is our brother. We're new creations born of His Spirit. There's nothing more that we have to do to prove ourselves or establish ourselves in God's family. But then let's take this analogy one step further. A newborn baby has a very limited understanding of her parents and their purposes. Right? You change the baby's diaper and the baby starts crying. Why are you wiping me with this cold cloth? Right? You try to put the baby down to sleep and sometimes she kicks and screams and protests, sometimes even for no apparent reason. Why?

Because the baby cannot fathom what her parents are up to. Much of raising children involves setting patterns and habits that children don't yet understand or fully appreciate. And over time, explaining why those habits and patterns make sense in the world that God has made. So that one day they can grow up and say, ah, now I understand what you were doing all along. And you see, that's God's purpose for us as His children. That we grow into a fuller knowledge of Him. You see, God doesn't want us as His children to live in ignorance and folly and confusion, sort of perpetually kicking and screaming in response to God's fatherly initiatives. God wants us to be filled with the knowledge of His will.

Now, when Paul talks about God's will here, Paul's not talking about our imperfect intuitions as to what God might be doing through the nitty-gritty, sometimes messy circumstances of our lives.

There's a place for that. But I think Paul wants us to see something far more glorious. Paul wants us to gaze at God's eternal purpose, to reconcile sinners to Himself by His grace, and to renew the whole creation for His glory. That's God's will writ large.

Paul wants us to grasp God's great plan of salvation that He promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the person of His Son, Jesus, and is carrying out in the world through the work of His Spirit. And He wants us to participate in that plan as His sons and daughters, as His co-laborers, as co-heirs with Christ, because we see the goodness and rightness and steadfastness of God's purposes.

[ 12 : 23 ] In other words, God wants us to see what kind of people He's made us to be all along, to bear His image, and to bear witness to His Son. You see, God wants us to grow up into a fuller knowledge of Him and of His will.

So, let me ask you this. If you're a new believer, if you've just begun following Jesus, are you seeking to grow in your knowledge of God's will? Or very practically, let me ask, what are you doing to get to know the Bible better?

You know, some Christians never read the Bible. And for the most part, Christians who never read the Bible grow very slowly, if at all, in their knowledge of God and His purposes.

Now, some of you may say, well, wait a minute, that's not fair. Most people, most Christians throughout history were illiterate and didn't own copies of the Bible before the printing press. Well, you know what? That's why the early church met every day to listen to the apostles' teaching and pray. If they couldn't read the Word, they would come and listen to it.

So, join a small group. And many of those illiterate Christians throughout history would repeat and memorize whole chapters of the Bible and learn them by heart. They would know the Psalms.

[ 13 : 44 ] They would learn the stories. They would repeat them to one another. Today, you can even listen to the Bible online for free if you have trouble reading or if you're having trouble with your vision. Go to Bible Gateway. You can get it right there.

When my dad was growing up in rural Maine, there was a man in his church who was mentally handicapped. But God enabled this man to read the Scriptures and to spiritually profit from them, even though he never read another book in his adult life. If you want a fuller knowledge of God's will, God will make a way for you to get it one way or another. So, let's pray and strive to be filled with the knowledge of God and of His purposes. That's the first thing Paul tells us to pray for.

But the second thing we see is in verse 10 that we should pray not just for a fuller knowledge, but also for a worthy walk, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

Paul's prayer is not that we increase in knowledge for knowledge's sake, or so that we can be puffed up with pride and a critical spirit and look down on others. No, Paul wants us to grow in knowledge for the purpose of godliness, so that we walk worthy of the Lord in all things seeking to please Him. Now, that phrase, walk worthy, it doesn't mean that we're constantly trying to prove ourselves worthy of God. That would be a futile endeavor. We could never do that. No, it doesn't say prove yourself worthy of God. It says walk in a way that's worthy of God.

In other words, walk in a way that reflects and displays how worthy God is. It's not about how worthy we are. It's about showing people how worthy God is. So that people would look at us and say, what an amazing God you believe in. I can see that God is making a difference in your life. And you know, when God sees us learning to walk in a way that reflects His worthiness, it gives Him great pleasure. It is fully pleasing to Him.

[ 15 : 57 ] You know, there's an amazing amount of pride and joy that parents take in seeing their child learn to scoot around the floor, and then to crawl, and then to pull themselves up, and then to walk around the coffee table, and then to step out and walk without holding on to anything.

And that's only a small picture of the delight God has in seeing the spiritual growth of us, His children. Brothers and sisters in Christ, you realize that God is pleased with even your spiritual baby steps. When you begin to walk by faith and trust that God is by your side instead of just cringing in fear. Or when you begin to forbear and forgive as God has forgiven you instead of holding on to bitterness and lashing out in anger. Or when you try to pray, even though the words don't seem to come naturally, even when you fall down and call out to Jesus for mercy, and by His grace, you get back up again and keep going. God is pleased as we learn to walk in a way that reflects His worthiness.

Now, the converse is also true. Imagine you're a parent, and your child is getting older and older. They're, say, two years old now, and they show no interest in learning to walk. They just lie on the floor all day and occasionally scoot around a bit, and if that's the case, you would be very concerned.

You'd say, something's wrong here. This child isn't growing in the way they're meant to. God's desire in Paul's prayer is that we grow, that we not be complacent or apathetic or stagnant.

Notice all the emphasis in this verse, verse 10, on movement, walking, bearing fruit in every good work. That's the outward dimension. Increasing in the knowledge of God, that's the inward dimension.

[ 17 : 56 ] There's sort of this virtuous spiral. A fuller knowledge of God leads to growth in godliness, which in turn leads to increasing knowledge of God. That's the kind of movement God desires for us.

We saw it last week in verse 6, where it says, the gospel of Jesus is bearing fruit and increasing, and in verse 10, those same verbs are used of us. Paul prays that we would become like the gospel itself bearing fruit and increasing. Now, let's consider this. For those of us who have been Christians for many years, let me ask this question. Are you still spiritually active and moving and growing? Is your life in Christ characterized by walking, stretching, exercising, bearing fruit, increasing? Are you actively seeking to grow in godliness? Are you actively attacking sin in your life? Are you actively sharing your faith with others? Those things don't just happen automatically, normally, apart from our participation.

There is no such thing as the spiritual equivalent of a Tesla, where you sit back and put it on autopilot, and you can lay back and fall asleep if you want and arrive safely at your destination.

That's just not how spiritual growth works. There's nowhere in the Bible where we see people drifting aimlessly and unintentionally into godliness. Now, sometimes as we grow older in Christ, it's more of a challenge to stay spiritually active, just as sometimes as we're our bodies age, it's more of a challenge to stay physically active, right? May not always feel the same vigor that you felt as a new believer. We may have sustained some bumps and bruises along the way, some injuries that we're still limping and recovering from. We feel the gravitational pull of this fallen world toward inertia, or what we might call sloth. But Paul urges us to keep on walking, to keep on pursuing godliness, to keep on being active in our faith and seeking to grow in our walk.

But that leads us on to Paul's third topic of prayer in verse 11, because in verse 11, Paul prays for persevering power. Sometimes when we think about growing in a fuller knowledge and growing into a walk that's worthy of the Lord, it feels intimidating. And so, the next part of the prayer is very appropriate.

[ 20 : 55 ] In the ESV translation, verse 11 begins a new sentence, but in the Greek, this whole paragraph, verses 9 to 14, is one long sentence. In other words, it's all connected.

A fuller knowledge and a worthy walk can only be sustained by God's persevering power. May you be strengthened with all power according to His glorious might. Now, on the one hand, I think this can be a humbling prayer to pray because it expresses our dependence on God. And many of us, if we're honest, don't feel our absolute dependence on God moment by moment and day by day.

You know, we can take a lot of things for granted in America. Running water, electricity, climate control, supermarkets with food on the shelves, freedom from war, immunity from deadly plagues, Wi-Fi almost everywhere you go.

And if we're reasonably healthy and decently rested and clothed and fed and housed, and our minds are functioning well, we can think that we have quite a bit of power in ourselves. We can even start to give ourselves the credit for being well-adjusted and decent and reasonable people.

But in fact, nearly everything that sustains us, the sun, the rain, the air, our minds, our bodies, is not of our own making.

[ 22 : 31 ] Colossians says that underneath it all, it's only Christ who holds all things together. And it's...we depend on the power of God, even when we don't realize it.

And it's also only the power of Christ that sustains and grows God's church. Not our ingenuity, not our cleverness, not our natural resources, not our human initiatives.

We need to pray for divine empowerment. There's an old Anglican prayer that goes like this. Almighty God, who see us that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended against all adversities which may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul through Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's a good prayer. To humbly recognize our dependence on the power of God to sustain us in body and soul. So this can be a humbling prayer, but on the other hand, for all of us who do feel our creaturely weakness and our sinful tendencies and our inadequacies and vulnerabilities, verse 11 can be a very encouraging prayer.

If you're beset by addictions, if you're tormented by anxieties, if you're weakened by illness, if you're weighed down with grief, pray for divine empowerment.

[ 24 : 12 ] And know that, as Paul says in Ephesians, that the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is at work in us who believe.

Isn't that an amazing thing? Sam Storms wrote in his devotional on this verse, there is no addiction which God's power cannot break, no sin God's power cannot defeat, no task to which we are called that God's power cannot fulfill, no fruit we are called to bear that God's power cannot produce, no broken marriage God's power cannot reconcile, no physical disease God's power cannot heal.

Whatever God requires, He also provides. You know, Paul's particular emphasis in this verse is that God's power equips us to persevere.

For all endurance and patience. N.T. Wright said, endurance is what faith, hope, and love bring to an apparently impossible situation.

Patience is what they show to an apparently impossible person. Let me ask, are you walking alongside someone who's facing an apparently impossible situation?

[ 25 : 32 ] Pray, verse 11, for them. That they would be strengthened with all the power of God according to His glorious might for all endurance.

Pray that they would know the truth of Isaiah 40, which says, The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary.

His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might, he increases strength. Even youth shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted, but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.

They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. You know, there are some days where we soar with the eagles, and there are some days where we run the race with endurance, and there are other days when all you can do is put one foot in front of the other.

But every day we can pray. And every day God's power is available to sustain us and equip us for endurance in apparently impossible situations.

[ 26 : 50 ] And every day God's power is also sufficient to give us patience when we're dealing with apparently impossible people. If you feel like you're dealing with apparently impossible people, remember, God is dealing with them too.

In every case, they have tried his patience far more than they have tried yours. Sometimes we want to experience God's power, but we don't want God's patience.

Sometimes we pray for patience, and then we're unhappy with how God answers that prayer. But God says here that one of his purposes in strengthening us with his power is equipping us to be patient.

It's one of the fruits of the Spirit, after all. Long-suffering, being slow to anger, being patient as God is patient in working out his purposes in our lives.

So that's the third prayer for persevering power. But fourth and finally, Paul prays for joyful gratitude. With joy, giving thanks to the Father.

[ 28 : 03 ] Now the phrase with joy comes sort of in between verse 11 and 12. You could link it with what comes before, enduring joyfully, or with what comes after, giving thanks joyfully.

In Greek, there are no punctuations, so you can't... It's hard to say with one way or the other. It's more of a both and than an either or. But if you come back to the parent-child analogy, which I think runs through this... is underneath this passage, one of the most satisfying things that I experience as a father is when one of my children expresses sincere and joyful gratitude.

When they run up to me and give me a hug and say without any prompting, Daddy, I love you so much. You're the best daddy in the whole wide world. Now one day they may grow up and see more of the world and revise their comparison estimate.

Even today, the assessments vary widely from one day to another. Could be the best parent in the world one day and the strictest parent in the world the next.

But comparisons aside, when my children express sincere and joyful gratitude, I think it's a wonderful gift to be your dad. And I think they see that the time my wife and I spend with them and the instruction and correction that we give them and the things we buy for them and the many things they want us to buy that we refuse to for their own good and the food we cook for them and the prayers we pray for them, it all comes from our deep love and commitment to them.

[ 29 : 36 ] And of course, children don't recognize half of what their parents do for them. And none of us remembers what all of our parents did for us before we were about four. But still, as a parent, it's deeply satisfying when your child can see and receive and rest in your love for them.

And it can be deeply wounding when they don't. But here's the point. The work that God the Father has done for us far surpasses the work of any human father or mother.

And that's what Paul points us to in verses 12 to 14. The great saving work of God on our behalf that all comes from the Father's deep love for us. Paul wants us to look up at God the Father with joyful gratitude as we recognize the greatness of what He's done for us and the love from which that springs.

He has qualified us, verse 12, to share in the inheritance of God's holy people in the kingdom of light. We have an eternal inheritance in heaven that far surpasses the most generous earthly inheritance, the most generous provision that any earthly parent can make for their children.

And God has qualified us for it, so no one can disqualify us. No one else can take away what God in His grace has granted to all who trust in Jesus, His Son.

[ 30 : 58 ] Verse 13 says, He has delivered us from the domain of darkness, from the world, the flesh, and the devil, from sin and death and the grave, from fear and shame and hiding, from lies and deception and accusation.

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life. We are no longer in bondage to the powers of darkness because God has delivered us.

He has qualified us. He has delivered us and He has transferred us. He has brought us in to the kingdom of His Son. We now have a place to belong, a family to be part of together, a kingdom in which we are citizens.

We're redeemed. We've been bought with the price of the blood of His Son. We've been forgiven of our sins, set free from our guilt. You see, God, the Father, wants us, His children, to grow up and recognize the amazing and unending blessings that He's poured out freely and lavishly upon us and turn toward Him and run into His arms and say, Thank you, Father.

Lord, I love you so much. You're such a wonderful God. There's no one else better than you. Joyful gratitude. You know, if you're not a Christian, this is what Christianity is all about, the rescuing grace of God in Jesus Christ, God doing for us what we could never do for ourselves.

[ 32 : 26 ] Will you simply receive Jesus and all that He's done for you? Admit that you need Him and take Him as your Savior and Lord. That's the beginning of a journey toward a fuller knowledge and a worthy walk and persevering power and always joyful gratitude.

Let's pray. Father, we thank You for this prayer that expresses Your desire for us. We thank You for how we can learn to pray with Paul for ourselves, for one another, for our church.

we pray that this would be true of us, that we would be a growing people in all of these ways, growing up into all that You have made us to be as Your children.

Thank You, Father. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.