

Colossians 1:9-14 (1984 NIV)

A Praying Church: Embracing Paul's Passionate Prayer

9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. 10 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. 13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Introduction

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who lived during World War II. She and her family were devout Christians who risked their lives to hide Jews from the Nazis. Her life story can be divided into four main seasons.

1. Season of Joy and Obedience: Before the war, Corrie's life was marked by joy and obedience to God. She and her sister Betsie would pray and seek God's guidance as they served in their local church.
2. Season of Suffering and Persecution: However, when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands, Corrie's life was turned upside down. She and her family were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Corrie and Betsie were eventually sent to Ravensbruck, a notorious camp in Germany. Despite the unimaginable hardships and suffering they endured, Corrie and Betsie continued to pray and trust in God. They would pray together, sharing what little hope and comfort they had.
3. Season of Grief and Loss: Tragically, Betsie died in the camp, leaving Corrie heartbroken and grief-stricken. Yet, even in the midst of her sorrow, Corrie continued to pray and trust in God's goodness.
4. Season of Forgiveness and Healing: After the war, Corrie returned to the Netherlands and began to share her story of faith and survival. She also established a rehabilitation centre for concentration camp survivors. One day, Corrie was speaking at a church in Munich when she saw one of the guards from Ravensbruck in the audience. She was taken aback, but as she looked into his eyes, she felt a surge of forgiveness and compassion. She prayed for him, asking God to forgive him and heal his heart.

Corrie's story is a powerful testament to the power of prayer in all seasons. Whether in times of joy, suffering, grief, or forgiveness, Corrie's faith and prayer sustained her, giving her hope, comfort, and strength.

Indeed, there is no prayer request so big that God cannot answer, and no prayer request so small that God will ignore. We are called to come to Him with prayers in all sizes and in all seasons.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corrie_ten_Boom)

In our text today, Paul speaks of how he has prayed for the believers in Colossae. And as Paul keeps praying for this church, we see that he prays for the church not just on special occasions, but also in all seasons.

As we examine Paul's prayer here further, we discover what he desires this church to be and to do. And I believe how and what Paul prays for this church in Colossae is also to be the manner in which the church today should pray as the Body of Christ.

From this Pauline pattern of praying in Col. 1:9-14, we can learn how and what to pray as a church today. Let's first look at the setting of the prayer in our text today.

I. Setting of the Prayer

From the setting of the prayer, we learn that Paul prays for Christians whom he has never met—"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you ..." (v. 9a).

- It is likely that Paul never visited Colossae.
- The church there was actually founded by Epaphras who was led to the Lord by Paul in Ephesus.
- But in spite of never visited the Colossians, Paul prayed for them whom he had only heard about.

I wonder how extensive are our prayers? Do we only restrict our prayers to our family, our church, own working or social circle? Of course, prayer for these is not wrong because they are people close to us. But we need to be reminded that God wants us to be also concerned with the needs of those beyond our own proximity. Indeed, our prayers can indicate how small or wide our world is. If we believe God not only loves us but also the world, then it is our business to be concerned with the needs of those beyond our own proximity, even the needs of those whom we may not have met.

Whenever we come to pray as a church, let us then also take time to intercede for Christians and even lost people around the world—people whom we may have heard about but not met.

- One way to obtain information about these people is through the prayer letters of missionaries we know or through newsletters of various mission agencies.
- We can use resources like these to guide and remind ourselves to pray regularly and in an informed manner for Christians and lost people around the world.

One of the stories from the mission field that is told on Wycliffe Translators website is that of Michael Wan. He has served in Wycliffe-related organisations for many decades in the Philippines in Malaysia.

One of his early experiences was a two-week visit to an island in the Philippines with an American colleague. The locals on the island were hostile to Christians, and the area was also a hotbed of insurgents. They knew that they were under scrutiny and also heard rumours that a group was planning to kidnap them. At the end of the two weeks, Michael left but his colleague chose to stay behind. Two days later, Michael heard news that his colleague had been kidnapped by the insurgents. Thankfully, after intervention by the local government, his colleague was released. This happened many years ago, but many missionaries are still working in places where there are risks of kidnapping.

It is story or report like this that can help us have a wider awareness and concern for the work of God's servants and the situations they are in. Though we may have only heard of them and their work from other sources, we can still pray for them and their work in a meaningful and informed manner.

(<https://www.wycliffe.sg/post/dare-all-for-god-but-stay-alert>)

From the setting of the prayer, we also learn that Paul prays for the Colossians without ceasing—"... we have not stopped praying for you ..." (v. 9b).

- Paul maintained a spirit of prayer for the Colossian believers—"have not stopped praying".
- This means Paul persisted in praying for the Colossians—he prayed for them frequently.
- To pray without stopping does not mean Paul observed overnight prayers for the Colossians without end.
- Rather, it simply means he prayed regularly for them as he went through the routine of his life and ministry.

Also from the setting of the prayer, we learn that Paul prays to give thanks as well as to petition—"asking God" in v. 9c and "giving thanks to the Father" at the beginning of v. 12.

- We see that Paul did not just remain in petition for the church in Colossae.
- He moved on to giving thanks to the Father for what He had already done to the church—i.e. blessing them with spiritual redemption and inheritance in Christ.

What about us?

- Are we more passionate and urgent only in petitioning to God, and less interested and focussed in our thanksgiving to Him?

- If we are honest with ourselves, we usually pray with more passion and urgency when things are going rough, isn't it? E.g.:
 - In times of serious illness.
 - In times of financial difficulty.
 - In times of making tough decision.
 - In time of family tension.
 - In times of church crisis.
- Of course, it is not wrong to pray with passion and urgency in such times; indeed, it is necessary.
- However, it is also important for us to realise that we don't pray only in such times; we don't only so pray when things are difficult and problematic.
- We not only pray passionately and urgently when things are ugly and upside down, but we also so pray when things are beautiful and right side up—that's the right spirit and attitude of prayer that Paul demonstrated in his prayer for the Colossians.

Notice how Paul prayed for them. Earlier in vv. 3-8, Paul gave thanks to God for the work that He had done in the church—"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit."

- Here, Paul interceded for the church even when there were already very strong signs of spiritual vitality in the church.
- At the same time he would not presume that all the very good things happening in the church would always be so.
- Thus, he prayed that God would protect the Colossians in their faith and faithfulness so that they would continue to grow as a church for God's glory.
- Paul then went to pray in vv. 9-14, asking God to protect and help the Colossians continue with the good work of their spiritual worship, work, and witness.
- In vv. 9-14, he prayed that God would do more of the same mentioned earlier in vv. 3-8 so that the Colossian believers would demonstrate even an increased measure of such spiritual vitality.
- Put in another way, Paul prayed in all seasons for the church in Colossae, regardless of good times or bad times.

Many of my non-Christian relatives claim to be open to the Christian faith. But they would say, "I will seriously consider becoming a Christian when I know I am about to die."

- To them, Christianity seems only appropriate for the bad times, like death and sickness.

- I hope that we will not regard prayer with the same attitude—i.e. appropriate only for times like sickness, family crisis, work problem, or even church conflict.
- Paul prayed for the church in Colossae with petitions and thanksgiving without stopping even when times were good for them.
- May we as a church also learn to petition, as well as GIVE THANKS to God even when times are challenging for us.

In the Middle-Eastern folk tale, “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp”, Aladdin could only ask the genie in the lamp to fulfil three wishes for him.

- Thus, Aladdin chose to ask the genie for a wish only when he was in trouble.
- But our prayer to God is not like Aladdin asking the genie to do his bidding when he’s in trouble.
- God is not a genie to do our bidding, but He is the Sovereign Lord Himself—He moves according to His own purpose, not to our bidding.
- Also, we have unlimited access to God—He does not only give us three opportunities to ask of Him; we can pray and ask of Him in all seasons regardless of good or bad times.

From the Pauline pattern of praying in Col. 1:9-14, we learn to ...

- Pray in all seasons not only for ourselves, but also for those whom we may have heard about but not met—we so pray in good and bad times.
- Pray in all seasons not only with petitions, but also with thanksgiving to God—we so pray in good and bad times.

We have looked at the setting of Paul’s prayer. Now, let’s look at the ...

II. Content of the Prayer

Paul prayed for the believers in Colossae that they be filled with the knowledge of God’s will (v. 9).

- Paul is here speaking of God’s will not only in terms of mere knowledge, but in terms of moving on to be transformed in character and conduct; in terms of making the most of every opportunity to do what is pleasing to God.
- Without such spiritual vitality, there is no real understanding of God’s will no matter how much knowledge one may have.
- Indeed, seeking and praying to know God’s will is not something an individual or a church should undertake in a casual manner because:
 - To know God’s will is to be prepared to do it no matter what it may turn out to be—that’s “risky”!
 - To know God’s will is to be prepared to reject what is contradictory to Scripture—that means pleasing God, not man.
 - To know God’s will is to be prepared to keep in close communion with Him—that’s hard discipline.

It is no wonder that Paul says the knowledge of God's will is "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v. 9).

- One problem the Colossians have to tackle is their pagan environment that threatens to diminish the pre-eminence of Christ and the sufficiency of His sacrifice on the cross to forgive sins.
- Therefore, Paul here cautions them that they cannot know God's will unless they seek wisdom and understanding at the spiritual level with their heart and mind all tuned in to God—i.e. a spiritual renewal of their heart and mind in the midst of much paganism.

Today when we pray for the growth of the church, we need to remind ourselves that there is no real growth if there is no spiritual knowledge of God's will because our heart and mind are not all tuned in to Him.

- The growth of the church is more than just numbers because it also includes an increasing willingness among the members of the church to do what God has indicated; to reject what is contradictory to Scripture (even though it may be popular and widely accepted); to keep in close communion with the Lord Himself.
- Hence, as we pray for the growth of the church, we are also to pray for our increasing diligence in these areas of spiritual discipline—i.e. obedience, separation from worldliness (i.e. in the world but not of the world), and close fellowship with the Lord.
- Numerical growth can come quickly yet it may be fundamentally unhealthy (like cancer cells—grow fast yet unhealthy). But spiritual growth takes time because the many areas of spiritual discipline are nurtured only over-time, not over-night.

From the content of the prayer, we see that Paul also prays that the believers be pleasing to the Lord—that they be "worthy of the Lord" (v. 10).

- Whether we like it or not, God has expectations of His people.
- Thus, we are to aspire to live up to His expectations of us.
- When we pray as an individual and as a church, and ask how we can please Him, we are actually seeking and pleading Him to help transform ...
 - How we work.
 - How we play.
 - How we talk.
 - How we serve.
 - How we treat others.
 - How we use our money.
 - What we read.
 - What we watch.
- Simply put, praying to know God's will is not an end in itself; we need to move from praying and knowing to actually doing what is pleasing to Him.

Paul also goes on to stress that a life pleasing to God does reflect certain characteristics in vv. 10-12.

1. “Bearing fruit in every good work” (v. 10)—this is the work of obedience in accordance to God’s will.
 - We pray to know something so that we can obey God and do it.
 - When we so obey and do God’s will, we will discover more of His will for us.
 - While mere knowledge will help us know more ABOUT God, it is knowledge that is translated into acts of obedience that will really help us KNOW God more.
 - When we pray, “God, let us know what you want”, and after He has answered us, what then after that?
 - Do we follow up and say, “God, enable us to do what you have made clear to us in obedience to you”? Or do we say, “It is good to know what God has in mind for us. But it is OK for us to stay put for a while. No need to run ahead of God for He is in no hurry”?
 - Yes, we are to do God’s will in God’s time, not our time—God’s thing that is done at the wrong time will often bring about wrong or bad outcome.
 - However, we must not use this as an excuse to remain in our comfort zone of complacency when it is indeed God’s time for us to act in faith and obedience.
 - Remember, we can never run ahead of God if it is indeed His time to act and for us to obey and join Him; and when God acts, we will have a hard time catching up with Him; we don’t have to worry about running ahead of Him.
2. Another characteristics of a life pleasing to the Lord as stressed by Paul is to display “great endurance and patience” (v. 11).
 - If we are to pray with endurance and patience as a church today, we need to avoid praying “through a binocular”—i.e. looking far ahead through a small and narrow lens.
 - I mean, if we focus exclusively on the final outcome; when we aim at a specific outcome that is a long way down the road, we can easily downplay the importance of the intermediate steps to that long journey ahead.
 - If we so pray and our prayers seem to hit a brick wall, we may need to hit the pause button and do a reset, breaking down that long-term final outcome into petitions for short-term intermediate results.
 - An example would be a church praying to God for a building that has a huge space to accommodate 1,000 people in a busy area when the church is presently 100 strong and sufficiently housed in a small rented place. And the reason for so “dreaming big” is because every church wants to be like that mega church and follow its model of church growth.
 - Jesus teaches us to pray, “Give us this day our DAILY bread”—He teaches us to pray in such a way that we exercise a daily reliance on Him; day by day, bit by bit, step by step.
 - Indeed, a big answer to prayer is often the accumulative results of many small answers to what we have been praying with “endurance and patience”.

Illustration: It took me a long time praying for my late mother before she finally believed and accepted Christ in 1990. I saw small things happened that moved her slowly but surely to the day she confessed belief and faith in Christ.

It all began one evening when I took her to a dinner-cum-evangelistic event. God used the evangelist to sow the gospel seed in her heart. On our way home that evening, I noticed that she was thinking deeply about the message she heard, though she did not make any decision for the Lord at that event.

Fast forward to 1990 and after some years had passed, she fell seriously ill and had to be bed-bound for a prolonged period. I took the opportunity to play an audio series of 20 short, evangelistic messages for her to pass her time while resting and recuperating at home. The preacher was that same evangelist whom she heard some years ago, and whom she somehow fondly remembered.

At the end of the last message in that audio series, I shared the gospel briefly with her again, and asked if she was ready and willing to believe and accept Christ in faith. The Lord was preparing her for this moment. Without much hesitation, she agreed and I led her to pray to accept Christ.

The sweetest prayer I have heard, even until today, is not that of a pastor, Bible scholar, or theologian. But it is to hear my late mother repeating the “Sinner’s Prayer” after me that day. But this blessed day had been a long journey of praying in “endurance and patience” for her salvation. Along the way, there were many misconceptions about Christianity that needed to be corrected; there was the fear of removing and so offending the idols that she had long been worshipping that needed to be quelled.

When we pray “through a binocular” and focussing only on the final, desired outcome without concern for the short-term steps, we can be easily discouraged when we keep hitting a brick wall; we can easily lost our spiritual endurance and patience.

Yes, as we pray, let us learn to pray with endurance and patience; step by step, and with expectancy for the dawning of that final, desired outcome.

3. A third characteristics of a life pleasing to the Lord as stressed by Paul is “giving thanks to the Father” (v. 12).
 - In the light of our salvation, we are to overflow with joyful thanksgiving individually and as a church.
 - We don’t pray as if God has not met our needs.
 - Instead, we pray with much joy and thanksgiving because God has met our greatest and deepest need—i.e. our need for a Saviour.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what are some pointers for us to take away if we are to be a praying church, having examined Paul's pattern of prayer in our text today?

1. Prayer goes beyond our own needs.
 - We are not to be inward-looking in our prayer. Like Paul, we are to pray even for people whom we may have only heard and not met.
2. Prayer is spiritual warfare.
 - We have this tendency to slacken and even stop in praying. But we are reminded to keep the spirit of prayer going and strong, praying both in good times and in bad times. Paul was praying passionately for the spiritual vitality of the church in Colossae even though many good things were happening among the believers there.
 - Prayer is also hard work that will test our spiritual endurance and patience—that's why Paul prayed passionately to God to grant the Colossian believers endurance and patience as they themselves prayed to know, understand, and do God's will.
3. Prayer requires an on-going desire to seek God's will through spiritual wisdom and understanding.
 - Believers are each to seek God's will for him/herself, as well as together to seek God's will for the church body. This work cannot be substitutionary—i.e. cannot simply leave it all to the pastor, or church leaders, or other members.
 - Also, though the wisdom and understanding we get from the world may not necessarily be against Scripture, we must not uncritically or conveniently use such insights in our spiritual journey with God. We need to measure the wisdom and ways of the world with the wisdom and ways of God. When that of the world is not in line with that of God, it is God's wisdom that must prevail and God's ways that must be obeyed.
4. Prayer is a balance between seeking, waiting, doing, and thanksgiving.
 - This is the characteristics of patience, fruit-bearing, and thanksgiving that are worthy of the Lord.
 - The final outcome—the "harvest" season—comes only after many seasons of seeking, waiting, doing, and thanksgiving in both sun and rain.
 - And when we so pray, we learn to pray in all seasons; in good times and bad times—day by day, bit by bit, step by step.

Let us then ask God help us be that praying church that is worthy of and pleasing to Him as we seek to know, understand, and do His will. Amen!