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The Prayer of Paul Colossians 1:1-12

Well, I will be doing Colossians this morning. This will start us on a series though Colossians. I'm not sure how far I will get, it will be depending upon how quickly Dale recovers but I suspect I will get around somewhere into chapter 3. This is my plan but I want to leave myself some leeway there in case he is a little more delayed but eventually we will finish the whole book. So we'll be in Colossians this morning the first chapter.

The number one best selling book in the year 2001, a year and a half ago, was this book; I don't know if you have ever read it, it's called "*The Prayer of Jabez*." It actually sold well more than the number two best selling book of 2001 and the number two best selling book in 2001 was the sequel to this. So you can see that this is a very popular, it got around, and a little surprising, quite frankly, when I first heard about it some people had asked me, a few people, so what do you think? I didn't read it and I didn't know anything about it but I knew the author, Bruce Wilkinson had gone to the same seminary as I went to. He's a pretty well known evangelical author. He had done a number of other things that were very good. So I had a positive sense that this was probably good, plus prayer is a good thing, so and it is by a publishing company that is very conservative as well so I was thinking this might be a good book.

There are a few kind of interesting things that kind of rattled around in my head, one was "who is Jabez?" You know it seems a little off the beaten trail. If you're going to write a book that gets so popular I kind of wonder what did you find here. But more significantly was when it became as best selling as it became you had to wonder why is it that so many people are wanting to buy this; it's not very often that something biblical gets to be so popular. I don't know if you noticed but we don't seem to be attracting flocks of people who want to know God's Word.

I think that Jesus put it,¹³ ***Enter by the narrow gate: for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.*** " There's a way that leads to destruction its way is broad. There are many who are going that way, a few that are going on the way to life.

And then you begin to read it. And I remember that Gordon Kemble, he was ministering with us before his untimely passing. He did a class on prayer and actually he did a section of his class on this book to give it some analysis and it turned into one of our position papers you can find on our web site or through the church office. And actually it really symbolizes what much of Christianity is about.

Let me read you the very first part of the book. The preface says. "Dear reader, I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers." So what can I say to God that He will answer? Of course the implication is there in an affirmative sense, not answering in a negative sense.

I will read you the passage that this book is taken from really quickly. "Now Jabez called on the God of Israel saying Oh that Thou will bless me and indeed enlarge my border that Thy hand might be with me and that Thou might keep me from harm that it may not pain me, and God granted him what he requested."

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So this one sentence tucked away in 1 Chronicles chapter 4 is the basis for the whole book.

So you have to wonder why don't we go to Jesus' prayer, or as we'll do this morning, the prayer of Paul. Well I think that prayer is all about what someone can gain for themselves and what kind of pervades this book is the enlarging of my borders and how God can do great things for me. And that's a very popular message these days, how can I get God to do things for me rather than what can I do that God wants to do in my life.

So, we will be looking at the prayer of Paul and I think this will be instructive to us because it will give us a different focus on prayer than what most people pray like, and I don't think most people are going to take this prayer and get really excited about it unless they are seeking to live for Christ. There is really two parts to this prayer. There's thanksgiving and there's supplication of asking on the behalf of others. So we will read just the first eight verses, first the thanksgiving part.

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ,, by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we've heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in the heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth the gospel, which is come to you; just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also, since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow-bond servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

So the two parts are thanksgiving and supplication. So the first thing we will look at is that we should pray with thanksgiving.

We should pray with thanksgiving

Now I'm going to move right past the first two verses because Dale has covered introductions to epistles many other times in the past and I don't have time to spend four weeks on these two verses so there they are for you, you can read them. Moving on to verse three, *we should pray with thanksgiving. We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you.* This first part is thanksgiving and as you read this what you can't miss here is the underlying point of view and that is he's not praying for himself.

We should be thankful for the spiritual blessings in the lives of others not just the physical blessings in our own life. His prayer is regarding the Colossians and the spiritual work in their lives not simply what's going on physically or in himself. So as we give thanks we should be not neglecting giving thanks for the spiritual work of God in the lives of others because that's really an emphasis here. We don't find a prayer for ourselves. Now Paul, when he wrote these people had never met them, he had never been there before. He had sent Epaphras who apparently had founded this church, but this wasn't people he had a close relationship with yet he felt a responsibility for them.

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So we can learn that thanksgiving can be for people we only hear about. In our fellowship you might not know half the people in our fellowship. But that does not mean that you cannot be thankful as you hear from the reports of people you do know of how God is working in the lives of others who express thanksgiving for how God is at work in the lives of others or even beyond our fellowship. So Paul didn't know these people personally. Yet he was thankful for them.

Now as we go through this text, let's look at what he is thankful for. In praying always for them, verse 4. It's because he heard their faith in Christ Jesus, the love that they have for all the saints, and the hope which was laid up for them in heaven. So there's the triplet here, faith, love, hope.

Paul was thankful for their faith in Christ, their love for each other and their hope for the future. We actually see these things combined, faith, love and hope in other places, they're grouped in, of course, (1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thess. 1:3, 5:8). Faith, hope and love go together and here's how they go together.

Faith produces love and hope. Those who have faith will produce in their lives love for God and for others and hope for what is to come. Hope laid up for you in heaven. This hope isn't "Gee I hope so, I'm not sure" but hope is the assurance that we have something that has been stored up that we have been looking forward to. But it's resting upon faith. Faith produces it. So that's the relationship.

Those without love or hope demonstrate they have no faith. And faith is the basis of faith in Christ. So he is thankful for the faith that is seen in this church in Christ Jesus.

Now we move onto verse 5. *Of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you; just as in all the world and is constantly bearing fruit.*

The gospel is described here as the word of truth, the word of truth spreading throughout the world. So this is true to those who understand it as true, embrace it as true and it is spreading throughout the world. This throughout the world isn't in a geographical sense, that it has landed on every plot of ground everywhere. It's a phrase that refers to the distribution of the gospel message to the different peoples of the known world at that time.

If you remember the day of Pentecost when many people from different ethnic groups and languages came and heard the word in Acts, chapter 2 and they received it and they took it back to their homes and in that God's Word spread to many, many people. Well that's what he is referring to, not strictly a geographical plot of ground. And it spread. It spread then and it's spreading now. It continues to spread. This process of God's Word in the gospel, the word of truth, is continuing to spread throughout the whole world. And it hasn't landed to every person yet but one day that will occur.

As it spreads, it does two things. **It impacts our life and our world, both internally within us and externally around us.** As we receive the word of truth, the gospel, it comes to us and then internally is increasing and abounding in us and that produces an external effect on us. So this impact is happening both internally and externally.

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Now there are two phrases that deserve some attention in verse 6. They are constantly bearing fruit and increasing.

"Bearing fruit" (KARPOPHOROUMENON) and "increasing" (AUXANOMENON) are in the middle voice. Now in English you can't tell that really well but in Greek as it was written in there is a middle voice which means that something is acting upon itself. So if I do something I act, if someone does something to me, it happens to me that's in a passive voice. But if I do something to myself, I hit myself with a hammer, that's the middle voice. So what we can see here is that the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing it is happening in and of itself. **In other words the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing in and of itself.** In and of itself it is doing it.

It is not dependent upon you specifically or me specifically for going forth. **The implication is that God's Word of truth bears fruit and increases with or without us.** So we can be a spectator or a participant, we can be on the field or in the stands, it's our choice but irregardless of what choice we make God will work out His will in the gospel, going forth, impacting the world with us or without us. Hopefully it's with us. Hopefully you are praying so that others can receive the gospel and you can be an active participant in that rather than an innocent bystander. But it will happen in and of itself because God is the one at work in this.

Next, there is a participation in the gospel. Since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth. So here's how people participate in the gospel. First they have to hear of it. Since the day you hear of it. They must hear of the grace of God in truth. This is reflected in Romans 10:17 *"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ."* In the context there how can they hear unless someone tells them, how can someone tell them unless they are sent? So in order for people to hear of the gospel they need to be sent. In order for us to receive the gospel we must hear of the gospel. There is a cause and effect that is necessary here. And then it's not just hearing it, it's understanding it.

Understanding the grace of God in truth. If you recall, remember the parable of the sower. The seed that was sown on the road, the parable that Jesus spoke, those people heard the word, and then there was the seed that was sown in the good soil and those people heard the word also. So everyone heard, but those who are described as on the road where there is no growth are described as not understanding, those who are in the good soil are described as understanding. So what becomes pivotal in our reception is our understanding the grace of God in truth.

This understanding is not just a cognition thing; it is more of a personal thing. It's also not so much a **developed knowledge of the truth but a conscious recognition about the truth.** It's more a subjective thing than an objective thing. We have a complete understanding, a developed knowledge.

For example, take this projection system that I am using this morning. I don't understand how this projection system works. I have some vague idea how the computer works that generates the things that happens on the projects system. I have a conscious recognition about the truthfulness that this will work so much so that when I planned this message out I knew this was going to work and I typed my stuff out as if it was going to work and I'm here planning on it working. I don't understand it but I am convinced that it will work.

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Well it's the same way with the gospel in the grace of God in truth we have a conviction that it is true. Do we understand it fully? Well, hopefully we are growing in that but we may never fully understand it in this lifetime but we can appreciate the truthfulness of it. **Another way to say that is you can be convinced of the truthfulness of something without being very knowledgeable about it.**

And this is I think our work in evangelism. It is helping people to understand the truthfulness of the gospel. Now are we able to do that well? No, we can't produce that, only God produces that. But we should try to help people in understanding it and see if they can get it, if the light goes on. If not, we should be patiently seeking to help them in that process to understand. So that is really essential in our reception of God's Word to hear and understand.

Now, how do we become more thankful in praying, how can we be more like Paul in this? Not just praying for physical things for ourselves, but praying and thanking God for the spiritual work of other people.

Well here's how I think this happens as we see in Verse 7 with Epaphras. **Our thankfulness will increase as we work together with fellow bond-servants who are faithful servants of Christ.** As we co-labor with people, we will be able to observe and appreciate more and more of God's spiritual work in the lives of others. If we don't do that we really don't have that data, that appreciation for what's happening in the lives of others, and our prayers will tend to focus on ourselves. So I would encourage you, exhort you to be co-laboring with others, working in God's work to build up others in faith. As you do that your prayers will become more and more like Paul's in being thankful for God's work in the lives of others and not so centered on yourself.

We should pray for spiritual growth

Now, the second part is a prayer for spiritual growth. He doesn't just pray for thanksgiving but he prays for spiritual growth. Verses 9 to 12 say,

⁹For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, and asked that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so that you may walk in a manner worthily of the Lord to please him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness in patience, joylessly ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light;

So, as we are co-laboring with others and we become more and more thankful for what God's doing in the lives of others, we will also be seeking to pray for them so that they will grow spiritually.

We should pray for the spiritual growth in the lives of others, not just physical gain in our own life. I think that most people are caught up in praying for themselves, making life better for themselves and not so caught up in praying for others. And particularly where it is not so fleeting, not so temporary. And that is in the spiritual sense not just in the physical sense.

And this is one reason why this book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, has gotten so popular. I think it allows people probably to do both, that's why some of you probably read it and thought, "Oh this is fine." You read your sense of Scripture into it.

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But it certainly allows people, even, I think, guides people to having a very self-orientated prayer life. Well Paul's prayer was for others, that they would be grounded and built up.

Verse 9 and 10 demonstrates a cycle that I'd like to show you.

The cycle of spiritual growth. It's found in verse 9 and 10. So there is a relationship between the elements of his prayer that he doesn't cease to pray for them. He continues eagerly to see these things happen through prayer.

And here's how it begins. *We have not ceased to pray for you to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will.* The first element here is **knowing God's will**. He's praying that they know God's will. That they'll know what God wants them to do. That they will understand what God's desire is. Let me ask you, how do we know God's will? Well we know God's will because of God's Word. That's how we know God's will. This is why he's writing. So in Ephesians, a very similar book, Paul can say, "*Don't be foolish but understand what the will of God is because of all that he writing to us.*" So God's Word, the Scripture, communicates His will and as we know His Word then we know His Will.

Then it goes on. *In all spiritual wisdom and understanding,* So in knowing Gods will we gain wisdom, **we gain wisdom.** *To ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*

Now here's how this works. As we know what God desires, what He wants, and His Word communicates that to us, it's not just a list of do this and don't do that. Rather it is a sense of a growing appreciation of things that God values, the things of his priorities and emphasis's and in that we become wiser and less foolish. We are able to put away foolish things and to adopt things that are wisdom, which are longer lasting, which are eternal, which are going to make a long-term difference in the lives of others. When we begin to live that way, we become wiser, we gain wisdom. So his priority is the knowledge of His will in all spiritual understanding.

¹⁰ *so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord to please him in all respects.* So a **godly walk** results from gaining wisdom. As we appreciate His desires and His values and understand wisely how that affects the life that we are living and the people around us and what to do and what not to do we become conformed more and more to godliness. We walk, we practice righteousness, we develop that.

As we walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, as we please Him in all the respects of how we conduct ourselves the next thing happens. Bearing fruit in every **good works**. So a godly walk will produce good works. So the cycle continues, righteousness doesn't begin and end with ourselves. It continues through serving others in good works.

This phrase "bearing fruit, fruitfulness" gets spoken of in terms of spiritual character in our own life. The fruit of the spirit, Galatians 5:22-23, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, etc., those things are internally within us. But usually when fruit is being described it's the works around us, the developing of ministry and working in the lives of others. So if you're seeking to work in a manner worthy of the Lord, it will result in good works in serving others around you.

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You cannot consider yourself wise and you cannot consider yourself righteous without serving others in good work, and bearing fruit in it.

These things are building on each other, they happen. And then it keeps going. *Good works leads to knowing God, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God;* So you can see the direct connection between when we do good works, we bear fruit and we know God better. This whole process leads to us to knowing God better because of this.

This is how Jesus lived. He walked in wisdom, He walked righteously, He did good works and bore fruit for those around him and He knew God ultimately. So as we walk in the manner that Jesus walked we will know Jesus better, we will know the Lord better and better as we produce this life within us.

And it doesn't stop there. As we know God, then we will know God's will. The more we know God the more we know what God wants from us, the more we know what God wants from us through His Word, the more we gain wisdom, the more we gain wisdom, the more we will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. The more we will bear fruit and the more we will know God and it goes around and around and around. If you take any element out of here you break the link in the chain, and it ceases to continue the momentum. We need all of these things happening.

And that's how spiritual growth happens. And that's the sort of thing that we should pray for others. That their spiritual growth would occur in this manner and we should give emphasis to all these things. As we continue to give emphasis to these things we continue this cycle, we continue **our forward momentum** for spiritual growth. And we don't stall out. So we need to pray that others will keep their forward momentum going for spiritual growth and that they will be filled with the knowledge of his word, walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, producing good works, coming to the knowledge of him, and keep it going.

So that's the cycle for spiritual growth. And verse 11 and 12 deals with **the capability for spiritual growth**. How does this happen? Does this happen because we will it so, that we have made a choice for spiritual growth to occur in our life. Well not hardly. Verse 11 says,

¹¹strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness in patience, joylessly ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light;

So this process is not happening because of us but we are strengthened in all power according to His glorious might. **We can be strengthened towards growth because of God's power, not because of our ability.** And we don't just pray that somebody will mature and grow, we pray that God through His glorious might will work His will in their life so that they can be strengthened in all power according to His glorious might. Not according to our abilities, not according to the strength that resides in us, but according to the strength of His might. So He has not just the ability and He has the opportunity as we are following this plan to strengthen us beyond what we can ask or think and then we can put this into practice. He gives us the ability to follow that cycle of spiritual growth. We need to ask Him to do that in our lives and in others lives.

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God not only empowers us and strengthens us to grow but He also does this for our steadfastness and patience, to patiently endure. He not only empowers us in growth but in patient endurance, which is a part of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is not going to happen apart from patiently enduring. Because everything isn't always easy and requires steadfastness, requires endurance. And God's ability stretches even to the difficult times when we need to continue persevering and continue pressing onward in the faith. It continues in that way.

Acknowledging God's grace in our sanctification (that is our spiritual growth) and in our eternal destiny will move us toward joyful thanksgiving. That's the last phrase, *Joyously giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*

That joyful thanksgiving that is produced is because of our confidence that God is able to cause us to become sanctified and that He has an eternal destiny for us that has been prepared. He has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. That is something that has been promised to us and has been reserved for us.

It's His work in doing this and as we see His work we will respond from the heart with joyful thanksgiving. So as we've gone through this, as we give emphasis for not just praying for ourselves but praying for others, as we give emphasis not for just physical things but spiritual things, should we in this prayer pray through this prayer everyday.

Here's a section at the end of the book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, after describing this prayer that is instructed to the reader, back to the prayer of Jabez. "I encourage you to follow unwaveringly the plan outlined here for the next 30 days. By the end of that time you will notice significant changes. The prayer will be on its way to becoming a life long habit. Pray the prayer of Jabez every morning and keep a record of your daily prayer marking off a calendar or chart for that purpose."

Should we do this with the prayer of Paul? Should we take this prayer and pray it every day? Do we ask, with exact words, that a person be filled with the knowledge of His will and all spiritual wisdom and understanding? Should we do this? I mean after all it is part of the Scripture, and maybe is a better prayer than I can come up with.

Well I don't think so. **The prayer of Paul is a model to follow not a scripture to recite.** And if you're like me you grew up citing a specific prayer a lot, and that's Jesus' prayer in Mathew 9:13, the Lord's Prayer. But right before the Lord's Prayer we have Mathew 6:7, which says, "don't use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do for they suppose they will be heard for their many words." So even the prayer of Jesus is not a script to recite, and thus the prayer of Paul is not a script to recite.

It's not that your prayers will be more effective if you say these right words and do it everyday and mark the box off. It is the model, the emphasis that we should follow, the things that we should give priority to. And in that we will find God pleased, not just by the words we say but by the meaning those words convey. So I would encourage you not to strictly go word-by-word, line-by-line, but to make the meaning of this yours. And to have this sense of God working in people's lives spiritually for their benefit, not just physically and not just surrounding prayers regarding you.

As we read through this there is left with us what is most important in life and what is most important in life is truly what God is doing in the lives of people. What God is doing in the lives of

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people is changing them from being unholy to holy. Responding to Him and walking in a way that is pleasing to His is what is of the greatest priority and hopefully our prayers will reflect that. And if our prayers are reflecting that then we will discover that our life is reflecting that, and as our life reflects that then God will be pleased with us and we will be well on our way to cycling towards spiritual growth.

There is a saying that I want to leave you with. **What you are praying for is what you are living for.** If you are praying these sorts of things then that will demonstrate that you are living not just for yourself but for Him who died and rose again on your behalf. Love the Lord and in loving the Lord, you are loving others and praying these things for them. Lets bow in prayer.

Lord, we do ask that you would help us mature and help us mature in our prayer life so that we can be praying for the things that are closest to your heart. Things that are not passing away, things that are not momentary, things that are not fleeting, the things that will be with us forever, and that is things that are spiritually orientated. And we pray that the blessings of the spiritual life will not just be in our lives or in our family's lives but in everybody we come across, everybody we ever hear about even though we are not with them. Lord, we pray that this will dominate our lives more and more and we would be more and more praying always for those who are seeking to grow and we ask that you will develop that in our lives in Jesus name. Amen.