

Colossians 1:3-23

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[0 : 00] I'd like us now for a few moments to turn to the second passage we read, that's the New Testament passage in the letter of Paul to the Colossians, Colossians chapter 1.

Looking particularly at verse 9 and the succeeding verses there, where Paul writes, 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.

When Paul wrote this letter, the churches which were being planted were growing rapidly.

Christianity was expanding and moving from the west to the east of the Roman Empire.

Many people were being challenged by the gospel and committing their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul himself tells us in just a few verses higher up how God's word was spreading throughout the world.

He tells us that God has been at work and that the gospel is known all over the world. This gospel is being fruit and growing just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace and truth.

[1 : 39] And so these words of Paul which were undoubtedly hyperbole in his day because the world that he knew was the world of the Roman Empire and today the world of course that is known by most people is a world which is much greater and a world which has a much larger population.

And there's a sense in which Paul's words here are a prophecy of the days to come.

And perhaps not least of our generation of our day when the church of God is growing rapidly in many parts of the world.

So we have the privilege of living in a world where the church is growing dramatically. Unfortunately in our land and throughout Western Europe and throughout Australasia that is not the case.

The churches are declining but everywhere else the church of Jesus Christ is growing. Now what Paul is teaching us here is that we ought to have a concern, a prayerful concern for churches that are growing, new churches that are coming to life through the gospel and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

[3 : 00] They are our new family members. They are our sisters and brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ. And as he urged the Colossians, assured the Colossians that he was praying for them, so also by implication he is urging us to pray for the young churches of Africa, for the young churches of China, for the young churches of Latin America, churches which are growing.

Even in India where there is dramatic growth in the Christian community. These are not, these are our concerns. They are not remote.

They are intimate. They are our sisters and brothers in the Lord. And our responsibility is to pray for them. Just as Paul prayed for the Colossian church.

Now what Paul prays for the Colossian church is not simply that it would grow statistically, that it would grow in numbers, but that it would grow spiritually.

He was concerned for the maturity of the church. Not simply for the expansion of the church, for the extension of the church, but for its maturity and for its growing in depth.

[4 : 14] Now someone has said that Christianity in many parts of the world today is a thousand miles wide and one inch deep. And that may be because when there are mass movements into the Christian faith, there are many who are carried along on the enthusiasm of others.

And the challenge that the church faces in many parts of the world today is to make disciples of those who are becoming converts to Christianity.

And unless this challenge is faced and executed, then today's converts will become tomorrow's nominal Christians.

So the command is to make disciples. The command is not to get people to convert. Although that is there.

The real command is to make disciples. So that people are converted not simply on a social movement, but they are converted in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

[5 : 20] And we need that concern for the church of God in our own land and throughout the world. We pray especially to this end for the church in Peru, the church in South Africa, the church in India, with which we have immediate connections.

And it is our responsibility to pray for them and for all the people of God who have recently come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And so Paul teaches us here how we ought to pray for new churches. How we ought to pray for new Christians. He prays that their Christian experience might be deepened in four directions.

He prays first of all that they may be granted greater knowledge. Verse 9. Secondly, that they might be granted greater fruit. In verse 10. A thirdly, greater power.

In verse 11. And greater praise. In verse 12. Now as we look at this prayer as a prayer for others, let us also recognize that we need to pray for one another along these lines also.

[6 : 36] That although we may have been born into the church of God. And may have been disciples for many years. None of us are too mature in the Christian faith.

None of us have passed beyond the stage where we might not need to grow. All of us need to grow. All of us need to be sanctified. All of us need to become more mature in Christ. So let us look at each of these four directions of Christian maturity.

First of all, Paul prays that the Colossian Christians might be gifted with greater knowledge. Look particularly at verse 9.

We have not stopped praying for you asking a God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

[7 : 35] Paul prays that the Christian community in Colossae would be filled with the knowledge of God's will.

That was his concern. That they would know what God's will is. And that they would do it. His concern was that the kingdom of God, the kingship of God might be fulfilled in their lives.

It's a very different vision from the kind of consumer lifestyle that we are fed in the media today. Where we are told we need to be happy.

We need to do this and do that so that we may enjoy ourselves. That's not what Paul is saying here. Paul is saying we must make our first priority the will of God.

And he's reflecting what Jesus taught when he said, Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And all these other things will be added. Now in contrast to what we're being told today in the media, happiness is not an end product.

[8 : 43] It's a byproduct. And if you make it an end product, it will elude you. And that's why although there is so much talk about happiness, so much entertainment today, we live in a society where people are profoundly sad.

We need to rediscover the true purpose of our creation is to glorify God, is to seek the kingdom of God, the kingship of God. And then these other things, including happiness, will be added to us.

And this is Paul's vision for the Colossian church. He prays that they may be filled with the knowledge of God. The idea of fullness returns again and again in this letter to the Colossians.

He is concerned that they may not only be converts, but that they may know the fullness of salvation. He makes clear that the fullness of the knowledge of God's will is not being initiated into some mysterious secret as some people who had infiltrated into the church were teaching.

But rather, full salvation comes through the knowledge, or the fullness of the knowledge of God's will. Here Paul is thinking of practical obedience to the will of God.

[10 : 04] He's not thinking of some hyper-spiritual experience, some second-stage initiation. He's thinking of an ongoing, ever-deepening, understanding and experience of the will of God.

And he says, the knowledge of God's will is in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Now he uses two interesting words there, wisdom and understanding.

The first word is a word which, in the Greek language, refers to first principles. And so what Paul is saying here is that we need to be clear on what the principles of the kingdom of God are.

That we need to be wise in that sense, that spiritual wisdom, to know how the kingdom of God operates, to know the values, the principles of the kingdom of God.

The second word, the word understanding, has to do with application. It's a more pragmatic notion of applying these first principles.

[11 : 15] So Paul is thinking here of God's will in general, in terms of its principles, and also God's will in particular in given situations. And so Paul is saying that he is praying, first of all, that there may be a greater knowledge of God's will, both in general and in particular.

Now Jesus has given us the model of discipleship, and the whole concept of discipleship comes into Christianity from Jesus.

He had his own disciples, and he taught them to make disciples. Now a disciple, in Jesus' understanding, and generally in the religious context in which he lived and operated, was not a student who sits behind a desk.

A disciple was like an apprentice, who went with his master, who was a practitioner, and from the very beginning was applying the theory to practice.

From the very beginning, he was involved in understanding as well as in receiving wisdom. And so Paul prays that the church in Colossae, this new church, might grow in its understanding of God's will, in every aspect of it.

[12 : 44] So the stress here is on the people of God comprehending, understanding, and applying God's will. Now God has given us his will supremely in the scriptures, and that's why it's so important for us to know the scriptures.

And God has also given us the Holy Spirit to help us to interpret the scriptures, and to apply them in different situations. And that should be our primary concern for the people of God, our own primary concern, and the concern, especially for young Christians, whatever they may be, that they may come to understand the fullness of the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

So as we pray in our own personal prayers, in our family devotions, and at the church prayer meeting, as we pray for the young churches of the world, let us remember Paul's concern here, that these new converts might know the fullness of the knowledge of God's will.

But Paul also prays that the young church in Colossae might bear greater fruit. We go on and read verse 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.

In verse 6, Paul speaks of the gospel bearing fruit. But here, in this verse, in verse 10, he's speaking of the converts bearing fruit.

[14 : 31] And Paul is envisaging really two types of church growth. The first type, as we've seen, is numerical. That's when he's speaking in verse 6.

He's speaking about the fruit in terms of the spread of the gospel. But Paul's concern is not simply with statistics. His concern is with the spirituality of the church.

And he wants to see and praise that there may be the fruits of the Spirit at work in the lives of the converts. This, in his concept, is absolutely vital for the health and well-being of the church.

And I dare say that, I think it's true to say that Paul is convinced that this second type of growth is more important than the first. You can have numerical growth, you can have statistical growth.

But unless that is accompanied by spiritual growth, then that avails little. You remember the parable that Jesus told of the seed that was planted, that grew for a little while on the shallow ground, and it flourished for a while.

[15 : 47] But when difficulties came, when hardship arose and persecutions came, it withered. And unless people are disciplined, unless converts are disciplined, then that's what will happen.

And the work will be a work of man rather than the work of the Spirit of God. And so we need to have this concern that the work of God in his people, especially among new converts, may go on and may flourish and may develop.

Now this fruit is practical fruit. He's speaking here about the fruit manifesting itself in every good work.

This means leading lives that are worthy of the Lord and being fully pleasing to him.

And it's important, I think, for us to remember that, that ultimately, our spiritual growth is demonstrated in tangible evidence.

[16 : 58] It is not a question of the amount of doctrine that we know, or the amount of theology that we may boast of, although these things are important. Ultimately, these things must be translated into our characters and through our characters into our conduct, so that there is tangible fruit.

There is practical work, good work, which brings glory to God's name and demonstrates the power of God's Spirit within us.

Now, Paul says that this growth, which brings more fruit, is in the knowledge of God. Now, he's speaking here of the knowledge of God.

Earlier he was speaking about the knowledge of God's will. Here he is speaking of the knowledge of God himself, which is more greater than the knowledge of his will.

It is the knowledge of himself. And Paul here is, I think, speaking about the personal relationships of the converts in Colossae with the Lord.

[18:06] He is concerned that they may have an intimate, a personal trust and relationship with the Lord so that they can call him Father, so that they pray to him regularly, so they live their lives out of his presence and in obedience to his word.

Paul is bringing us here to the heart of Christian discipleship, a spiritual relationship with God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. He prays that they may come to know God even better, as one paraphrase puts this verse.

So here we have a model, a model of spirituality. There's a great deal of talk about spirituality in the world today, but much of that spirituality is fed by the New Age, fed by New Paganism, and many other things.

There's a spirituality that focuses on the self. The whole, the enemy is the ego and you must get past the ego to get to the self and find yourself in yourself.

Paul's spirituality is totally different. You find yourself in God. You find yourself in a new relationship with him. You find yourself as you develop a personal, intimate, devotional, faith relationship with God as your father.

[19:27] This is what Paul, this is the secret of bearing fruit, says Paul. And he is concerned that we might understand that and that we might pray that this secret might be discovered by the young churches of the world that they may indeed bear greater fruit.

But thirdly, Paul prays that the church in Colossae might experience more of the power of the gospel. He prays in verse 11 that they might be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience and joyfully giving thanks to the Father.

Paul is here focusing on the availability of the power of God, the power of his glorious might.

Paul is, as it were, you know, reinforcing the power of God here. He speaks about being strengthened. He speaks about power. He speaks about might.

He is underlining the availability of the power of God. The word that Paul uses for power here is the Greek word for power from which we get our word dynamite.

[20:54] And the power of the gospel is dynamite. There is power in the gospel to transform lives and to flow through our lives to touch and transform the lives of others and the life of communities.

And so he is praying that the church in Colossae would be strengthened in the power of God and that the power of God may accompany them and equip them and give them endurance and patience and enable them to go on giving thanks to the Father as they continue as they continue in their Christian way.

God's power is a prominent theme in Paul's letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians which to both many New Testament scholars believe that these letters are in a sense sequels and there's a division of opinions which one came first but there are very similar themes being treated.

The themes of Colossians are developed more deeply it seems to me in the letter to the Ephesians but there's a lot of links between them and the church of Colossae and the church of Ephesus were very close and of course this letter was written not only to the church in Colossae but to other churches in the area as Paul tells us at the end of the letter and so there's a focus in both these letters upon the power of God we see it in verse 29 of the first chapter to this end I labour struggling with all Christ's energy which so powerfully works in me now Paul is praying that this energy may powerfully work in the church of God in Colossae so he's not simply you know he's not to satisfy that they become Christians he's praying that they may go on that they may grow that they may become disciples in every sense of the term and that they may bear fruit and that they might experience the power of God this energy which so powerfully can work in the people of God because God's work continues only by God's power and the danger so often is in the church that we live in the momentum of the past and of course blessing in the past does have its momentum and can carry perhaps into two generations but it doesn't carry much beyond that and that's one of

the problems that we are facing today in the church in this land generally speaking the church is living on the momentum of the past and we're running out of power and Paul's prayer for the Colossians ought to be our prayer for our church and the prayer for all churches that that power the power of God the dynamite of God might be experienced in every generation and especially in our generation and in the next generation for which we have a particular responsibility this ongoing strengthening by this ongoing strengthening the Colossian Christians would receive three great Christian graces the first grace is the grace of endurance they would endure everything they would become strong enough to endure anything as one translation puts it the idea behind the Greek word for endurance is not passive we think of endurance as you know grinning and bearing it but that's not the meaning that the word has it's active it is the spirit which no circumstances in life can ever defeat and which no event can ever vanquish as one

[24 : 52] Greek scholar has defined it and so this is the first grace the grace of endurance but there's also the grace of patience and this is another very interesting Greek word which is different from the word for endurance the word for endurance refers to situations circumstances this word refers to people and what Paul is praying is that they may be able to endure in harsh circumstances and to have patience with difficult people all of us I think know the difficulties that we can face in the church when circumstances suddenly change and they become adverse or when some of God's people become very difficult and tend to be loners rather than members of the body of Christ Christ and Paul is concerned that the church in Colossae would be equipped to deal with such situations but they're to do so joyfully they're to give thanks to the

Father who has qualified them to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light and so Paul says that in the midst of the adversity that these words suggest the difficulties that they can know the joy of the Lord joy the joy of the Lord is available even in adversity and sometimes indeed the church of God in its history and its experience has discovered more of the joy of Christ in adversity than in prosperity I remember many years ago hearing a speaker at the Kessie convention relating a discussion he had with the captain of a submarine and this captain said when there's a raging gale on the surface of the Atlantic 50 fathoms down it's calm dead calm and he used that as an illustration of the joy that the people of God can know in the midst of adversity in the surface there may be a gale there may be a hurricane there may be a tempest there may be a tsunami deep down there's this joy the joy of the

Lord is God's people's strength and so we need to pray for ourselves and for the people of God and especially for the younger churches of the world that they would experience the power of God and that the power of revival which has brought many of them into existence may not be a power which disappears but a power which continues and it's only through prayer I think that God invites us to be fellow workers with him in praying that his power may be released and be manifested in succeeding generations but Paul finally prays that the church in Colossae would be able to experience a greater sense of giving praise to God in verse 12 giving thanks to the father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light giving thanks to the father

Paul brings the church here to recognize the importance of prayer the importance of worship the importance of exalting the Lord the importance of just enthroning him on our praises and as we sing and as we pray that's what we should be doing we should be exalting the Lord and praising him glorifying him giving him thanks expressing to him our thanks giving for his great salvation we are to thank him particularly for the share that he has given to the people of God in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light he refers here to the inheritance of the saints or the part the purpose of God for his people the word that is used here for inheritance is a very interesting word it refers both back to the

Old Testament and outward to the culture in which Paul lived and worked in the Old Testament the word inheritance of course is very important the people inherited the land and the word literally here means lot part of the inheritance Canaan was allocated among the twelve tribes and each tribe received its inheritance its lot and Paul I think is playing on that theme from the Old Testament but he may also be reflecting the culture in which he lived and in which the Colossians found themselves where the word was used of small holdings assigned to veteran soldiers who had settled on the land after their army service was over and he is urging the Colossians to give thanks for their inheritance and I think he's referring here to the inheritance of eternal life the inheritance of the new world the inheritance of the kingdom of God he speaks in verse five of the hope that is stored up for us for them in heaven he speaks here of the kingdom of light which is contrasted in the

following verse with the dominion or power of darkness and Paul is here urging the church and urging us to give God thanks for having delivered his people out of the kingdom of darkness and given them an inheritance in the new age the true new age in the new world in the new order that God is in process of creating today and which will be consummated when the

[31 : 24] Lord Jesus Christ returns and he expands this thought with two key words which we find again and again in the new testament and these words are first of all redemption and secondly forgiveness he says we have redemption in whom the kingdom of the son whom he loves in whom we have redemption the forgiveness of sins redemption in its most common ancient usage was used to describe the release of a slave or a captive or a booty given in return for a money payment it means deliverance of the payment of a price and Paul is urging them and urging us never to cease to give thanks that the Lord Jesus Christ gave his life a ransom for many and that he purchased for us our redemption that he accomplished our deliverance we must give thanks for our redemption secondly for our forgiveness the forgiveness of sins the word to forgive literally means to loose to let go it was used in the Greek version of the

Old Testament of cancelling debts every seventh year under the Jubilee legislation and it was indeed also used of the year of Jubilee every 50th year when debts would be released and when people who had debts these debts would be cancelled and Paul is using this word to illustrate what happens when we are forgiven by God we are indebted to God we've got our debts we pray in the Lord's prayer forgive us our debts because we are deeply heavily over the moon in debt to God there's a great deal of concern about the debt crisis in our society today but that crisis is nothing compared to the debt crisis the spiritual debt crisis that we all face with God but Paul tells us that through Christ we can be delivered from that and loosed from that debt that's forgiveness we can be forgiven we can be set free and he encourages us here to give God thanks for that and so he prays for the church in Colossae and as he prays for the church in Colossae he encourages us to pray for churches like the church in Colossae which recently have come into faith which recently have been brought into existence with the power of the spirit of God that these churches might grow and develop and mature and so it's not enough for us to be concerned to hear that there was as I heard recently in India in the area where we've been working as a mission for many years in a very hard area there's been a great movement and someone told me who was there recently there's a thousand people in that area who have asked missionaries for baptism there are now many other missions working there as well as we a thousand people waiting for asking for baptism that's extraordinary news we give God thanks for that but we need to be concerned that those who are seeking baptism you know will become disciples and that they will enter into the fullness of the knowledge of God's will and that they will experience all that Paul is praying for the Colossians that ought to be a much greater burden in our hearts than it is so often we're concerned with evangelization rightly so but we also need to be concerned with discipleship so that the people of God are disciplined and that the church of God is built up and strengthened in the Lord and so as we pray for the church of God around the world let us remember this prayer of Paul let us give God thanks for what he has done and is doing today in the world but let us recognize that we have a responsibility that God calls us to be co-workers with him in conserving the harvest in ensuring that the harvest will not go wrong the harvest can go wrong sometimes and I remember some years ago visiting Russia the first time

I went there and it was in the early days of Gorbachev when things were beginning to change and I read in the newspaper on the flight to Moscow that it was reckoned that 80% of the potato harvest would rot in the ground it was in October and when I got there I mentioned this to Anatoly Rudenko who was then and still is the general secretary of the Bible Society in Russia and I said what's the problem and he said the problem is this he said when the communist party was in full swing he said people would be dragooned out of the offices out of the factories into the fields and they had to go because the police were behind them with bay nets and with guns but he said now we've got more freedom no one wants to get their feet muddy people don't want to go and so the harvest rotted in the ground there's a great harvest out there that potentially at least for the kingdom of God today but we cannot be sure that that harvest will be brought in until people are disciplined until people are established and strengthened and built up and that is the task I believe that we need to address and it ought to be a priority in our prayers may God grant that it may be and may God grant that we ourselves may demonstrate and experience all of these spiritual growth and maturity features that Paul prays for the Colossians let us pray