

TJW, HT, 20.9.09, 9.15am & 11am,

**Colossians 1.9-10**

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Most people will pray in a crisis. It seems to come naturally to us.

And I'm always surprised how many people who are not committed Christians are sincerely delighted to be told that a Christian is praying for them, when they're in some kind of trouble.

If people are pleased to be prayed for even when they're not even sure that there is a living, powerful God who hears prayer - then isn't it even more wonderful for a Christian to have someone pray for you - because you know that God your Father delights to hear those prayers for you.

It shows you that a fellow-Christian loves you enough to pray for you.

And it reminds you, in case you'd lost sight of it, that we have a loving Father-God who delights to hear his children's requests - and if you're in Colossians, turn back just one page, to Philippians 4.6. Here's what God says to us [READ]. And when someone else prays for you, it reminds you of the loving, mighty character of God.

The letters of the apostle Paul in the New Testament often start with him telling the church in a certain town: "this is what I'm praying for you."

If you turn on a page, back to Colossians, you'll see that he does exactly that at the beginning of this letter - verse 3 [READ verses 3-

4]. We looked at that last week - Paul thanks God for what the Colossians have already got - for what God's done in them.

And Paul keeps on telling them what he's praying for them - verse 9 [READ verses 9-10].

Now, he says - because God has done that for you, because you're really Christians, I pray that he will keep giving it to you - and keep on filling you with a knowledge of his will, so that your life will be worthy of him, and pleasing to him.

You know how, if you're looking at a picture on a wall, sometimes you'll get up close to see the details, and sometimes you'll stand back to take the whole thing in.

In a minute we'll get up to these two verses, 9 and 10, a bit closer - but for now let's just stand back and take in the big picture of Paul's prayer.

Doesn't Paul's prayer feel like **a God-honouring way to pray?**

He's praying for the Colossians - but his prayer is all about God:

"I ask God to fill you with knowledge of his will, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord, and please him."

He prays for knowledge of God to fill their minds - and for the character of God to fill their lives.

You can tell a lot about someone by what they pray for.

And this prayer tells us that Paul thinks that more of God in their minds and in their lives - that that is the biggest need these Christians in have got.

They must have had all the usual problems of life as well.  
But Paul prays for the one thing that they need most of all.

Just about all the prayers in the Bible, that are example prayers for us, are like this. They start by being all about God.

The Lord's Prayer is the same. If you've grown up knowing the Lord's Prayer off by heart, you might have stopped noticing this years ago.

But the first half of it is all about God, not ourselves: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth, as in heaven." And only then come the requests for us: "Gives us today our daily bread."

And Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer primarily not so that we should repeat it word for word, but so that it should set the pattern for our prayers: "When you pray, pray like this."

So here's a simple and searching question. When you pray for yourself, when you pray for other Christians, when you pray for people who are not yet Christians, when you pray for people you've never met but have heard of - is your prayer anything like Paul's prayer?

Is your prayer as God-honouring and God-focused as Paul's prayer?

If it often is - be encouraged - your prayers rich and deep.

But maybe you rarely pray this way.

Maybe you usually pray just: "I pray for my friend who's ill. I pray for people in trouble. I pray for myself tomorrow."

But we need to say that just saying, "I pray for..." is barely a prayer.

Paul is bold enough to ask God to do things for these Colossians, and so should we be: "Father, will you please help my Christian friend to please you in all they do."

Or maybe ninety percent of your praying is for people's problems and practical needs.

It's good to pray for those things - but the problem is that your perspective has gone wrong, and there isn't enough of God in your prayers.

"Father, I pray for my friend who hasn't got a job - please help him to get one. But even more, I pray that you'll fill him with a knowledge of Jesus Christ.

I pray for that person struggling with a bad addiction - help them to get out of it. And please, Lord, give him the strength to want to live a life that pleases you in every way."

Last January, at one of our Vision Sundays, I set as a vision that our prayer should be increasingly God-focused. I am convinced that we must not let up on that.

Next time you pray on your own or in Home Group, you could start by having these two verses open in front of you. And every time you pray for someone's practical needs, which we should do - also pray for them what these two verses pray for - knowledge of God in their

minds, so they can please him in their lives - because whatever their other issues are, that is what they need most of all.

And when you've prayed that way once, do it again. Keep doing it with these verses open in front of you, till it becomes a habit - till you can barely pray without praying this way.

It would be a weird and tragic marriage if a couple talked to each other after 20 years of marriage the same way they did on their first date. That would be a relationship that had never matured.

And it's an odd and immature relationship with God that doesn't mature into this way of praying to God, in a way that really honours him.

So we are taught here a God-honouring way to pray.

But we've also already seen two vital ingredients that Christian life needs. So let's step up a little closer to the picture, to see what God is saying to us in each of these.

First, **we need knowledge of God's will**.

Do you see that, half-way through verse 9? [READ].

It would be interesting to play one of those word-association games - asking: "What first comes into your mind when you hear the phrase, 'knowledge of the will of God'?"

Maybe you think of the toughest parts of life - the things you go through that most make you ask: "What is God up to? Why isn't he doing something? What is his will in all of this - and why can't I see it?".

Or maybe the phrase 'the will of God' makes you think of all the crossroads you face in life. Should I marry this person? Should I move house? Should I pack my job in and look for something else? Should I take this path in life - or another one?

Many Christians start to talk about 'knowing the will of God' in times like these. And they agonise about trying to work out exactly what God wants them to do in every situation.

But, do you see, we need to learn from the Bible, rather than from our own thoughts, what is meant here in the Bible by the phrase 'knowledge of God's will'.

And here it does not primarily refer to the tricky decisions that you have to make in life, to go this way or that way.

Of course God cares for every detail of our lives - just as a good father will gladly listen to every last detail of their child describing something funny that happened at school.

It's just that that's not what Paul is talking about here.

What he is talking about is what God planned and willed to achieve through his Son, Jesus Christ. The evidence for that is right here in Colossians.

Looking in verse 9, do you see that this knowledge of God's will comes, it says, 'through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives'?

Now turn over a page - to find the same phrase, but this time all about Jesus - 2.2 [READ 2.2-3].

The wisdom and knowledge that God supremely wants us to have are given to us through the Holy Spirit - and they are found in Christ, and they're all about him.

It's a knowledge of Jesus Christ - what he has done, what he will do, who he is - that is the knowledge that God supremely wants us to have.

If you're a committed Christian, you've already got this. Look back in chapter 1, verse 6 [READ].

You have got it - you have understood it.

Do you still have a lot of questions about what God is up to in different part of your life? Why did he do that? Why isn't he doing this?

Of course we have those questions - because right now God chooses not to show us the full picture - we walk by faith, not by sight.

It's like a little child going on a long journey with their family. They don't know where they're going. They don't understand everything that's going to be happening. But if they trust their parents then they'll happily go along, because they know that someone trustworthy knows what's going on and where the journey is leading. So too for the Christian. We don't have easy answers to every question about God's purposes in our lives. But if we know Christ then we know that we've been reconciled back to God as our Father, and we know he's leading us to an eternity with him. We know that - and that is his great will in our lives.

So what do we do now, in the confusion of life? Well, as verse 9 puts it - ask God to keep filling you with more of that knowledge of Christ that you've already got. The more certain you are about the truths about Christ you already know, the steadier your faith will be in handling the questions we can't answer right now.

Do not be one of those Christians who spends more time agonising about what they can't understand about God in their lives than they do being reassured by what they do know about Jesus Christ and his grace to them, and resting in that.

Be like the child who knows that his Dad can be trusted, and so will keep holding his hand.

But now this knowledge of God's will - this knowledge of Christ - is given to us for a purpose: it's **so that we can live a life that pleases God**. See how verse 10 follows on from verse 9 [READ verse 10].

God wants to fill you with a knowledge of Christ so that your life will be worthy of God, and so that you will please him in every way.

Every time someone confesses to God that they are not worthy of him, and accepts Jesus Christ - not first as their moral example but first of all as their saviour - their moral life begins to change.

Love for others and love for God starts to come in and elbow out just pleasing myself and my family, and God starts to be the controlling principle of life.

Do you see that knowledge of what God has done for you in Christ is the fuel for a life that pleases God? The only way to get to the life of verse 10 is through the knowledge of verse 9.

(For anyone who's not a committed Christian, that might be the key point for you this morning. Christian life starts with Christ in verse 9, not with a good life, in verse 10.)

And did you also see that verse 10 comes back to knowledge of God - 'growing in knowledge of God'?

There's a spiral here. The more we know what Christ has done for us, the more we'll live lives that please God. And that will deepen our knowledge of God - because the more you live God's truth, the better you'll know God's truth.

Some of us may hear those words about having lives that please God, and are worthy of him, and we think that we'll never get there - like a high-jump bar that keeps being inched up, out of our reach.

But Paul isn't setting an impossible standard here so that he can turn round and beat us over the head with it.

He's telling Christians what he prayed for them - what could happen - what would happen - what was already happening - if they'd understood God's grace, if they were being filled with a knowledge of what Christ had done for them, and if that knowledge was spilling out and transforming their life

If that's happening to you, then verse 10 tells you how pleasing your life is to God.

So in all this, do you see that Paul prays that these Christians will continue well - not by adding this new experience and that new spiritual truth to their lives - but by building deeper foundations into what they've already got in Christ.

It's like a good friendship. You deepen and keep it going just by going deeper into the relationship that's already there.

Christians don't need some spiritual novelty - or some brand new spiritual experience to ease the tedium they feel, or to fill the void they think is there.

We simply need to ask to be filled with more of what God's already given us through in trust in Jesus Christ.

God is so good that he's already given us all we've ever need.