



# Praying for Christians Who Are Strangers

[1:9-14]

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*“For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:9-14).*

We are looking for the answer to the question: Who is Jesus? The answer to that question is crucial because our behavior as believers will never surpass our view of Jesus. Before we hear Paul’s answer in Colossians 1:15-20, we have the unique privilege of hearing a saint at prayer. As we read 1:9-14, we are able to slip into Paul’s prayer closet and overhear the apostle on his knees, to discover that for which he prays.

The real challenge of these verses is that Paul records his prayer requests for Christians he has never met; he has only heard about them through his friend Epaphras. Does the church of which you are a part support some missionaries? If so, have you ever met them? Do you regularly pray for them and their converts? Do days, even weeks, pass when you do not mention them to God?

Paul was devoted to the ministry of intercessory prayer, even for fellow Christians whom he had never met.

## THE CUSTOM (1:9)

What can we learn about prayer for Christians whom we have never met? Paul’s custom of praying for the Colossians is striking: “For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you” (1:9a). *When* did Paul do this? Where was Paul when he wrote this? He was in jail in Rome, chained day and night to a Roman soldier. Talk about a prayer partner! Paul never had a moment to himself. Twenty-four hours a day he was bound to his jailer. Yet that did not stop the apostle from praying. It would have been so easy to make excuses, to rationalize why he could not have a quiet time with God. But Paul was not intimidated by some soldier breathing down his neck all the time. He just kept on praying.

The one reason Paul would do this is that he believed God hears and answers prayers. Therefore, he made intercessory prayer a priority in his life.

Paul told the Ephesian church, “Be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18). Later, he told Timothy, “First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority” (1 Timothy 2:1, 2a). At the end of the

letter to the Colossians, he told this young church, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving" (4:2).

In light of all these encouragements to pray, I wonder why we do not pray more than we do? If we tried to explain to Paul why we just cannot find time to be alone with God and intercede for others, he would shake his head in disbelief. For Paul, prayer was the heartbeat of the spiritual life. Here is where spiritual battles are won or lost. Though he had not met them personally, he continually lifted them up in prayer.

### THE CONTENT (1:9)

Let us notice the content of Paul's prayer for the Colossians.

Robert Fulghum wrote the 1989 best selling book entitled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Some of the important truths the author had learned in his formative years were these: share what you have, play fair, do not hit people, clean up your mess when you are through, and put things back where you found them. I was surprised that saying, "Please," and "Thank you," were not on his list. I was brought up to believe that if you did not say, "Please," and "Thank you," you did not have good manners. When we look at the content of Paul's prayers, we find that he always said, "Please," and "Thank you," to God. But for Paul, "Thank you," came before, "Please." Verses 3 through 18 are full of "Thank you"; only in verse 9 does he get to "Please." That is a good pattern for our own prayers. Before we bring the shopping list of needs we have to God, let us say, "Thank you," for everything in the situation about which we are praying that is a cause of gratitude. We should start there. It will keep our prayer lives in perspective.

Look carefully at the "Please" of Paul's prayer for the Colossians. What do you pray for when you pray for people whom you have never met? It is not enough to tell someone you know, "I'll pray for you." What should you pray for when you intercede for others?

Paul said he prayed that the church would be filled with knowledge: "And to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (1:9b).

Paul was not praying that the Colossians would be able to discover the will of God as though it were some deep dark secret to be pried

out of God. These people knew the will of God; Epaphras had taught them His will. Rather, Paul asked that they be *filled* with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and spiritual understanding.

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## "For Paul, prayer was the heartbeat of the spiritual life."

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Being "filled" is a significant idea in Colossians. Paul used it repeatedly. In the New Testament, the word "filled" means "to be controlled by." Jesus told His disciples, "Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart" (John 16:6). Jesus had just told them He was about to die. Immediately, they were filled with sorrow, that is, they were controlled by their grief. All their thoughts, all their conversations with Jesus evidenced the sorrow in their hearts.

Paul said, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). Paul's point was simple. If a man is filled with wine, he will be controlled by his drunkenness and will act foolishly, if not immorally. If he is filled with the Spirit of God, he will be controlled by that Spirit to act wisely and righteously.

When Paul prayed for the Colossians (1:9), his request was that they would come under the complete control of their knowledge of God's will. After all, is that not really our problem? Mark Twain once said, "It's not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that bothers me. It's the parts I do." We do not need more knowledge, at times. We need to put into practice the knowledge we already have.

To do that, we need divine wisdom and understanding. "Wisdom" is grasping the principles out of the knowledge we have, while "understanding" is grasping how those principles apply in our particular set of circumstances. Perhaps you are struggling with a problem on the job or you are trapped in a difficult relationship with a rebellious child and do not know

what to do. The Bible contains the knowledge you need to cope in your particular situation. What you need to pray for is the wisdom to see clearly which Bible teachings apply to your problem and for understanding to see to how they apply. When that insight and understanding come, you have what Paul calls in another place “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

That is the content of Paul’s prayer for the Colossians. He wanted them to be so dominated by God’s Word that it would control all the thoughts, affections, purposes, and plans they faced in daily life.

### THE CAUSE (1:10-14)

The cause for the petition was this: “So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects” (1:10a).

Why did Paul pray for the Colossians to be controlled by the will of God? He wanted their lifestyle to be God-honoring. Paul was always practical. True spirituality is more than a head trip; it is a way of life.

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Years ago when the Yankees perennially won the pennant, one player on the team, Bobby Richardson, observed, “When a man puts on a Yankee uniform, he probably plays 20 percent better than he really is because he is trying to live up to his uniform.” The Colossians were clothed with Christ; they found their new identity in Him as they came to know His will. Now Paul prayed that they would “live up to their uniform.” If they did, they would delight the heart of God.

Paul exhorted, “. . . learn what is pleasing to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10). That ought to be the aim of your life and mine: to please God. How can we know that every day in every way we are bringing joy to the heart of God? Paul gave four marks of the life that pleases God.

First, a worthy life before God is one that is “bearing fruit in every good work” (1:10b). Fruit-bearing is a spontaneous process. It happens inadvertently. An apple tree never strains to produce apples! Apples come naturally because that is what apple trees do. Just so, a Christian filled with the will of God naturally does what is good.

With respect to God, “bearing fruit” means we will be involved in prayer, confession, praise, adoration, and worship. With respect to other people, “bearing fruit” means we will be involved in their lives, teaching, guiding, encouraging, serving them. With respect to our own lives, “bearing fruit” means we will seek to develop purity of thought, meekness, gentleness, truthfulness, and honesty. Such good deeds are the fruit of our relationship with God.

A second evidence that we are living the worthy life is that we are “increasing in the knowledge of God” (1:10c). Paul had been praying that the Colossians would have a deeper comprehension of God’s will. Now he was saying that as they practiced what they came to understand, they would know God better than before. He would be more real to them than ever.

Have you had those times when you wanted to understand *why* God asked that something be done before you would do it? Paul’s conviction was that obedience leads to greater understanding, not the other way around. If you do the will of God, you will find yourself becoming more intimately knowledgeable of God and His ways.

A third mark of a life pleasing to God is to be “strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience” (1:11). When you are facing trying circumstances or difficult people, power is needed to handle those situations. Our natural inclination is to become upset, to scream, to lose our cool. It takes power to resist those urges when we feel them coming on, and every Christian has that power within him, given to him by the grace of God.

God is pleased when we exhibit steadfastness and patience. “Steadfastness” is a mindset which resists collapsing into despondency when circumstances go against us. “Patience” is a self-restraint which does not readily retaliate for a wrong committed against us. We learn obedience through what we suffer. Anyone can be joyful when all is going well, but God is genu-

inely delighted when we do His will even though we are facing difficulties.

The final mark of a God-pleasing life is “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:12-14). A beautiful spirit of thanksgiving pervades the life and spirit of any Christian who lives to please God.

Paul pointed out three things we have to be grateful for. First, we should be grateful *for a possession we do not deserve*. God has “qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (1:12b). This inheritance is not in the future as you might at first think. Paul had in mind all that we already enjoy because we have become children of God, such as a Father’s love, a Savior’s constant companionship, a spiritual family to love and encourage us, the certainty of justice being done when evil seems to be winning the day, all the blessings and abilities that enable us to make life a rewarding, victorious, fruitful experience. We do not deserve any of this, but God has freely provided these blessings for us through Jesus. That ought to move us to continually give Him thanks.

Second, we should be grateful *for the problems from which we have been freed*. God has “delivered us from the domain of darkness” (1:13a). What would your life be like if you had had no experience of the grace of God? John Bunyan looked

at the sinners of his day and said, “But for the grace of God, there go I.” That would be our own biography had not God rescued us from the kingdom of darkness! Who knows the magnitude of the problems we would find ourselves in if God had not liberated us from Satan’s control of our attitudes and actions? Have you thanked God for the things you have not had to experience because of His loving care for you?

Third, we need to be grateful *for the pardon we enjoy*. In Christ, “we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:14). All of us are unworthy of an intimate relationship with God; our sins have come between us and God. By virtue of the new birth, God has freed us from the guilt and condemnation that comes because of sin. Every morning Christians can begin with a clean slate. All of yesterday’s failures are washed away as we pray for forgiveness that we might have nothing against us as we begin a new day. God gives us another opportunity to learn to live a life that is worthy of the Lord and pleasing to Him in every way.

How is this possible? How can God pardon me for my failures? It is possible only because of Jesus.

## CONCLUSION

Who is this Jesus? How can He set me free from my guilt and condemnation? We now turn our attention to the answer to that question as Paul moves from prayer to a paean of praise to Jesus.

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# Applying Scripture to Life

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## *Surrender All*

A woman in a west Texas city was an invalid. From her youth she had wanted health more than anything else; but the more she desired it, the less she seemed to have. She became an anxiety-ridden invalid, filled with resentment and self-pity, a burden to herself and those about her.

One day she picked up a New

Testament and read the words of Jesus about seeking to save one’s life and losing it. Suddenly it dawned on her what she had been doing, and she exclaimed, “That’s it! I’ve been seeking desperately to save my health, and I’ve been losing it and life too.” That moment she surrendered her health to God and said, “Even if I am an invalid the rest of my life, I am willing to see the good You are bringing me and to make

the most of each hour and each day.”

She regained her health and became one of the most creative and beloved women in the community, one whose Christ-like concern for others was matched by her sweet serenity. She was well physically, but first of all she had become well within. She would have continued well within even if she had remained an invalid.