

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
October 22, 2023

## **My Prayer for You**

Colossians 1:1-14

As I've noted in today's bulletin, I'm grateful for your kindness and generosity to me last Sunday, as expressed in your card and gifts for Pastor Appreciation Month. For those who weren't here, or who may not have completely seen it, your gifts included this T-shirt that reads, THIS PASTOR HAS AN AWESOME CONGREGATION AND YES, THEY BOUGHT ME THIS SHIRT.

I can imagine Epaphras wearing a shirt like this whenever he visited the church in Colossae. He's the one who had first evangelized in the area and helped the congregation get started. From what we can tell, Paul, to whom the letter is attributed, had not at this point visited the church in person, though he may have later. Right now, though, Paul writes to the congregation from prison.

He opens this letter, as he does most of his letters, with an expression of thanks to God for these brothers and sisters in Christ. The Colossians have heard and received the gospel message, and now this message is growing and bearing fruit among them. In particular, Paul notes how the gospel has generated faith, love, and hope in their life together.

When the Colossians first heard and received the good news, a remarkable change began to take hold in their lives. They began to see how God had mounted a divine rescue operation and had taken them out from under the power of sin, death, and evil, and had moved them into a new world, a new reality where Jesus Christ holds sway. By divine mercy, the Colossians had been reconciled and restored to a right relationship with God, and had now been placed under the sovereignty of the beloved Son. They believed this news, and began to live out its implications. That was faith. And without this faith, there would be no Christians in Colossae, no church to speak of, or write to. No wonder Paul gives thanks to God for their faith.

He also gives thanks for their love. Faith in Jesus Christ, the kind of faith created by the preaching of the gospel, takes concrete form in lives of love and service. People who are living under the lordship of Jesus will show care and concern for one another, and for the larger world, in specific and practical ways. The love of God, revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ, will become visible and evident in the ways that believers sacrificially give themselves to one another. So when Paul prays, he gives thanks to God for the love that's taking shape in the church at Colossae.

And then Paul does something interesting. He says that the Colossians' faith and love are dependent on something else, namely, hope. When Paul says hope, he doesn't mean wishful thinking about the future. He means a solid sense of assurance and confidence that the rescue operation God has begun in Christ will be brought to completion when, at the end, Christ is fully revealed and the effects of his sovereignty are fulfilled in a new creation. Until then, the hope that the Colossians possess will keep on generating the faith that becomes visible in love.

From there, Paul shifts from reflecting gratefully upon the Colossians' past to petitioning God about their future. He moves from prayers of thanksgiving to prayers of intercession. Paul says that he and his coworkers pray steadily for the Colossians. Most of all, Paul says that he prays for their knowledge of God. "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" (v. 9). Though Paul uses three different terms—knowledge, spiritual wisdom, and understanding—they all have to do with essentially the same thing, namely a deeper, more comprehensive knowledge of God's will. The fact that Paul accumulates these three different words probably just indicates how important this is for him. This is his top priority when it comes to interceding for the Colossians.

Apparently some false teaching has made its way into the life of the church in Colossae. Paul and his coworkers are concerned that some in the congregation are in danger of being taken in by ideas and philosophies that undermine the sufficiency of what Christ has accomplished in his death and resurrection. They're at risk of thinking that salvation depends on human effort or the perspectives of this present world. That's part of why Paul concludes today's text by reminding the Colossians that the gospel is the only solid ground for lasting hope. "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (v. 14). God the Father really has accomplished this. Christ really has done this for you. This is what you believed.

But it takes others praying for you in order for you to grasp more completely what Christ has done for you, and what this means for the circumstances, choices, and challenges of life in this present world as we await the world to come. In other words, the prayers of others for you is part of how God works to keep you grounded in the hope of Christ. And among those praying for you is myself. I treat this as one of the most essential and critical parts of being your pastor.

I've shared before about how, shortly after beginning my ministry here at Grace Baptist Church, I wrote a newsletter article emphasizing the role of prayer in a pastor's work. I highlighted the fact that in my covenant with you, I intended to be a praying pastor. But when the newsletter was actually printed, the "a" in praying was accidentally left out. So rather than being a "praying pastor," it appeared that I intended to be a "prying pastor." At that point, some of you may have been wondering how I planned to nose my way into your life and your business.

The good news is that for the most part, that hasn't been necessary. Throughout our more than 22 years together, I haven't had to do much prying. You've opened your doors, your hearts, and your lives to me and welcomed the ministry of Christ that I can share with you. I know that you join me in giving thanks for how the Lord has worked, in a multitude of ways, to weave us together as pastor and people, and to strengthen our bond with Christ and with each other.

As your pastor, I prayerfully give thanks to God for the faith, the love, and the hope, the fruit of the gospel, that continues to emerge in your lives, individually and together. And in keeping with what Paul says, I not only pray with gratitude about you, but also pray for you. As I stressed, one of the primary responsibilities of my daily ministry is to intercede for you. I recall hearing a story about a pastor who was praying in his church office one morning and a prominent member of the congregation called. The secretary told the gentleman that the pastor was busy praying right now. "Praying!" said the church member. "Shouldn't he be working?"

The work of the gospel includes the work of prayer. In my daily prayers, I give thanks for all of you, especially for the faith, love, and hope that are taking shape in your lives, individually and together. These things are generated by the power of God, the effectiveness of the gospel, in you. And each day, in addition to thanking God for you, I hold you before him, asking him to give you the kinds of things that are in keeping with what we hear in today's text.

Most of all, I ask God "to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." That's a very rich and eloquent summary of what you and I need each day in order to live according to the truth of the gospel. Basically, it means that I pray that God will fill you with a perception of his will, a daily understanding of what is spiritually important. I pray that God will enable you to discern what he wants in all the moment by moment experiences, opportunities, challenges, and choices that you face. Whether in your home, on the road, at your workplace, in the marketplace, at the doctor's office, at your school, in the public square, or at the church, you and I need spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that we can know how to follow Jesus where we are, in our particular context. So I pray that God will help you know and understand, day in and day out, what it means to live under the reign of Christ.

As I your pastor pray for you, I pray for you as whole persons, as people redeemed by God in Christ and being remade in the image of Christ. As one commentator has pointed out, you and I not only have to be reborn but also retrained.<sup>1</sup> Over time and through experience, we need to develop our spiritual discernment. We need to mature in our understanding of the gospel. That's what I pray for when I hold you before the Lord. I ask God to help you grow in knowing him, in a deep and personal way. While I certainly pray about many things that are going on in your life, such as your health and your material needs and well-being, I pray about more than just the exterior parts of your life. Above all, I pray about your interior life, your spiritual well-being and progress.

This doesn't mean that the Christian life is only about what happens on the inside of you. I'm not just praying that you'll get gospel-centered ideas about God into your head and your heart. I'm also praying that your gospel-centered understanding of God will come to expression in gospel-centered living. In our text, Paul tells the Colossians, "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,... (v. 10). Knowledge of God, for its own sake, isn't the goal. Spiritual wisdom, for its own sake, isn't the goal. Understanding, for its own sake, isn't the goal. The goal is a way of life that's pleasing to the Lord, a life in which your attitudes and actions correspond with his values and the priorities of his kingdom.

I pray for you, that in all the events, experiences, relationships, and tasks of your daily lives, you'll be able to discern what is consistent with the good news of Jesus Christ and what isn't consistent with the good news of Jesus Christ. In other words, to be able to tell what is gospel from what isn't gospel. To be able to recognize what's faithful to the way of Jesus and what isn't faithful to the way of Jesus. I pray that as you exercise spiritual wisdom, it will yield in you a life of doing good, a life that reflects the reign of Christ.

I know that in and of yourselves, and in and of myself, this isn't possible. That's why we need, as Paul says, to be "strengthened with all power according to his glorious might" (v. 11). Only by the power of the Holy Spirit, God's personal presence at work in us, are we able to discern spiritually and live spiritually. So I pray that you will have both the knowledge of God and the power of God. I pray that you will be strengthened by the Lord to face whatever happens to you with perseverance and patience. I pray that you will be

filled with more of the joy of the gospel. I pray that you will grow more fully into the new reality we inhabit because of Christ. There's plenty of pastor appreciation going on this month, and that includes this pastor's appreciation for you. I give thanks to God for you, and I pray for you. Day by day, I pray that you'll be transformed more and more into the image of Christ, living a life of faith, love, and hope, for God's glory.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Wall, *Colossians & Philemon*. IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1993) 51.