



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

A Different Kind of Prayer

Colossians 1.9-14

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Introduction

In a lesson he presented at a church where I was serving at the time, Derek McNamara asked us to think about how the prayers we hear compare with those we read in the New Testament. He pointed out that we are much more focused on “the sick” and similar concerns than they were; in fact, such concerns often comprise the entirety of our prayer request lists today.

He also shared that he had grown up outside our fellowship and in another country. That’s helpful because seeing ourselves as others see us helps us look at things we would not otherwise consider. That is especially useful when an issue is harder to talk about. This one is harder, not least because there is biblical merit for congregational prayer for the sick (James 5.13ff.) and those enduring other distress (Acts 12.5). The question, then, is whether such concerns ought to be as prominent, whether they should be *the* focal point of our prayers, as they often are. Even as we continue to include such requests, shouldn’t we be growing to the point that our prayers are more like those of Scripture’s faith giants?

Paul’s prayer in Colossians 1 is an example to emulate, especially when we think about it in light of the complete development of his thought in 1.9-23, which we can only summarize here.

- In 1.21-23, he emphasizes that believers have been transformed from being “alienated and hostile in mind” to being “holy and blameless and above reproach before him.”
- In 1.15-20, he shows that this is possible only because of the reconciliation brought about by the preeminent Christ, the creator and sustainer of the universe who is also head of the church. He is the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”
- In 1.9-14, he emphasizes that our goal should be to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,” valuing the blessing of a share in the divine inheritance and our change of status.

Meditating on and applying the specifics of the prayer he models in verses 9-14 can help us learn to offer prayers that are more comprehensive in scope than many of those we often hear.

We need to know our spiritual status (1.12-14)

These verses remind us that important ideas often cannot be captured with only one or two words. Paul uses four important terms to refer to the spiritual status of believers. Each has a

rich Old Testament background. Together, they imply a depth to his teaching that we will be wise to factor into our thinking and prayers.

First, in verse 12, he says that we who believe are “qualified ... to share in the *inheritance* (κλήρος; *klēros*) of the saints.” In view of the Old Testament background that singles out Israel as the recipient of an inheritance from God,¹ it is noteworthy here that Gentiles are included among those who are part of the possessed and called community of God (cf. Acts 26.18).²

Second, in verse 13, he says that we who believe have been “*delivered* (ῥύομαι, *hruomai*) from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of his beloved Son.” *Hruomai*, which has essentially the same meaning as σῶζω (*sōzō*, “to save”), was used in the LXX to refer to the exodus deliverance (Exod 12.27; 14.30). The core idea is liberation. In Colossians 1, that deliverance is from “anti-divine powers.”³

Third, in verse 14, Paul says that we who believe have “*redemption*” (ἀπολύτρωσις, *apolutrōsis*) in Christ, God’s “beloved Son” (v. 13). This compound word, derived from the verb λυτρόω (*lutroō*), “to free by paying a ransom, *redeem*,”⁴ was used in the LXX to refer to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt (Deut 7.8; 9.26; 13.5; 15.15; Pss 74.2; 77.15 [16 in LXX]) and Babylon (Isa 41.14; 43.1, 14; 44.22-24; 52.3). Its use here would have likely served to remind Paul’s readers of those signature events.⁵

Fourth, also in verse 14, Paul says that we who believe have “the *forgiveness* (ἄφεσις, *aphesis*) of sins.” The idea involved in this word is that of having a debt or legal relationship cancelled. The phrase is used in verse 14 in apposition to “redemption,” and thus explains the means and significance of the liberation inherent in that word.

These brief definitions barely introduce the depth and nuances of the ideas the words convey. And given the overly simplified language to refer to being saved that is often used today, digging deeper into and meditating on these words may stretch us. But for the sake of deeper spiritual growth, we should commit ourselves to make the effort.

We need to be growing in our understanding and practice (1.10-11)

In verse 11, Paul prays for the Colossians to be strengthened according to the “glorious might” of God in order to have “endurance and patience with joy.”

In asking this, he is explaining the implications of the petition in verses 9-10—that the wisdom and understanding of God’s will they develop will result in them “walk[ing] in a manner worthy of the Lord.” That walk, or lifestyle (cf. NIV), has a twofold goal: (1) to be “fully pleasing

¹ See Exod 6.8; Num 16.14; 18.20; Deut 10.9; Josh 14.2-4; Jer 51.19; also the intertestamental Sirach 24.12; 44.23; 45.22. These are just some of the texts where the LXX uses a form of *klēros*. For more on the term, see J. H. Freidrich, “κλήρος,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (EDNT)*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 2:299-300.

² Christianity has been seen as a Gentile faith for so long that many find it hard to appreciate this point.

³ See Hermann Lichtenberger, “ῥύομαι,” *EDNT* 3:214.

⁴ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 606.

⁵ See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 80-81.

to" God; and (2) to live so they will be "bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (v. 10).

We need to know and use what it takes to grow in understanding and practice (1.9-10).

Verses 9-10 show how the goal set forth in verses 10-11 is to be accomplished.

Notice, first, Paul's repetition in verse 10 of the phrase "bearing fruit and increasing" from verse 6.⁶ In both verses, the envisioned fruit bearing and growth result from learning and doing the will of God. Verse 6 continues the thought begun in verse 5, where the focus is on "the gospel, the word of truth" that they had heard and that was being spread. As noted above, in verse 10, bearing fruit and growth are expected to be part of the life of one who is "walk[ing] in a manner worthy of the Lord." That walk will result from being "filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v. 10).

Thus, as he prays for the Colossians' growth, Paul closely connects Christian living and spiritual growth with an increasing knowledge of the word, God's will. That focus on teaching and depth of understanding is an important theme in the rest of the foundation section of the letter.

- As we saw above, the four terms used in verses 12-14 to refer to the change in spiritual status all have rich and deep theological meaning.
- Verses 15-20 call on the readers to consider the teaching about Jesus.
- In verses 21-22, he reminds them that they were no longer "alienated and hostile in mind," but had been "reconciled" and were thus "holy and blameless."
- Verse 23 calls on them to consider the implications of "continuing in the faith" and "not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard."
- In verses 24-27, they are to reflect on what it meant for Paul to complete their knowledge of Jesus.
- Finally, in 2.1-5, he calls on them to reflect on growing more in hopes of "reach[ing] all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ" (v. 2).

Continuing to teach and witnessing their growth in such things is how Paul defined his goal, as he says in 1.28-29.

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Conclusion

To pray in ways that reflect deeper theological concerns instead of simply vocalizing "prayer requests," we must commit ourselves to offering prayers that are more theologically informed. We will do well to begin by praying and living the ideas in Colossians 1.9-14.

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⁶ Both verses 6 and 10 use the identical Greek phrase, consisting of the participles, καρποφορούμενον και αύξανόμενον (*karpophoroumenon kai auxanomenon*).