

# *“Lord Teach Us To Pray”*

## **A Study in the Exposition of the Prayers of Paul: Colossians 1<sup>1</sup> Two Week Study Guide**

### **Week One**

#### **Scripture**

Colossians 1:9-14

#### **Introduction**

Paul’s letter to the Colossians gives significant attention to his labor and desire to see Christ completed in them, and he establishes the introductory foundation of the book with a clear emphasis on prayer: testifying to his praying for them and then unpacking what that looks like too. However, what one does not discover until the concluding greetings of the book is that one of their own has distinguished himself not as a wealthy man, not as an athlete, not as a cultural celebrity, but as a man who labors for them in prayer. What Paul is expressing doctrinally throughout the book, Epaphras is executing in the labor of prayer for them. “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.”<sup>2</sup> I would not doubt for a moment that Paul would also be identified as struggling in prayer for others – he has effectively testified to this. But there is a particular sweetness to this faithful brother in their company who is known so little from his few references in Scripture, but is forever known as one who struggles on bended knee for a church that he loves that they might stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

### **AN EXAMINATION OF THE TEXT’S ELEMENTS**

#### **1:1-2, Greetings from a man who bends the knee for you.**

Paul opens the letter with a familiar greeting: identifying himself and the office that God has entrusted to him as an Apostle (by the will of God). He also introduces and affirms those who are with him and are affirming the letter and its included truths, doctrines, principles, precepts, and commands.

Paul also addresses those to whom he is writing, an assembled gathering or body of believers in Christ at Colossae.

Then, having identified himself, his companions, and the recipients there is an opening blessing rooted in the kindness of God toward the beloved, a people who are recipients of both divine grace and divine peace. These are blessings that the Creator God and Lord of all alone could extend and apply to their lives, and he has and generously continues to do just that.

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by David Crowe for Pray’s Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School

ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 4:12

**1:3-8, Praying out of affection for  
Christ's Church – even those known only by testimony.**

Paul then begins with a wonderfully kind exhortation to the church of Colossae and it is rooted in thanksgiving and prayer. These truths in 1:3 (which operate in tandem with one another) are what all that is included in 1:4-8 grow out of.

Now, before examining how 1:4-8 will develop and further unpack 1:3, we need to first understand what is being stated in 1:3 and recognize that there is a credible difference of conclusion among respectable translations, This difference impacts what is being communicated in this verse which the following will build off.

The primary translation difference among the better English translations here is whether "always" is modifying "we thank" or "we pray."

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you...."  
Colossians 1:3 ESV

"We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you...."  
Colossians 1:3 NET Bible

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you...."  
Colossians 1:3 HCSB

"We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you...."  
Colossians 1:3 NASB

"We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you...."  
Colossians 1:3 NKJV

Grammatically "always" has the capacity to modify either "thanks" or "praying", however the decision is not left to one's preference. There was an intention that the term "always" was to modify one word or the other when the letter was written. So, one of the ways that we can be aided in this process of determining likely intent is to examine like or parallel texts.

David W. Pao has provided a list of "like" texts in which we can observe that Paul had a consistent pattern of expressing giving "thanks always" in the introduction to letters.<sup>3</sup>

"I give thanks to my God always for you..." 1 Corinthians 1:4

"We give thanks to God always for all of you..." 1 Thessalonians 1:2

"We ought always to give thanks to God for you..." 2 Thessalonians 1:3

"I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers..." Philemon 4

This pattern is effectively the same in both the NASB and NKJV translations of these "like texts" so there appears to be reasonable grounds to conclude that here, in Colossians 1:3, "always" is modifying "thanks," a conclusion that informs how both the immediate verse and its unpacking is to be understood.

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<sup>3</sup> Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Colossians & Philemon; David W. Pao; Zondervan, 2012, Pg.50

So, while it is clear from reading the various letters of Paul that he was a man of vigorous and constant prayer, here the emphasis was on his giving thanks to God for these believers - *giving thanks as a pattern in his prayers* for the Colossians was the emphasis here. With Paul's constant thanksgiving in prayer to God for the Colossians in view, the following sections can be further examined: 1:4, The Context of Paul's Thanksgiving in Prayer, 1:5-8, The Reason for Paul's Thanksgiving in Prayer.

#### **1:4, The Context of Paul's Thanksgiving in Prayer**

Paul and Timothy did not directly participate in the planting of the church in Colossae, but the church's corporate testimony had reached them. The Colossian church was identified as a people who had submitted in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Colossian church was also identified as a people who bore the fruit of faith, namely they loved others redeemed in Christ. So, the testimony that reached Paul and Timothy was that these were genuine Christians and this was the catalyst for Paul's pattern of thanksgiving in prayer for them as he will develop in the next section.

#### **1:5-8, The Reason for Paul's Thanksgiving in Prayer**

In 1:5 Paul articulates the reason for his pattern of thanksgiving in his prayers for the Colossian church: because of the hope laid up for them in heaven - a hope that was wholly secured in the gospel. Their redemption in Christ was the means of his thanksgiving.

In 1:6-8, Paul speaks to the testimony of their having heard and received the gospel of Christ. Paul affirms the following elements of their testimony:

- 1) The gospel that they have placed their faith in is the same gospel that redeems all other believers in Christ (it was not Paul's gospel, it was not Peter's gospel, it was not a regionally sensitive gospel, but it was the gospel of Christ which remains the same and is effective everywhere it is declared and received).
- 2) The gospel that they have placed their faith in is a fruit bearing gospel - it effectually works in the hearts of those who believe and this work manifests itself by believers' love for one another and obedient submission to the truth.
- 3) Epaphras, himself a faithful minister and a man mighty in prayer, provided personal affirmation of their progress and love.

#### **1:9-14, Instructions from Paul's Petitions and Thanksgiving for the Colossian Church**

Now, with this foundation of thanksgiving established Paul transitions, in 1:9-14, to how he was praying for these affirmed brothers and sisters in the Lord.

First, Paul provides an element of personal testimony regarding his serving the Colossians through prayer. In 1:9 we observe that Paul and his companions have not only consistently prayed with thanksgiving in their prayers for the Colossians, but they have also consistently been praying. He states that from the time of the Colossians' testimony having reached them, they have been stirred to action, not ceasing to pray for them.

Also in 1:9 Paul shares how he is praying for them before developing the reason for this matter of prayer in 1:10-12 and then finishing in 1:12-14 with expressing a worshipful articulation of the work of salvation.

## **The Elements of Paul's Prayer:**

1:9

Thanksgiving was consistent from the time that he was made aware of their testimony.

1:9

Petition for spiritual maturing: knowledge of God's will (articulated in/through the Scriptures) in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (supernatural insight and understanding provided by the Spirit of God).

Paul is effectively praying that by God's help they would be mighty in the Scriptures and that the Scriptures so informing their life would transform their thinking, insight, and application to life's nuanced elements.

1:10

The reason for this petition is so that they might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, being fully pleasing to him.

The provided reason informs the expressed petition: knowledge of God's will with all spiritual wisdom and understanding is the means by which they might walk worthy of the Lord and thereby be pleasing to him.

1:10-12

Paul provides four elements of walking in a worthy manner and fully pleasing to God:

- 1) Bearing fruit in every good work (they are executing good works and seeing the returns thereof).
- 2) Increasing in the knowledge of God (that which begets the whole of this process is also further increased/matured as a result).
- 3) Strengthened with all power according to his glorious might (humbly posturing oneself to receive God's supernatural and sovereign enablement for all endurance and patience with joy).
- 4) Giving thanks to the Father who has redeemed you (replicating the disposition of gratefulness that Paul modeled and joyfully affirming God's kind gift and work).

1:12-14

The final element of Paul's prayer was giving thanks to the Father, and he finishes 1:12 and continues through 1:13-14 by expressing the means by which our magnificent inheritance has been made secure: through deliverance and through redemption. The Father has delivered us – who are united with the saints in light – from the domain of darkness, and he has transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. In the Son we have redemption by the forgiveness of our sins.

**Reflection and Application**

Too often we are expressing that we are struggling with prayer... what might you do to be more like Epaphras and struggle not “with” prayer, but “in” prayer – serving the beloved of God in the process?

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Note that Paul's reason(s) for always thanking God in prayer for them was not for a reciprocating benefit that he would derive from their life of faithfulness or even their good testimony. He was not even the immediate tool for this church's establishment and likely had not even made direct contact with them at this time, and yet he was praying for them and was always giving thanks in his prayers because of their redemption in Christ and their progress and maturing faith.

For whom are you making it a pattern to give thanks for, and are you restricting this to persons who you anticipate/expect to receive a return from in some regard?

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Of the four elements identified in 1:10-12, which ones are you excelling in and which ones are areas of deficiency or struggle? How might you improve these fundamental elements in pleasing God?

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## **Week Two**

### **AN EXAMINATION OF THE TEXT'S PRINCIPLES**

**“Paul asks God to fill believers with the knowledge of his will.”<sup>4</sup>**

Paul prays that the Colossians will be filled with the knowledge of God’s will and he speaks of the will of God as that which is discerned by principle and precept from the Scriptures. However, it is a common contemporary problem to treat the will of God as something that must be discerned with razor sharp precision and by mystical means of affirmation through contrived conditions and self-designed helps. Carson speaks to this pursuit of discerning the will of God with such “precision” and gently rebukes that which effectively detracts from what is plainly observed in the Scriptures as God’s will for every believer.

“There are many ways in which the Lord does lead us, and we should not despise them. Nevertheless this focus is quite misleading, perhaps even dangerous, for it encourages me to think of ‘the Lord’s will’ primarily in terms of my future, my vocation, my needs—and that is often another form of self-centeredness, no matter how piously put. Worse, it expunges from my consciousness the dominant ways in which the Bible speaks of the will of the Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

Carson continues with the plain reality that the Lord has revealed his will to us through the Scriptures and such was the implicit understanding of others who have preceded us, including the psalmists. “The psalmist does not here encourage us to find God’s will, for he assumes it is already known. Rather, he is concerned with performance of that will. When he says ‘Teach me,’ he does not say, ‘Teach me your will,’ but ‘Teach me *to do* your will.”<sup>6</sup>

God’s will predominantly comes down to faithfully operating with a renewed mind – a truth rich mind that is seeking to apply wisdom to general choices that are not directly informed by Scripture.

**“The purpose of Paul’s petition is that believers might be utterly pleasing to the Lord Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>**

“If we are to join Paul in his petition, we will have to align ourselves with his motives: ‘And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.’ In thought, word, and deed, in action and in reaction, I must be asking myself, ‘What would Jesus have me do? What is speech or conduct worthy of him? What sort of speech or conduct in this context should I avoid, simply because it would shame him? What would please him the most?’”<sup>8</sup>

Agreeing with Carson, I have found that the truer application of the will of God is not seeking to discern it so much as it is executing it faithfully. Further, it is likely that more of our petitions regarding clarity in God’s will should be transitioned to petitions for help to carrying out that which is already sufficiently clear.

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<sup>4</sup> A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Praying with Paul; D.A. Carson; Baker Academic, 2014; (Hereafter: Carson), Pg.80

<sup>5</sup> Carson, Pg.81

<sup>6</sup> Carson, Pg.81

<sup>7</sup> Carson, Pg.84

<sup>8</sup> Carson, Pgs.85-86

**Paul sketches, in terms of four characteristics, what a life pleasing to the Lord looks like (1:10b-14).<sup>9</sup>**

Bearing Fruit: "...Paul cannot imagine anyone being pleasing to Christ without fruitfulness in good works."<sup>10</sup>

Before God, a pleasing life is a fruitful life – one that manifests the labors in obedience expected of a child of God.

Growing in Knowledge: "To learn something of God's will and to use such knowledge to live a life worthy of the Master and utterly pleasing to him, is to engage in the business of obedience. But as you get busy in the business of obedience, you get to know God better. That in turn impels you to more obedience, which in turn opens up new vistas in the knowledge of God and his will. Of course, as your knowledge of God and his will improves, you are driven to greater obedience. Such obedience is one point of access to greater knowledge of God; and on, and on, and on..."<sup>11</sup>

Effectively this comes down to growing in grace, and truth begets growing in grace and truth.

Strengthened for Endurance and Patience: "'Great endurance and patience': the expression suggests both the kind of stamina that gets under a burden and carries it with enduring fortitude, and the kind of stamina that knows how to possess its soul in patience."<sup>12</sup>

Such qualities must mark the life of a believer – a life that is identified both as a race we are running and as an exile.

Joyful Thanksgiving: "...to live a life worthy of Jesus Christ is to overflow with joyful thanksgiving in the light of the salvation we have received at his hand."<sup>13</sup>

Paul began his treatment of prayer by testifying of his own consistency in thanksgiving in prayer for the Colossians and he finishes with a final exhortation that they too be a people of prayerful thanksgiving, and he provided the most immediate means for our thanksgiving: redemption in Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> Carson, Pg.86

<sup>10</sup> Carson, Pg.86

<sup>11</sup> Carson, Pg.87

<sup>12</sup> Carson, Pg.88

<sup>13</sup> Carson, Pg.89

## **Reflection and Application**

Carson had some challenging things to say about the “will of God” and the contemporary indulgence of seeking that it be defined with an accuracy beyond what Scripture offers. How does this impact your thinking about the “will of God” and subsequently how does it affect your prayers?

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Paul was uniquely busy in the work that the Lord had entrusted him: traveling great distances and to challenging places, evangelistically sharing the gospel, discipling new and mature believers, establishing local churches, shepherding, dispatching co-workers, and even financially supporting himself through tent-making. Yet, he not only disciplined his life in such a way that he could say with sincerity to so many people and to so many churches that he was praying for them and laboring for them in prayer, but he also secured a means to receive sufficient testimony to know how to pray for them. Even to this precious church, which he neither planted nor had the opportunity to personally visit up to this time, he writes that he has been constantly giving thanks to God in prayer on account of the testimony that he has received about them.

Now, with this in view I am going to expand the matter of application with a significant measure of generosity, but in a way that I think is acceptable and speaks to an area of general deficiency in our culture.

Think about how much joy so very many persons in the church have in John 3:16. Consider also how frequently you have heard the missional calls of Jesus from Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. Look at these texts once more and think carefully about where, geographically, the words were spoken and consider where you are on the globe at this very moment.<sup>14</sup>

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”  
Matthew 28:18-20

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:8

Having examined these texts, now consider the fact that these charges were issued from Israel, and over the course of two thousand years the gospel has advanced through an extraordinary number of lands, terrains, language barriers, and peoples. The charge to be

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<sup>14</sup> The approximately distance between Jerusalem, Israel to Atlanta, USA is 6,440 miles.



witnesses in Jerusalem was executed, in all Judea was executed, in Samaria was executed, and to the ends of the earth also executed. Consider your present geography, you who dwell distances beyond the New Testament believer's imagination. So, am I making an argument that the commissioning work of missions is completed? No, I am making no such assertion. But what I want to help you see is that we have popularized a fallacy that our home town is "Jerusalem" our neighboring areas are "Judea" and so on.... No, Jerusalem is Jerusalem, Judea is Judea, Samaria is Samaria, and where you live, work, and worship is among the ends of the earth from these stated locations. The work of missions most certainly continues, but do not fail to see and appreciate that the Lord has his people all over this world too, and they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They constitute our redeemed family and their testimonies bear hearing and upon hearing they should and must inform and fuel our prayers for Christ's Church throughout the nations. Do not say that you cherish Jesus' statement in Matthew 28 that states that we are to make disciples of all nations if you do not also give thanks to God for the disciples that are already made among hundreds of nations at present. Do not say that you rejoice in God expressing his love for the world in John 3 if you do not also rejoice that he has called a people to himself throughout this world. Finally, how do you presently find opportunity to worship in the revelation of future glory in the new song expressed in Revelation 5:9-10 that declares Christ redeeming a people from every tribe, language, people, and nation if you do not now rejoice in their present salvation, their enduring testimony, their struggles, joy and progress in the faith? We would do well to widen our view of God's Church, to seek out the testimony of our family in the faith beyond our present culture, and to respond with thanksgiving for a people that we have not and may never meet on this earth.

Is the testimony of God's people and their faithful submission to a joyful life in Christ sufficient enough for you to make the commitment to a pattern of thanksgiving in prayer for them?

Reflect on this and express how you presently rejoice in the testimony of the larger church or how you might better posture yourself to hear the church's testimony and begin praying with thanksgiving for them.

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Is having a world-wide view of the church simply romanticizing missions or should a view to the church in other nations and cultures impact my thinking and praying? Write out your thoughts and how this will or will not impact your prayer life.

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Ethnocentrism is defined by dictionary.com as follows:<sup>15</sup>

noun

1. *Sociology*. the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own ethnic group or culture.
2. a tendency to view alien groups or cultures from the perspective of one's own.

Is ethnocentrism consistent with a biblical worldview? Do your prayers reflect your conviction on this subject or is there need of a measure of repentance?

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If discerning God's will is predominately a discipline of becoming stronger in the Scriptures – applying what is plainly instructed and seeking wisdom rooted in principles and precepts for what is not plainly instructed, then how does this impact my praying for God's will to be accomplished?

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What areas of your life are presently contrary to the plain and clearly articulated will of God? Will praying about them bring them into alignment or will it require prayer and acts of intentional effort to change?

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<sup>15</sup> Information accessed and secured from dictionary.com on 061217 – precise link at time of access: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/ethnocentric?s=t>

How can you pray requesting for the will of God to be accomplished in your life if/when there are matters plainly in contrast to the will of God and yet you do nothing about them? Might you not be obstructing your own prayers?

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Carson makes a profitable observation regarding the enduring nature of some requests and the need to make them perennial items on our lists.

“The point to be emphasized here is that there are some things for which we should not stop praying. Some books on prayer so urgently advocate making specific prayer requests that this broader perspective is overlooked. When Paul tells the Colossians that he has ‘not stopped prayer for them,’ he implies that there are some things for which we must pray again and again. Prayer is God’s appointed means for appropriating the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus. Many of the best of those blessings we need again and again, and so we must constantly ask....”<sup>16</sup>

Have you maintained a short-sighted view of prayer? Are you one who only prays in view of the immediate and the most demanding elements of life and faith, or do you pray in view of both the immediate and the enduring, or as Carson expressed, matters that require constant petition? Reflect on how this should shape your prayer life, what might you do to mature in this area or maintain a healthy balance.

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*Final Reflection and Application, and Conclusion on Next Page*

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<sup>16</sup> Carson, Pg.78

While having just addressed the matter of needing to give some matters of prayer consistent attention there are likely already some matters that you already pray for consistently. Are these subjects that have been prayed for out of habit or out of meditative reflection on the glories of Christ, the life of obedience, and a view of our blessed hope to come? Are there some requests that you need to better knit with biblical truths or some that you need to dismiss as prayers only of habit?

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Laboring in prayer is not a simple task – it involves disciplines that must be matured in, time that must be set aside, and biblical theology that needs to be learned and marinated in the mind. It is a worthwhile task for those who will give themselves to it – costing very much and yielding in return even more. May the Lord give you grace as you mature in this most necessary area of the Christian life.