

Paul's Prayer for Our Need

Colossians 1:1-14

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it is good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you would join us this morning, and you are joining us in the first Sunday of a new series in the Book of Colossians. So we're in the New Testament Book of Colossians, so if you have a Bible, you can turn there to Colossians 1. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs in front of you, and you can find our passage on page 981, or you can follow along on the screens, because we'll have the passage there as well. But since this is the first week in a new series, it's good for us to take just a moment and to orient ourselves to this book of the Bible.

I'm sure some of you have read it before, maybe you're familiar with it, maybe you've studied it. Others of us, maybe this is the first time we've opened up to this portion of God's Word, and so it's important for us to know a little bit about it. And so what we need to know is that this was written by the Apostle Paul, and he's writing to a church that he's never actually met. So this is a little bit unique, because oftentimes when Paul is writing a letter, he's writing to maybe a fellow laborer like Timothy or Titus, or he's writing to a church that he helped plant or start, that he's familiar with, like 1st or 2nd Corinthians, or Ephesians, or Philippians. But here with Colossians, Paul's never been there. He hasn't interacted with these people, he doesn't know their faces, he's only heard their names through his fellow worker, fellow laborer, Epaphras. You see, this church was planted by Epaphras, and over the years, somewhere along the way, we're not sure when, but Epaphras has been talking to Paul, and been sharing with Paul about this church, about how it's growing, how it's facing various challenges, what's occurring within the life of the church. And so Paul's writing to them. He's writing to them from prison, and we're not sure which of his imprisonments he's writing from, right? There's a number of them, you can read about them in Acts, but historically and traditionally, we have thought that he's probably writing from his time in prison in Rome.

And so what this means is this is one of his later letters. And he's writing to them because there are these philosophies and ideas that have started to seep into the church, that are devaluing the importance and significance of Jesus. And instead, these philosophies and ideas are emphasizing a need for heavenly wisdom, or secret knowledge. In fact, it's kind of like what would later come to be known as Gnosticism. It's not Gnosticism yet, because that doesn't appear until many, many years after Paul is dead, but it's kind of like a proto-Gnosticism, where the people are encouraged to move on beyond the things of this world, physicality, and the things that we experience, and what we need to achieve is some sort of heavenly, or secret, or enlightened knowledge. That's what's seeping into the church, and Paul's writing to them to encourage them and to tell them that what their greatest need is, above anything else, is Jesus. In fact, so much so that some theologians have referred to Colossians as the most Christ-focused of the New Testament letters. Now, that might be a little bit of hyperbole, because all the New Testament letters point to Christ, right? But we get the point.

Paul is presenting to them and to us that what we need, more than anything else, is Christ. Okay, that's a little bit of background. I'm sure as we go through this series over the next few

months, there'll be other bits of background, but that's probably sufficient for now. So, let's go ahead and dive into our passage, and we'll read Colossians 1, beginning in verse 1.

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has 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.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can come to your word and we ask now that you would help us to open our eyes to behold your goodness. Father, we ask that by your Spirit you would meet with us, that you would give us understanding, that you would increase our knowledge, and that everything that is said and done here would honor you. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

So, the other week I was having lunch with a friend. It was just a normal lunch, casual. There was nothing earth-shaking. There was nothing groundbreaking. There was nothing mind-blowing about our lunch, our conversation. It was just a normal kind of catch-up. How are things going? Let's reconnect a little bit. And as the lunch was ending and we were getting ready to go to our different places, my friend stopped and said, “Well, what do you need?” *What do you need?* And I have to tell you, in that moment, I was taken back a little bit. I was kind of surprised that he would ask me this question. It was innocent enough, but it kind of threw me for a loop, and it was a little bit disorienting because I can't remember being asked that directly about my need, right? He didn't ask, “Is there anything you need? Is there anything I can do?” He simply said, “What do you need?” And that implied to me that I clearly have some sort of need he's aware of. If he would have said, *what do you need? Or how can I help you? Or is there anything I can do for you?*, then I could have processed that a little bit and realized, *well, I'm not a needy person. I don't need anything. I'm perfectly fine.* But “What do you need?” It kind of was unsettling.

And the first thing that ran through my mind that I didn't say out loud was *I need nothing*. I didn't know how to respond to him. Because in that moment, and honestly, in most moments of my life, I don't want to be in need. And I don't want to be known as someone who is in need or is needy. And yet, as I was thinking about that, the truth is that every time that I ask for prayer for myself, or every time I pray for myself, or I pray for someone else, I am praying because in that moment, that thing that I'm praying about means I have need. Right? I'm praying for God's patience, for his direction, for his strength, for his leading, for his wisdom. By praying for it, it implies that I don't have it. That I am in need. And the truth is, it's not just me that's in need, but we all are. We're all in need. And Colossians 1 is helping us to see what that need is.

Gospel Rootedness

We see it through Paul's prayer for the Colossians. Now, as we come to Colossians 1, there are kind of multiple ways we could approach this passage. We could approach it from the standpoint of associating ourselves with Paul, and saying, this is the model prayer for people in need. So, we could approach it that way, and there'd be nothing wrong with that. It'd be totally appropriate. Pastors have done this, you know, many, many times over. Totally fine. Or we could approach it by associating ourselves with the Colossians and seeing that maybe this is a prayer for our need. So I'm going to take the second way. We're going to look at it by associating ourselves with the Colossians and seeing that Paul is praying not only for their need, but for ours. And what our need is, is gospel-rootedness and gospel-fruitfulness. Those are the two things that we're in need of. Gospel-rootedness and gospel-fruitfulness. And we see the rootedness in the Gospel in the three things that Paul points out in verses 3-5. He says, "We always thank God when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, the love you have for all the saints, and because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." So, you hear it, right? Paul's heart is stirred with thanksgiving when he hears about their faith, love, and hope. Those are the things that root us in the gospel. Faith, love, and hope.

a) Faith

Now, faith isn't just some kind of nebulous, rootless trusting in anything. Faith is specific. Did you see that? Paul didn't just say "Faith", he said "Faith in Christ Jesus." Faith in Christ Jesus. Now, look, we're in church, and maybe you've, you know, you're familiar with the ministry here at CTK. Maybe you've been coming for a while. Maybe you've listened to some of the sermons from time to time online, whatever it might be. But we're in church, and so you're going to expect at some point we're going to talk about faith in Jesus, right? Like, we're at least going to say that phrase because faith is a very churchy thing, and it's a very important churchy thing. And because we're familiar with it, it's easy for us to hear faith in Christ and just be like, *okay, I know, faith in Christ*, but let's get a little bit deeper. Let's get to something meatier, something more theological.

But don't move so quickly off faith. Now, in fact, we don't want to bypass this. We want to actually sit with it for at least a second, because the truth is that there are many things we can put our faith in. We shouldn't presume that we have put it in Christ, because there are many things we're invited to put our faith in. Other religions, national leaders, right? The economic markets, ourselves, right? We can put our faith in our ability, our knowledge, our capabilities. We can put our faith in so many things. And so before we move off of it, we have to ask ourselves, *where is our faith? What have we put our faith in? Is it these other things that we are invited to, or is it in Christ?* Because in an ultimate sense, faith that isn't in Jesus is

brittle, and it's movable, and it is rootless. The faith only has ultimate value if it's in Christ. And so where is our faith?

b) Love

Gospel rootedness begins with faith, but Paul doesn't just stay at faith, he moves on to love. And look who they love. They love all the saints. Now, that word saint in the New Testament, some of you know this already, saint isn't referencing super Christians, okay? Saint isn't those people who, like, sell all their possessions, and they move into a jungle, and we never hear about them again until they come back with a tribe that is converted to Jesus, right? Like, that's not the saint that Paul is talking about. Saints aren't super Christians. They're not canonized. They're not those who perform miracles. No. Biblically speaking, saint is anyone who has faith in Jesus. So, if you're here this morning, and your faith is in Christ, and his resurrection, his death, his work for forgiveness, then that means you are a saint. You're a saint. Saint Doug, and Saint Hugh, and Saint Sarah, and Saint Lisa. That we are the saints. That's what Paul calls us. That's what the New Testament calls us. That if we belong to Jesus, we are united to him, and we are his saints.

But we're not just united to him, we're united to one another. So, we love not only Jesus, but we love his people. That's what Jesus said in John 13. Do you remember? He said, "by this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love for the saints is evidence that we belong to Christ. Now, love may not sound all that radical or unique to our ears, because we live in a world that's calling us to love always, right? We're supposed to have love for our country, and love for our family, and love for our friends, and for goodness sakes, Virginia is for lovers, right? Calls to love are all around us. But think about the people that we love.

The people that we love are often people who are very much like us, aren't they? People who raise their kids like we do. People who vote like we do. People who look like we do. People who sound and behave like we do. But love of the saints? Well, that's a love where skin color, and common language, and economics, well, it has nothing to do with it. You see, we love one another because the gospel transcends those things that often divide us. It transcends us because it unites us in Christ. That the most important thing about who we are, our faith in Jesus, is the thing that we have in common, and that's what we are united around, and that's why we love one another. That the gospel unites us in Jesus, and unites us in love. I mean, think about Paul. I said earlier that Paul had never met these people, but you wouldn't know that if I hadn't shared that with you, and we're just reading through Colossians. You would have assumed, I bet, I would have, that Paul had planted this church. He had spent many years with these people, right? He had walked through hardship and joy, and he knew their faces and all their names because there's so much love, right? There's so much affection in just these first 14 verses. You would assume he knew them intimately, and he's never met them.

The Colossian church could have showed up at his jail cell, and he would have had no idea who they were, and yet he loves them. He loves them because he is united to them in Christ, and we are united to one another. That is gospel rootedness. It's love. It's faith, but finally, it's hope.

c) Hope

We hear it. “A hope laid up for you in heaven.” You see, gospel hope is not founded in the things of this world. No, gospel hope turns our attention to what's to come. We heard it actually in our assurance of pardon. We heard in Titus that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation, training us to renounce ungodliness, to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives, waiting for our blessed hope.” And what is that hope? Well, it goes on in Titus. “The appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” That is the hope that is laid up for us in heaven. That Jesus is going to appear. He is going to return, and when he does, he will make all things right. He will do away with sin and death and despair, and we will dwell with him and all the saints. The saints who came before us and the saints who will come after us. We will dwell for all time. That is the hope of heaven. That is gospel hope.

A hope that doesn't look to the things of this world for redemption, but looks only to Jesus. That's what we hear at the end of our passage. Did you see it in verses 12-14? “The Father who has qualified you, qualified us, to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” What is this inheritance? It's heaven. “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness, transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” You see, friends, that's what it means to be rooted in the gospel. To have faith and love and hope, because we were once those who were dead in our sins and trespasses. We were those who were once dwelling in the land of darkness, but we have now been transferred. The word transfer, the theologian Peter O'Brien, he comments that this invokes the image of a king picking up a people and moving them at his will. And that's what God has done to us. We didn't transfer ourselves. We didn't move from darkness to light on our own. No, he transferred us from darkness to light, from death to life, from the tyranny of sin to the kingdom of Jesus. And he has done it through the work of Jesus, the one who forgives our sins. Friends, that is what we need.

Gospel Fruitfulness

That is the rootedness of the gospel, the hope, the faith, the love that we have in the gospel. But Paul doesn't only talk about gospel rootedness. He also talks about our need for gospel fruitfulness. So we see the language of fruit in verse 6-10. The gospel is bearing fruit, increasing in the world. Verse 10, believers are to bear fruit. And so for Paul, this bearing of fruit plays out in two ways. The first is in knowledge and the second is in our walks.

a) Our Knowledge

So we see with knowledge in verse 9, “that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” Okay, so I said earlier that we want to associate, we're going to associate this morning more with the Colossians than Paul, but for just a moment, let's think about Paul. And let's think about his prayer. And when I thought about Paul's prayer, I realized how different Paul's prayer is than my prayers. So what do I pray for? I pray for my behavior, my thoughts, my actions, for wisdom. I pray for the health of others, for relational dynamics, right? I pray for all these things. And all those things are perfectly fine, right? Don't hear what I'm not saying. Pray for those things, you know. Pray for them for yourselves. Pray for them for me. Pray for them for one another. There's nothing wrong with those. But you notice what Paul prayed for? Knowledge. The knowledge of God. To increase in wisdom and understanding. You see, the fruit of the gospel is us growing in knowledge of who God is and his will for our lives.

Now maybe you're thinking, it's all well and good, Penny, but I've believed in Jesus for decades. I've known the Lord since my earliest days. I know an awful lot about God. And that's probably true. In fact, I know many of you, I know most of you, and you do know a lot about God. But think about the relationships you have with others. Like your relationship with your spouse, with your children, with your friends, with your siblings. Do you ever exhaust learning about your people in your life? I mean, like, would you ever go to your wife, say, and say to her, "I know you want to share with me all this stuff that you've learned or been thinking about, but, you know, I kind of know what I need to know." I mean, you could say that, but then you better follow it up with some jewelry and maybe some flowers, right? You would never say that because we also know the truth is that we can never exhaust those relationships, right? That over weeks and months and years and decades of living with a spouse, of being around our siblings, of engaging with our friends, that we're learning more about who they are. We're learning more about what they love, what they think. And if this is true of our spouses, of our siblings, of our parents, how much more true of an infinite, almighty, creator God. We can never exhaust our knowledge of him.

So how do we increase in knowledge then? Well, it's not through secret wisdom. It's not through hidden philosophies. It's through the ways that God has revealed himself. It's through things like reading the Bible and reading great theological books and coming to worship and sitting under God's word and going to Bible studies and Sunday school classes. This is how we grow in the knowledge of God. And this is where many of us are probably going, *this is speaking my Presbyterian language*. Because we like thick books and big theological words, right? Because we're the people that, why would we use a five-cent word that everyone would understand when we could use a five-dollar word that only we do and makes us look so smart? But we must see, friends, that gospel fruitfulness isn't theological big-headedness. We shouldn't reduce fruit to data because data is not enough.

Think about the wise men when they came to Herod. So, you know, the nativity story in Matthew chapter 2, the wise men, they're following the star and they see where it's coming and they know that this is where the Messiah is going to be born, the king of the Jews. And so they go to Herod, right? Because you go to a palace, that's where a king would be born, logically. But they go to King Herod and they say, "Where's the king to be born?" And Herod has no idea who they're talking about. So Herod goes to the chief priests and the scribes. These are the experts in the Jewish law. He goes to them and says, "There's a king supposed to be born. Supposedly he's maybe been born. You know anything about it?" And what do they do? They quote from the Old Testament. Oh yeah, the king of the Jews, the Messiah, is to be born in Bethlehem.

So if you're a scribe, you're a chief priest, right? You have the biggest heads theologically, right? And you have been waiting and hoping and longing for the Messiah to come. And you just got wind that maybe that a baby has been born and it sounds an awful lot like this one that you've been waiting for. What would you do? You would drop everything, right? You would throw away your papers, you'd go running, you'd be sprinting, right? *Wise men, can I hop a ride on a camel?* Let's go, right? But what did they do? They went back to their books and they put their heads down because data and information isn't enough. What we do with knowledge is what we need to be pursuing. Fruit isn't just knowledge. It is knowledge, but it's not just knowledge.

b) Our Walk

Because true fruit leads to true walking. It leads to walking. That's what we see as we grow in knowledge. Verse 10, "So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." True knowledge manifests itself in true action. That we are not simply to be doers or knowers about God in his word, but we are to be doers and reflecting that knowledge of him. As N.T. Wright put it, "understanding will fuel holiness, holiness will deepen understanding." And that is the fruitfulness that we are to be pursuing. This is the work of God in us. We see it in verse 11. After we "walk in a manner worthy of the glory of God," Paul says, "being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy." You see, God strengthens us by his glorious might so that we would endure. We would live with patience and joy. We would manifest the qualities of the gospel, love and hope and faith. That we would have gospel fruitfulness.

Now listen, it's very important for us to hear that some of us, when we hear walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, that for some of us could feel like a noose around our necks or a blade above our heads. Because what we might hear is we better get our stuff together and we better walk in a way that pleases God or else. And I better make sure I've got all my words right and I've got all the ways that I'm supposed to look and all the things. I better get it all right. That's what some of us hear. But y'all, that's not the gospel. The gospel is Christ has redeemed you. He has forgiven your sins not because you pulled yourself together. No, you didn't transfer yourself from death to life. He did it. The gospel is Christ redeeming and forgiving and it comes before our walking. You see, we respond to his grace. We respond to his redemption with joy and patience and endurance. We respond because he has loved us. Not so that he would love us.

You see, the walk, this gospel fruitfulness, isn't us trying to merit God's grace. It is a joyful response to his grace. C.S. Lewis was once asked, "Is it easy to love God?" And he replied, "It is to those who do it." This isn't as paradoxical as it sounds. When you fall deeply in love, you want to please the beloved. That is the gospel. That when we have tasted of the love of God in Christ and we have experienced the work of the gospel in our lives and when our need for forgiveness has been met in Jesus, we'll want out of joy to please our beloved. We will want to be rooted in the gospel and experience and grow out and manifest fruitfulness from that gospel. And we need his help to do it. And so let's ask him to do to help us now. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you. Thank you that you have revealed the gospel of our Lord Jesus to us. And that is our greatest need. The forgiveness of sins, the redemption of our bodies, the work that you, Jesus, have done on our behalf. And so we pray that you would root us in faith and love and hope, that we would turn our eyes towards you and fix them upon your grace, clinging to it, holding fast to it. And as we hold fast, Father, equip us to live fruitfully as a beautiful response to your beautiful grace. We pray that you would help us. We are in need of your grace. And so we ask that you would lead us and guide us. And we pray all of this in the name of Christ, and God's people said together, Amen.