

Colossians 1:1-14

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 May 2016

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0:00] So, Colossians chapter 1, verses 1 to 14, I think we're going to do it in 9 weeks, I think. And Paul begins in the way that he often does, by telling those in Colossians what he prays for them.

So Paul's prayers and our prayers are a big part of what we're going to think about tonight. And prayer is one of those topics, isn't it, that doesn't always generate positive reactions from people.

But Christians, thinking about prayer often just makes us feel guilty, doesn't it?

And we know we don't pray as much as we want to, or as much as we should do. And we know that we find prayer hard work, and yet there are Christians out there who seem to write books, who delight in it and find prayer as some kind of transcendent experience.

And we know that when we start looking at the prayers of the Apostle Paul, we often feel that our prayers are fumbling and inadequate of this. And so the motivation for Christians to think about our prayers, I think, can be quite low.

For those who are not Christians, it just seems strange, doesn't it? Most people who are not Christians, they are aware that praying is something that Christians do. But it seems a little weird.

[1:16] Talking to someone you can see, who may or may not be there, it's just a bit odd.

Admittedly, many unbelievers, they find themselves praying, don't they? All people pray at certain moments in life.

And lots of unbelievers are familiar with set prayers, like the Lord's Prayer. But turning to these paragraphs that we're going to look at tonight, just may seem to you a bizarre religious practice that doesn't make sense.

So what do we gain by looking at Paul's words in Colossians chapter 1? Will people walk away thinking tonight, if you're not a Christian, that Christian is just weird? Or maybe you will think Paul is an exceptional individual, who's a great man of prayer, and my prayers are hopeless.

But I hope you won't. Instead, I hope that we leave tonight understanding prayer better, and I hope we'll feel more motivated to pray. Because there's something going on in these verses that is much bigger than the topic of prayer.

Something that is tremendously powerful and exciting. I've got no points tonight, which is quite unusual, isn't it? But I think I've got one message, and tell me whether you've got it in the end. The letter of Colossians begins with a greeting, it's in verses 1 and 2.

[2:27] And the first thing you learn in the book is what? That it's from the Apostle Paul, and his colleague Timothy. And that explains, doesn't it, why Paul is using the plural we right through these verses.

Interestingly, after the opening section, Paul drops the we and moves to the personal pronoun. And so by the time you get to chapter 1 and verse 23, Paul is saying, I and me and my.

Paul is certainly the one who wrote the letter. But he wants the Colossians to know that his friend Timothy stands with him in everything he writes. And we know that Paul is in prison.

When he writes, if you flick over to chapter 4 and verse 3, and then again chapter 4 and verse 18, Paul refers to his chains. Chapter 4 verse 10, he's from Michael Aristarchus as a fellow prisoner.

And most scholars conclude that Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison. It's probably around 62 AD. And as we see in verse 2, he writes to Christians in Colossae, who he considers brothers in Christ.

[3:30] It is almost certain that Paul never went to Colossae, either before or after he wrote this letter. So most of the people he addresses here are folks he's never met.

Nevertheless, they are dear to him, aren't they? Can you see that he greets them as family? To the saints and faithful brothers, they are spiritual brothers. And not only are they brothers, but they are

faithful. They are holy and faithful.

We've seen it the last couple of weeks, isn't it? The word holy is the same word as saints. Verse 4 and again verse 12. And so, our Bible translates it as saints.

We saw last week, don't we, that saints just means holy ones. It's a term that the Apostle uses to describe all Christians. All Christians are holy, not by virtue that they've done true miracles or live notable lives.

But they are holy because of Jesus Christ's notable sacrifice. And that was why Paul addresses the Colossian Christians like that here. And they are not only holy, they are, can you see in verse 2, they are faithful.

[4 : 34] They've trusted in Jesus and they've stuck with him. And we're going to see more of that in a moment. Now as I've already mentioned, these believers did not come to faith in the Apostle Paul's ministry directly.

It seems that they heard the Gospel through a man, verse 7, named Epaphras. And he's mentioned again in chapter 4 and verses 12 and 13. And Epaphras was a Colossian south.

And it seems that he brought the message about Jesus to Colossae after hearing it somewhere else. The most likely possibility is that he heard it from Paul in Ephesus and took it back.

The Book of Acts doesn't record Paul visiting Colossae. But it does record that Paul, for two years, taught in Ephesus, isn't he? He's about 95 miles away from Colossae.

In the province of Asia. And Paul's ministry in those two years was so extensive that the writer in Acts 19, verse 10, says that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

[5 : 38] That is, it spread out from Ephesus. So there's a good possibility that Epaphras became a Christian whilst maybe on a business trip to Ephesus. And then he travels with Paul's encouragement back to Colossae.

And he tells the people in his home city, and a church is formed. That's probably the first half of the 50s. As much as ten years before Paul wrote this letter.

And in that time, the Colossians have grown. And they demonstrate that they are faithful, and that they are holy, and Paul has heard about it. And he says that in verse 4, and then he makes it explicit in verse 8 that it's Epaphras to fill them in.

So he begins this letter, can you see, by thanking God for them. And in particular, Paul thanks God for the faith, and the hope, and the love of the Colossians.

That's in verses 3-5. We always thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you, since we hear of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid out for you in heaven.

[6 : 41] St. Lucas says that these three qualities, faith, hope, and love, are the hallmarks and proper evidences of a work of God in the soul of man.

How do you show a Christian? How do you see a Christian? Three things. Faith, hope, love. So notice Paul thanks God for their faith in Christ Jesus.

It's not just some faith in an abstract way. People often speak, don't they, as if faith was a substance. So some people are lucky enough to have faith.

Or they say, I wish I had your faith. If it wasn't for my faith, I don't know where I'd be. But that isn't how Paul uses the word.

In the Bible, faith is fundamentally a relational word. It is about how people rely upon, or depend upon, God and his Son, the Lord Jesus. And that is what the Colossians are doing.

[7 : 44] Their faith is in Christ Jesus. And their love is for all the saints. And they have a continuing concern for their brothers and sisters in Christ. And seemingly, not just the Christians in Colossae, but Christians in other places, like the Apostle Paul himself.

And he says, doesn't he, they have a love for all the saints. Verse 4. Then Paul talks about how their faith and love are spread from hope.

What they have in heaven. Which they've heard about in the Gospel. Now, that's quite interesting, how he writes it. Often we think that faith produces hope.

But it's the other way around. In these verses. Can you see that? Paul says, it is their hope that has produced their faith and love. And of course, both connections are true in the Christian life, aren't they?

It is true that our faith in Christ does produce us, and develop in us confidence for the future. That God has promised. Faith does lead to hope. But it's also true that the hope of the Gospel, is what invites a person into faith in the first place.

[8 : 53] Because the Gospel about Jesus, tells us what is stored up for us in heaven. Which we just read about in Crip Pogre's Progress. For those that follow him. And that's what's happened in the lives of the Colossians.

That Paul writes. Notice that Paul describes the Gospel in verse 5. Can you see how he describes it? As the word of truth. It's not just worshipful thinking.

But the Colossians have placed their faith, not in a kind of myriad of spiritual options, but in the word of truth. And that is a radical claim, isn't it?

It was a radical claim in the first century, and it's no less radical now. It's not the message that Jesus brings. It's the word of truth. And it comes from the God who never lies.

And it is the truth that has come from God, which has convinced the Colossians. It has convinced the Colossians of the hope of heaven. And it has produced faith and love in their lives.

[9 : 52] And that is why Paul thanks God for it. It's striking that he doesn't slap the Colossians on the back. He doesn't start the letter by saying, I'm so proud of you. He doesn't say, I'm always praising you to other people.

He starts his letter by saying, we always thank God for them in their lives. Because what he's heard about is the work of God in the Sermon of Man. Their faith and love are the fruit of the hope of the Gospel amongst them.

Paul thanks God for their growth and their faithfulness, because it is what God has done for them. And that is the language that he uses in verse 6. He talks about the Gospel bearing fruit and growing all over the place.

Just as it has been doing amongst you since the day you heard it. And you understood what God's grace and all its truth is all about. Notice that the word truth is there, isn't it?

And the word grace in that verse. The Colossians have responded in this way to God's truth.

Because they have discovered that in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the life that pleases God is not about striving to make God pleased with you.

[11 : 05] But it is a response, isn't it, to the Lord Jesus Christ striving for our souls. And Paul sees the Gospel of grace like that. Like a little seed that gives life to a whole plant and then it keeps on growing and growing and growing fruitfully.

And Paul is full of thanks to God because by his grace and by his truth, the Gospel has borne fruit in the lives of the Colossians. But do you know, it's just not just among them.

What had happened in their lives was part of something much bigger, something much, much bigger. Let me read to you verse 6. Which has come to you as indeed the whole world is bearing fruit and increasing.

as it does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth. You see, the Gospel of God was not just planted in one place but in many places and the book of Acts tells you the story of how that happened.

And now the name of the Lord Jesus is becoming known in Jerusalem and then in Judea and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth. And if that was true then, how much more true is that now?

[12 : 22] If Paul could write in AD 62 about the Gospel bearing fruit and growing all over the world, how much more could we, 2,000 years ago, see that? That it continues to grow.

It's like Jesus' parable, isn't it? Of the Gospel. It starts out as this little mustard seed but it grows to become a mighty tree in which birds everywhere can perch. So let me tell you what the last week I've had.

I met with the UCCF worker in ED who told me that three people in the University of West London in the last month have started to meet with him to read the Bible. I met with a Christian leader in Iran who told me of six men that prayed for seven years and all were martyred and since then the Gospel has exploded in Iran.

I can tell you of an alcoholic in Cambridge who was converted this week. of churches being planted in Lebanon. It's a great joy to hear things like that. Faithful Christians sharing Christ in different parts of the world.

It's a handful of stories that I know of. But those stories could be told, couldn't they? In place after place after place all around the world. Because what Paul said then is true.

[13:37] Now, more so than 1862. The Gospel that grows and bears fruit in your life and in your mind is the same Gospel that bears fruit and grows all over the world.

And Paul thanks God for it. And what Paul prays for is that that stunning work of God might continue. Particularly in the light of the Colossians.

So in verse 9 he moves on. He's been thanking God for them and telling them about it to what he's asking God for them. So you're thanking God for them in the first paragraph and then you're asking God for them in the second.

Look at verse 9. for this reason. And so from the day we hear we have not ceased to pray for you. We have not ceased to pray for you asking that you may be filled with knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Paul prays for a growing knowledge of God's will for the Colossians. And he sees this as a prayer not for kind of fuller brains.

[14:53] But it's a spiritual thing. It's a spiritual thing because it's a relationship thing. He prays that they might get to know God better personally. And he prays that God would in his kindness illuminate them.

That he would reveal himself to them by his spirit. So that they would understand him and his purposes and that they would be wise. It's a simple prayer but it's a great prayer isn't it?

And one of the actually wonderful things about the Christian life is this. We never know God perfectly do we? The adventure and the privilege that is getting to know God never ends in this life.

So you can pray this prayer for somebody who's just become a Christian this week. And you can pray this prayer for somebody who's been a Christian for 70 years. And then Paul goes on to give the reasons why he prays this simple prayer and that is what he's doing in verse 10 onwards.

He says we pray this so that you may 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.

[16:04] May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious fight for all endurance and patience and joy giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

This is the sort of life Paul wants the Colossians to live. A life which is worthy of Jesus. A life which brings credit to him and not embarrassment. A life that pleases him in every way.

A life that brings pleasure to the heart of the risen Lord Jesus and not sadness. A life that bears fruit and good works. One which is discernibly different from the life once lived or a life lived by others in the world.

A life that grows in the knowledge of God because knowing God is great is a great joy in and of itself. But also because knowing God well actually it's the only way to live well in this world.

A life that knows the power and the strength of God to endure a hardship and grief and opposition and sin with patience and with joy. because a joyful life in the midst in the face of the world's harshness is not possible without God's power.

[17:24] And a life that is thankful from beginning to end and thankfulness is a huge theme in Colossians thankful because the hope that first gave rise to faith and love continues to affect every moment of Christian life.

It stands as a great reminder of what is ahead. the inheritance with all of God's holy people in this kingdom of light. I hope it's pretty obvious that you see the parallels between this paragraph and the one that comes before.

What Paul asks for is what he gave thanks for. They're really one and the same thing. He thanked God didn't he that the fruit bearing gospel had grown amongst the Colossians and he tells them then that he longs to see the fruit bearing gospel continue to grow amongst them and that is why he asks God to fill them with the knowledge of his will because the life he longs to see them live depends on knowing God's will.

You cannot live a life that pleases the Lord and is worthy of the Lord unless you know what the Lord wants. praise. And so that is what Paul prays.

And could there be anything more important to pray for? In the final two verses of the second Paul spells out the ultimate reasons for wanting the Colossians to be thankful.

[18 : 57] That seems to be the connection and in the process of those he spells out the ultimate reason for his kind of ultimate thankfulness as well. And he reminds the Colossians again and us that the work of God in the lives of the Colossians is part of something much much bigger.

It's something much much bigger. Paul's conviction is that God should be thanked. You should thank God because of what? Because of what God has done. And what has God done? Verse 13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption and forgiveness of sins.

Now note the contrast you have the dominion of darkness and you have the kingdom of the saints in light. Verse 12 It's not describing the transfer from one abstract reality to another.

Verse 13 He stresses that people move from being under the rule of darkness to being under a person. It's different. But they become under the rule of the Lord Jesus himself, the son whom God loves.

And it's in him that all Christian people have been redeemed and brought back from darkness, from the darkness of life without God in order to enjoy the light of life with God.

[20 : 26] And at the same time we are liberated aren't we from the darkness that grows in our own hearts. like having our sins forgiven. And all of this Jesus has achieved through his deeply loving death on the cross and through his majestically powerful resurrection.

And we live with the assurance that we do not need to strive. We do not need to strive for our own souls because he has strived for them and won them.

And verse 13 and 14 talk about the way Jesus has met the deepest need that you have. That he has come to us in our sin and he has plucked us from it.

That he has plucked us from the dominion of darkness and he has washed our sins away. And he has given us a new king to serve. The very one who first served us.

And that is why Paul thanks God. And that is why he longs out of Colossians and you and I will be thankful to because we have got plenty to be thankful for. And it is this ability to see clearly the things that are most needful, that are the most important, it is that that informs Paul's prayers and that should strike us tonight.

[21 : 49] That should strike us more than anything tonight. That Paul realised what was most important. do you think that anyone in Colossi IPC had cancer?

Do you think that anyone in Colossi IPC had recently lost a job? Do you think that anyone in Colossi was going through the pain of relationship breakdown?

do you think that in that church family there was anything that they were anxious about or excited about? Do you think that there were people in that church that had lost loved ones?

Do you think that there were people in that church that were going through real big health concerns problems? And of difficult families? Why doesn't Paul pray for those things? Why?

Well we know it wouldn't be wrong to pray for any of those things. God tells us in his word that we should pray for everything and anything. So why do you pray for you?

[22 : 56] Is it because Paul prays for what he sees is most needful? Most important? Is it because Paul thinks that there are realities in the lives of the Colossus that transcend cancer and jobs and relationships?

Is it possible Paul thought those things were things to be excited and anxious about much more than anything else? Is it possible that Paul's prayers might make us reflect on our own prayers with a measure of embarrassment?

Because what we pray is often so small isn't it? Self-centered compared to this. Paul's prayers may have an effect on you tonight. Perhaps they should.

But I want you to hear me clearly tonight. I do want you to hear me clearly. But I don't think that's really the point. Because there's something going on behind this that is far more important, that is very significant about Paul's life.

And it's important that his prayers reveal that to us. I am rebuked by the content of Paul's prayers. Alright? But more than that, I am rebuked by Paul's aspirations.

[24 : 13] Because I'm convinced that Paul's prayers are the expression of his aspirations. What he wants. And the fact that Paul wants these things is more challenging to me than the fact that he prays them.

one of the things I've learned about the Christian life is that people almost always pray for the things that they really want. We talk don't we sometimes as if our trouble with prayer is that we don't have

time.

It's nonsense. Or we don't make time. Or the big one, I'm not disciplined enough. That's the big one. Or we don't know what to pray for. Or we don't know how to organise our prayers.

But I notice, as you notice, that there are moments in people's lives when all those reasons vanished on me. The moments I'm talking about are when people long for something very very deeply.

When people learn that someone that they love is in deep trouble or very sick, they will pray. And if people are struck by a dreadful fear, they will pray for their fear not to be realised.

[25 : 30] So young people, you pray on the morning of exams, don't you? If there's deep anxiety about something coming up, we pray, don't we, that it will go well.

We all do that. If you feel like you're yearning for something, that you feel that your life lacks, well, you'll ask God about it. And when our longings are great, aren't they?

When our longings are great, we find the time to pray. And I think we really do pray for those things which we really aspire to, which we really want.

And is it possible that that is what is happening in Paul's life here too? So the reason why Paul prays in verse 9 and 10, so from the day we hear we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will and 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.

the reason we have these parables, I think, is because Paul wants those things with every fibre of his being.

[26 : 47] And he can't think of anything for which he'd rather pray. And I think as we read these verses, there is every reason to believe that Paul tells us the things he prays because the things he prays for are the things he really wants in his heart of hearts.

the question that I need to be asking myself tonight as I read these verses is not so much why are my prayers more like Paul's, but why are my aspirations more like Paul's?

Do I want what Paul wanted? Do we care about the things that really matter as much as Paul did? And if our prayers are small and self centred, could it be because our hearts are small and self centred? That is a far more important question.

And that is why I say what our prayers are like is not the big issue. I am convinced that we will praise what we really desire in our heart of hearts. So the real issue is what's in our hearts?

[27 : 59] what are we really longing for? We all long for things, don't we? We all have aspirations. You've got aspirations for things and very often my aspirations, they matter less than what the apostle Paul aspires to for himself and for others.

We've got career aspirations, don't we? You've got aspirations for your health, your fitness. You've got aspirations for your physical appearance. You've got aspirations for relationships. You've got aspirations for your children, your grandchildren.

aspirations for your leisure. I want to say none of those things, none of them are unhealthy in and of themselves. But if those things dominate our hearts, then there's something wrong.

Because unless the sort of things that dominated Paul's heart dwarf all our other aspirations, then we fail to really see as clearly as Paul did what matters most and what is most needful.

I've got no doubt that there were people in that church in Colossi, they were stressed about employment, they were stressed with relationship issues, they had all sorts of excitement and issues, but this is what Paul prayed for them.

[29 : 10] And there are of course all sorts of aspirations represented here tonight, all sorts of anxieties and excitements that reflect the things in our hearts. But if Paul was praying for us tonight at IPC, this is what he would pray.

He thanked God for our faith and our hope and our love and he would pray that we would know the will of God better and better so that we can live a life that is worthy of Jesus.

And I know this is what Paul would have prayed that, because these are the things that occupy his whole letter as we're going to see, not just the opening paragraph. And if you don't understand Paul's aspirations, this Jesus series is going to be as an overwhelming to you.

I read this morning from the Puritans, the Valley of Vision, it's a great book of Puritan prayers. And he speaks about praying wrongful prayers.

Isn't that interesting? And in it he says, purge me from every false desire and every base aspiration. I've struck me by those lines because I need to pray that.

[30 : 19] my prayers are sometimes wrongful. And even when they're not wrongful, my prayers are often small and self-centered. But the problem isn't my prayers per se.

My problem is my base aspirations that sometimes dominate my heart and I need God to purge me of them. What about you? Is there any chance you need God to do that for you?

And I do hope that our time in this passage tonight will affect our prayers. But more than that, I pray that it will change our aspirations. I hope that if you're here tonight and you're not a Christian, you will recognise in these ways a picture of life that really matters.

That whatever your aspirations might have been up to now, wherever they have been when you walked into this building tonight, I hope you will find that the life that is truly life is the life that is lived to please the Lord.

A life founded on God's grace and all his truth. A life lived by those whose sins are forgiven. A life lived under the kinship of Jesus. And if you're a believer here tonight, I hope you will allow God's words to penetrate the practice defenses of your heart.

[31 : 33] To search your aspirations. I hope that as you kept at the table tonight, you will allow yourself to be wooed again by the Lord Jesus. By the Jesus who loves you. In order that you might long for, and you might live for these things.

I hope that you will go home tonight thanking God for the faith and the hope and the love that you see in your own life from the people sitting next to you. Simply because nothing brings you more pleasure, and I hope you'll go home tonight thanking God because the gospel that you believe is bearing fruit all over the world.

and to be frank with you, you and I know that far better than the apostle Paul could ever have known it. And I hope you will know that because nothing excites you more.

And you'll go home tonight praying for this for yourself and for others, that God would fill us with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Not because you feel you should pray that, but because you want to think more.

Nothing you aspire to more for yourself and for others than to live a life pleasing to Jesus, pleasing in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in knowledge of him, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, which will lead us from great endurance and patience and will overflow with thanksgiving and joy.

[32 : 51] One last thing, okay? If you are here tonight and you're at that stage where you think, I know these things in my head, but I know I should run for them, I don't.

If that is hope for you, well I hope you won't go home tonight feeling that you've got to make some huge effort of emotion or kind of strength of your will to change things. I hope you will go home seeing that the only thing that purges a person's heart is the gospel itself.

The only thing that changes the aspirations of our hearts is the gospel. And so listen carefully if you fall asleep, I've gone on a bit of my head, but listen carefully. The only thing that will make a person long for things that matter most is the word of truth.

The only thing that plants in a person's heart new desires and aspirations and grows them is the grace of God. And if our hearts are weak and shallow and lukewarm, the solution is not to read verses 3 to 12 over and over again and beat yourself up that you don't pray like this.

The solution, if I can humbly suggest, is to read and to re-read verses 13 and 14. That he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son and hope we have redemption and forgiveness of sins.

[34 : 20] Because the truth is this, as we absorb those truths, that those reasons contain that the gospel which is bearing fruit all over the world will bear its fruit in our hearts.

For he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and he has transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption and forgiveness of sins.

Let's pray.