

IV. Paul's Prayer for the Colossians

February 17/18, 2010

Colossians 1:9-14

Aim: To follow Paul's example and learn how to pray for the spiritual needs of our fellow believers – that they may grow in knowledge and righteous living in Christ.

The Christian church was barely one generation old, yet new teachers had emerged with a seductive new approach that was in danger of attracting a sizeable following. This new teaching was essentially an attempt to modify the Christian message, to make it more palatable to first-century people by blending it with various ideas that were widely accepted at the time. This problem has never gone away. We face it today. In every age the church has come under pressure to allow her message to be shaped by the intellectual fashions of the day.

In the original Greek, Paul begins a sentence in verse 9 that does not end until verse 20. This enormous sentence has 218 words. This meaty chunk of prose is made up of two distinct sections, each with its own main theme. Next time, we will look at verses 15-20, which deals with 'the preeminence of Christ.' This lesson will look at verses 9-14, which contains 'Paul's prayer for the Colossians.'

In the opening lines of the letter, Paul celebrated the miracle of this little church's existence in the Lycus Valley. Predictably, this overflowed in prayer, which begins in verse 9. His prayer is a beautifully constructed tapestry which makes a perfect model for the fabric of our own prayers. His example tells us how to pray for the *knowledge* and then for the *conduct* of the Church. Paul's prayer is very rich. He does not confine himself to minor matters, nor is he overly concerned about the material needs of the people. Instead he asks the Lord for spiritual blessings. One outstanding feature of Paul's prayers is that spiritual concerns are always to the fore. This is not always true of our prayers for other people. We become easily absorbed with lesser things – physical health, career prospects, and so on.

A. Paul's Petition (Col. 1:9-12a)

A noteworthy feature of this prayer are the number of parallels with the thanksgiving section:

'since the day you heard' (v. 6)	'since the day we heard' (v. 9)
'thank' (v. 3)	'giving thanks' (v. 12)
'always' (v. 3)	'not stopped' (v. 9)
'when we pray for you' (v. 3)	'praying for you' (v. 9)
'understood' (v. 6)	'knowledge' (vv. 9, 10)
'bearing fruit and growing' (v. 6)	'bearing fruit ... growing' (v. 10)

The parallels are numerous enough to suggest that Paul is deliberately echoing the language of the thanksgiving in his petition. The effect is to subtly remind the Colossians again that they must continue on the course they have already begun.

1. Orthodoxy (1:9)

a) Paul's Concern for the Colossians (1:9a)

Paul's petition for the Colossians proceeds directly from his thanksgiving for them, as the connect phrase 'for this reason' makes clear. It refers to the favorable report Paul had received

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from Epaphras (v. 8). Since the day Paul heard that report, he had been praying for the Colossians. Especially in the face of the threat posed by the false teachers, the Colossians' good start and genuine progress should lead not to complacency but to renewed effort. Much of our prayer time focuses on those who are struggling, facing difficulties, or fallen into sin or physical distress. Paul, however, knew that the knowledge that others are progressing in the faith should never lead us to stop praying for them. Rather, it should encourage prayer for their greater progress.

From verse 9 onwards, building on his words of heartfelt thanksgiving, Paul wanted his readers to understand that he prayed for them. Not only did Paul pray for the Christians in Colossae, he never stopped! The phrase, 'we ... do not cease to pray for you,' does not mean that he prayed around the clock, but rather that during his set times of prayer, the church at Colosse came up again and again. The spiritual good of these believers mattered to him.

b) Paul's Request for the Colossians (1:9b)

It would seem that the false teachers who had come among them had told them that the teaching they had heard from Paul, and also that which had been relayed through Epaphras, was not noble enough. Instead, these false teachers urged the Colossians to follow their instructions and had promised them that, as a result, they would experience 'a fullness' that they had never dreamed would be possible. This fullness seems to have centered on a 'knowledge' and 'power' that was far greater than anything they had come across before. Notice how Paul handles this situation. He does not say: 'Don't listen to these wicked men, instead follow us.' Rather, he prays for these Christians that they would be 'filled with the knowledge of [God's] will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.' *Plēroō* ('filled') means to be completely filled or totally controlled. As conjugated (*plērōthēte*), it is a 'divine passive' with God as the implied agent: 'filled by God.'

Paul's choice of words at this point is highly significant. The language of 'fulfill' or 'fullness' occurs at some crucial junctures in Colossians (1:19; 2:9-10). 'Fullness' and 'knowledge' were two of the pet themes of the new teachers who had infiltrated the church at Colossae. These men had not opposed Epaphras outright. Instead, they seem to have hinted that, while he had certainly introduced the people of Colossae to Christian basics, something more was needed. Now the time had come to move on, to take the next step, to receive the full gospel. Powerful hints were continually being dropped that they needed an experience of 'fullness.' Any believer in Colossae who wanted to belong to the spiritual elite needed 'knowledge.'

It is significant that Paul prayed for the Colossians' knowledge, because they were under siege by people who were telling them they needed a better knowledge, a *gnōsis*. The [Gnostics] were teaching that Christ was a good place to begin, but that there was so much more they could know and experience if only they would incorporate the Gnostic system of passwords, rites, and initiations. Their superior, know-it-all air was intimidating, and some of the Colossians were made to feel they were lacking.

This knowledge for which Paul prayed was set in bold contrast to that of the false teachers. Their word for 'knowledge' was *gnōsis*. It could also be rendered 'insight.' It does not mean knowledge of the Scriptures, but a form of mystical enlightenment. Those who had it were 'in the know.' A century later, a more developed form of this teaching, known as Gnosticism, became a serious problem to the churches.

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But Paul used the word *epignōsin* as a reference to full knowledge for the Colossians. The additional prefix (*epi*) intensifies the meaning. The knowledge Paul wants the Colossians to have is a deep and thorough knowledge. Paul prayed for an *epignōsis* which would fill them in such a way that it would instill a wisdom and understanding which was singularly ‘spiritual’ (the word *spiritual* is emphatic in the Greek). This was a common prayer of Paul’s for other believers (cp. Phil. 1:9; Phm. 6; Eph. 1:7).

Paul had a different kind of ‘fullness’ and ‘knowledge’ in mind – not something esoteric and mystical, but something hard-headed and practical. It was knowing God’s will. The Scriptures become the primary source of ‘knowledge’ for the believer as they are studied in the power of the Holy Spirit. This produces a Christian mind, which in fact is what Paul is praying for (cp. Ps. 1:1-2; Jos. 1:8).

Having the knowledge of God’s Word control our minds is the key to righteous living. What controls your thoughts will control your behavior. Knowledge of God’s Word will lead to ‘all spiritual wisdom and understanding.’ *Sophia* (‘wisdom’) refers to the ability to collect and concisely organize principles from Scripture. *Synesis* (‘understanding’) could be a more specialized term, referring to the application of those principles to everyday life. Both *sophia* and *synesis* are ‘spiritual’ (*pneumatikos*); they deal in the non-physical realm and have the Holy Spirit as their source.

Typically when we pray for ourselves or for others, we pray for physical health, well-being, social relationships, and spiritual growth. But part of our intercessory prayers ought to be for ‘the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.’ Every Christian should be concentrating when he or she hears the preaching of God’s Word. Every believer should be able to filter his culture’s seductive *gnosis* through the grid of God’s *epignosis*.

2. Orthopraxy (1:10-12a)

Spirit-given insight into the will of God, as important as it is, is not an end in itself. Paul indicates that the Colossians’ mental and attitudinal realignment is to produce behavioral transformation. The Bible views knowledge of doctrinal absolutes as foundational to godly living. Most of Paul’s letters begin by laying a doctrinal foundation before giving practical exhortations. Godly living is directly linked in Scripture to knowledge of doctrinal truth. Believing, submissive Bible study leads to the knowledge of God’s will. A mind saturated with such knowledge will also be able to comprehend general principles of godly behavior.

Paul’s aim in seeing the believers filled with the knowledge of God’s will (v. 9) was so that they might live in a manner worthy of the gospel. Pleasing God should be the aim of every true Christian, not merely following a good teacher. In verse 10 and following, Paul explains that knowing God’s will has ethical and moral consequences.

In this section, Paul describes what the Christian lifestyle looks like (‘walk’), using employing in the Greek four participles: ‘bearing fruit,’ ‘growing,’ ‘being empowered,’ and ‘giving thanks.’

a) *Walking Worthily (1:10a)*

In Hebrew vocabulary throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, the word ‘walk’ symbolically referred to one’s conduct, picturing one’s lifestyle as a road that one travels along. This idiom is carried over into the Greek of the New Testament and especially here in Colossians (e.g., 1:10; 2:6; 3:7). ‘Walk’ describes the whole direction of a person’s way of life, and that life must be ‘worthy’ of God (cp. 1 Th. 2:12; Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27). Here it is ‘the Lord’ who sets the standard

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of our ‘worthy walk.’ A mind controlled by knowledge, wisdom, and understanding produces such a life. Trying to walk worthy in our own strength is doomed to failure. But God has given us the Holy Spirit to make this life possible.

In the Hebrew mind, knowledge and conduct were bound together. But in Gnostic culture, teaching was highly speculative and theoretical, not related to life. There was even one school of Gnosticism which reasoned that since the body was evil and the spirit was good, it did not make any difference what one did in the body!

The Hebrews saw an absolute connection between knowledge and conduct. From their perspective, a person did not know something unless he or she *did* it. This is from where Paul and indeed all authentic Christianity springs. True spiritual knowledge means action! Paul was the ultimate contemplative mind, but also an incredible man of action.

How can we ‘fully please’ God in every respect unless we make a systematic and thoroughgoing attempt to find out how He wants us to live? In the same way, how can we avoid what displeases Him unless we take the trouble to find out what it is?

b) Bearing Fruit (1:10b)

Good works are the outworking of Christ’s life in His people. The participle ‘bearing fruit’ is present and continuous. Paul prayed that this fruit-bearing would be a constant, ongoing reality. He echoes the language of verse 6; the Colossians are to continue to do what the gospel is already accomplishing among them. Fruit is the by-product of righteousness. It is the mark of every redeemed individual. This involves a commitment to spiritual excellence right across the board. Our good works are to have a certain character. They are to be shot through with spiritual and moral worth.

Does this seem mundane and unexciting measured against the different kinds of ‘full gospel’ package? It is certainly in keeping with other statements by Paul about the will of God (1 Th. 4:3; Rom. 12:2). It is God’s will that we should not let the world shape the way we think.

c) Growing in Knowledge (1:10c)

Spiritual growth is progressing ‘in the knowledge of God.’ *Tē epignōsei* is an instrumental dative case. It indicates the means by which our ‘increasing,’ or growth, takes place. Why does Paul mention knowledge again as he prays for their conduct? Simply because Paul saw the dynamic connection between action and knowledge. One begets the other in a delectable upward spiral: the more one truly serves Him, the more one opens to knowledge of Him – the more one knows of Him, the more one wants to serve. So it goes onward and upward! The knowledge of God revealed in His Word is crucial to spiritual growth. This mutual cause-and-effect relationship between knowing and doing is one of the fundamental laws of spiritual growth.

The false teachers’ pitch was essentially, ‘You will never be a complete Christian until you have added this extra dimension, this new experience or gift.’ In response, Paul was not advocating stagnation. Every Christian needs more. But the fullness that Christians need is not something new or different, but more of what they already have. They already knew God. All Christians do. But there is more of God to be known than we have yet discovered, a greater depth of love, a more intense holiness than we have yet reached.

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d) *Being Strengthened (1:11)*

(1) Power

Living a life worthy of the Lord is a high and difficult calling. In typical New Testament fashion, Paul reminds us that God gives what He demands: ‘being strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power.’ Verse 11 describes the extent and purpose of God’s empowerment of the believer. Paul longed to see God’s power in all its fullness at work in the lives of his readers. The form of the participle *dynamoumenoi* (‘strengthened’) in the present tense suggests that God’s provision of strength is continuously available. Believers are continually ‘strengthened with all might (*dynamis*)’ throughout their Christian lives.

‘Glorious’ is from *doxa* and refers to the manifestation of God’s attributes. It is a very basic characterization of God, signifying His ‘weighty,’ overwhelming presence. The strength that God supplies His people is in accordance with (and is the expression of) His own intrinsic glory. ‘Power’ translates *kratos*, which refers to strength in action. The power available to us is the limitless power of God Himself, manifested through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Paul is talking of ‘Colossal’ power!

‘Power’ was another term often employed by the new teachers. Some modern evangelicals are also obsessed with it – power to heal the sick, speak in other tongues, give ‘words of knowledge,’ drive out demons, and so on. Here, Paul is concerned with a different kind of power, the power to show ‘patience’ in adversity and to combine ‘long-suffering’ and ‘joy.’ In other words, Paul asked God to give his friends moral power, the ability to live well and to go on doing so.

God is more concerned with graces than with gifts, with our character than with our abilities. Gifts, however wonderful, are morally neutral, and God wants us to be holy. ‘Patience’ and ‘long-suffering’ are not spectacular. A man with a reputation for the gift of prophecy will attract attention. A man who can endure bitter disappointments while keeping his faith intact may well not. Indeed, ‘patience and long-suffering’ only become apparent with the passage of time.

(2) Endurance and Long-suffering

The focus of the power is, first for ‘endurance’ (*hypomonē*). The kind of steadfastness Paul meant is that which enables one to hold one’s position in battle. It is the ability to last the course, steady perseverance, bearing up under difficult circumstances (cp. Heb. 12:1). He had in mind the evil forces in the Lycus Valley which were trying to destroy the Colossian church.

To ‘endurance’ Paul added ‘patience’ or ‘long-suffering’ (*makrothymia*). ‘Endurance’ is in reference to adverse circumstances, whereas ‘patience’ is in reference to difficult people. It includes the ability to keep going without bitterness in the face of disappointments. Paul was praying that the Colossians would have a long-suffering, patient spirit as they related to one another and to those outside the Church.

Paul knew that such qualities could only come by being ‘strengthened with all power according to His glorious might.’ There is nothing flashy about the power to keep going, but it is Christianity of the old school. Which kind of ‘power’ would you prefer – the ability to produce a spectacular miracle in front of a crowd of thousands, or the ability to live out a whole lifetime without letting Jesus down. The church with ‘endurance and patience’ is a great church. It is a church which walks ‘worthy of the Lord.’

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(3) Joy

Paul does not have in mind a stoic, teeth-gritting endurance. The strength provided by knowledge of God's Word allows the believer to endure trials joyously, literally 'with joy' (*meta charas*). The phrase 'with joy' could modify either what precedes or what follows it. It seems preferable to couple it with 'long-suffering.' 'Giving thanks' (v. 12) already includes the element of joy. Knowledge of God's truth give us the ability to endure trials joyously, as did Paul himself (cp. Acts 16:25).

e) *Giving Thanks (1:12a)*

Paul wanted the Colossians to be increasingly thankful. This is the summit of the prayer, and thanksgiving is diffused through all of it. We cannot walk worthy of God without constantly giving joyous thanks, as the Greek participle emphasizes. The giving of thanks implies that what has been received has not been earned but is a gift. Thanksgiving is therefore the flip side of a key Pauline theological claim: that Christians are saved by and live by grace.

'Father' emphasizes the personal, relational aspect of our union with God. Before our salvation, God was our Judge. We stood condemned before Him for violating His holy, just laws. But when, through the grace of God, we placed our faith in Christ, God ceased being our sentencing Judge and became our gracious father.

B. Paul's' Praise (Col. 1:12b-14)

Like Paul's prayer here and elsewhere, our prayers should include praise as well as petitions. Paul shifts his focus, turning from praying for the Colossians to rehearsing what He has done for them. Paul reminds the Colossians of the foundation for their new life in the redemptive work of the Father through the Son.

1. Qualified for Inheritance (1:12b)

Paul lists three specific reasons in verse 12 to 14 why believers who walk worthy of Christ constant give thanks to God for their salvation. First, He 'has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.' By describing salvation as something that believers inherit, the apostle was touching on a wonderful privilege that belongs to every Christian.

'Qualified' is from *hikanoō* (cp. 2 Cor. 3:6). It means 'to make sufficient, to empower, to authorize, to make fit.' We are not qualified through our own efforts. God has qualified us through the finished work of Christ. Before God saved us by His grace we were truly unqualified for our inheritance. Before our salvation, we were dominated by the evil world system; its wicked ruler, Satan; stateless, covenantless, hopeless, godless. Our minds were given to futility; our understanding was darkened. We were cut off from the life of God, ignorant, hardhearted, callous, immoral, impure, and greedy. The only thing we were qualified to receive from God was His wrath. And that is what we would have received, if not for God's mercy to us.

Their qualification did not depend on their own moral worth, but on the life and death of Jesus Christ as their substitute. This note of reassurance would be important to them. Some of them might have gained the impression from the new teachers that they were actually 'disqualified' from a place among Christians of the first rank (see 2:18). In the same way, nervous believers are often fearful because they fell that they could never qualify for a place in God's favor. This

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is why the doctrine of justification by faith alone is so important. It reminds us that our right to a place in God's favor is not dependent on our performance in any way at all. This is because God the Father 'qualified' us for it! It was not due to anything we have done. It is all of Him. Thus, we give joyous thanks constantly!

'Inheritance' is literally 'for the portion of the lot' in Greek (*eis tēn merida tou klērou*). Paul uses two words that overlap in meaning: *meris* and *klēros*, which both mean 'share' or 'portion'. We each receive our own individual allotment or portion of the total inheritance. Paul here alludes to the partitioning of Israel's inheritance in Canaan (cp. Num. 26:52-56; 33:51-54; Jos. 14:1-2). Just as the Israelites received their inheritance in the Promised Land, so also do we receive our portion of the divine inheritance. Deuteronomy 10:9 reflects the most common use of the words in the Old Testament (LXX), where they are often applied to the territories allotted to Israel's tribes in the land of Israel. The translation 'inheritance' is a natural extension of meaning: that which is 'allotted' is an inheritance. Paul applies this language to the spiritual privilege enjoyed by God's new covenant people.

'Light' (*phōti*) here marks a contrast with the 'darkness' (*skotous*) of the believer's former life (1:13). It has a moral and a spiritual dimension. Light represents two things biblically. Intellectually, it represents truth (Ps. 119:130). Morally, it represents purity (Eph. 5:8-14). In contrast to Israel's earthly inheritance, the saints' inheritance is in the light – the spiritual realm of truth and purity where God Himself dwells (1 Tim. 6:16).

When do we receive our inheritance? The present tense participle *hikanōsanti* ('qualified') indicates we have it now (cp. Eph. 1:11). We have already been transferred from the domain of darkness into Christ's kingdom (1:13). We are already fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17). The full possession of that inheritance, however, is yet future (cp. Heb. 9:15; 1 Pe. 1:4).

This is a *present* reality (note the aorist tense). *We are now in the realm of light!* (cp. 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Th. 5:5; 1 Pe. 2:9). We are presently in the light, but it is also a *future* reality! It has not yet been manifested in all its infinite brightness, but we are being made ready for the ultimate inheritance in light. New Testament believers enjoy the promise of an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade (1 Pe. 1:4).

2. Delivered and Transferred (1:13)

The second reason for thanksgiving is given in verse 13. God the Father's bestowal of the inheritance on His new covenant people takes the form of a rescue and transfer operation. Paul speaks of salvation as having being 'delivered' (*rhyomai*, 'to draw to oneself,' 'to rescue.'). A dramatic rescue has taken place. God drew us out of Satan's kingdom to Himself. That event was the new birth. We are not gradually, progressively delivered from Satan's power. When we placed our faith in Christ, we were instantly delivered.

Paul may be alluding to the rescue of God's people from Egypt. The parallels between Exodus 6:6-8 (LXX) and Colossians 1:12-14 are obvious: in both, God 'rescues' (*rhyomai*) and 'redeems' (*lytroō*) people, taking them out of a situation of bondage and bringing them into an 'inheritance,' (*klēros*). Paul may also be making allusions to other passages in Scripture, such as Isaiah 42:7, 16; 49:9.

Exousias ('domain') could be translated 'power,' 'jurisdiction,' or 'authority.' Our Lord uses the phrase 'domain of darkness' (*exousias tou skoutos*) to refer to the supernatural forces of Satan marshaled against Him at His arrest (Luke 22:53). Through His death, Jesus crushed Satan and

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delivered us from his dark kingdom. People who have not been rescued by God in Christ live in a power structure that is characterized by the forces of chaos, evil, and judgment.

Salvation involves being transferred from one kingdom to another, and Paul describes our new domain. The word for ‘brought’ or ‘transferred’ (*methistēmi*) means to remove or change. It was used by Josephus to describe a mighty king picking up a whole population and deporting it to another realm (*Antiquities*, 9.235, where the same word is used of Tiglath-pileser’s removal of the Transjordanian tribes to his own kingdom). The verb speaks here of our total removal from the domain of satanic darkness to the glorious light of the kingdom of Christ.

‘Kingdom’ refers to our spiritual reality right now. Paul gives us a definition of it in Romans 14:17. The kingdom is the special relationship men in this age have with God through Jesus Christ. A kingdom in its most basic sense is a group of people ruled by a king. Christians have acknowledged Christ as their King and are subjects in His kingdom. He reigns in eternity, rules now over His church, and one day will return to rule over all creation forever.

We are in the ‘kingdom of the Son He loves’ (literally, ‘the Son of His love;’ *tou huiou tēs agapēs autou*). Paul may be alluding to another key Old Testament messianic prophecy, 2 Samuel 7:12-16, which uses the title “Son” and stresses God’s eternal love for Him. The Father gives the kingdom to the Son He loves, then to everyone who loves the Son (Lk. 12:32). It is a kingdom enveloped in love. For this reason we give joyous thanksgiving. The transfer is complete. We have left one kingdom behind and have been placed firmly in another. People who have undergone this kind of experience have every reason to be profoundly grateful.

3. Redeemed and Forgiven (1:14)

The final reason is given in verse 14. Our deliverance described in verse 13 is explained in verse 14. It was achieved by ‘redemption’ through Jesus Christ, the payment of a ransom at the cost of His own blood. We have been purchased from the slave market, and our sins have been sent away. That is the *present* reality, right now!

Apolytrōsis (‘redemption’) expresses a blessed aspect of the work of Christ on our behalf. Alongside such terms as ‘sacrifice,’ ‘offering,’ ‘propitiation,’ ‘ransom,’ ‘justification,’ ‘adoption,’ and ‘reconciliation,’ it attempts to describe the riches of our salvation. It means ‘to deliver by payment of a ransom,’ and was used of freeing slaves from bondage. The meaning of *apolytrōsis* is expressed in our English word ‘emancipation.’ It is used several places in the New Testament to speak of Christ’s freeing us from slavery to sin (cp. Eph. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 3:24). Christ came to ‘redeem’ (*lytroō, apolytroō*) sinners from their slavery to sin by offering His own life as a ‘ransom’ (*lytron*) (see especially Mark 10:45; cp. Mt. 20:28; Rom. 3:24).

Aphesin (‘forgiveness’) refers to pardon, or remission of penalty. It is a composite of two Greek words, *apo*, ‘from,’ and *hiēmi*, ‘to send.’ Because Christ redeemed us, God has sent away our sins; they will never be found again (cp. Ps. 103:12; Mic. 7:19).

So Christ’s death on our behalf paid the price to redeem us. On that basis, God forgave our sins, granted us an inheritance, delivered us from the power of darkness, and made us subjects of Christ’s kingdom. Those wonderful truths should cause us to give thanks to God continually, as did Paul in his prayer.

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C. Conclusion

'Fullness' teaching, whatever form it takes, has a way of minimizing salvation. It leaves us with the strong impression that salvation is only a first step on the way to something more complete. Yet Paul speaks of salvation in glowing terms. It is a terrible thing to imply that there is still something wanting after a salvation so marvelous and complete.

Paul prayed that God would endow his readers with an impressive combination of qualities, a large measure of 'spiritual understanding,' (1:9), a life that was pleasing to God and increasingly filled with the knowledge of God's will (1:10). He also pleased with God that they might be given the power to keep going and made truly grateful for a wonderful salvation (1:11-12).

Why not covenant to pray for both the *knowledge* and the *conduct* of your fellow-believers. A church which is growing in the knowledge of Christ and His will, and is walking worthy of Him, will do great things. Let us commit ourselves to sensitive, fervent intercession for our brothers and sisters.

For next time: Read Colossians 1:15-20.