

“More of the Same”

Col 1:9–14

Introduction. We have some great mental support organisations in our community: Lifeline, Beyond Blue and Headspace come to mind. They’re so well named:

Lifeline—throwing someone a lifeline

Beyond Blue—there is a life beyond the blues

Headspace—managing the space between my ears.

Now that can be quite a challenge—managing the space between my ears. The universe that fluctuates as my mind processes the world around me. As Thomas Cooley wrote:

“I am not who you think I am; I am not who I think I am; I am who I think you think I am ”

Cooley is saying that we fill our minds with perceptions. What I think about myself is what I think others are thinking about me. What I fill my mind with is a product of my personality and perceptions.

But sometimes we inhabit our thoughts to our peril. The one thought that simmers is satisfying our needs and wants. The pre-occupation with myself. I interpret the world in a way that advantages me.

There is an inclination to put myself first and attend to my needs.

This was true of people in first century Colossae and it is true today. Although culturally we are apart from life in the Roman Empire, the pre-occupation of filling our minds with self-indulgence was as true then as it is now.

Indeed, Paul says that life outside Christ is characterised by “evil behaviour” (Col 1.21) which he explains in Ephesians as a desire to satisfy the “cravings of our flesh” by following the desires and thoughts of our sinful nature (Eph 2.1–2).

The moment of Christian conversion brings with it new identity.

This was indeed the case in Colossae when the Spirit overhauled the mind of the new believers and they began to think new thoughts. Their perception of reality changed. Their trust in Christ altered their relationship with culture and it changed self-perceptions and priorities.

In Christ, we truly are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come.

The ego is demoted and the void is filled by the Son who is in the image of the invisible God. Life is now anchored in Christ which flows into a love for all God’s people. The hope this world offers is subverted by the hope stored up in heaven.

We are citizens in a new world, which Paul describes in verse 13 as the “kingdom of the Son”.

Faith, love, hope. These are the pillars of the Christian life.

Not any faith—but trust in Christ Jesus.

Not any love—but a love for those whom God has called into his kingdom

Not any hope—but an assured hope awaiting us in heaven

And so we live by faith in Christ, with renewed relationships as we love one another, and in the shadow of the hope stored up for us in heaven.

Our headspace is renewed as we fill our heads with these things. But filling our minds with faith, love and hope requires effort. It requires prayer. So Paul prays for the Colossians that the faith, love and hope that began their Christian lives will continue to shape the whole of their lives.

There's a Cathedral in Salzburg, Austria. It has three bronze front doors. Over the door on the right is written FAITH. Over the door on the left is written HOPE. Over the central, larger, and more imposing door is written LOVE.

We may write each word over the communion table. We can write FAITH because we believe Jesus died for us. We can write HOPE because we believe He will come again. In the largest letters of all we can write LOVE.

“Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one's life for his friends” (Jn 15.13).

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5.8).

In Colossians 1, Paul prays for the Colossians who started so well—in faith, hope and love—and who risk being side-tracked by hollow and deceptive philosophies (Col 2.8). Paul prays for more of the same. Keep trusting Christ, keep loving the saints and keep that heavenly hope before your eyes.

Live a life worthy of the Lord.

Paul's Powerful Prayer

Praying what matters (v.9–10). Paul prays this way in verses 9 to 14 which we consider today. As I was writing this talk, I was hearing the newsreader speaking quietly in the background.

I heard a report that two police officers were seriously assaulted;

I heard that a woman injured herself jumping out a window to escape domestic violence;

I heard that a girl is bashed in a shocking attack in Melbourne;

I heard about alleged corruption and disgraced politicians.

The heart is damaged beyond repair. So Paul persistently prays that God will renew the hearts of those who are his people. Verse 9, “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you”.

What does Paul pray for?

Paul prays that God will fill them with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding in order that it will result in the right behaviour, that the Colossians will “conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing the Lord with good works”.

Christians often talk about seeking God’s will. There’s been whole books written on the topic. What’s God’s will for my life?

What car should I buy, what house should I live in, should I take that overseas trip?

And while at one level it is good to ask the Lord for guidance on these matters, our questions resonate with self-centredness. When I was at university I never heard of God calling any Christian be a cleaner or a sewage worker. It was always into professions like being a doctor, or a lawyer or an engineer. Low paid jobs could never be God’s will for them.

Paul steers us away from thinking about God’s will in terms of my needs.

The big issue in the Bible is not knowing God’s will, its living in harmony with it. It’s obedience. The psalmist doesn’t pray for a knowledge of God’s will since he knows God’s will because he knows God’s law. Instead he prays in Ps 143.10, “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground”. As Don Carson comments (slide):

“To do the will of God in this passage is virtually synonymous with obeying what God has mandated. What God has mandated is his will; our responsibility is to do it ... It is folly to pretend to seek God’s will for your life, in terms of a marriage partner or some form of Christian vocation, when there is no deep desire to pursue God’s will as he has already kindly revealed it”.

God’s will for his people is known. It’s no secret. It’s not given to a select few who have special knowledge and we bow to their reverence. The gospel is the revelation of God’s will and we must consider its impact on our lives. To do the will of God is to obey his commands. For example (slides),

Eph 5.15–17, “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is”.

1 Thess 4.3, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified”

1 Thess 5.16–18, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”.

God's will is no secret! The issue is not knowing, it's doing. So Paul prays that we will know because we can know, and that we will be filled with the knowledge of God's will in order so we will live in a manner worthy of the Lord.

The second part of verse 9 connects knowledge of God's will with spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Knowing God's will is more than filling our heads with doctrine—not that people tend to do that these days. And while it's good to have your head filled with a clear understanding of the Scriptures, knowing God's will is more than this for it is tied up with wisdom and understanding.

Wisdom is knowing how to live. Wisdom is living in harmony with the truth of the gospel. Paul never trades away intellectual understanding. Knowledge, wisdom and understanding are gifts of the Spirit that God is willing to give us as we pray for such things.

When you think about prayer, do you think about praying that God will fill you with the knowledge of his will, that he will give you wisdom and understanding so that you may live in a way pleasing to him?

The purpose of Paul's petition is that believers might be utterly pleasing to the Lord Jesus. And he gives us four ways which are pleasing to the Lord. For in every important thing in life God doesn't leave us guessing.

In a typical, lovely Greek way these four virtues are marked out by four participles in verses 10 to 12: bearing fruit, increasing in knowledge, being strengthened with all power, and giving thanks. It's like each participle is a dot point. You may even remember from school that participles are often "-ing" words.

Here's four "-ing" phrases that instruct us in the way of godly living.

Bearing fruit ... (v.10). The first participle in verse 10 is "bearing fruit". It's the same word we saw in verse 6, when we saw that the gospel is "bearing fruit throughout all the world" (Col 1.6). And now those who would live a life worthy of the Lord should be "bearing fruit".

Paul cannot imagine anyone being pleasing to Christ without fruitfulness in good works.

We have an orange tree at home. And for a while I've been watching oranges grow, slowly turning from green to an orange colour. Recently we had a frost which I am told adds to the flavour to the orange.

A life worthy of the Lord bears healthy fruit, the sort of fruit sketched out by the next three participles.

Increasing in the knowledge of God ... (v.10). As we pray for God to fill us with a knowledge of his will, a fruitful life will result in an increasing knowledge of his will. Christians grow in their knowledge of God. And we gain our knowledge of Him through his Word.

So it's important that we immerse ourselves in God's Word. The Psalmist says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path ... My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end" (Ps 119.105, 112).

Too often we fail to understand the mind of God because we fail to understand his Word.

Increasing our knowledge of God enables us to grow in our love for God and one another. It empowers us to bear fruit in our lives. And importantly a robust knowledge of the gospel fortifies us against false teaching.

Sound gospel knowledge increases our immunity to deceptive teachings.

Sad to say the average Bible knowledge in the pew has declined in recent years. I spoke to the Principal of a Bible College who was flabbergasted at the low Bible knowledge of those applying for their courses.

Or we drive a wedge between the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Why do we need the Word when we have the Spirit? One can sometimes hear these words, "I don't need Bible knowledge because the Spirit leads me".

But the Spirit leads us as we read his Word and as we obey his Word.

Praying that God will fill us with a knowledge of his will is a profoundly spiritual exercise. For wisdom and understanding is a gift from the Spirit who urges us to conduct ourselves in a manner pleasing to the Lord.

Should laziness be your problem then pray that God will lift this burden from you. For laziness is a return to self-centredness and rebellious behaviour.

Christians grow in their knowledge of God.

The third participle is being strengthened with all power (v.11). Paul thinks of believers as "being strengthened with all power according to [God's] glorious might, so that [they] may have great endurance and patience".

We are living in unsettled times. There have been numerous crises and people are panicking. The COVID-19 pandemic brought much turmoil. As people panicked they attempted to find solace by hoarding toilet paper. The Black Life Movement has precipitated an attack on the foundations of western culture. Protests have turned to violent riots.

Paul singles out endurance and patience as weapons we need to live in this world. As NT Wright says,

“A patient and longsuffering spirit, the quiet corollary of faith, hope and love, is the product of the settled conviction that the Father of Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord of the world, and that he is able to bring about his purposes in his own time and manner”.

Paul prays that God will provide the endurance and patience we need for godly living. These are qualities so far beyond what humans can muster that they require the power of the Spirit of God. These virtues, according to Carson, “enable the believer to survive with joy when persecuted, to triumph in self-composure and contentment when insulted, to trust God’s all-wise and all-gracious providence when one is suffering like Job”.

It is prayer that underpins the receiving of these gifts.

Then lastly our fourth participle is giving thanks (v.12). Christians joyfully giving thanks to the Father. What draws our thanks? It’s the gospel of the Lord Jesus. “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound; that saved a wretch like me”.

“Give thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” Col 1.12–13).

“And whatever you do”, Paul writes in Col 3.17, “whether in word or deed, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”.

I like watching the TV series “Paramedics”. Occasionally serious life-saving rescues take place. Sometimes when the patient gets well, they visit the paramedics who saved them and give them a big hug and say thanks. It’s an emotional re-union.

It’s the same on “Bondi Rescue”. Sometimes a person who almost drowned returns to say “thanks” and it’s an emotional re-union.

When someone saves your life—it’s emotional. You have a fresh perspective on life. It’s like you’ve got a second chance.

The Christian life is one of thanksgiving. Once we were drowning in the dominion of darkness, but we were redeemed, bought for a price and brought into the kingdom of the Son. The grace of God. As Jim Packer says, “For [God’s] love awakens love in return; and love, once awakened, desires to give pleasure ... Thanksgiving will move anyone who has truly received grace to do as God requires”.

Conclusion

Live the Christian life, then do more of the same. You began with faith in Christ, love for God's people and a yearning for the hope stored up for you in heaven.

Pray for more of the same.

Pray that God will fill you with the knowledge of his will. Pray that his Spirit will lead you into wisdom and understanding. Pray that you will live a life worthy of the Lord.

That you will bear fruit ... that you will grow in the knowledge of God ... that God will strengthen you to endure and be patient ... and that your whole life will be one of thanksgiving.

God delights when we pray such things, because he is only too willing to answer for he has rescued us and brought us into the kingdom of his Son.