

August 24, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Christ is All and All-Sufficient

Colossians 1:9-14

9 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, 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. 11 May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The primary purpose of this letter Paul wrote to the Colossians, was to combat a poor understanding and outright false teaching concerning the truth of the gospel. ***And the two main problem areas were the doctrine of the person and work of Christ; and how that affects Christian living.*** Most of our problems and issues spring from a low understanding of who Jesus is – it is because we do not treasure this eternal, transcendent Christ and instead spend our lives treasuring temporal, fleeting pleasures – that we struggle so. ***Treasuring other things weakens our walk, sucks the vitality out of our worship, robs our prayer life of power, and sabotages our witness of the gospel.***

At the center of the gospel is God – God in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself through the death, burial and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ; and the book of Colossians reveals the ***absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency of this Christ. He is the center and circumference of all that is eternal and good and perfect – and He is all we need.*** The Christian life, Paul contends, flows naturally out of this revelation that ***Christ is all – and He is all-sufficient.*** He is all-powerful and He is all we need.

The gospel is the good news because it brings us to Christ – not first of all because it saves us from eternal hell – not primarily because it frees us from a guilty conscience, restores ruined lives, forgives our sin, justifies us before a holy God and grants us eternal life – ***it is good news because we get God.*** If the gospel does not bring us to Christ as our all-sufficient, supreme treasure – then the gospel, whatever else it may be – is not good news. It may bring some measure of temporary comfort – it may bring temporary hope – it may for a while take our minds off our troubles, ***but if it does not bring us to Christ, it is not good news.*** Tragically, many people have hoped in an incomplete gospel that glorifies the gifts but not the Giver. Like small children who would rather play with the box than the gift inside, those who treasure ***what Christ will do for you*** rather than ***treasure Him for who He is*** are left with an empty box at the end of the day. And so Paul writes to ignite a passion in the saints for the supremacy of Christ in all things.

And one of the things Paul does first is pray. *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,* Colossians 1:9 Paul is referring to the Colossians having heard and responded to the gospel – and his first impulse is to pray for them. I do not believe that any aspect of God's kingdom advances without a foundation of prayer. I believe prayer is what fuels the purpose of God here on earth. Early on Jesus taught the disciples to pray – and to pray in a specific way: *Thy kingdom come – Thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven.* The reality of what is in heaven is brought about through our prayers here on earth.

Paul does not take it for granted that having once embraced the gospel, the Colossians would never be in danger of leaving the faith. He prayed – unceasingly – night and day – sometimes with tears. Fighting the good fight on his knees in his prayer closet that the Colossians would not be blindsided by the enemy – that they would hold fast to the word that they heard – that they would treasure Christ above all things.

Of all the enemy's schemes – prayerlessness is the most effective weapon he possesses. ***The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but he trembles when we pray.*** Samuel Chadwick

We can engage in all kinds of good works – we can go to church every Sunday and twice on Christmas and Easter – we can fast and read the Bible and exhibit a lot of other Christian virtues – but if our prayer life is empty – ultimately everything else is as well. Because it is prayer that brings us into communion with God. It is prayer that grants us the face to face kind of relationship with God that fuels our passion for Him. ***“If I should neglect prayer but a single day, I should lose a great deal of the fire of faith.” - Martin Luther I believe that the measure of our Christian life is found in the measure of our prayer life.*** If you find that you do not treasure Christ above all – if you do not have the sense that He is sufficient for your every need – perhaps it is time to pray.

So Paul prayed. And he prayed very specifically. *asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will.* The first thing Paul prays is that the saints would be filled with knowledge – the knowledge of God's will. The word for knowledge here is **epignosis**. It is a full knowledge – an ever-increasing filling to completeness. Paul's thought here is a kind of thorough knowledge that involves a deep, accurate and comprehensive understanding of the way God manifests Himself in the Bible. Psalm 103:7 says: *[God] made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel. Knowing God's ways is deeper than knowing His acts.*

The Israelites knew His acts – for forty years they saw Him deliver them time and time again; they saw water come out of a rock – they saw Him miraculously provide food for three million people for 14,600 days in the wilderness without missing even one; their clothes, the Bible says, did not wear out – but Paul told the Corinthians that: *with most of them God was not pleased.* 1 Corinthians 10:5 In fact all but two died there. There are, I believe, many people, Christians included, that have seen the mighty acts of God – seen signs and wonders – seen the impossible come to pass – and yet, because they do not know Him – they do not know His ways – **what they have experienced of the miraculous ultimately does not keep them all the way to the end.**

Paul's prayer is that they would know the will of God. I hear lots of people say, 'What is God's will?' And what they mean is what does God want me to do? What is the will of God for my life? And they are waiting for God to shout directions through His heavenly megaphone – or perhaps ring them up on the cell phone – and tell them to 'Turn left here.' But that is not what Paul is talking about. What Paul is talking about goes to the heart of knowing His ways – **it is understanding the purpose of God** – in fact **purpose** is another way to translate **will** here. **So we have two questions: what is the purpose of God – and how do I fit in that purpose?**

The purpose of God, simply stated, without going very deep this morning, is, I think, most clearly expressed in Ephesians 1:7-10: *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.* Ephesians 1:7-10 Everything will be one day summed up in Christ – all of creation will be under subjection to the Son in the final analysis. We do not see that yet – but that is the final end of all things. He will be the center and circumference of all things. Everything will have its purpose and meaning in how it relates to Christ. That is the will of God – His grand purpose. And we are an integral part of that purpose.

The will of God for us personally as it relates to His universal purpose, we see best I think in Romans chapter 8: **27 And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.** There it is – the will of God – the Holy Spirit is praying something for us based on His knowledge of God's eternal purpose for us.

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. There it is again, His will, His purpose – we are called based on the purpose of God – He has something in mind – some reason why we exist.

29 For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, Romans 8:27-29 **This is the eternal, unchanging will of God for us – the summing up of all things in Christ means that we will one day look like Jesus.** In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul tells us how that happens: *For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,* 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 The melding of the eternal purpose of God and His will for our lives is that we would be sanctified – made holy – separated wholly for God Himself – with no other competing ties or superior affections – that we would possess our bodies in such a way that God is glorified and honored in every area of our lives.

The reason Paul prays this way for the saints comes in 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.* The reason we need to be filled with the knowledge of His will is so that we would please Him in everything – that we would bear fruit in every good work – and that we would continue to increase in the knowledge of God. **The end of prayer is not spiritual** – we are not seeking some mystical, ecstatic experience divorced from the practical realities of life. **The result of prayer is that we would be more transparent witnesses of the grace and glory of Christ in us** – that we would like healthy trees, bearing fruit in our good works – that we would grow and increase in knowing God – not just knowing about Him – but knowing Him. The knowing here is that experiential knowledge of God that comes as a result of knowing His ways and walking with Him.

Prayer at its highest is directed toward **understanding the will of God and appropriating the power of God to do His will.** That is why Paul goes on to pray: *May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.* This is the sufficiency of Christ. There is nothing He will not do for the child of God that is wholly given to His will. *"For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His."* 2 Chronicles 16:9 All kinds of power is available. And yet it is always connected with the eternal will of God. This is not, as some claim, power to do unauthorized things.

Teaching about the kingdom one day, Jesus said this: *Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'* Matthew 7:21-23 Another translation of that says, 'Go away. The things you did were unauthorized'. So many Christians are enraptured by the miraculous – the sensational – but I think that we will find out on that day that many of these prophetic utterances, demon exorcisms and so-called miracles were unauthorized – they were not according to the will of God. Early on, the disciples were sent out two by two and given all kinds of power to do miraculous things – and yet, when Jesus was not well-received by one village, and the disciples wanted to call down fire on them – Jesus rebuked them saying: 'You don't know what kind of spirit you have'. In other words, they would have exercised the power outside the will of God. **That they could do it was not the question – whether they should do it was the issue.**

Paul's prayer for the saints is that they would be strengthened with all the glorious might of the Son of God – not for amazing miracle-making or eye-popping healings, but *for all endurance and patience with joy.* The greatest need we have is for endurance and patience. Endurance – **hupomone** – remaining under the mighty hand of God when everything in you wants to run the other direction. And patience – **makrothumeo** – waiting on God in the face of opposition. **The one is a refusal to be overcome by hard times – the other is a refusal to be upset by perverse people.**

And the qualifier – **the way we know that this is from a God-borne strength is that this endurance and patience is always with joy.** Joy – **chara** – flows from grace – **charis** – and joy in the Bible is nearly always connected with hardship and suffering. There is nothing superficial about this joy – it is not a careless exuberance nor a gushy bubble of happy face times. It is rather the quiet sense of wholeness and contented happiness that comes from knowing and being known by God – of loving and being loved by God – of holding Christ at the center and mountain peak of your affections.

In his devotional book, *My Utmost For His Highest*, Oswald Chambers writes: *The things we try to avoid and fight against - tribulation, suffering and persecution - are the very things that produce abundant joy in us. Huge waves that would frighten the ordinary swimmer produce a tremendous thrill for the surfer who has ridden them. "We are more than conquerors through Him" IN all these things - not in spite of them, but in the midst of them. A saint doesn't know the joy of the Lord in spite of tribulation, but because of it. Paul said "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation".* Oswald Chambers,

In one of his books John Piper writes: *I have never heard anyone say, "The deepest and rarest and most satisfying joys of my life have come in times of extended ease and earthly comfort." Nobody says that. It isn't true. What's true is what Samuel Rutherford said when he was put in the cellars of affliction: "The Great King keeps his wine there" -- not in the courtyard where the sun shines. What's true is what Charles Spurgeon said: "Those who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls."*

Perseverance and patience with joy is that deep settled confidence in the face of adverse circumstances and perverse people that God is in control of every area of my life and His mighty power will see me through. Joy is not dependent upon circumstances or people – it is not dependent upon prosperity or health – it is the expression of the indwelling Christ who is all and all-sufficient. And this is what Paul prayed for.

"I have everything I need for joy!" Robert Reed said. His hands are twisted and his feet are useless. He can't bathe himself. He can't feed himself. He can't brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his underwear. His shirts are held together by strips of Velcro'. His speech drags like a worn-out audio cassette. Robert has cerebral palsy. The disease keeps him from driving a car, riding a bike, and going for a walk. But it didn't keep him from graduating from high school or attending Abilene Christian University, from which he graduated with a degree in Latin.

Having cerebral palsy didn't keep him from teaching at a St. Louis junior college or from venturing overseas on five mission trips. And Robert's disease didn't prevent him from becoming a missionary in Portugal. He moved to Lisbon, alone, in 1972. There he rented a hotel room and began studying Portuguese. He found a restaurant owner who would feed him after the rush hour and a tutor who would instruct him in the language. Then he stationed himself daily in a park, where he distributed brochures about Christ. Within six years he led seventy people to the Lord, one of whom became his wife, Rosa. His shirts may be held together by Velcro', but his life is held together by Christ who is all and all-sufficient.

As a third-century man was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend: ***"It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not...They have overcome the world. These people are called Christians—and I am one of them."***

Our gracious God and

We confess before You that our hearts are often cold toward You and our desire for the things of God too weak. We are paralyzed too often by our affection for other things and we have not treasured You as we ought. Grant that we would know Your ways, not just Your acts. Inspire our hearts with joy, real joy and don't let us settle for the temporary pleasures of this life that quickly turn sour and unfulfilling. Let us no longer buy into the lie that things or people or experiences will bring us joy, when all the time You long to fill us with real joy. Cleanse us from shallow desires and petty concerns and running after temporary joys. Fill us Holy Spirit with a passion for You, increase our appetite for the things of heaven and enlarge our capacity for the things of God, and fill us with joy and delight in You alone, so that we who have been made glad in God would live to make others glad in You. In the precious and powerful name of Jesus we pray, Amen

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***

