

COLOSSIANS: AUDACIOUS HOPE IN A MIXED-UP CULTURE

3. AUDACIOUS PRAYER

Colossians 1v9-12

Because we live in a pluralistic society we are faced with challenging issues every week. If you are the President of the United States of America and a professing Christian you also have to make big decisions on controversial subjects every week and you have strong lobbies bombarding you from opposing sides with no hiding place. This week, newly inaugurated President Barack Obama lifted restrictions on federal funding for stem-cell research on donated embryos, believing this will lead to breakthrough in the treatment of a wide range of serious medical conditions. His predecessor, George W. Bush had used his presidential veto to block this in the belief that destroying human embryos to extract stem cells crossed the “moral line”. Both men are sincere Christians and both were acting out of conviction, but each came to a different conclusion on this hugely controversial issue. It’s not always straightforward being a Christian in the 21st century.

Last Sunday we saw how Paul set out to encourage the Colossian believers as they struggled to live out their faith in a challenging culture. We left him assuring the Colossians that he was praying for them. But how did he pray? He prayed *audaciously*, and we can trace two big themes in his praying: Knowing God’s will and Experiencing God’s Power.

1. Knowing God’s Will (v9,10)

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God. *Gnosis*, knowledge, was one of the philosophical buzz words at that time. But Paul is not talking about abstract, mystical secrets available to an elite few. He is praying about down-to-earth knowledge to help believers live out their faith.

He has been told of the many different cultural pressures the Colossians face but he refuses to give them a manual on how to act in every given situation. That is what the scribes had done in Judaism, producing a large body of rules and regulations. Instead Paul prays something audacious. He asks God to fill them with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. But how is this possible? What is there to help us?

- The Holy Spirit helps us.

Paul talks about **spiritual** wisdom and understanding. This might be better translated, **all the Spirit’s wisdom and understanding (insight)** The word **filled** should also trigger this connection with the Spirit. This is a function of the Holy Spirit. He fills us. We need to go on being filled with the Spirit to

know the will of God. The Christian life is not to be lived by a rule book but by the Spirit. This is what it means to “*live by the Spirit*”, to be “*led by the Spirit*” and to “*keep in step with the Spirit*”. (Galatians 5v16, 18, 25)

- Fellow believers help us

This is not just about you and the Spirit doing your own thing. These words are written to a church, to a community of Christians together. We need to keep in step with the Spirit together. This is a safety factor to keep us from weird and whacky ideas.

- Biblical truth helps us.

In Scripture God has revealed unchanging principles. Our challenge is to apply them in the 21st century because the questions we are being asked are different from the 1st century. Get to know your Bible. Then the Holy Spirit can help you apply its principles today.

- Renewed minds help us.

Paul writes about this to the believers in Rome. “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.*” (Romans 12v2) God is interested in your mind because *how you think determines how you act*. God is renewing our minds because He wants us to use them. Of course, if we keep on filling them with rubbish then our reasoning and judgments will still be all over the place. If we fill our minds with biblical truth the Spirit can guide us.

- Good questions help us

Jesus often asked questions to help people find the right path. We can do the same. For example we can turn the next part of Paul's prayer (in verse 10) into four questions and use them as a check-list when we face difficult dilemmas and are unsure what to do.

1. Is this worthy of the Lord? Does it help others to understand what the Lord Jesus Christ is like?
2. Is this pleasing *him* in every way, rather than to please others?
3. Is this bearing good fruit in my life? This immediately reminds us of Galatians 5v22,23, the fruit of the Spirit .
4. Is this helping me to grow in my knowledge of God *Himself*, or will it set me back?

Last week I asked you to discuss a real-life question in your groups: *If you were the driver of a bus bearing the atheist poster, 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life' - what would you do or say?* (This advertisement is currently running on 200 bendy buses in London and 600 vehicles in England, Scotland and Wales.) Well, now consider the helps I have just spoken about and take another look at this question. I'm not

suggesting that every Christian will come to the same conclusion; but it will mean that you are not neglecting the helps God has made freely available.

Of course it is one thing *to know what to do* - but *being able to do it* is quite another thing. Where will we get the strength, the ability and the courage to do what is right? This leads us to Paul's second key theme.

2. Experiencing God's Power (v11,12)

Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father. This really is audacious prayer. **Being strengthened with all power**, is, literally being "*empowered with all power*".

And asking **according to his glorious might** is outrageously bold! If Paul was asking for power *from* God's glorious might, it would be a big enough prayer. But to ask to be strengthened with power **according to his glorious might** is in another realm. It is the difference between asking for a contribution from Bill Gates and asking for a gift in keeping with the size of Bill Gates' immense fortune. This is what Paul tells the Colossians he has been asking God for. That they be empowered with all power! And they needed it, faced as they were with all the pressures of their society and culture

He also prays that they **may have great endurance and patience**. This kind of living is counter-cultural for us in the west where instant gratification and insisting on your rights is the prevailing mood. But Paul is not thinking of grim endurance. In the midst of all their pressures and challenges the believers can be full of **joy**, rather than be a company of miseries, and be characterised by **thanksgiving** rather than forever complaining. But you and I need God's power to live like this.

We have our challenges, but in some cultures today Christians live in constant danger. Let me tell you about a remarkable man who knows what it means to experience God's power day by day. He lives in one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian; Baghdad, He is the vicar of Baghdad, Canon Andrew White.

He drives to church in an armoured plated car escorted by 25 members of the Iraq army. He has a congregation of 2,000 but each week familiar faces disappear – kidnapped, abducted or blown up by a suicide bomber. He knows he could be killed any day. In 2005, eleven of his staff were kidnapped, shot or they disappeared. In July 2007 pictures of him were posted around Baghdad with the caption: '*Wanted, dead or alive.*'

White has lived with danger for many years, stretching back into the regime of Saddam Hussein. He speaks of the depths of evil of those years when colleagues and their families were tortured and put to death. He recalls how he agreed to have dinner with Saddam's two "*odious*" sons Uday and Qusay, only because the intermediaries' families would all be shot if he refused.

Canon White and his staff have been involved in negotiations on behalf of 142 victims of kidnappings. This has meant meeting with killers, terrorists, militias and other factions. He says *“Much of my time is spent with unpleasant people and so before I approach them I simply pray, “Lord, help me to love them.”* He draws on God’s power to live each day. He is trusted and respected by politicians, generals, Muslim clerics and the poor and needy and desperate of Baghdad. President Bush wrote to him on leaving office last week, thanking him for all he is doing and for *“sharing the Almighty’s love with the people of Baghdad.”*

He hardly mentions it, but he has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Because of the dangers his wife and two sons live in Hampshire. He says: *“People ask me why I spend so much time in places such as Gaza and Baghdad. The truth is, because that is where I am sent. And so I am never afraid... because I have an uncomplicated, almost childlike faith in God. The more I have done this type of work, and the more I have struggled with the reality of death and destruction, the more I have had to put my trust simply in my Lord and my God. I was not sent to Baghdad by the Church; I felt I was sent by God.”* (Michael Binyon in ‘The Times’ Saturday 24th January 2009 / See also ‘The Vicar of Baghdad’ by Andrew White. Monarch Books)

What a challenge his life is to people like you and me. He is living evidence that God answers prayers like the great apostle’s. **Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father.**

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Paul isn’t praying about Christians clinging on by the skin of their teeth in a hostile environment. It is audacious prayer about knowing God’s will and experiencing God’s power. It is one of confidence in the certainty of the love of God and the triumph of the gospel. Audacious hope in a mixed-up culture!

John Wilthew. January 2009.

AUDACIOUS PRAYER

Colossians 1v 10-12

MESSAGE SUMMARY

Please read the passage and then use this summary prior to your discussion.

Paul explains how he prays for the Colossian believers, faced as they are with the challenges of their culture. This is audacious prayer with three key themes:

1. Knowing God's will (v9,10)

Paul refuses to give the Colossians a manual of rules telling them how to act in every given situation. Instead Paul prays something more audacious. He asks God to fill them with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

- The Holy Spirit has a big part to play in this. The Christian life is not to be lived by a rule book but by the Spirit.
- But it is not about you and the Spirit doing your own thing – Paul is writing to a company of Christians. Be led by the Spirit – together with others.
- Biblical truth will also play a big part. In Scripture God has revealed unchanging principles. The Spirit helps us apply them in the 21st century.
- Your mind has an important part to play. Read Romans 12v2. How you think determines how you act.
- Ask big questions. We can turn Paul's words into questions and use them as a check list when we are unsure of what to do.
 1. Is this worthy of the Lord?
 2. Is this pleasing him in every way?
 3. Is this bearing good fruit in my life?
 4. Is this helping me to grow in my knowledge of God?

Of course it is one thing *to know what to do* but *being able to do it* is quite another thing. Where will we get the strength and the courage to do what is right? This leads us to Paul's second key word.

2. Experiencing God's Power (v11,12)

This really is audacious prayer. **v11: being strengthened with all power**, literally "*empowered with all power*", **according to** (not just "from") **his glorious might**. Faced with all the pressures of their society and culture, Paul prays that God will empower them so they **may have great endurance and patience**. And Paul is not thinking of grim endurance. In the midst of all their pressures and challenges they can be full of **joy** and **thanksgiving**.

Canon Andrew White, the vicar of Baghdad, is living evidence that God answers prayers like this. For him to be able to live and work in this dangerous city he needs to know he is in the will of God, and he needs to experience the power of God day by day.

So, Paul isn't praying about clinging on by the skin of your teeth in a hostile environment. It is audacious prayer about knowing God's will, experiencing God's power and being full of joyful thanksgiving.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Remember, you don't have to use all, or any of these questions, if you have other questions arising from the message or the text you want to talk about.

1. Paul not only tells the Colossians that he prays for them, he explains the content of his praying. Why does he do this?
2. Why do we so easily slip back into living by rules rather than the Spirit?
3. What kind of things might it be helpful to check out with fellow Christians in seeking to know God's will?
3. What biblical principles come into play when thinking about our attitude to stem cell research?
4. What might constitute filling our minds with rubbish?
5. Can you think of situations at work where the four questions arising out of verse 10 might help you?
6. In what ways do you feel that you have experienced God's power in your life?
7. Why is it that joyful thanksgiving stands out as so clearly in our culture? How can we cultivate this more in our lives?
8. How does the example of Canon Andrew White challenge you?