

The Mystery of Christ

Colossians 4:2-6

What is it that Christ has done for you?

There are many good answers to that question.

We have explored many of them over the past several weeks.

Delving into the mysteries of Christ in you, the hope of glory, will take an eternity.

But for the purposes of our passage today, we are going to distill it down to one basic truth: Christ has restored your relationship with God.

The anger and contempt that God held towards you in your sin has been removed by Christ. Christ has transformed God as Executioner into God as Father.

You are now free to engage in a real relationship with your heavenly Father.

We have come to the conclusion of the main body of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Read Colossians 4:2-6.

Paul finishes the body of his letter on the mystery of Christ with a simply exhortation to "keep on praying."

² Continue steadfastly in prayer,

Make prayer such a high priority in your life that you never quit praying.

ESV **Romans 12:12** Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

ESV **Acts 1:14** All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

ESV **Acts 2:42** And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

ESV **Acts 6:4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Prayer is not an accessory to the Christian life.

It is the very beating of the heart that pumps the blood throughout the body.

But unlike the heart, that keeps beating even when we forget it is there, we must constantly remind ourselves that we must keep praying.

And unlike the heart, that continues to belt out its beats, in natural rhythm, our prayers often seem awkward, even forced.

Elizabeth Bloechl

“We understand the importance of prayer and admire those who devote themselves to it. Yet, we feel incompetent, ill-equipped, and even unable to pray. We wonder how to begin, and once begun, how to continue.”

Kevin DeYoung

I often feel like I’m struggling in my prayer life, and I daresay most of the people in my church feel like they’re struggling in their prayer life. I think that there are a few things in the Christian life that we know we’re supposed to do, and we constantly feel like we’re failing.

And when you feel like you are miserably failing, you dread hearing someone talk about the importance of prayer. It is like pouring salt on an open wound.

I don’t want to heap guilt upon you or to make you feel uncomfortable.

I do believe that the Bible is very clear that every Christian must choose to devote themselves to prayer. There are no exceptions.

At its core...

Prayerlessness is unbelief.

We do not believe that having a conversation with God is necessary or worthwhile.

We do not believe that entering into a conversation with God is the most basic fruit of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

And every time you choose to pray, you are choosing to believe.

Prayer is the fight to believe.

But making the choice to pray is one thing... cultivating a life of prayer another animal altogether.

It might surprise you, but prayer did not come naturally to Jesus’ disciples.

They watched Jesus engage in prayer and they recognized that there was a quality to His prayers that was entirely foreign to them.

It was not just a few of the disciples who struggled to pray. All of them struggled.

And so, as a whole, they approach Jesus. And they implore Him, “Teach us to pray...”

In other words, “We know that this is important. And we truly want to be faithful to pray. But we do not know how to pray. Please help us.”

I hope hearing this helps you to breathe a sigh of relief.

Conversation with the God of the Universe is unlike any other activity of your life.

You cannot see Him.

He already knows everything you will say even before you say it.

His purity burns hotter than the hottest recesses of the sun.

He chooses to remain silent while we pray, so it does not even feel like a dialogue.

Of course, God does speak back to us directly through His Word and the Holy Spirit often brings to mind the truths of God's Word.

But it is not a normal two-way conversation that you might have with another person sitting over coffee at Little Guatemala.

And I have not even brought up the awkwardness of praying in the presence of others.

This adds a whole other dimension to the challenge.

On the one hand, prayer is one of the most intimate activities in which you can participate. You know what it feels like if you are having a very personal conversation with someone and then a third party walks up. There is this sort of awkward silence that occurs. If the third party is aware of this, he will excuse himself as soon as possible.

But in group prayers you are called to continue the conversation with others listening in.

On the other hand, instead of continuing to pray in a very personal way to God alone, we pray what we think others want to hear. We pray to their expectations. In essence, we have quit praying and begun impressing. And we innately know that this is not right. So, we would rather just not pray with others.

These are only a few of the challenges to prayer.

What I want you to get is that no one really knows how to pray well.

We are all amateurs.

We all need to sit at the feet of Jesus, and learn from Him.

This is the primary reason why we pray the Lord's Prayer every week.

It is not some magical mantra.

We do not mindlessly recite it to mystically unleash the blessings of heaven.

We recite it because when the disciples were struggling to know how to pray, this is what Jesus taught them.

They explicitly asked Jesus, "teach us to pray." And this is how Jesus answered them.

And so, we think that His instructions are important enough for us all, young and old alike, to remember.

But at some point, you must also reflect upon the meaning of the words that you have memorized. You must take the attitudes and the categories of prayer and make them personal to you in your situation.

It just so happens that that last nine questions and answers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is designed to do this very thing.

WSC 99 What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?

A. The whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer, but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called The Lord's prayer.

By rule we should think of a pattern. It is an authoritative guide. It is more than suggestions... more than helpful hints.

But I am not sure that "strong commands" captures the sense of Jesus' instructions.

Jesus has been asked by the disciples who are struggling to know how to pray if He can help them. Jesus, being the perfect Son of God, is the Master of true communication with His Father. He wants to help his floundering disciples know how to improve in this mystery of communication with the Divine.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus is not telling you that you must pray. He is kindly telling you how to pray.

Let's learn from Him.

WSC 100 What does the preface of the Lord's prayer teach us?

A. The preface of the Lord's prayer (which is, Our Father who art in heaven) teaches us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father, able and ready to help us; and that we should pray with and for others.

A man must be brought into a state of friendship or reconciliation with God before any prayer he makes can be accepted. I do not think that most Christians realize the privilege that is theirs in Christ. Every believer in Christ has been given access to God as "their" loving Father.

Christ has transformed God as Executioner into God as Father.

This is where the mystery of Christ grabs your soul.

Because you are united to Christ by faith alone, you have the privilege of approaching God as your Father.

Unbelievers cannot approach God as Father. This is a privilege that is granted to those who are in Christ through faith alone. And parents, you also have the privilege of teaching your children to call upon God as Father even before they understand the Gospel and have consciously placed their faith in Christ.

The idea of a father can mean many things.

In our twisted and corrupt world, most of them are negative.

But God intends for the thought of His being our Father to evoke good feelings.

If for whatever reason the thought of God being your Father evokes terrible feelings, the answer is not so much to think of God in other ways, but to begin reprogramming your mind to see the goodness of God as your Father.

Kevin DeYoung boiled down the concept of father into two qualities: authority and love.

I think this gives us a good balance.

Jesus might have told us to address God as our friend, but that would have lost the idea of authority.

He might have told us to address God as Lord, but that would not have captured the sense of love.

To address God as Father, captures both of these.

As Father, God is perfect goodness. The Larger Catechism speaks of God's "fatherly goodness".

It says that when we pray we are to have "confidence in his fatherly goodness."

And it is more than who God is in Himself; it is who God is "toward us."

When you pray, you are to believe that God's attitude towards you is one of fatherly goodness.

God remains sovereign over the Universe. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. It is right to approach Him with reverence and awe. But if you do not believe that He deeply cares for you as a loving father and is willing to graciously condescend to you in your weakness and failures, you will not approach Him.

If I were to describe my journey as a Christian, and my pursuit of God in Scripture over 40 years, it has been an attempt to know my God rightly as my Father.

It is more than having right thoughts about God.
It is having right thoughts about God's thoughts towards me.

The Father's love towards you as His child is deeper than you imagine.
It is also purer than you can imagine. He knows the destruction that sin causes in you.
And He patiently, yet persistently, is working to drive every last vestige of sin from your heart.

At the same time, He does not withhold Himself from you until all sin has been removed. When you come to Him humbly as a needy child, he ever waits to welcome you into His arms.

The Prodigal Son is a great place to go to meditate upon God's deep and abiding love for His children. Benny Hester has a song, "When God ran." It is old, but it captures well the joy of God when we come to him humbly.

The mystery of Christ is that He produces between you and the Father the same relationship that He has enjoyed throughout all eternity. At least, this is true from the side of the Father's love towards you. From your side, our confidence in and enjoyment of that love still falls so very short.

I was struck again by how woeful is my enjoyment of the love of my heavenly Father over me this past week.

I was studying in the book of Nehemiah. I have learned much from this book, but I must honestly say that it has not grabbed me so deeply as often happens when I teach through a book.

Nehemiah is the leader God used to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem after the Exile.
The book contains many things that matter to me. There is hard work and team work and personal sacrifice. All things that I value.

Still, my study so far left me flat for some reason.
Until this week.
I must say that I was stunned by what I found in chapter 8.

I am going to read you three verses, but let me preface them by saying that Nehemiah has been able to complete the construction of the wall. Only now that the physical construction is completed does he begin to think more about the people. And what he finds is that the city is way too empty. Some 90 years before some 42,000 exiles had been led back into the Land. But only a small portion of them were now living in Jerusalem. Nehemiah is discouraged by this. If Jerusalem is to be a glorious city of God, then it must be full of God's people.

And so, he issues a call for the people in the surrounding villages and countryside to come to Jerusalem to gather before God and His Word. We do not know how many people came, but it was a lot. They had to build a platform for Ezra to stand on to read from the Mosaic Law, something that the people had not enjoyed in years.

Nehemiah 8:8-10 gives us the account of this moment.

Nehemiah 8:8-10 ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

As the people heard the Law of God being read, their first reaction was weeping. The people felt just how far they had fallen from obedience to that Law. Their hearts were grieved. I believe their grief was a godly sorrow, produced by the Spirit of God.

How often do we feel how far short we fall from the standard?

I felt this when I read the words "remain steadfast in prayer" because of how often I have not been steadfast. You may have felt this way too.

It is right to grieve over your prayerlessness. But it even more important that you submit your grief to God's deep feelings of love over you.

I cannot go into the details today, but the short conclusion to the story is that God forbids His people to grieve.

Why?

Because the day in which they found themselves was "holy to the Lord."

The restoration of Jerusalem was more important than their individual grief.

God's people had lived in exile and then in poverty and ruins. God had worked to restore the city of God. The people had been gathered together to enjoy this moment.

Sure, they felt grief over their lack of devotion to God. But the greatness of God bringing salvation to His people was even greater.

This is why God says to them, "The joy of the LORD is your strength."

And then it hit me. I had always read this as "my joy in the LORD was my strength."
But in that moment, I saw these words in a whole new light.

You see, on that day God was happy. He was joyful.

Why was he joyful?

Because he was working to restore His people to Himself.

God was happy over His people.

And He desired His happiness over them to infect them.

There would be other days for grieving. But this day was for rejoicing.

They are told to go to their homes happily feasting.

And then it hit me. This is why we want to embrace joy during the Christmas season. Not because we do not have many reasons for grief and sadness. And certainly not because we do not have many reasons to repent of our having fallen short in our devotion to God. We are to embrace joy because we are celebrating the coming of God into the world to accomplish salvation for us.

And we are to enjoy God's Joy over us.
This is the mystery of Christ.
The joy that the Father has over His only beloved Son, He now enjoys over all who are in Christ.

And then into this wonderful thought rushed many doubts.
How can you think this way?
Get your life in order, then maybe you can enjoy God's love over you.
Until then, you only have a right to His scolding eye.

And then I realized how very little I get God's love for me.
I sing that His redeeming love has been my theme. And yet, I know that I have only dipped my toe into the ocean of that love.

When you call upon God as your heavenly Father, these are the thoughts and feelings God wants to run through your soul.

I suspect that there will be days that this might be as far as you get in your prayer. And that is just fine with God.

The Catechism breaks the Lord's Prayer down into 6 petitions.

WSC 101 What do we pray for in the first petition?

A. In the first petition (which is, Hallowed be thy name) we pray, That God would enable us and others to glorify him in all that whereby he makes himself known; and that he would dispose all things to his own glory.

Hallowed be thy name is really a prayer for what we have been talking about. It is a prayer that God's greatness would be recognized throughout the world. It is a prayer that the greatness of the mystery of the Gospel in Christ would be spread throughout the entire world.

Jesus helps his disciples see that their thoughts of God are smaller than they ought to be. Make it a regular pray that God would enlarge Himself in your heart.

As the greatness of God grows in our hearts, we must want it to grow in the hearts of others.

This is essentially what Paul requests of the Colossians in vv. 3-4:

3 At the same time,
 pray also for us,
 that God may open to us a door
 for the word,
 to declare the mystery of Christ,
 on account of which I am in prison-

4 that I may make it clear,

which is how I ought to speak.

The opening of a door is here limited to the expansion of the Word of God, and the mystery of Christ.

The mystery of Christ is the key that unlocks the door to the greatness of our God.
God was certainly great before Christ, but no man can enjoy God's greatness apart from Christ.

Paul is in prison.

Paul does not pray specifically to be released from prison.

He asks for prayer for the Word of God to continue to go forth.

At the heart of every prayer is that we would grow in our enjoyment of the greatness of our God.

John Piper made famous the statement: Missions exists because worship does not.

By praying for God's name to be hallowed, we are asking God to continue working in the hearts of men with the result that men would engage in the worship of God.

Jesus helps his disciples to take their focus off of themselves and place it where it belongs: on the awesomeness of God.

WSC 102 What do we pray for in the second petition?

A. In the second petition (which is, Thy kingdom come) we pray, That Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.

There is so much to be said about the kingdom of God.

Suffice it to say for now, that Christ's kingdom is not of the present world. If it was, He would not have allowed Pilate to crucify him. Christ's kingdom belongs to the New Heavens and New Earth. That does not mean that the kingdom has no present reality.

Christ advances His kingdom as the Gospel goes forth. He is gathering the subjects of His kingdom from every corner of this world. Jesus takes each of us from the camp of Satan and brings under His own lordship.

Our prayers should reflect a desire for Jesus to continue winning souls now.

Our prayers should reflect a desire for Jesus to have greater dominion over us and others.

And our prayers should reflect a desire for Jesus to return and set up the Kingdom in all its fullness on the Day of Judgment.

WSC 103 What do we pray for in the third petition?

A. In the third petition (which is, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven) we pray, That God, by his grace, would make us able and willing to know, obey, and submit to his will in all things, as the angels do in heaven.

This prayer is very much connected with the previous prayer.

In the previous petition we hunger for Christ's global reign.

In this petition we plead with Him to reign over us individually.

WSC 104 What do we pray for in the fourth petition?

A. In the fourth petition (which is, Give us this day our daily bread) we pray, That of God's free gift we may receive a competent portion of the good things of this life, and enjoy his blessing with them.

As focused as we ought to be on the spiritual glories of knowing God, it is also true that as long as we live in this world, we need God to take care of us. And so, it is right to ask him for our daily necessities.

Never disdain the most simple prayer for something that really matters to you.

I remember being in youth group some time ago, when a young man prayed for his sick chicken. That prayer received some chuckles from others present. But it was precious to God, I am sure.

But more than God's provision, we are to also have a sense of God's blessing over us as we receive and enjoy them.

When you thank God for having enough money to pay this month's electric bill, or for a car that has just been fixed, do you recognize in that provision, the work of a loving heavenly Father who is pouring out His blessing upon you.

Or when some other member of the body of Christ gives to you a very generous gift, are you able to enjoy that gift to the fullest as a token of God's blessing? Or do you only feel guilt for being so needy?

WSC 105 What do we pray for in the fifth petition ?

A. In the fifth petition (which is, And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors) we pray, That God, for Christ's sake, would freely pardon all our sins; which we are the rather encouraged to ask, because by his grace we are enabled from the heart to forgive others.

In this petition we see that Jesus expect that the confession of sin is to be an ongoing and regular part of our prayers.

But confession of sin to our heavenly Father does not leave us groveling before and uncaring Lord. When we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us. Why? Because He wants us to climb back up onto His lap.

And every time we are reminded of how desperately we need forgiveness from God, we are to plead with God to give us this same forgiveness towards others.

Once you experience the joy of being forgiven, Christ in you wants to give this same joy to others.

True forgiveness and reconciliation can only occur when a person repents of their sin.

But as those having been forgiven so much, we yearn for God to humble those who have hurt us so that we might freely forgive them. And even before they repent, we refuse the bitterness that would keep us from sacrificially loving them.

In this way, Jesus teaches His disciples that God cares about our human relationships.

WSC 106 What do we pray for in the sixth petition ?

A. In the sixth petition (which is, And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil) we pray, that God would either keep us from being tempted to sin, or support and deliver us when we are tempted.

Temptations come to us from the outside. Situations and circumstances confront us.

But temptations are tempting because of the sinfulness of our old nature.

We are attracted to the temptation because of remaining evil within us.

When we stand in glory, temptation will no longer exist.

Much can be said here. But I will limit my comments to only a few.

If at any time, God would leave us to ourselves, we would be overcome by temptation. That in itself is very humbling. You are never so strong that you cannot fall. Your victory over sin is always a product of God's grace to you.

God wants us to humbly plead with Him for mercy to win the victory over temptation. Do not be surprised when God does not answer this in the way that you hoped. I have prayed this prayer and only felt the temptations get worse.

The fault is not with God when I sin.
But in His providence, He has not seen fit to remove all temptation.
Continue to pray.
As Paul says, "Be steadfast in prayer."

Christ has defeated Satan at the cross. And He will have the victory over our hearts as well.

WSC 107 What doth the conclusion of the Lord's prayer teach us?
A. The conclusion of the Lord's prayer (which is, For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever, Amen) teaches us to take our encouragement in prayer from God only, and in our prayers to praise him, ascribing kingdom, power, and glory to him. And, in testimony of our desire, and assurance to be heard, we say, Amen.

I believe that this connects with Paul's encouragement in Colossians to "be watchful in our prayers".

being watchful in it

What does it mean to be "watchful in prayer"?

Paul is encouraging God's people to be vigilant in prayer.

Vigilance in prayer is supported by an understanding of our desperate need for God's grace. And vigilance in prayer is supported by our faith in the greatness of our God and our trust in His covenant love toward us.

This is why we always pray with thanksgiving.

with thanksgiving.

We are to be thankful for what God has already given to us.
But we are also to be thankful for what God has promised to us and has yet to bestow.

He who has given us His Only Beloved Son, how will He not also give us all things?

The mystery of Christ is that He has brought you near to the love of God.
In Christ, God is your heavenly Father.
What is awkward for you is joyful for Him.

Brothers and sisters, fight against unbelief.
In prayer, fight for belief.