**Citizenship in Heaven**

**Philippians and Colossians – #21**

**The Letter to the Colossians 1:9-10**

**Being Filled with the Knowledge of the Will of God**

***Colossians 1:9*** *And so, from the day we heard of it, 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*** *to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*

**Commentary - Ambrosiaster (5th century)**

Hearing of their devout and eager willingness in matters concerning the faith of Christ, the apostle prays for them, that when they have understood the will of God they might more readily express the devotion, which they had learned when they heard the faith of Christ, some corresponding work, so that such confident dedication of mind and strength of faith might not lose the fruit of their labour by doing something without the proper consultation and advice. Whatever was done with a devout mind and in wisdom would be freely accepted by God.

**Question**

Did you learn anything from this old commentary about the phrase: “*be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*”? Please read it again. This was the beginning of the breakdown of the relationship between the Bible and the Daily Christian Life.

**Modern Commentary - James D. Dunn, 1996**

On Colossians 1:9: Having completed his thanksgiving (1:3-8) and in view of having had so much to give thanks for, Paul turns from thanksgiving to prayer, more or less repeating what he has already said in the second half of 1:3. “*From the day we heard*” is perhaps a deliberate echo of the same phrase already used in 1:6: as they were fruitful from the very day they heard the gospel, so Paul and Timothy have been prayerful from the very day they heard of their response to the gospel. Note again the plural “we” in contrast to the singular “my” of Philippians 1:9 and Philemon 4-7. We also see the plural “we” in 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 and 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12. The intensity of prayer is marked – “*from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray on your behalf and to ask*” (cf. Rom 1:9-10; 1 Thes 1:2-3; and especially Eph 1:15-16) – and introduces the “fill/fullness” motif that comes to be a feature of this letter (1:9, 19, 24, 25; 2:2, 9, 10; 4:12, 17; O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon 20). The middle voice – “ask” – appears elsewhere in the Pauline books only in Ephesians 3:20 (cf. 1 Cor 1:22; Eph 3:13).

It is not surprising that the prayer focuses on “*knowledge of his (God’s) will*.”

For a theist who believes that God’s active purpose determines the ordering of the world, lies behind events on earth, and shapes their consequences, one of the most desirable objectives must be to know God’s will. The corollary, spelled out in the following phrases, is that such knowledge gives insight into and therefore reassurance regarding what happens (often unexpected in human perspective) and helps direct human conduct to accord with that will. Such desire to know and do God’s will is naturally very Jewish in character (e.g., Ps 40:8; 143:10; 2 Macc 1:3), and was, not surprisingly, shared by Jesus (Matt 6:10; 7:21; Mark 3:35; 14:36; Luke 12:47) and the first Christians (e.g., Acts 21:14; Eph 5:17; 6:6; 1 Thes 4:3; Heb 10:36; 13:21; 1 Peter 3:17; 1 John 2:17; see also in 1:1). No doubt the knowledge prayed for here included the teachings that follow in the letter, but hardly need be limited to that.

A characteristic claim in Jewish tradition was that the necessary knowledge of God’s will came through the law: “*Happy are we, Israel, because we know what is pleasing to God*” (Bar. 4:4); “*you know his will and approve the things that matter, being instructed from the law*” (Rom 2:18; cf. Wis 15:2-3; 4 Ezra 8:12). But for Paul in particular there was now a better and surer way of knowing God’s will and of discerning what really mattered: by the personal transformation that flowed from inward renewal (Rom. 12:2), probably set in deliberate contrast to Romans 2:18, so that he can sum up the call to Christian conduct in terms of walking in accordance with the Spirit (Rom 8:4, 13-14; Gal. 5:16, 18, 25).

However, there is no simple contrast here between Judaism and Christianity so far as the quality and stimulus for ethical conduct is concerned. For the recognition that obedience to the law must spring from inner consecration is familiar also in Jewish thought (e.g., Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26-27). Even the claim that Paul’s Spirit ethic was distinctively eschatological in character (the hopes of Jeremiah and Ezekiel now fulfilled) does not enable us to draw a clear line of contrast with his Jewish contemporaries, as the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) remind us. For they, too, claim a knowledge (of God’s will) given directly by the eschatological Spirit, though a knowledge that, as is also evident, focuses on a very sectarian interpretation of the Torah (see, e.g., 1QH 4:9—12; 6:10-12; 11:7-10; 12:11-13; 16:11-12; IQS 5:8-10; 9:13; 11:15-18; see further Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, page 25). Thus, although the orientation to the Torah comes out differently in each case (“the law of Christ” facilitating Paul’s inclusive gospel in contrast to Qumran’s introverted and exclusivist interpretation), the eschatological-psychological dynamic is similar.

The spiritual source and character of this knowledge is reinforced by the qualifying phrase, “*in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*,” which could equally well be rendered “*in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” (RSV, NRSV, NIV), or “*with all the wisdom and understanding that his Spirit gives*” (GNB). The language and aspiration were widely shared by Greco-Roman philosophy, as classically expressed in Aristotle’s numbering “wisdom” and “understanding” with “prudence” as the highest virtues (*Ethica Nicomachea* 1.13).” But the more immediate background for the thought here is again, doubtlessly Jewish, since the combination of “wisdom and understanding” is a repeated feature of Jewish writings. Here, too, the wisdom in particular is understood as given through the law (Deut 4:6; 1 Chron 22:12; Sir 24:23-26; Bar 3:36- 4:1), but it is equally recognized that such wisdom can come only from above (as in Wis 9:9-10). And particularly to be noted is the recognition that wisdom and understanding come only from the Spirit (Exod 31:3; 35:31; Isa 11:2; Wis 9:17-19; Sir 39:6; Philo, *De gigantibus* 22-27; 4 Ezra 14:22, 39-40). It is certainly this thought that is taken up here (“spiritual” as given by and manifesting the Spirit – cf. 1 Cor 2:12-13; 12:1,4; 14:1-2). Whether there is an implied rebuke of an alternatively conceived or false wisdom is less clear since in that case we might have expected more emphasis on the point (as in 1 Corinthians 1-2); but the allusion in (2:23) does indicate that a claim to wisdom was part of the teaching in Colossae that called forth the response of this letter (see also 2:2-3).

All this reflects the charismatic and eschatological character of Christian self-consciousness, not least in the transition from conviction to praxis *[enactment of a practice]*: Charismatic in the sense of the immediacy of wisdom and insight that Christians (or Paul in particular) expected to provide their lives with direction and motivation (the parallel with Phil 1:9-10 is very close) and eschatological in that they (or Paul in particular) were convinced that this knowledge of God’s will was the outworking of the eschatological Spirit and renewal looked for in the prophets (hence the enthusiastic “filled with” and “all”; Isa 11:2; 33:6).

(James D Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentaries*, 1996, pages 69-71)

**Questions:**

1. Did the great scholar of our time tell us what is the knowledge of the will of God especially that we my “be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”?

2. Did he tell us how that was working in the life of the Early Christians? Please read it again?

**Letter from Abba Philemon**

Brother George,

Peace in Jesus who is our peace and love in the Beloved who is our true love. You have raised the question of all time: How do we speak of the knowledge of the will of God and in particular the teaching of St. Paul (Col 1:9).

First: We know the will of God in Christ. Never speak of the will of God without Christ because you will slide in to the pit of abstract perception. Jesus our Lord is the Revelation of God. All words and concepts must find their real meaning in him and through his teaching, life, death, and resurrection. If you get away from this defined scope of true and eternal knowledge, you will be walking away from our Love that is Jesus. Some told me that the will of God is in the commandments, but they have not succeeded in telling me: what is the relationship between all the commandments and the Two Great Commandments: Love God and your human brother as you love yourself. This was the witness of the prophets, and later on of our Master and the apostles, that the whole Law is based on and is an expression of these Two Great Commandments. St. Paul provided us with a good commentary of the Two Great Commandments (1 Cor 13:1-8). These words of are the very Icon of the Life of our Lord. Every word is about his love.

Second: You ask me what is the will of God regarding your marriage or your becoming a monk or leaving us to study abroad? My beloved brother, [make] this the last time you write or speak about “God”; try to be a Christian and write and speak all the time about “God the Father of our Lord Jesus.” There is a way of a vague life where we speak of God just like the Moslems speak of God (Allah is common among Christians who speak Arabic). But for us the Fatherhood of God is the very foundation of our Knowledge of the will of our Father, thus we say “your will be done” and that is to be done in union with Christ because outside this unique communion with God there is no will that we can do or even pray for. Be on your guard, the will of the Father is to be like His Son. The will that we seek is to love like Jesus and this is our cross. The heavenly Father does not impose his will on any one. You want to get married, the Father will bless you; you want to be a monk the Father will accept your offer. You have to choose because your choice is your love. If you fail in either marriage or monastic life, the Father will heal your failure and give and accept you as you are.

Third: I have met too many people who ask me: Is it the will of God that I become a priest? I say to all of them:

Do you love to serve the Lord and to take the cross of ministry? Do you sincerely love and forgive your enemies and bless those who insult you? If these two great commandments are too hard for you it means that your love for the Lord is not mature enough to become a priest. Again, if anyone wants to offer his life to the Lord, such a person must learn the difference between the life of the people of God and the life of those who are called to service as teachers of the Gospel. The second must be fully crucified with the Lord and daily die to their will, while those who have a secular job must do the same, die to their will but for their work which is also for the Lord but not for the Gospel. The difference is very little and it is only for the style of their life and the duties. Let us carry our cross and that cross will teach us how to truly love and learn from our growing love what is the will of God.

This is enough for now.

Philemon asks for your prayers.

20 August 1965

**Abba Philemon**

George beloved of God,

May God our Father grant you the courage of the Children and take away any form of fear that can hold you up as a prisoner of your own self. You asked me where is the will of God in our daily life? My simple answer is “keep the commandments” if you truly love the Lord. The commandments are like the wide circle which all of us live inside to experience God’s love as our Father. They are not a chain of slavery but the way to true life. Then you have to be free, for our Lord Jesus did not tell us how to dress or what to eat. He did not even define times for prayer or attending the church. All these are the little circle of our own freedom and the Lord has his joy in watching us freely move in this life guided by our love not by the fear of the slaves. Some brothers asked me if it is right to go to the Cinema? I have never been in a Cinema and when I told them that Christ did not fix a code of behavior and that they have to choose what is fitting and beneficial, they were not pleased with me. I quoted the great words of the free disciple of Jesus: “”*The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve.*”(Rom 14:22). They were confused because they have been under the “custody” of their own law, not the Law of Jesus that is founded on love.

Let us be clear that we have the right as the children of God the Father to organize our life in any way that does not put us outside the circle of the divine commandments and live our Christian life according to whatever way that is in harmony with our love for the Lord Jesus.

When you come back you have to tell me what people see in the Cinema.

May the Lord be with you,

Philemon

2 Sept 1965

***Pope’s Notes***

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