

New Years Day 2026

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as you all know, it's a new year. We're stepping into 2026 together, which is always! very, very exciting. And as a new year begins, I'm sure that for all of us, there are many, many things that we want in the year that lies ahead. For those of us in school, we'll be thinking about subjects that we need to choose, maybe grades that we need to get, things that we want to be involved in, whether that's sport or football or music or whatever it might be. Any of us who are studying might be thinking about qualifications that we want to gain. Those of us who are working might be thinking about progress we want to make in our career. Maybe we might be thinking about a new job.

All of us would love better finances. I'm sure all of us would like to be fitter and healthier, more organized, less chaotic, and have tidy houses, tidy gardens, clean cars, all these different things, loads of things that we want in the coming year. And there's lots of things that we might even pray for, things that we really will be seeking that God would give us. And that might be to do with our health, praying for protection, for preservation, for healing. It might be to do with big decisions that we have to make. This year will definitely bring moments where we'll all have to make big decisions. Might be praying for courage and strength with things that are going to be difficult for us.

And maybe we'll be praying for a better mindset, for better habits, both in terms of our walk with the Lord and in our lives with other people. And all of these things are good things to aim for, good things to think about, good things to pray for. But today I want us to ask, if Paul was here today, what would he want for us? And what would he pray for, for us?

Well, we don't know the definite answer to that, but I think it's very likely that his answer would be very similar to what he prayed for, for the church in Colossae, which we have in verses 9 to 12 of Colossians 1, where Paul says, And so, from the day we heard, we've not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 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. May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, but all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who's qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. This is an example of one of Paul's prayers for the churches that he is writing to. And you see prayers like this in several of his letters. And his prayers are always both rich and surprising. They're rich because they're full of beautiful theological truth. They're surprising because the things that Paul prays for are often quite different from the things that we pray for, or for the things that we maybe tend most to pray for. So I want us to look at this prayer together.

We'll focus especially on verses 9 and 10 that are on the screen, because in these verses, Paul prays for four things, and we're going to look at them in turn. And these are four things that the Colossians needed, and they're four things that we definitely need as individuals and as a congregation as we step into 2026 together. What are the four things he prays? Well, he says he prays that we may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. He's praying that we would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. He's praying that we would bear fruit in every good work. And he's praying that we would be increasing in the knowledge of God. And I hope that by the time we get to the end of the sermon, we will all leave here saying, that's what I want for 2026. So we'll look at them together. First of all, he prays that we'd be filled with the knowledge of God's will. Now, that's an immensely important phrase and concept, this emphasis on God's will, but it's so easy for that phrase to be confusing and maybe even a bit unsettling. This whole idea of God's will, it can be like a huge help and a huge worry for us in our lives because we can often think of God's will a little bit like a car driving along a road. In fact, maybe even better, a motorbike because in a motorbike, it's just us.

[4 : 47] There's nobody else in it. And we focus very much on the path that we're on and we think of God's will in the sense that there's this road and we've got to make sure we stay on the right road. We've got to make sure we don't take a wrong turning. We mustn't make sure that we go the wrong way or do the wrong thing, that God's will is this line. We've got to stay on it and we better make sure that we don't make the mistake of taking a wrong turn. Now, in some ways that's true, but I don't think that that's the most appropriate or helpful way for us to think about God's will because, first of all, it's really hard for us to know which way that road is going. And in terms of how 2026 is going to turn out, none of us can actually see. We might think, well, this is how it's going to go, but we've got no idea if that's exactly what's going to happen. So it's an assumption to think that we know which way the road is going and it's an even bigger assumption to think that we are in the driving seat of our lives.

And so that idea of God's will as a kind of road that we need to stay on and we mustn't turn off, I don't think it's the most helpful way to think about it. I think a better way to think about it, and this isn't a perfect illustration, I know, but I do think it's maybe more helpful. I think a wiser way to think about God's will is to think of it as a boat or to think of it as the ferry.

Because when it comes to the ferry, we are on board, but we are not driving. It's not us who sets the direction in so many ways. We're just passengers and we are being taken by another, by someone else.

And so that means our responsibility is not to do the steering. Our responsibility, however, is that we behave in a way that's safe and wise and appropriate for everybody who's on board that ship. And we need to make sure that we don't do anything stupid as we're carried along. And I think that's helpful because it's helping us to see that as God steers our lives, because he is the one who's steering our lives, our aim is not to try and figure out the direction, but our aim instead is to make sure that the way we're living our lives at every moment is conforming to what he wants, that it's wise and beneficial and helpful to everybody who's around us on the same journey. He's the one who's steering. He's the one who's leading. And at every moment, his expectation for us is not to try and figure out his path, but to behave in a way that's appropriate, that conforms to what he wants as he carries us along. And what that means is that, and what this corresponds to is the fact that in terms of God's will, the big emphasis in the Bible is that our day-to-day conduct is more important to God than the one-off decisions, the big one-off decisions that we might have to make in life about where we study, where we live, what job we might do. Those things are important, but they're not what's most important in God's sight. So when we think about God's will, as it's mentioned in a passage like this, we need to remember that for God, character matters way more than career. Attitude matters way more than your address. And personal qualities matter way more than personal qualifications. And that's why if you go later on in the letter, if you read through to chapter three, Paul gives more details about how he wants us to live our lives. And he says absolutely nothing about your job or your status or your address or any of that stuff. Instead, he says, you need to put away anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk. Don't lie to one another.

You've put off the old self. You've put on the new self. And so put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another. And if you've got a complaint against one another, forgive one another as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these things, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. That is by far the priority to God in terms of his will. Not the big decisions about which way the road is going, but the moment-to-moment decisions of how we live our lives as he carries us on and he says he leads us on together. And so we need to be thinking about God's will.

[9 : 34] And Paul's prayer is that we would have a knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. That phrase, spiritual wisdom and understanding, it's really helpful because it's just immediately drawing a contrast between the wisdom and understanding of the world around us. And that's the reality that we're going to face in 2026. We're surrounded by a different set of categories in regard to how, as to what wisdom looks like and as to how the world should be understood.

That understanding of the culture and society around us is very, very often going to be in contrast to the way God sees things and to what God wants. That's why spiritual wisdom and understanding is so crucial. And all of this is immensely important because this year, for all of us, no matter what stage of life you're at, no matter what you're going to do, this year, you are constantly going to be conforming to someone's will. You're constantly going to be conforming to someone's will. Now, maybe that'll be your own. And maybe you will go through this year and your focus is entirely on yourself and what you want is always prioritized over everyone else.

Maybe, but not many people live like that. Some people do, not many do. More likely, though, is you're going to spend this year conforming to other people's will. What do I mean by that? Well, the fact that so often we are worried about what other people think and what other people want, and we're pulled in all sorts of directions by the pressure of the people that we are in school with, the people that we work with, the people who live near us, the people who seem to be doing better than us and we want to get to their level, whatever it might be. And you see it in the way that our society functions in terms of our work, in terms of the clothes that we wear, what we buy, what we look like. All the time, we're actually conforming to other people's will who are setting a set of standards upon us that we feel we need to conform to. So it's going to be so easy. There's so many times in 2025, I felt pressure to conform to other people's will, and I'm sure it's going to be the same this year.

far, far better for all of us if we conform to God's will. If we are shaped by what He wants for our day-to-day lives, living out that love and compassion and kindness and humility and meekness and patience that Paul describes in chapter 3.

And of course, this is where we see that knowledge of God's will, that's just another way of saying knowing our true purpose. Because our purpose is fulfilled when our lives align with what God wants. That just makes perfect, total, basic sense. He is the one who's made us. We're made by Him and for Him. And of course, the place that we go to learn this and to grow in the knowledge of God's will is God's Word. We keep coming back to it to guide us and to shape us. All of this year, we're going to be pulled to conform to other people's will. Paul's prayer for us is that we'd be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

[12 : 47] Second thing he prays is that we would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. Walking is an image that you see a lot in the Bible. And it's not just meaning, you know, walking like we do physically.

It's an image of way of life. It's speaking about how we conduct ourselves in every aspect of our living. And you'll see here that in that verse there, I forgot my computer, by the way, so I don't have my pen, so I feel very bereft of all my powers today. So you'll have to just go with me. Imagine there's a line under knowledge and walk. Those two things go together side by side in Scripture.

That what we know in our heads and how we outwardly live out our lives always go hand in hand in Christian discipleship. The biblical pattern right the way through the Bible is that what we know should shape what we do. And Paul's prayer is that that would be true of us, that our walk, the way we live our day-to-day lives, would be worthy of the Lord. Now that's maybe another way of saying that, you know, to think about what that phrase worthy of the Lord means, is to think, well, that the way that we live our lives would be appropriate before Jesus. And so basically, if we're walking along the way we're walking, Jesus could walk with us, and it would not be inappropriate for him. It's appropriate before Jesus. It's worthy of Jesus. And the consequence of that is that we live lives that are fully pleasing to him. Now, that immediately feels inspiring and impossible. It feels inspiring and impossible. At one level, it's so inspiring because it's calling us to a way of life that sits appropriately alongside Jesus. Jesus is the most important, most influential, most significant figure in all of history, and we're being called to a life that's worthy of him, that he could come and walk with us. It's calling us to a life where every day, the way we speak, think, and behave makes Jesus smile. That is so inspiring. That's absolutely how I want to live my life this year. But as soon as I say all that, it feels impossible.

And you think, I'm never going to be able to do that. And you think, I can think of so many ways in which, you know, I think of the way I've walked and the way I've behaved, and I think I could turn around and Jesus would be standing way back there thinking, I ain't coming with you as you do that.

And so often, this kind of call can feel impossible. And that's the big theological question. Is it impossible? Is it impossible to live our lives this year in a way that feels pleasing to Jesus?

[15 : 40] Or to put the question positively, is it possible? Can we do it? Can we do it? The biblical answer answer to that question is absolutely. Absolutely yes. Now, it's not possible on our own, which is why the very next thing Paul says in verse 11 is that we need to be strengthened because on our own we're weak. And it's not possible to the level of perfection because in the path of discipleship, there's always a battle, always a conflict. And chapter three talks about putting off the old self, putting on the new. That's a constant battle every day. But the key point is that Jesus is not expecting perfection from any of us, but he is expecting dependence. And that's emphasized by the fact that everything that Paul is saying here is a prayer. And prayer emphasizes that walking in a manner worthy of the Lord is not possible on our own, but it's absolutely not impossible. It is possible.

It's possible for us with the help of God as he guides us and leads us. It's possible for us to react well to difficult situations. It's possible for us to think well of other people. It's possible for us to take the initiative in showing compassion and kindness even when nobody else is. It's possible for us to speak of ourselves and of one another in a way that's healthy and nourishing and encouraging. And it's possible for us to say no to stupid things that are going to ruin our lives. All of that's possible with the Lord's help. And all of it's reminding us that God's expectations for our year are magnificently positive. And so God is not standing with us on 1st of January, 2026 saying, well, it's going to be another rubbish year for all of you. That is not God's mindset at all. His mindset and his expectations are magnificently positive. He wants us to step into this new year in the hope, in the confidence that we'll walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. And this is where it's maybe helpful to think, when we're thinking about walking, it's helpful maybe to draw a distinction between footprints and footsteps.

Footprints and footsteps. They're very similar, but there's a crucial difference. Footprints are in your past. And they tell a story. They might tell a story of success. So maybe there's things that, if you look back at your footprints in 2025, there are maybe times when those footprints take you through things where things have gone really well and you're thinking, that was a great day, that was a great achievement, I'm delighted. Those footprints will probably, if they're anything like mine, will also tell a story of mistakes and of failures. And those footprints will go into areas where you think, I wish I'd never gone down that path. But all those footprints are in the past.

But footsteps are in the future. The footprints of the past year and of all the years of our lives are unchangeable. They're there. They're written. But the footsteps of this new year are still to be taken. And the amazing thing about God is that He is not so much interested in your footprints.

He's much, much more interested in your footsteps. And so often we think that we need to impress God with our footprints, with the kind of story of our lives and the achievement of our lives and the successes of our lives. So we think we have to be good enough for God. Or we can find ourselves thinking that our footprints just condemn us, that they've led us too far away from God, that they tell the story of too many mistakes. And God is telling us that it's too late, that our chance has gone. But that is never true. And the amazing thing about the cross, the amazing thing about the gospel is that our footprints don't really impress God. Our best footprints don't really impress God.

[19 : 53] Our worst footprints don't make Him recoil. In other words, God deals with them all at the cross. And as God deals with all of that at the cross, it relieves pressure and it removes guilt. The gospel relieves the pressure to be good enough. We don't need to strive because we can't. And it removes the guilt of every mistake that we've made. God has said the footprints are in 2025 and all the other years that have gone. Now it's 2026. And I'm much more interested in your footsteps.

And that's why as you sit here today, as you sit before God's Word, the massive thing that you have to think about is not the 100,000 million steps that you've taken and the footprints that you've left.

The thing you've got to think about is your next step. What's your next step going to be? And I hope for all of that, it's going to be my next step.

It's going to be walking with the Lord. And whether that's a first step to walk with the Lord or a step back to walking with the Lord, having maybe sort of stumbled and doubted and worried or wondered, or maybe just as you kind of continue on knowing that with every step you take, you need the Lord's help. Leave all the footprints in the past. And please just think about your next step. Paul wants us to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. Then he prays that we would bear fruit in every good work. Fruit is another very common image in the New Testament, and it's hugely helpful. And there's three important things about fruit.

Fruit is visible, fruit is beneficial, and fruit is nice. Fruit is visible, beneficial, and nice. It's visible in a sense that fruit serves as an external identity marker. And that's the language that Jesus uses when he speaks about a fruit, a tree bearing fruit. And by the fruit that that tree bears, you know what kind of tree it is. That's obvious, basic, but incredibly important.

[22 : 19] And apple tea is an apathy because there's apples on it. You know a Christian is a Christian because there is visible fruit in their lives. And this does, I've said this zillions of times before, but I'm going to keep on saying it, that for those of you who are kind of in the, I'm not sure if I'm a Christian category, of which there are many on our island and many in our community. And so often we think, you know, I don't have a testimony, I don't have a clear moment, I don't have this amazing story to tell, I don't really know, I don't really know what to say. Jesus never asks us for an impressive testimony for a definitive moment or for anything like that. You don't get that kind of stuff in the Bible. What Jesus is looking for is fruit. And for so many of you, we can already see it, even though you can't. And the fruit in our lives is that visible identity marker. And so Paul wants us to bear fruit so that as we go into our lives this week, the way we speak, the way we behave, the way we react, the way we react is visible outwardly to others. Fruit is also beneficial.

Fruit actually does two things beneficially. It nourishes and multiplies. So you eat fruit and it's nourishing, but the key point is that it's nourishing to other people. And this is a wonderful aspect of what Paul is emphasizing here, that image of fruitfulness is that that external fruit that we want to produce in our lives as Christians has a beneficial effect to other people. What happens to fruit if it just stays in the tree forever? It just rots. And it's no good for anyone.

But if the fruit is shared, then it nourishes others. That's absolutely how we want to live our lives, where the way we live our lives, speak, behave, is beneficial and helpful to others.

And that can happen in a thousand ways. That can happen in ways that you're completely unaware of. This is maybe going to sound silly, but I am never going to forget something this morning.

And when I walked through that door after Ian was praying with us before the service, the place was buzzing with noise. And it was so good to hear. And you guys were just chatting. But in doing that, there was external fruit that nourished my soul. And I almost didn't want to start the service because it was just wonderful hearing the buzz of togetherness, of joy, of seeing one another. It was brilliant.

[24 : 51] And that's a wonderful example of just fruit, outward fruit, benefiting, nourishing others. But fruit doesn't just nourish, it also multiplies. That's why the imagery of fruit is so good. A fruit has got a seed. The seed is planted. A new plant grows. More fruit comes. It's all about multiplication.

And so there's a great mission emphasis in the bearing of fruit. As we bear fruit in every good work, that's what God uses as a witness. That's what God uses to build his church. That's how the church of Jesus Christ multiplies. So fruit's visible, fruit's beneficial, and fruit's nice. Fruit is sweet and pleasant. And very enjoyable to encounter. And that is so important for Christians. Because we never want it to be the case that people will encounter us and what they meet is bitter, unpleasant, and unenjoyable to encounter. Instead, we want to be that positive blessing. We just want to be a thoroughly nice, thoroughly nice people to meet. We want that to be true in our homes, in our jobs, in our community, in our church. And that's where the phrase every good work is so helpful because it's just magnificently general. It's telling us that we can bear fruit no matter where we are, no matter what we're doing. We must never forget that God's orchard is way, way bigger than we think it is.

And God's orchard, God's realm where his fruit is cultivated, is never confined to the walls of a church building. His orchard extends into our homes, into our workplaces, into our schools, our universities.

Everywhere we are, that's where God wants to see his fruit. That's the third thing that Paul prays for. And then the fourth thing is that we will be increasing in the knowledge of God. Again, that's an easy phrase to misunderstand because when we see that word knowledge, we think about what we know, we think about learning. And if you're anything like me, all you ever think when it comes to the Bible and Christianity is you think, I know so little and there's so much that I still have to learn.

And that, of course, is true for all of us. There's always so much to learn. But the emphasis in the Bible around that word knowledge is not really about being an expert in something. It's not really about knowing lots of stuff. Knowledge in the Bible is far, far more about knowing someone really well.

[27 : 35] That's the emphasis there. Increasing in the knowledge of God. It's not about being a theologian in that sort of knowledgeable sense. It's about knowing God really well.

That's what Paul wants for us. That's what he's praying, that we would get to know God better. And that's so important, so important for all of us because so often our struggles and our stumbles in our faith, our doubts and our hesitations and our kind of discouragements, so often they come into our lives because we think that God is something that he isn't. In other words, we think of God in a way that's not accurate. And there's loads of ways that that can happen. So we can think that God is like an exasperated boss, that it's just like he's got this level of expectations, we're not conforming to it, and he's just fed up because we keep on failing. It's so easy to think of God like that, that he's just rolling his eyes at frustration. We can so easily think of God as kind of a detached parent, that he's just, he's so busy, so many other people who are doing better than us, that he's more interested in, and we are absolutely nowhere near his priorities at all. We can think that God is this kind of miserable, fun stifler, like the happier, the more miserable we are, the happier God is, and the more things go wrong, the happier God is, and the more rubbish things are, the better it is. And that in so many ways, God wants to see us suffer because the more that we suffer, the more, well, we're just being toughened up, and enjoyment, fun, laughter, pleasure, those things are not appropriate at all. It's so easy to think of God as this kind of semi-pathetic therapy provider, where, you know, well, he can be nice to us, and he can help us, and encourage us, but he doesn't really have any intellectual credibility, and there's not really any kind of, you know, concrete substance to what the Bible says, and there's so many things that actually undermines it. And God, yes, maybe he's there, but he's kind of just not really, you know, he is not really someone that we can have total confidence in at all. It's so easy to think like that, and it's easy to think that God is this kind of embarrassing relative, that he's part of our upbringing, part of our heritage, part of our family, but kind of a wee bit. It's easy to think of God as an exasperated boss, a detached parent, a miserable fun stifler, a semi-pathetic therapy provider, an embarrassing relative, a hundred other things. Every time we think like that, God is saying,

I think you need to get to know me better. Because God is none of these things. God is none of these things.

And we need to get to know him better. And as we get to know God, we discover that he is the absolute of all reality. Nothing exists.

Nothing has any intellectual explanation. Nothing has any philosophical foundation unless there is a God. And God is the absolute moral standard for all our behavior.

[30 : 59] He is the one who sets. He's the reason why we have moral categories of right and wrong. God is the provider of everything that is good. Every single thing that is good.

From the amazing food that you eat, to the beautiful views that you see, to the power in the wind in your face, everything that is good comes from God. And God is abounding in compassion and mercy and kindness to all of us, no matter what our situation.

We have got to get to know God better. And that's to whatever stage you're at. Whether you've been following the Lord for a long time, this year we want to get to know God better. Whether you're just starting out following the Lord, you absolutely need to get to know God better, learn about him.

If you're seeking the Lord, you need to get to know the Lord better because you're going to probably probably find lots of things that makes you think that it's impossible for you to be saved or that there's this, that, and the next thing that you need to do.

You need to get to know God better. And if you're not really sure about things at all, and if you're looking for answers to life's biggest questions, you've got to get to know God better. And as we get to know God better, we'll find everything that we need.

[32 : 13] And that's why Paul is praying that we should increase in the knowledge of God. You know, I was thinking to myself this morning, I am definitely going to finish at 12, before 12 today.

Look at that. Day one of 2026. I've failed. Might as well start as we mean to go on. Right, we're at the conclusion anyway, so we'll finish at 12.03 or something like that.

Paul's prayer highlights four brilliant things that we need for 2026. I want to just conclude by asking, how do you respond to all of this? You see those four prayer points, and you might think this is so inspiring and so motivating.

And if you feel like that, fantastic. That is how I want you to feel. You might be thinking, not really interested. I'm not even sure I believe any of this.

I hope you don't think like that. I hope you don't. If you do, I'm more than happy to talk, but I hope that, to chat about it, I hope you don't think of it like that. But I think, I think most likely, if you're anything like me, you're going to be listening to all of this and thinking, that sounds great, but it's actually a bit overwhelming, and it's a bit intimidating.

[33 : 21] Because I'm just never going to match up to this. If that's the response it produces in you, there's two key things I want you to see. The first is that all of this is a prayer.

And the fact that it's a prayer reminds us that this is only ever possible with God's help. The fact that this is a prayer is amazing. You talk about growing in the knowledge of His will, walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God.

Who's actually doing all that? The fact that it's a prayer is that Paul is asking God to do something. And so all of these things come through God working in us, and it's with His help.

It's only ever possible with His help. So remember it's a prayer. But also remember that all of these prayers are grounded on the gospel. And that means that everything that this prayer expresses is grounded on what God desires.

So when you see that concept of God's will, what is that telling you? It's telling you that you are more precious than you ever imagined. Because it's telling you that God wants you to be His.

[34 : 37] And He wants you to live in His way. Because you are more precious to Him than you ever imagined. And when you see that phrase, walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, it's telling you that your life can be something incredibly beautiful this year as you follow Jesus.

With His help, we can walk through this year in a way that is beautiful and wonderful, no matter what we're doing. Bearing fruit tells you that you can make a massive difference to other people this year.

That with God's help, you can be an amazing blessing to your family, to your colleagues, to your friends, to your community, to your church, as you're used by Jesus.

And that concept of the knowledge of God tells you something amazing. It tells you that God wants you to know Him. And as you get to know Him, He wants you to discover that He knows you and He loves you more than you will ever fully be able to grasp.

That whole concept of the knowledge of God is not so that you can become expert theological students. It's so that you can know His loving arms around you as your Father holds you and loves you and leads you in 2026.

[36 : 12] So this is a brilliant prayer from Paul. It's a brilliant prayer for us to pray. And in God's grace, may these things be true of us all and may you all have an amazing 2026.

Amen. Let's pray.