

“Pray ... that God May Open a Door”

Colossians 4:2-18

Key Verse: 4:3

“And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.”

Today we come to the last lesson in the book of Colossians. Through this letter, Paul has proclaimed the supremacy of Christ and the sufficiency of Christ. Christ is the invisible, eternal God, Creator of all things and Sustainer. Christ is the head of the church. He is the head over every power and authority. Christ is the Lord of our personal lives, our Christian community, our families, and our work places. We need to practice the Lordship of Christ in every area of life. Christ is also sufficient for our salvation. When we have faith in Christ, he comes to dwell in us. He fully satisfies our souls. He provides everything we need for life and godliness.

In the closing remarks of his letter, Paul emphasizes prayer. Why? It is because without prayer it is impossible to practice a Christ-centered life. Remarkably, Paul’s prayer topic was not to be released from prison, but to proclaim the mystery of Christ. Though in chains, Paul’s concern was not for his personal security. Paul’s desire was to proclaim the mystery of Christ. Because of this great desire, he prayed for an open door and to proclaim the gospel. What is your heart’s desire? What is your first prayer topic? Recently we have been struggling to keep our DuPage Bible house open for worship, after the Village of Glen Ellyn insisted that we need a special use permit. A Christian lawyer said to me, “Of course, your main concern is not just to win the case, but to preach the gospel.” I was encouraged, and a little embarrassed, realizing that my prayer topic should be to preach the gospel even in that matter. Some people eagerly pray to marry, others to make more money, and still others to gain or keep power. Such people always talk about marriage, money and politics. Today Paul teaches us why we have to pray and what our prayer topic should be. Furthermore, he shows us how to work together for the kingdom of God. Let’s learn Paul’s prayer life and his leadership.

I. A Christian prayer life (2-6)

First, devote yourselves to prayer (2). In our Christian lives, the word of God, prayer and praising God are essentials. All of them are vitally important. The Bible often mentions prayer. Even though Jesus is the Son of God, while he was on earth, he prayed earnestly. He also taught the importance of prayer to his disciples.

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Prayer is a most blessed way to communicate with God. Under the old covenant, the way to approach God was strictly limited. People had to offer animal sacrifices, and they needed a mediator. If they approached God without a blood sacrifice or a mediator, they would die. But God opened the way for us to come to him through Jesus Christ. Jesus was sinless; yet he offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins, once for all (Heb 10:10), and became our mediator (1 Ti 2:5). Now everyone can approach God by the new and living way opened through the cross of Jesus (Heb 10:20). Now we can pray to God anytime, in any place: morning, noon and night, at home, work, or even on the bus. We can enjoy the presence of God and his unlimited blessings through prayer. Prayer is the privilege of God's children.

In verse 2, Paul told the Colossians how to pray: “**Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.**” The word “devote” comes from “pros-kar-ter-eh'-o,” in Greek, which means “to adhere to,” or “to be steadfastly attentive to.” So, to be devoted to prayer means to hold steadfastly to God, not giving up. We need to do this personally, and as a community. We have been praying for North America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But sometimes, when we look at the present spiritual condition, we can become discouraged. Then our prayer topic seems to be just a UBF motto. But we should not give up. We should continue to hold fast to God with this prayer topic, believing that we cannot do it, but God will do it.

Paul also instructed the Colossians to be watchful in prayer. It is easy for us to doze instead of praying. The Puritans thought that if anyone was dozing during prayer time or worship, they were under the devil’s influence. So, ushers carried long poles with hard balls on one end, and feathers on the other. If a man was dozing, they knocked his head with the ball. If it was a woman, they tickled her nose with the feather. In this way they helped fellow Christians to be watchful. Some people doze out of tiredness, others out of habit. In some cases, dozing people make noises. Dozing and prayer are not the same. Paul tells us to be watchful in prayer. Jesus also told his disciples to watch, especially for his second coming. We don’t know when Jesus will come again: whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn (Mk 13:35). We also don’t know the time of our own death, when we will go to God and stand before the judgment of Christ. That is why we have to be watchful.

Paul further instructed the Colossians to be thankful. Some people approach God with complaints, or even threats, saying, “If you don't listen this time, I will take matters into my own hands.” However, we must come to God with

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thanksgiving, instead of complaints or demands. Philippians 4:6-7 says, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** When we pray to God with a thankful heart, believing his absolute love, God is pleased and willing to help us.

Second, the importance of intercessory prayer (3-4). After giving general instructions in verse 2, Paul shared personal prayer topics. Let's read verses 3-4. **“And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should.”** In most cases, a prisoner's urgent prayer topic is to get out of prison. But Paul's urgent prayer topic was different. He asked them to pray that God might open a door for his message so that he might declare the mystery of Christ. We can learn two things.

In the first place, Paul's indomitable spirit to proclaim the gospel in any situation. People usually think that they can serve God better in a more favorable situation. But in favorable times, they hardly serve God, offering reasonable excuses. In this way, time flies - one year, two years, ten years, twenty years. Then one day they wake up to find that they have become old and their strength and resources have dwindled. If we wait for a more favorable situation, we may never have a chance to serve God. Paul did not wait. Paul preached the gospel at every opportunity: at his arrest, at his trials, on the way to Rome in chains, in a storm at sea, and in a Roman prison. Paul did not seek a better situation; he proclaimed the mystery of Christ. This was his earnest desire and hope. How could Paul have such a heart's desire? It came from his love for Jesus. Paul always remembered that he had been the worst sinner, but Christ had mercy on him (1 Ti 1:15). Out of his gratitude, love welled up in his soul and compelled him to preach the gospel at every opportunity. Moreover, Paul believed that the gospel is the power of God that saves everyone who believes (Ro 1:16).

When he had earnest desire, Paul was inspired to ask the Colossians to pray for an open door for his message. Then, mysteriously, God opened the way to the Roman palace guard. While Colossians was written at the start of Paul's two-year imprisonment in Rome, Philippians was written at the end. In Philippians we can see how God answered prayer. Philippians 1:12-13 say, **“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.”** Paul was

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under palace guard. These guards were a superior contingent of 9,000 hand-picked soldiers who were tall, strong and able. They were elite, the “GI Joes” of Rome. They protected the Roman Emperor and freely moved about the palace. Usually, prisoners are afraid of the guards. So they do their best not to offend them at all. They become fatalistic and depressed and do nothing. But Paul saw the palace guard with the eyes of Christ: They needed salvation and they were good disciple candidates. Usually, guards kept watch over prisoners in four-hour shifts, by chaining their left arms to the prisoner’s right arm. Most prisoners felt bound by the chains. But to Paul, it gave him a captive audience for his gospel message. Four hours was enough time for Paul to have a thorough Bible study with each guard. He could have six one-to-one Bible studies every day. Paul welcomed his guards one by one and proclaimed the gospel. These tough soldiers might have tried to ignore him at first. But Paul was not intimidated at all. He fearlessly kept on speaking. Finally the soldiers began to listen. They felt Paul's genuine humility and love, and the character of Christ in him. Eventually, they repented their sins with tears, and accepted Christ as their personal Savior. Then they shared the gospel with their wives and children, and with their fellow soldiers. In this way, the gospel was preached throughout the whole palace guard. God opened a door in the heart of the Roman Empire.

In the second place, the importance of intercessory prayer to proclaim the gospel. Though Paul had a heart’s desire to proclaim Christ, he needed God’s help. So he asked the Colossians to support him in prayer. It was because he believed that God was pleased with intercessory prayer and worked through the prayer of his people. I heard one beautiful story from a missionary. There was a girl who was bedridden for a long time due to an incurable disease. She heard the gospel and received salvation. She really wanted to serve God by going to the church and singing in the chorus. But she could not leave her bed. One day her pastor visited and told her that she could please God by praying to God. Sometime later there was great work of God in that church. Many people were saved. Several months later, the girl went to heaven. Behind her bed, a list of 56 names was found. Under each one's name, there was a red cross. They were the very people who had been saved in that church. God is pleased with intercessory prayer. In this part, we see that when Paul had a heart’s desire to proclaim the gospel, and received full prayer support, he overcame himself and his environment and became a world changer. According to Romans 1:5, we have received the same grace and apostleship as Paul. Therefore, we can have the same heart’s desire to preach the gospel. With such a heart’s desire and with prayer support, we too, can be world changers, regardless of our circumstances.

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Third, be wise toward outsiders (5-6). Verse 5 says, **“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.”** Here “outsiders” means “unbelievers.” Christians share the world with unbelievers. We should not avoid them by forming our own exclusive groups. We are called to be the salt of the earth and light of the world by proclaiming the gospel to them. In order to do this we need to show integrity in word and deed. Unbelievers carefully observe us. If we are hypocritical and selfish they will not listen. But if they see the integrity of our lives and message they may listen. That is why Paul said, **“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.”** This means that when God opens a door for evangelism, we should seize that opportunity to share the gospel. When someone is sick or in trouble, we should share the gospel with them. Paul tells us how to do so in verse 6. We should let our conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt. This means that we should speak proper words that can cheer others up and leave a good impression. Speaking in this way to angry people calms them down. Proverbs 15:1 says, **“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”** We should always remember that unbelievers need the gospel. With this mindset, our conversation should be full of grace, seasoned with salt - which is truth. If there is no salt, food tastes bland. If there is too much salt, the food is completely ruined. With just the right amount of salt, food becomes delicious. So we need wisdom to speak the truth in love.

II. Paul’s leadership in gospel ministry (7-18)

As Paul ended his letter in verses 7-15, he introduced the messengers and sent greetings from his coworkers in Rome. First, he mentioned Tychicus. He carried Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Paul regarded him as a dear brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. Paul sent him to let them know about his circumstances and to encourage their hearts. Paul also sent Onesimus. He had been a slave in Philemon’s household who stole money and ran away from his master. He was caught and imprisoned in the same place where Paul was. Through Paul, he accepted the gospel. Later he pastored the Ephesian church, succeeding Timothy. Though he had been a slave, Paul calls him a faithful and dear brother, accepting him as a child of God. Aristarchus was from Thessalonica. He was with Paul during severe trials (Ac 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; Phm 24). He was now with Paul in prison. Aristarchus was a loyal coworker in Christ to the end. Mark ran away during Paul’s first mission journey. Because of a dispute about him, Paul and Barnabas were separated. A bad impression about Mark might have lingered in the Christian community. So Paul asked the Colossian believers to welcome him. He was now a useful man to Paul (2 Ti 4:11). We don’t know much about Justus, but he was also called Jesus. Aristarchus, Mark and Justus were Jews. Though most

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Jews persecuted Paul for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, these men coworked with him for Gentile ministry and were a comfort to him (11). Epaphras pioneered the churches at Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis. He was always wrestling in prayer for them that they might stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured (12). Luke could have made a lot of money as a doctor. But he stayed with Paul and took care of his health. Later, as an historian, he wrote the books of Luke and Acts, based on his experience with Paul. There was no praise for Demas. Later, he deserted Paul because he loved the world (2 Ti 4:10). Lastly, Paul gave his greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea and to Nympha and the church in her house. Paul asked the believers in Colossae and Laodicea to circulate his letters so that they might be encouraged. Archippus took care of the church in Colossae while Epaphras was absent. So Paul encouraged him to complete the ministry he had received in the Lord. Finally Paul signed the letter in his own hand and asked them to remember his chains. Paul concluded his letter by saying, “Grace be with you.”

Paul’s letter reveals that he was not alone. He was surrounded by people who were willing to serve the gospel ministry with him, in the midst of danger and trouble. They trusted Paul as an apostle of Christ. Basically they worked for the kingdom of God. Here we learn about Paul’s leadership in gospel ministry. He uses the words “dear brother,” twice (7,9), “dear friend” (14), “fellow servant” (7), “fellow prisoner” (10), and “coworkers for the kingdom of God” (12). There is no hint of a hierarchy. Paul regarded his coworkers as dear friends and fellow servants. Paul valued them very highly, respected them and trusted them. Paul’s leadership was not authoritarian. It was servant leadership. He knew that the work of God was not done by one man alone, but by many coworkers together. The focal point was not Paul, but Christ. Here we can see how Paul had changed. In the past, he had been a self-righteous Pharisee who exercised authority out of selfish ambition. But he learned from Christ to be a servant leader. Even though Christ is the Son of God, he did not come into this world to be served, but to serve (Mk 10:45). Jesus earned his disciples one by one by serving them. Jesus bore all their weaknesses and finally died on the cross to cleanse them from sin and transform them into new people. Even though Jesus raised them as his disciples, he did not treat them like personal attendants, but as fellow servants of Christ, coworkers, partners and friends. In various ministries around the world, coworkers have conflicts with each other. One reason is that Christ-centered servant leadership is lacking. We need to practice Christ’s leadership to do the work of God effectively. Christ is our Lord. We are all co-workers. We work together for the kingdom of God.

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Christ is the Lord of all. If Christ opens a door, no one can shut it. If Christ does not open the door, we can do nothing. So we need to pray that God may open the door so that we can proclaim the mystery of Christ in every mission field, especially North Korea, China, and Muslim countries.