

MAKING THE CHRIST CONNECTIONS

VIII. “Connected in Fellowship”

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Colossians 4:2-18

INTRODUCTION

When I visit with people as a pastor, whether in the hospital, at home, or in my study, I like to conclude the visit by praying for them. Sometimes I ask them, “How can I best pray for you?” It is a question that can reach deeply inside us and bring into focus what we’re really about— some of the core issues of our lives. I always appreciate honest, soul-revealing responses, for that enables us to pray with greater depth and discern more of what God’s desire is in answering the cry of our heart.

Remember, Paul started this letter with prayer for the Christians in Colosse. Now, as he concludes the letter, he not only encourages them to pray, but also asks for prayer for himself. It is not unusual for Paul to ask for prayer for himself at the end of one of his letters. Sometimes it is a simple, “pray for me.” But occasionally, as here, he is more specific. In his prayer request, we see revealed Paul’s heart and soul. What Paul asks for and what he doesn’t ask for tells us a lot.

Now, imagine yourself for a moment in Paul’s shoes. He has broken no laws. He is innocent of all the trumped-up charges. The only reason he is in prison is because of the jealousy, fear, and hatred of the Jews who feel threatened by his testimony. The Roman judicial system creeps along. He’s already spent a couple of years in prison in Israel, with trials before the Sanhedrin, then the Roman rulers: Felix, Festus, and then King Herod Agrippa. Because that seems to be going nowhere he appeals to Caesar. On the way to Rome, he’s shipwrecked. Now in Rome, he’s sitting locked up in prison again, waiting. What would you be asking for? Wouldn’t you want people to pray for your release; for freedom; for speeding up the justice system; for strength and grace to handle your difficult circumstances in prison? But, for what does Paul ask them to pray for? His request is two-fold: 1) pray for an open door to proclaim the message of Christ, and 2) pray that he may proclaim it well— with clarity and wisdom. That’s it. I find that amazing.

Sprinkled in with Paul’s prayer request are valuable admonitions for our prayer life and our call to spread the message to others. All who have not yet reached Paul’s passion, sense of purpose, and confidence in God’s plan will do well to pay heed to what he’s saying here.

PRAYER

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful (Col 4:2).

There are three big words about prayer here: it is to be devoted, watchful, and thankful. Together

these words lead us into a vast, exhilarating place of prayer.

“Devote” conveys total commitment, a setting apart for that purpose. To be devoted is to be faithful. So if we’re going to “devote ourselves to prayer,” this is no casual quick little, “Lord, bless Paul” kind of prayer. This is something serious, demanding, that engages our whole being in intercession. In our “hurry-up age” of “quick little prayers” it is helpful to remind ourselves of how some of the great Christians have understood prayer. The great reformation leader, Martin Luther, said, “If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the devil gets the victory through the day.” John Wesley, through whom the great Methodist revivals spread in England rose daily at 4 a.m. for two hours of prayer. Bishop Francis Asbury, riding his great circuits on horseback to spread revival in America said, “I propose to rise at 4 o’clock as often as I can to spend two hours in prayer and meditation.” Such examples of being devoted to prayer can challenge our sporadic and often paltry prayer commitments.

Devoted prayer takes time— there’s no way around it. E. M. Bounds (another one of those 4 a.m. prayers from the early 20th century) wrote:

Praying— true praying— costs an outlay of serious attention and time, which flesh and blood do not relish. We can habituate ourselves to our beggarly praying until it looks well to us— at least it keeps up a decent form and quiets conscience. We can slight our praying and not realize the peril until the foundations are gone. To be little with God is to be little for God. It takes good time for the full flow of God into the spirit.

We need to learn to spend good blocks of time with God to receive His power and strength.

“Watchful” is Paul’s second great prayer-word. The phrase “Watch and pray” is used a number of times in the Bible. Jesus uses the admonition for his sleepy disciples in Gethsemane. This is prayer alert to the conditions— eyes wide-open to what is going on. It is prayer alert to the hints and movements of grace. It conveys expectancy in our prayers where we really are looking for God’s response to our prayers. Often our prayers can be dull, and so without expectations that we miss the answer. We pray for guidance and remarkable circumstances happen that we think, “That was sure lucky,” not even seeing the hand of God in our “luck.” We pray for healing and get better and give all the credit to the carrot juice we started drinking. Prayer is meant to be alive, alert, quick to discern the smallest in-breakings of God’s Spirit.

This alertness is sensitive to combating evil wherever we encounter it. Where there is oppression, darkness, or sin we will be moved to pray. Whatever needs we encounter are offered up in prayer. This counters the despair we can quickly feel in this world where so many bad things happen. Prayer lifts our eyes to the God who is love and is Lord of all.

“Thankful” completes this triad of great prayer-words. The Message puts it, *with your eyes wide open in gratitude*. I think that captures more the spirit of this. We hear the word “thankful” and think, “Yes, I need to remember to thank God for His blessings.” That is true, but it is too compartmentalized. Thanksgiving is meant to flow in, around, and through every part of our lives. So, that’s why I like The Message’s emphasis upon living *with your eyes wide open in gratitude*. That enables us to begin seeing the hand of God in everything and everyone. It

reminds us that God is primary. We realize it is not just about ourselves and our responsibilities. Flowing around it all is God's creative life-giving, life-transforming Spirit. In our alert, watchful praying, as we recognize this, our hearts will continually overflow with gratitude.

OPPORTUNITIES

The focus of Paul is clearly outward..

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. (Col 4:3-4)

It is amazing that Paul isn't praying for the prison doors to be opened for him, but rather that doors of ministry be opened. The phrase translated *open a door for our message*, literally means a door for the Word of God. Psalm 119:130 says, *The entrance of Your words gives light*. Paul knows prayer is needed to crack the door in order for God's Word to do its creative work.

Wherever Paul is, he sees opportunity. During a storm and shipwreck, he is praying for everyone and proclaiming the gospel. Here in prison he is praying for the means to continue proclaiming the message of Christ. In Philippians, he gives a fuller account, another letter likely traditionally held to be written about this same time from this same imprisonment:

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really 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. (Phil 1:12-13)

So, the guards assigned to Paul heard the gospel and it spread through thousands of others among the elite palace guard. While Paul was captive, the guards were also a captive audience.

This is an awesome view of God's purposes that Paul is so confident in. If Paul is traveling as a missionary preaching and teaching thousands, planting churches, that is good. If Paul is locked up in prison, his calling and ministry don't really change— just the audience and Paul accepts that. There is no complaint, no kicking in frustration against the constraints of circumstances.

In an interesting 20th century version of Paul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor when Hitler came to power, went to prison because he refused to compromise with the Nazis when they wanted to use the church for their ends. He was executed for his faith. But, while in prison, his guards had to be constantly changed because he kept converting them.

Yet in all of it, Paul is aware that prayer is the key to making it happen. Prayer opens hearts so people can hear. Prayer is needed for Paul to explain it all clearly to them. None of this is Paul's engineering. And, he enlists the church in Colosse as partners in this ministry. Paul is not Lone Ranger out there, doing it his way.

Do we understand the crucial role of prayer in reaching others for Christ? Maybe we are frustrated (or relieved) that we don't have opportunities, open doors, to share Christ. For hearts to be open, ready to receive, we need serious prayer. For whom are you praying in that way? Perhaps you feel like you really didn't share the gospel with clarity when you had a chance. You probably did better than you think— but, even Paul needed prayer that he'd do it right. Trust prayer.

Then, Paul translates all this into two verses of admonition for these Colossian believers:

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Col 4:5-6)

Here is excellent guidance in evangelism. By “outsiders” he means those who are not yet Christians. Paul’s example should inspire us to *make the most of every opportunity*. As Presbyterians, most of us need considerable encouragement to even be aware of opportunities.

Bruce Sexton was teaching a 7th- 8th grade confirmation class in his church. Quoting from Mtt. 28, and Jesus’ command to “Go and make disciples of all nations,” Bruce told the class that Jesus wanted them to make more disciples. One student looked up and asked, “Why did Jesus want them to make motorcycles?” Maybe that’s what happened to some of the rest of us. We thought Jesus said to make motorcycles when he said to make more disciples.

Paul gives good counsel regarding our conversation. You’ve heard of “salty speech.” I don’t think that is what Paul means when he says our conversation should be “seasoned with salt.” Salt sparks things up. Food is bland without it. Paul says our conversation shouldn’t be tedious, boring, but lively, interesting. Our message is full of life— resurrection life. And, it should be filled with grace as well as gracious. We shouldn’t be condemning others, pointing out their flaws. We point to Jesus, proclaiming Him in all His love and grace. The Holy Spirit will do the convicting.

Those early Christians did their job well. Beginning with the 120 in the upper room, plus maybe a few hundred others who weren’t there, they spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. By 350 A.D. there were nearly 34 million Christians— over half of the total population.

Ruth Graham Bell, the wife of evangelist Billy Graham tells the story of the conversion of one of the renowned professors of anthropology at the U. of Pennsylvania, Dr. Alexander Grigolia. He was one of Billy Graham’s favorite professors. This brilliant Ph.D. had been led to Christ by the simple testimony of a bootblack years before. Dr. Grigolia stopped by this shoeshine stand on occasion where this little man turned scruffy leather shoes into shining works of art. This professor was a very unhappy man, feeling inner emptiness and despair. One day he looked down at this bootblack, who was always so cheerful, and asked, “Why are you always so happy?” The bootblack, surprised, sat back and said, “Jesus. He loves me. He died so God could forgive my sins. He makes me happy.” That simple witness, backed up by a cheerful heart, is what eventually brought that professor to the Savior.

SUPPORT NETWORK

At the end of Paul’s letters, he often begins sending greetings to various people with difficult-to-pronounce names. It is a time we often decide to speed read. But that is a mistake. Someone counted 100 different people mentioned in Paul’s letters as associates or people to greet. There are a lot of people facilitating the part of the Lord’s work Paul is involved in.

Tychicus and Onesimus are the ones carrying the letter to the church. They will be able to give a personal, first-hand account of what is happening in Rome with Paul's imprisonment. We'll learn more of Onesimus' story next week as we look at the letter of Philemon.

Epaphras is again mentioned, as he was near the beginning of the letter. It is probably through his evangelistic endeavor the church in Colosse was established. There is this wonderful sentence about him:

He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. (Col 4:12)

I preached a sermon on that verse a year ago— which I'm sure you remember, so I won't repeat what I said about "wrestling in prayer." But this also ties in with what Paul has just said about being devoted to prayer. Epaphras is a prime example of someone taking prayer seriously.

Notice also that Mark is mentioned as being with Paul. A few years earlier, Paul and Barnabas who went on their first missionary journey together, had a disagreement over whether to bring Mark with them when they began to plan a second missionary journey. Mark had left them mid-journey the first time. Paul didn't want to give him another chance and Barnabas did. It ended up splitting Paul and Barnabas apart, making separate journeys. Barnabas took Mark and Paul took Silas. But now, you see Mark has redeemed himself in the eyes of Paul. I'm sure there has been a lot of grace and forgiveness going on with both Paul and Mark. Healing grace.

And, the ever-faithful Luke is there with Paul. This is the only place we learn that Luke was a physician. He was a frequent companion of Paul's in Acts, the book he authored along with the gospel.

CONCLUSION

Nepal is the only official Hindu kingdom in the world. Dr. C. Peter Wagner, professor emeritus of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, says, "Many missiologists considered the Himalayan region a hopeless case for Christianity.

However, several years ago, Lok Bhandari, a national martial arts champion whose father had groomed him to become prime minister of Nepal, committed his life to Christ. He is an effective ambassador for Christ now in Nepal. He is not discouraged by the fact that he has been arrested more than 30 times and is regularly persecuted for preaching the gospel. Lok tells crowds of 70,000 how Jesus revolutionized his life. Christians in Nepal now number more than 700,000. Just 50 years ago there were no known Christians in Nepal.

Reaching others for Christ is the heartbeat of what we're about as Christians. It is everyone's job. It begins with praying evangelistic prayers.

- Are you seriously praying for open doors?
- Are you praying that your message will be clear?
- Are you alert to opportunities to share Christ?

§ Is your conversation filled with the love and grace of Jesus and gracious toward others?