

January 25, 2009

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Open Doors and Gospel Clarity*

### Colossians 4:2 – 6

The normal Christian life is one that looks like continuing steadfast in prayer. This word in the text is variously translated as '**be devoted to prayer**' or '**devote yourselves to prayer.**' It means to be **constant in prayer or faithful in prayer.** Being devoted to prayer doesn't mean that you spend 24/7 on your knees in your prayer closet. **It does mean that there will be a regular habit of praying that looks like continuing steadfast in prayer.** In light of this admonition from Scripture, we have to answer the question: Am I devoted to prayer? Is there a regular habit of praying in my life that can honestly be called 'continuing steadfast in prayer'?

We saw last time we were together around this word that prayer is God's design in order that we might participate in His purpose on earth and He would get all the glory. We understood that prayer is a means God uses to make our joy full because it is when our hearts are connected to heaven and filled with the purpose of God that deep and lasting joy is found. *Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.* John 16:24 And just as prayer fills us with joy, our praying gives God delight. *'The prayer of the upright is His delight.'* Proverbs 15:8 He takes joy in answering the prayers that He inspires and even commands us to give Him no rest from our prayers.

**We saw too that prayer is a good gauge of our dependence upon God.** At the center of what prayer is all about is the sense of our dependence upon God for things. Praying for something means that we cannot get what we want on our own and so we ask. **To the extent we recognize our own need – that we understand that we need God – to that extent we will pray.** So **continue steadfastly in prayer.** That means you **pray often and you pray regularly.**

So what should we pray? How should we pray? What sorts of things are legitimate issues to bring to God in prayer? Firstly, if we are to believe the Bible, it instructs us, urges us, even commands us to **pray about everything.** In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Paul says: *'...pray without ceasing...'* I like how the NLT puts it in Philippians 4:6: *'Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything.'* Everything in the Christian life is a matter of prayer. Particularly those things threaten your peace of mind – especially those things that tempt you to worry. As if worrying about anything would change the outcome. We need to bring everything to God in prayer. Before we put our foot down in the morning – prayer ought to be rising. As one person put it: **"Dear Lord, so far today I've done alright, I haven't gossiped, lost my temper, been nasty, selfish or over indulgent. But in a few minutes Lord, I'm going to get out of bed and from then on, I'm going to need all the help I can get."**

Here in Colossians, along with the command to be devoted to prayer, Paul give us specific ways to be devoted. *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 that I may make it [the mystery of Christ] clear, which is how I ought to speak.* Colossians 2:3-4 Two things are at the top of the list of things to pray for in Paul's mind: **Pray for an open door for the gospel,** and **pray for boldness and clarity in its proclamation.** Paul could have asked for prayer for a lot of things, but he didn't. His heart was revealed in his request: **'Pray for the spread of the gospel and pray that I do it well.'**

**We need to pray for open doors for the gospel.** We are not hyper-Calvinists who sit back with folded arms and say that God is sovereign (**which He is**) and has chosen from the foundation of the world those who will be saved (**which He has**) therefore we do not need to do anything. People will be saved without our help and besides we might just get in the way. But aside from that statement reflecting a sinful apathy and laziness, it is also incredibly biblically ignorant. Paul tells us in Romans that the means of salvation is God-ordained through the preaching of the gospel. **13 For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. 14 How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?** Romans 10:13-14

And **the preaching of the gospel goes through doors that prayer has opened.** As Paul told the Corinthians: *But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.* 1 Corinthians 16:8-9 And again in his second letter: *When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, ... a door was opened for me in the Lord,* 2 Corinthians 2:12

On the Monday after Easter in 1952, Duncan Campbell was seated on the platform after speaking to the Faith Mission Convention in Bangor, Northern Ireland, when he sensed the inner voice say to him, "Berneray!" (That is a small island in the Hebrides.) Duncan bowed his head and prayed silently. Again came the name "Berneray." He prayed on, and the name came a third time. So Campbell turned to the chairman and whispered, "Brother, you will need to excuse me. The Holy Spirit has just told me that I am to go to Berneray." The chairman objected, "You are the speaker tomorrow." But Duncan could not be dissuaded. He knew the Spirit had spoken and he had to go. He later recounted, "I had never been to Berneray, had never known anyone from there, and had never received a letter from anyone there." He went to the hotel and packed his two suitcases and contacted the airport. There were no connections with Berneray because it was too small and out of the way. So he caught the first flight to the nearest island.

When he got there he went down to the coast and asked how to get to Berneray. The answer from a fisherman was that there is no usual commercial way, but that he would take him for a certain amount. It was almost the exact amount Campbell had in his pocket. When they got to Berneray the fisherman returned and left Campbell alone on the shore. He climbed the bluff and found himself on the edge of a plowed field and a farmer not far away. He said, "Please go to the nearest pastor and tell him Duncan Campbell has arrived." The farmer responded, "We don't have a minister for the church now." "Do you have elders?" Campbell asked. "Yes." "All right, go to the nearest elder and tell him, Duncan Campbell has arrived." The farmer looked at him quizzically, then started off across the field as Campbell rested on his suitcases. After a while the farmer returned and said, "The elder was expecting you. He has a place ready for you. He has announced the meetings begin at nine o'clock tonight."

While Campbell had been ministering in the convention at Bangor three days earlier, this elder had spent the day praying in his barn for God to send revival to the island. God gave him the promise in Hosea 14:5: *"I will be as the dew unto Israel."* He claimed it in faith. His wife in the house heard him praying in the barn, *"Lord, I don't know where he is, but You know, and with You all things are possible. You send him to the island."* He knew in his heart that God was going to send Duncan Campbell, who had been used in mighty revival in other parts of Scotland, to Berneray. He was so sure that he would be there in three days that he made all the arrangements to use the local church and had announced the services. (This excerpted in part verbatim from *Let God Guide You Daily* by Wesley Duewel, Zondervan, 1988, pp. 117–119.)

What the elder had been praying for was an open door for the word of God to spread throughout his island, and God answered that prayer by not only sending an outpouring of His Holy Spirit on that island but throughout the whole chain of islands that make up the Hebrides. We need to pray that God would blow off the hinges of the iron gates that hold the peoples of Tibet, and China, and Africa and the Middle East and so many other countries, in darkness and slavery. We need to pray that God would open the doors of our neighborhoods and communities to the gospel. God will create opportunities for the gospel in response to prayer. **We need to pray for open doors for the gospel.**

We also need to **pray for boldness and clarity in its proclamation.** *'... that I may make it [the mystery of Christ] clear, which is how I ought to speak.* Colossians 4:4 Paul says that the gospel is a mystery and his job is to make that mystery clear. It is not a mystery because the gospel is tricky or confusing or deliberately misleading – it is a mystery because it is divine in origin – because no one would ever know it or think it or make it up unless God had made it known. The truth of the gospel runs absolutely counter to the wisdom of this age:

- The way up is down
- The way of getting is giving
- The way of life is death
- The way of power is to be made weak.
- Want to get the most? Go to where the least is.
- Want to be free? Become a slave of Christ Jesus.
- Want to become great? Become the least.
- Want to find yourself? Forget yourself.
- Want to 'get even' with your enemies? Bless, love and pray for them.

This is why the gospel is called a mystery. Without divine help, it is incomprehensible, nobody would think this up on their own: that the Creator of stars and planets and galaxies, and the intricate balance of life should care for weak, frail, rebellious people that only want their own way; that the perfect, sinless Son of God should bear our sins and die for those who hate Him. The gospel is a mystery, Paul says, and it takes someone who has been changed by this mystery to de-mystify it all over the world. We need to pray that not only are doors opened but that when the gospel goes through those doors it is crystal clear to those who hear.

These two things, **open doors and gospel clarity** come together for us in Acts. Acts 2 starts with a prayer meeting and ends up with a powerful gospel message and 3,000 new believers. Acts 3 begins with Peter and John going to the temple to pray and ends with a miraculous healing and a gospel message. Chapter 4 continues that drama as Peter and John spend a night in jail and then are given opportunity to preach to those who had orchestrated Jesus' crucifixion, are beaten for their pains, and ends with a house-shaking prayer meeting where the Scripture records that *'...they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.'* It is clear that prayer is an integral part of opening Satan-blocked doors and the clear presentation of the gospel.

And now in verse 5, Paul turns to something seemingly unrelated to open doors and gospel clarity. He says: *Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.* Colossians 4:5 – 6 **What is the link between praying for open doors and clarity and boldness in preaching and walking in wisdom and graciously seasoned speaking?**

First of all, what does it mean to *'...walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time?* Wisdom is knowledge of the facts coupled with the sense or discernment to put it to use. So what does wisdom toward outsiders look like? I think wisdom here looks like **winning outsiders to Christ**. The fact that they are outsiders means that we are talking about unbelievers – and wisdom says that unbelievers need to hear the gospel. **Wisdom tells us that life outside of Christ ends in eternal hell and the best use of our time is to tell them about Jesus.** Proverbs 11:30 says: *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who is wise wins souls.* In other words, walking in wisdom here means that we are on the lookout for souls to win to Christ. That is why Paul emphasizes this with *making the best use of the time*. Literally this is translated as **'buying up the opportunities'**. This was a term of the marketplace. There is a transaction happening – and the transaction is redeeming the time we have been given by using it wisely. **We buy up the opportunities when we walk through the open doors, and with clarity and boldness share the gospel with outsiders.**

In the Gospel of John, Jesus took the opportunity with a woman at a well one, hot dry day, to share the gospel. His disciples had gone away into town to get something to eat, and when they came back they found Him at the well with this woman of low reputation and they were a little scandalized. But Jesus gave them some wisdom. *'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.* In effect He was saying, **'Don't lose sight of the goal. Don't get sidetracked from the will and work of God.'**

*'Do you not say, There are yet four months, then comes the harvest? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.* John 4:34-36 In Daniel 12:3 we read: *And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.* The goal of the wise is to lead people to righteousness. **So the link between open doors and gospel clarity and walking in wisdom is that we pray for open doors so that we might buy up the opportunities to win souls to Christ.**

And it is in those opportunities that our speaking should *always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.* It is clear from this verse that Paul evidently felt that different people require different answers. Not a different gospel, but a different way of presenting the gospel. Paul shows us what that means practically in 1 Corinthians 9: *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.* 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

**So the link between open doors and gospel clarity and graciously seasoned speaking is that when the doors are opened and the opportunities presented, we have a timely, gracious, seasoned word that fits in the minds and lives of those to whom we are speaking.**

This ought to inform our praying for open doors and gospel clarity. We need to pray for God to open the doors for us to walk through. We need to pray that the gospel is preached with boldness and clarity. We need to pray that we are alive to every open door, every opportunity and we need to pray for gracious, seasoned speech that burns through the mist and darkness shrouding those who are outside and for words that fit the moment that will lead people to righteousness – to Christ.

*Our gracious God and compassionate Father,*

*Grant that we would be a people devoted to prayer – vitally connected to Your global purpose and united in steadfast prayer for the spread of the gospel. Your cause, O Lord, and not our own engages our hearts and fires our affections, and we pray, set up Your kingdom in every place where Satan now reigns. Blow the hinges off the doors long locked to Your gospel and grant that we would walk through those doors with courage and boldness to preach Your gospel with clarity and conviction. We love and adore You that You are God and we long that others should know it, feel it, revel and rejoice in it. O that all men might know You and love You and give You praise that Your name would be glorified in this world. Let those on the outside of Your saving grace be brought in for the sake of Your dear name. Make us sensitive and alive to every gospel opportunity open doors present and grant us timely, gracious and seasoned words to lead others to Christ. May we who have been made glad in God live to make the nations glad in You we pray, in the precious and powerful name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto you;  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.***