

An Open Door

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[0 : 00] Colossians chapter 4, we're going to be reading starting at verse 2. If you're visiting with us, it's our habit to read, typically read through a book of the Bible. And so we'll be in Colossians today and next week.

And then we'll be doing a two-week short series, you might call it, for Easter. So Colossians chapter 4, verse 2. Hear now God's word.

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 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 speak, excuse me, that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak.

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.

Amen. This is God's word. A couple years ago, Carly and I had the chance to visit one of these traveling art exhibits, and this one was for Vincent van Gogh. And the one part of the exhibit that I remember most was there was a room with quotes all over the walls that van Gogh had said throughout his lifetime.

[1 : 22] And there was one quote in particular that has always stuck with me, and it's from a letter that van Gogh wrote to a friend. And in the letter he says this, A great fire burns within me, but no one stops to warn themselves at it, and passerbys only see a wisp of smoke.

And if you know anything about van Gogh's life, you know that he was not a success in his own life, and no one appreciated his art. And what he was talking about in that quote is he's describing the pain of feeling like you have something to share with the world.

There's this fire inside of you. And yet when you actually go out into the world and you try to share it, what everyone else around you sees is just a wisp of smoke. That's how he talked about it.

And that stuck with me because I think a lot of times that's how we can feel about evangelism. If you've been changed by the Word of God, if you've been changed by the Gospel, sometimes it can feel like a fire inside of you.

And you say, I want people to know about this. And then when you go and tell people, there's a disconnect. And you see it in the other person's eyes that all they see is just a wisp of smoke. They're not grasping why the Gospel is so meaningful to you.

[2 : 40] And what you see in this passage this morning is that Paul understands that challenge. He understands the challenge of evangelism. And he takes it seriously. And the way that he paints the picture, the way that he explains the problem, is down there in verse 3.

He says, Pray for us that God may open to us a door for the Word. So for him, the way that he described the challenge of evangelism is for the Word to go out, for it to really have power and to transform lives, a door has to open.

That's how he describes the whole problem. But the good news is he gives us this morning, he tells us how the door opens. And there's three elements to it. And that's what we're going to look at this morning. Three essential elements to the door opening for the Word so that the world can see the power of the Word.

Okay? And the first element, they're all really simple. But the first element is this. It's prayer. Now, you put yourself in Paul's shoes. Paul, we know from this passage, he's sitting in prison. He's in jail.

And he's writing to his supporters, the Colossians. And you've got to think to yourself, if you were in Paul's shoes, and you could ask for one prayer request from your people, and you're in jail, what would you ask for?

[3 : 50] Would you not ask for freedom, right? Pray for me that these doors, the prison doors, would be opened. And for whatever reason, that's not what Paul prays for. What he asks is that a door would be open, but for the Word.

comfort. And I think part of the reason is because Paul, for him, comfort was always secondary to the mission. You know, if a lack of comfort was what was required for the Word to go out, he would be happy with that.

And so he prays for the door to be opened. But, well, he prays for his people to pray that the door would be open. And just think about what that means. That means that Paul, you know, great apostle though he was, had all this, God used him so powerfully, but Paul really, what he believed in was the power of ordinary people's prayers.

I've shared this story before in our Wednesday night meeting, because it's a prayer meeting. But there's a great story about Charles Spurgeon, who was probably the most famous Baptist minister in the 1800s.

He had a congregation of about 5,000 in London in a time way before you would have anything close to megachurches like we have today. And there's this story that Spurgeon was asked one time, what's the secret of your ministry?

[5 : 01] What's the secret sauce of it? And the story goes that he took this person who asked that question down into the basement of the church. And down there, there was a hundred of his congregation members praying.

And he said that the secret to our church's success is that my people pray. And he called that meeting the boiler room because in his mind, his people's prayer was the propellant for the church.

It was what gave it success. God worked through the people's prayers and that's what made his ministry successful. And Paul's saying the same thing here. He's saying to the Colossians, listen, your prayers for me, that a door might be open for the word to go out.

Your prayers spread the kingdom of God. God is using your prayers. And I think some people struggle with that sometimes because we say to ourselves, you know, especially if you start talking about things like predestination and God's providence, and you start to say to yourself, what good is prayer?

Because doesn't God already know the future? Doesn't he already have everything worked out? Why would you pray in the first place if it's already going to work out some way? And that's a fair question. It's a reasonable question, but there is an answer to it.

[6 : 14] The first answer of why would you pray is because God tells us to pray. But an answer that gets more to the heart of the meaning of that question is, our prayers matter because God has decided that they will matter.

In other words, God has ordained that our prayers are the means through which he accomplishes all the things he's going to accomplish in this world.

And if you think about it, you know, God. God can do whatever he wants, right? He doesn't need our prayers to do what he wants to do in this world. But he has told us that he's made the world in such a way that when we pray, he listens and he answers our prayers.

And that's incredibly encouraging, right? And one reason it's encouraging is because I don't know about you, but sometimes, isn't it true, you get up from a time of prayer and you may not say it out loud, but you wonder to yourself, did anything really just happen?

Did my prayers accomplish anything? And, you know, in one sense, we can say, well, that makes sense that you might feel that way because our prayers by themselves don't do a thing.

[7 : 27] What makes our prayers effective is the fact that God has promised to listen to them. It's not like we have some magic. It's that God has promised to hear our prayers and he's the one that makes them effective.

He's the one that makes prayer essential to something like evangelism. So he has said, he's told us, you know, when you pray, I will work. And that's why Paul would ask the people to please pray for me.

That's an encouragement. And if you want the gospel to go out, you know, say you're that person who says, I've got this fire inside of me and I want my neighbor to know about Jesus.

You know, one of the questions you have to ask yourself is, and this is hopefully an encouraging question. Do you know the power of prayer? Do you really believe like Paul believes that when you pray, God can do something like open a door that you would have said to yourself, there's no way that I could have ever done that.

Do you believe in the power of prayer? Okay. But the second essential element, and this is the deepest one, this is the most central one, is what you would call providence.

[8 : 33] So you've got prayer and then you've got providence. And providence may be a word that you're not familiar with. All it really means is, when we talk about providence, we're talking about the way that God cares for his creation and everything that happens inside of it.

It's what Jesus meant when he was trying to encourage his disciples about the fact that God really cares for them. And he says to them, he says, not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of my father.

Jesus is telling his disciples, you've got to believe in God's providence, that he really watches over this world and that wherever you go, he's there with you. Do you believe in providence? And personally, what that means is, God's fingerprints are all over every part of your life and my life.

He is everywhere. And everything that happens to us, he's a part of. He's in it doing something, working good, even from evil. And you get the picture of what Paul's talking about here.

So he uses that image of opening a door. And you see what he's talking about in a different passage in Acts 14, where Paul goes to speak to another church in Antioch.

[9 : 49] And Luke, who wrote Acts, he describes it like this. He says, and when they arrived, when Paul and Barnabas arrived to the church, Paul and Barnabas declared all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

So everywhere Paul went, he was working as hard as he could. He was preaching the gospel. But when success happened, he attributed it always to God doing something, to God opening a door.

And when we think about evangelism, sometimes we only think about it in human terms, right? So you bring your arguments. You bring a message about the gospel. You go share it with someone. And then hopefully, Lord willing, they come to believe in it.

And you say, well, how did that happen? And the answer that you might give is, well, they were persuaded by my argument. But what Paul is saying here is, no, it's deeper than that. It's actually way more spiritual than that.

Anytime someone believes, anytime someone believes, it's a miracle. And it's something that only God could do. And it's because, the way he puts it here, God opens a door for the word to go through so that faith actually bears fruit.

[11 : 02] And when you think about God's providence, just in terms of evangelism, I think Paul's giving us a warning here and also a hope. And the warning is, don't treat your neighbors like machines.

Sometimes you can become so focused on, what do I need to do for someone else to become a Christian? That you can almost turn your neighbor into a machine where you say, if I just bring them the right argument, if we just do these things, then inevitably they should come to faith, right?

And if they don't come to faith, well, that must mean that they're really broken. And that's not true. The gospel says every single person is so fallen from God that they can't come to God without God working.

And what that means for us is we have to come to our knees. We have to get on our knees and say, I can never bring someone to faith. God is always the one who brings people to faith.

And it should humble us. That's what Paul says here. He's dependent on God doing something that he could never do himself. Great preacher though he was. But there's also a hope. And the hope is that where the word goes out, God promises to be there.

[12 : 11] Do you remember when Jesus, just before he ascended into heaven, he gave that great commission and where he says, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and son, the Holy spirit.

Do you remember what he says just before that? He says, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, to Jesus. Then he says, go therefore and make disciples of all nations.

What he's saying is, he's saying, I have been authorized. To have all the authority in heaven, on earth. And now he's, he's, he deputizes his, his disciples and he deputizes us.

And the reason that's hopeful for us is because when we go and share the gospel, when we talk to people, we love about who Jesus is to us. We know that we're not alone. We know that we're going in his authority and in his power.

Go therefore. Okay. But then there's a, there's a final piece here to evangelism, a final essential element. And so you've got prayer, you've got providence, but the final thing that you've got is peculiar people.

[13 : 18] You see this in verses five and six. What does Paul say? Walk in wisdom towards 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.

Paul is telling the Colossians. He's saying, so that the connection between him asking them to pray for him and then him turning around now and saying, now watch how you live.

The connection is, is evangelism. And it's about the word going out. He's saying, just like you've got to pray for me that the word can go out. He says, you've also got to watch how you live. And the assumption is that the word goes out through the testimony of our lives.

And this is interesting because if you think about Paul, Paul, Paul had this, he had a real belief that he had been called uniquely by God to be an apostle, to go bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

And if anybody can say, no, really my job is evangelism, Paul could have said it. But anytime Paul talks about the gospel going out, just as much as he talks about his own calling, he also reminds the Colossians that this is your calling as well.

[14 : 35] You are involved in the word going out. And that's why he says, be careful how you walk towards outsiders. Because his point is, your whole life is a testimony to the world around you about who Jesus Christ is.

And, you know, evangelism, if you think about it, it can come in a lot of different forms. When we think about evangelism, sometimes we think about maybe the guy who's standing on the street, handing out bulletins, not bulletins, whatever you call it, tracks, handing out tracks or someone going door to door.

Just two weeks ago, two young people knocked on my door. And when they opened the door, they were from another church. And when they opened the door, they said, oh, you. And they said something like, we guess you don't need to hear this, do you?

But it was great. It was great to see people out in Columbia going door to door and sharing the gospel. And that's normally what we think about when we think about evangelism. But, but Paul's, Paul's view of what evangelism is, is so much bigger than that.

And the kind of evangelism that he talks about here is, is the kind of evangelism that you don't plan on. And one way that you know that is because of what he describes going on. So you can see in the last verse, he says, let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

[15 : 58] And the assumption there is, is that maybe not necessarily that you're going out and spreading the gospel, but the way that you're living is so peculiar that people are coming to you, demanding answers for the way that you're living.

And so it, of course, that's not to say, don't go out and share the gospel, but it's also saying sometimes people come to you. And that's what Paul's expecting here is that the way that the Christians live in the first century is going to be so strange, so peculiar that people will come to them, maybe even antagonistically, and they've got to be ready to answer for the hope that they have.

And one of the things that historians will always point out about why Christianity grew and what made it unique is Christianity was really a countercultural movement of the first century.

And there were a lot of values that Christians had that the world around them just did not have at all. Just to give a few examples, Christians refused. It was common in the ancient, in the Roman world, for citizens, for citizens, as good citizens, to go offer sacrifices to the Roman emperor as a god.

And in that time period, that was just seen as what it meant to be a good citizen, in the same way that we say the Pledge of Allegiance. And these Christians come along and they say, actually, no, we can't offer that sacrifice.

[17 : 20] We can't be this part. We can't be a part of the citizenship in this way because we only have one God. And that made them peculiar. Or Christians were notorious for not aborting their children.

In a world where it was very common, if there was any defect in your child after it was born, it was okay to let it die. Christians said, no, that's not our ethic.

They had a very strong sexual ethic where they said, in a world that was very polygamous, that would have said, what matters is your sexual fulfillment. Christians came and said, no, sex is for marriage.

It's beautiful, but it's for a very specific purpose and to be used in a very specific way. One of my favorites is, Christians were radically generous. That's one thing that made them peculiar.

There's a great letter that one of the ancient Roman emperors named, just Julian, excuse me, that Julian wrote to one of his counterparts somewhere else in the empire. And he's describing a problem that he has with the Christians that he's come across.

[18 : 24] And he says this, he says, these impious Galileans. Now, he's calling them impious because they don't worship the old gods. And he's calling them Galileans because that's where Christianity started.

He says, these impious Galileans, they not only feed their own poor, but ours also welcoming them into their fellowship. They attract them as children are attracted with cakes.

He, the, the, the, the, these Christians are not trying to be generous in order to evangelize. It's just the, they have been so transformed by the gospel that they have become generous people.

And Julian, the emperor is saying, this is, this is horrible. They're taking all of our people away from the old gods because of how generous these Christians are. He ends up ordering all the, all the ancient temples to start being more generous to try to combat Christianity.

But, but all that to say, Christians had to be prepared to make an answer for their faith because they were so peculiar. And that was how God used them.

[19 : 28] And, and you see that just in the same way today. You know, I think one of the best ways we saw that in the past week was, do you remember that the, the astronauts who were stuck in space for nine months, if you can imagine.

And one of the astronauts is a guy named Butch Wilmore, who's actually an elder at a local church in Texas. And there was a nationally televised CBS interview where they asked him, what lessons have you learned from being stuck in space for nine months?

And one of the things he said, and he's in the space station when he's talking at this point, he says, he says, one of the things I've learned is that God is working on the space. Working out his plan and purposes for his glory throughout all of humanity.

And how that plays into our lives is significant and important. And however that plays out, I am content because I understand that. I understand that God is at work in all things.

He's saying, I believe in Providence. And, you know, today we know this. A lot of people, the three people, the three jobs that they trust the least is lawyers, politicians, and preachers.

[20 : 33] And there's a lot of people that will listen to not a thing that I say simply because I'm a pastor, but they'll listen to an astronaut because, you know, he's a serious person. He's a professional. And, you know, God gave that astronaut, because, because he was a good astronaut, God gave him a chance, opened a door for him that the word could go out.

And because he was, he was peculiar for having such contentment in a really hard situation. And I would argue that the only way that you can explain the spread of Christianity, sometimes we think about Christianity like it's all about the big men.

It's all about the Pauls and the Johns and the Barnabases. And they were the ones who evangelized the whole world. And God did use them. But the real story of Christianity is, is all these peculiar people all across the Roman Empire who are transformed by the gospel.

And they begin to go out into their jobs, the farms that they work on, the places that they work, the businesses, and they begin to talk about the hope that's within them.

People begin to ask them because their lives are so different. Let me, let me just come to a conclusion about this. You know, this sermon is all about evangelism. It's all about the need to share faith.

[21 : 49] But more important than the, the how, how do you evangelize is the why, right? The only way that we will ever be able to be faithful, to God's call to share the gospel is if we can really see it as good news.

And one of the things that Paul says here, and I haven't brought it up in this whole series, even though it's been all the way across this whole series is thankfulness. He says there, I think it's in verse two, he says, continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

And if you go back and read through Colossians, that's the fourth time that he's commanded the Colossians to be thankful. He's imagining a type of Christianity that is just suffused.

Is that the right word? Just filled with thankfulness. The kind of thankfulness that overflows into evangelism, where you're, you're just looking at Jesus and you're so transformed by what you see in Jesus that maybe without even realizing it, you begin to be changed.

And then the people around you begin to wonder at what's happened to you. And that, but that also means that if the proper response to the gospel is thankfulness, that must also mean that Jesus in the gospel is giving us something that we needed.

[23 : 07] And we don't have the gospel because we are great, because we're good people. We have the gospel because what? God opened a door to our hearts, to hearts that were just as simple as anyone else's.

He opened the door to our hearts and we came to believe. And that's, that's how we go out into the world is not to say, you know, I have life figured out. It's to say, listen, I, you and me are the same.

We are sinners. And I have found something that I think gives me an answer to the deepest parts of my need. A year and a half ago, I shared this illustration, but I think it's helpful.

I think it's just a beautiful story. There's a, a moment in the TV series, the West Wing, where one of the main characters is helping one of his, his subordinates, a guy that works for him, go work through a real crisis.

And the, the older gentleman gives a parable that's always stuck with me. And this is what he says. He looks at this guy that he's trying to help. And he says, he said, so there's this guy walking down a street and he falls into a hole and the walls are so steep that he can't get out.

[24 : 16] A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, Hey, can you help me out? The doctor writes a prescription and throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then the priest comes along and the guy shouts up, father, I'm down in this hole.

Can you help me out? The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down into the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by. Hey, Joe, it's me.

Can you help me out? And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, are you crazy? Now we're both down here. And the friend says, yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out.

And that's our message to the world. But we, we know what it's like in the pit and we have seen a way out by God's grace. Let's pray. Heavenly father, help us to never stop being thankful for the gospel and to let that thankfulness move us to tell the world.

In your son's name we pray. Amen.