

Evangelism & Prayer

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[0:00] Colossians chapter 4 verses 2 through 4 continue steadfastly in prayer. Someone once asked the question, what is more important for an aircraft, the right wing or the left wing? Now, I've never been in a plane with only one wing, so I can't answer from personal experience, but I guess the safe bet is to say that each wing is equally necessary.

If a plane is to fly. We may equally ask the question, what is more important for a healthy church? Prayer or evangelism? Prayer or evangelism? Again, strange question. Doesn't a healthy church need to engage in both prayer and evangelism? An aircraft needs both wings to fly, and the church needs both prayer and evangelism for health and fruitfulness? The answer is surely obvious. But while the answer is obvious that a church needs both prayer and evangelism in practice, it's not easy. Many churches which emphasize the importance of a congregational prayer meeting aren't always diligent in emphasizing their need for outward mission. And many other churches which emphasize the importance of outward mission aren't always diligent in their emphasis on congregational prayer. But surely the answer is found not in either prayer or mission, but in both. The prayer meeting of a church, I maintain, is the powerhouse for its evangelistic fruitfulness. And the evangelistic mission of a church is the natural outflow of its prayer meetings. As one of our friends from IPC, Jovan Pufflin, reminded us, the church always moves forward on its knees. Now, in these verses in Colossians 4 from verse 2 through 4, the apostle Paul makes the link between prayer and mission.

[2:18] In these verses, he shows that prayer without an emphasis on mission and evangelism is incomplete, and that evangelism and mission without prayer is ineffective.

His teaching is one reason we want to go against the flow in our church and emphasize the collective congregational prayer meetings of our church as the greatest power God has made available to us for mission.

And why, as leaders of this church, we long for our prayer meetings to be more numerous and vibrant than they currently are.

Because we believe that the prayer meeting is the most missional and evangelistic activity in which we can engage as a church.

For it's through prayer God opens doors for the gospel and gives opportunities for its clear proclamation. Well, this evening, as we consider this vital connection between prayer and evangelism, we want to see two things.

[3:23] First, evangelism is necessary for prayer. And second, prayer is necessary for evangelism. Let's remember these words from Jovan Pufflin, our friend from IPC.

The church moves forward on its knees. Our vision as a church is to equip for gospel fruitfulness. And without prayer, especially evangelistic prayer, we're failing in our vision.

And our church cannot and will not grow. First of all then, evangelism is necessary for prayer. Evangelism is necessary for prayer. Colossians chapter 4, verses 2 through 4 constitute one sentence in the original language.

One sentence. It's divided up by full stops and commas in English. But in the original language of Greek, it is one sentence. The Apostle Paul was very fond of long sentences, all of which find their central theme around one active verb.

[4:35] There's always just one active verb, one long sentence. And in our case, the active verb is found at the beginning of verse 2, continue

steadfastly.

Persevere. Devote. Its central idea is strength. Be strong in prayer, Paul commands us. The active verb.

Prayer is not an optional extra for you Colossians, he says. It's entirely necessary for the church that we persevere, we devote ourselves, we continue steadfastly in prayer.

If it was ever said of our church that one of its characteristic marks is that we are strong in prayer, it would be the greatest compliment to us. Every church is healthy in its own way and unhealthy in another way.

Let it never be said that our church is unhealthy in prayer. Rather, let it be said that we devote ourselves to this most otherworldly of Christian activities, prayer.

[5:39] A group of otherwise intelligent people gather together in a room and they talk to fresh air. In the eyes of the world, what could be more absurd?

And yet it's through prayer nations are turned upside down and the kingdom of God grows. Again, notice here, continuing steadfastly in prayer is not an optional extra for the church.

It's an apostolic command. The Holy Spirit is commanding us here in Colossians 4.2 to devote ourselves to prayer. Just as surely as we are commanded to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ unto salvation, to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, to eat bread and drink wine at the table of the Lord, so we are commanded as a church be strong in prayer.

Now, Paul attaches two immediate qualifiers, participants to his command, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. Being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

You'll know the Colossian church was infected by false teaching, and true Christians here are being called to be on their guard against anything that doesn't smell of the gospel.

[7:02] In the same way, we are to be watchful as we pray that our own pride and selfish ambition don't get in the way of the gospel we believe or preach. Likewise, we're to pray with thanksgiving, always remembering that our access to God in prayer has been dearly bought with the blood of God's own Son.

It's to Jesus we owe this privilege of prayer, this access by which we can pour our hearts as a church out to Him and express our deepest concerns. Now, if you're reading the ESV here, you will notice that there's a full stop at the end of verse 2.

But in original language, there is only a comma, which means that verse 3 is a continuation of verse 2, and that the first words of verse 3 are another qualifier to that original command to continue steadfastly in prayer.

Remember, the first two qualifiers are being watchful and thanksgiving, and the third is this, therefore, at the same time praying for us in order that God may open to us a door for the Word. And this third qualifier constitutes our prayers for evangelism and mission for God to open a door for His Word. And what Paul's saying here is that watchfulness and thankfulness are essential and necessary elements of any genuine prayer to God.

[8:44] But he's likewise saying that prayer for the mission of the church is also an essential element of any genuine prayer to God.

It is entirely as important for us to include prayers for evangelism and mission in our church as it is to give God thanks or to confess our sins.

The left wing of the play needs the right wing. Paul's saying, in order for our prayers as a church to be complete, they require not merely to have an inward horizon, watchfulness, to keep a watch on our own hearts, an upward horizon, thankfulness, but an outward horizon, mission.

Let me say that again. For prayer to be complete, it requires an inward horizon, watchfulness, an upward horizon, thanksgiving, and an outward horizon, mission.

WTM is an abbreviation used by the travel industry for the world trade, world travel market, the world travel market.

[10:04] We can use it in another way, WTM, watchfulness, thankfulness, mission. Watchfulness, thankfulness, mission.

The three legs of the Pauline stool of prayer here in Colossians 4. The greatest prayer meeting I ever attended in my whole life was the Saturday evening prayer meeting led by William Still, minister at Gilcompton South Church of Scotland in Aberdeen.

I don't know if anyone else was ever there. That's Saturday night. Yes, the Dunlops are shaking their head, Evan shaking his head. By the stage that I was a student there and I went to the meeting, Mr. Still was an impossibly small and wizened old man, and he'd hobble into the pulpit, and he'd carry with him a bundle of letters under his arm that he'd received from missionaries. And having preached for 20 minutes or so, all you could see, because he was so small, all you could see was his wee bald head above the wee pulpit. He would read all his missionary letters out, and he'd call the congregation to a time of open prayer where they prayed earnestly through every prayer request listed in these letters.

Only heaven will fully tell of the worldwide impact of Willie Still's Saturday evening Gilcompton prayer meeting.

[11:30] But all I can remember is leaving that meeting awestruck about how powerful a prayer meeting can be. It's like a game of Jenga, where you have all the blocks arranged in a tower, and to keep the tower standing, you don't want to remove the wrong blocks.

If we do, the whole tower comes crashing down. Paul's telling us here that a prayer meeting without a mission, without a focus on mission and evangelism, is doomed to crash.

You can remove other blocks, and it won't damage the structure altogether much, but if you remove a missional emphasis from the prayers of the church, it will fall. Our prayer is incomplete and falls short of what God commands unless we follow the WTM method, watchfulness, thankfulness, mission.

When a prayer meeting becomes entirely introspective, focusing only on matters internal to the church, it's not healthy. When a prayer meeting becomes almost entirely heavenly minded, focusing only on divinely revealed theology with no requests, no petitions, it's not healthy.

For a prayer meeting to be complete, it requires the outward look of mission. Evangelism is necessity for prayer, for without an evangelistic emphasis, our prayers are not complete.

[13:03] Let's remember WTM from Colossians chapter 4. Our prayers must have an inward horizon, watchfulness, including confession of sins, so on, an upward horizon, thanksgiving and adoration, and an outward horizon of mission and evangelism.

Evangelism is necessity for prayer. Second this evening, prayer is necessity for evangelism.

Prayer is necessity for evangelism. If it's true that for our prayers to be complete and pleasing to God, it's necessary for them to have a missional focus, then for mission to be complete, effective, and fruitful, it must be grounded in prayer.

Prayer is necessity for prayer.

of Paul and his brothers. Doors will remain closed to the gospel, and that even when the gospel is being proclaimed, it will be proclaimed in a confused manner, and will be impossible for those who are listening to understand or respond in faith.

[14:40] So we maintain the prayer meeting is the most missional meeting of the church, because it provides the foundation and power prayer to open any door to the gospel, and for every gospel conversation to bear fruit.

Prayer is not optional for the Christian. Prayer with an evangelistic focus is not optional for the Christian, and evangelism soaked not in prayer prayer is not optional for the Christian.

Most evangelistic training courses that I've encountered have as a central plank of their teaching an emphasis on praying for people with whom we'll be sharing the gospel.

That's Pauline theology. And in these verses, Paul commands prayer for two elements of the mission. First, for an open door, and then for a clear proclamation.

An open door, a clear proclamation. Prayer, first of all, for an open door. Paul writes, Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the Word.

[15:55] He's asking the Colossian church to pray that he'll have opportunities to share the gospel, and he's using here the image of an open door.

Now, bear in mind that at the end of this verse, verse 3, he tells them that he's in prison on account of the gospel. So, this letter's being written from a prison.

Prisons in those days didn't have open doors. They didn't have, prisoners didn't have mobile phones or all the perks they have nowadays. All the doors were closed and securely locked, and the prisoners were chained.

It's ironic, then, that Paul uses this image of an open door to describe the opportunities that we may have to share the gospel with other people. As we learn from the letter to the Philippians, a letter he sent at the same time as the letter to the Colossians, just because Paul was bound up with chains in prison didn't mean that he didn't get opportunities to share the gospel with his jailers.

The doors of the prison were closed, but the gospel passed beyond those locked doors to the extent that even members of Caesar's household were becoming believers.

[17:16] You know, even when things seem impossible, prayer opens doors which seem closed to the gospel. Now, although it's a movement of God's sovereign grace, who knows how many tens and hundreds of thousands of Christians have been praying for years for doors to open in the nation of Iran for the proclamation of the gospel.

And now we have from that nation one of the fastest growing churches in the world. And the same can be said for China and Afghanistan.

I remember when I was a young Christian, people used to say to me that you could count the number of Afghan Christians in the whole world on one hand. And in Glasgow, I don't know how many Afghan Christians I've met in the last couple of years.

Prayer opens locked doors without any need for keys. Are there places and peoples in Glasgow which and who are closed to the gospel at present?

Where are they? And who are they that we may pray to God for him to open a door for effective mission among them? The other thing that's amazing about Paul's request here is that though he's writing from Rome, he's asking the church in Colossae to pray for the situation he is facing.

[18:49] Now the distance between Rome and western Turkey is many hundreds of miles. And yet by prayer the Colossian church can affect the situation that he faces in Rome.

The Colossian church can be involved in the fruitfulness of his mission. Just as Katrina said this morning, distance is no object in prayer. We can do as much if not more good for those we stand beside in prayer from a thousand miles away as if we were standing beside them in person.

Let's take an example. We support our brother Sudhaj Kisula in his mission in Nepal. Now, suppose you're standing beside him in Kathmandu.

You could not engineer an opportunity for him to share the gospel with another Nepali. But as we pray for Sudhaj in our congregational prayer meetings, it is God who opens a door for him and gives him those opportunities that we could not from thousands of miles away.

When I was a student in Aberdeen all those years ago, I was deeply influenced by an older elder in the church there called Sam Will.

[20:14] Now, for many years, Sam had served as a missionary in Peru but had retired to Holborn Street in Aberdeen. And as a student, I used to visit him regularly. In his downstairs cozy room, he had a map of the world laid out on the table.

I'll never forget it. And every day, he would pray over that map. And when I would visit him, he'd point to various countries and tell me about the fortunes of the church in that country.

But the point is that he would spend, he'd be praying for God every day for God to open doors to the Word in countries which were presently closed to the gospel.

This is the early 1990s. Some of those countries he told me to pray for were Iran, Afghanistan, and China.

Think of the size of the church there today. Some like Somalia and the Maldives are still closed to the gospel.

[21:22] We have seen God opening doors in response to his people's prayers. By his grace and sovereign will, will see it again. But we must follow in the example of dedicated believers like Samwell and many others of that generation who had a global focus on mission.

God willing, we intend to plant a church in Bearsden, Mulgai. I hope I'm not misspeaking myself, Nate. That church plants greatest needs near our money, but our prayers.

Not our ideas, but our intercessions. that every day God would open doors for his word in Bearsden, Mulgai.

Let's take this down into the personal nature of this prayer. Are there people with whom we would like as individual Christians to share the gospel? Think in your mind of two people with whom you would love to share the gospel.

Okay, I've got them in my mind. They're both members of my running club. Write them down in your heart and begin to pray that God would open a door for the word.

[22:41] In other words, let's pray for an opportunity to speak to these two people about our faith in Jesus. And furthermore, let's go out of our comfort zones.

Let's take a Christian friend into our confidence. And let's say to this friend, will you pray that God will open a door for me to speak to these two people with whom I really want to share the gospel? Will you pray that I'll get an opportunity to share the gospel with these two people? It will amaze us how God will honor our prayers and will open that door because before we know it, we'll get that opportunity for which we and our friend have been praying.

So, prayer for an open door. But then lastly, prayer for a clear proclamation. Prayer for a clear proclamation.

If you're anything like me, having been presented by an opportunity to share the gospel with someone, I get all tongue-tied and afterwards, I feel I've made a mess of it.

[23:53] According to Paul, we need to pray not just for opportunities to share, but also for clarity in what we share. As he says, that I may make it clear. After all, in the previous verse, what Paul's telling us we're being called to declare is the mystery of Christ.

We've got a mystery to declare, something which is beyond the unaided human mind to understand. I'm not sure that we sufficiently appreciate just how closed the natural human heart is to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That salvation is by faith alone and not by works or religious performance. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 4, that the God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see.

It is impossible for the natural man, for those two people you have in your mind's eye for whom you'll be praying and getting your friend to pray also, dominated by the darkness of sin to see with clarity the gospel of God and understand his or her need of Jesus.

It's impossible. Only God can open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears. Which is why we pray not only for God to open doors but to grant us clarity and proclamation.

[25:23] Because to unbelievers, this gospel is a mystery until God enlightens their understanding. And this is why we pray. Again, perhaps the first stage is to pray that we ourselves would be clear about what it is we're sharing.

To be clear about what the gospel really is. If asked to summarize the gospel in a couple of sentences, could we do it? If asked to summarize the gospel in a couple of sentences, could we do it?

And this is where evangelistic training courses like Christianity Explored or A Passion for Life can come in handy because they help us to focus on what the essential elements of the gospel are. Let's pray that we ourselves would be clear about what the gospel is. And then let's pray for opportunities to share that gospel with two unbelieving friends for whom we and a friend of ours have been praying.

We will be amazed at how seriously God takes our prayers and how He answers. You see, without prayer, none of our evangelism will be effective.

[26:36] Which is why we go against the flow in this congregation and we encourage the weekly prayer meeting or city groups of our church as the ideal setting for us to pray for mission and evangelism.

At one of our prayer meetings recently, one of our elders opened up and he asked us to pray for one of his non-Christian friends that he'd have an opportunity to share the gospel with them.

We want to encourage that kind of openness at our prayer meetings and city groups so that as a body of Christians and not just as individuals, we may pray for God to open doors and give us

clarity of proclamation.

Why collective prayer is more effective than individual prayer is beyond the scope of this sermon, but I know and the Scripture teaches it is better for a hundred Christians to pray together as one than for a hundred Christians to pray separately.

Another day, we'll look at that topic. There are many of us who don't come to the midweek congregational prayer meeting for fear that somehow we'll be asked or forced to pray out loud.

[27:49] Do not fear that that will ever happen. What happens is that certain people voluntarily will pray out loud and we will pray along with them.

So, Evan might decide that he'll pray out loud. And as I'm listening to Evan, I'm making his words my prayers and joining in with him and asking for what he's praying for.

Let me encourage everyone here to come. We even have two prayer meetings every Wednesday, 2.30 and 7.30. We have city groups which are smaller, more intimate settings every second week. But why do we emphasize what seems to be an outdated church practice? It's because we believe that a plane needs a right wing and a left wing if it's to fly.

And we believe that a church moves forward on its knees. We could go on and on and tell stories of how revival has always been preceded by faithful prayer on the part of God's people, of how the great awakening happened as a response to a worldwide concert of prayer, and of how God uses technically poor preaching to bring many thousands of people to faith in Jesus.

[29:13] But ultimately, it's all about this truth. God delights in answering His people's prayers for open doors and clear proclamation. At present, according to all mission statistics, Scotland classifies as an unreached people group.

We are one of, if not the most secular nation on earth. Just as 30 years ago, Afghanistan was the hardest nation on earth toward the gospel.

What will change this situation? Yes, by all means, evangelism and mission. Ultimately, it's only God who can open closed doors and give us clarity of message.

And here in Colossians 4, we're told that He'll do that as His people pray. Wouldn't it be amazing to see days of reformation and revival power in our nation again?

Wouldn't our mouths, like in Psalm 126, be filled with laughter? We'd be like men who dreamed. By prayer, let's make that dream a reality and commit to pray.

[30:37] Pray in