

# A Call to Prayer

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[ 0 : 00 ] In his foreword to Paul Miller's book, *A Praying Life*, theologian and biblical counselor, David Paulison writes the following. It's hard to pray.

It's hard enough for many of us to make an honest request to a friend we trust for something we truly need. But when the request gets labeled praying, and the friend is termed God, then things often get very tangled up.

You've heard the contorted syntax, formulaic phrases, meaningless repetition, vague non-requests, pious tones of voice, and air of confusion.

If you talk to your friends and family that way, they'd think you'd lost your mind. But you've probably talked that way to God.

You've known people who treat prayer like a rabbit's foot for warding off bad luck and bringing goodies. You've known people who feel guilty because the quantity of prayer fails to meet some presumed standard.

[ 1 : 13 ] Maybe you're one of those people. I think Dr. Paulison was gracious in saying in the foreword to readers of Paul Miller's book, maybe you're one of those people.

He could very well have said, and accurately so, no doubt you are one of those people. Because the truth is that prayer neglect and prayer weaknesses mark many Christians.

So I believe that most, if not all of us, can identify with Dr. Paulison's words. We oftentimes wrestle with guilty feelings related to some aspect of prayer.

And so this morning, the purpose of this message is not to heap more guilt on us, reminding us about things we already know about how we are weak in the area of prayer, but instead this morning's message is intended to encourage us and to help us to grow in prayer, both individually and corporately.

Growing in prayer is one of our church's resolutions for this year, growing in prayer together. And so I'm trusting that the Lord will use this message to do exactly that.

[ 2 : 36 ] So if you've not yet done so, please turn in your Bibles to Colossians chapter 4. And we will be directing our attention this morning to verses 2 through 4. Colossians chapter 4, verses 2 through 4.

And I'm reading from the English Standard Version. If you have another translation, yours will read slightly differently. And brothers and sisters, I remind you that this is God's holy, inerrant word.

Let us receive it as such. 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 make it clear which is how I ought to speak.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this morning for the gift of your word. We thank you, Lord, for the privilege of being able to sit under the instruction and the authority of your word.

[ 3 : 57 ] Lord, would you speak to our hearts in the area of prayer? Father, would you provide the means to cause us to grow individually and as a local church?

Father, we pray that you would cause each of us to hear as we ought, in the context of where we stand with you in our communion, in prayer with you.

And Lord, we trust you to do the work that only you, by your Holy Spirit, can do this morning. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Although these verses that we've read this morning are brief, they're actually quite profound in terms of what they teach us about prayer. They confirm to us the often repeated truth that we find in Scripture, and that truth is this.

In the face of spiritual opposition, God's people are called to a life of consistent prayer. In the face of opposition, God's people are called to a life of consistent prayer.

[ 5 : 17 ] And so this morning, from these brief instructions from the Apostle Paul, I want to impress upon us two aspects of the call to prayer that are duties of all of us who belong to Christ.

The first aspect is a call to pray continually. That's what God's people are called to do.

We are called to continue in prayer. In his little book, titled A Call to Prayer, J.C. Ryle begins by asking his readers this simple question, Do you pray?

And then he goes on to write the following, To be prayerless is to be without God, without Christ, without grace, without hope, and without heaven.

It is to be on the road to hell. Now can you wonder that I ask the question, Do you pray? I ask again whether you pray, because our habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian.

[ 6 : 31 ] Now those are piercing words. But those are true words. Prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian.

It's not the only mark, but it is one of the surest marks. And here's how Bishop Ryle goes on to explain it. All of God's, all of the children of God on earth are alike in this respect.

From the moment there's any life and reality about their religion, they pray. Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again is praying.

It is one of the common marks of all of the elect of God. They cry day and night to Him. The Holy Spirit makes them new creatures, works in them the feeling of adoption, and makes them cry, Abba, Father.

The Lord Jesus, when He quickens them, gives them a voice and a tongue and says to them, Be dumb no more. God has no dumb children. It is as much a part of their new nature to pray as it is of a child to cry.

[ 7 : 50 ] They see the need of mercy and grace. They feel the emptiness and weakness. They cannot do otherwise than they do. They must pray. What J.C. Ryle wrote is true of all believers.

They must pray. When we consider these three verses, we see that the Apostle Paul clearly assumes the same thing.

He assumes that Christians pray. And so He calls the Colossians and all believers to pray in an ongoing way, to pray continually. And as He does that, He touches on three characteristics that should mark our continual prayers.

The first one that He notes is with steadfastness. Notice how He says it in verse 2.

He says, continue steadfastly in prayer. The NIV translates it be devoted to prayer. In other words, God's people are called to pray in an ongoing way.

[ 9 : 00 ] Paul could have simply said, continue in prayer. He could have said that. But by adding the word steadfastly, he indicates that we need to persist in the commitment to pray continually.

And I think we all probably have some idea why He would say to us that we are to pray with steadfastness. I think if we have any degree of familiarity with prayer, we recognize that we oftentimes face opposition in our prayers.

And our opposition really comes mainly on three fronts. The first one is the front of our own flesh. And by flesh, I mean indwelling sin. The reality that the struggle against sin will remain until the day that we die or until the day that Jesus returns.

And the Apostle Paul addresses this issue of indwelling sin in Romans 7, 14 through 19, where he talks about how as believers we sometimes do not do the good that we want, but instead the thing that we hate.

And sometimes our flesh fights against our desire to pray and our efforts to pray. The second front from which we face opposition is the world.

[ 10 : 18 ] And by the world, I'm not talking about the created world of flowers and trees and birds and bees and mountains and oceans and rivers and seas.

But instead, I'm talking about the world as fallen humanity organized in rebellion against God. That's the world in which we have to exist every day.

And the Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 2, verse 2, that it is the course of this world. He refers to this world and the pressures that we face in it as the course of this world.

We live in this fallen world that presents us with many temptations and many distractions that come against us. and one of the areas that they come against us is in the area of prayer.

And then the third front of opposition that we face in prayer that is easily overlooked is the devil. And when I say the devil, I don't mean Satan himself is necessarily opposing all believers as they seek to pray.

[11:31] but instead what I mean is that sometimes we are resisted in our efforts to pray by spiritual forces of darkness over which Satan rules, aided and abetted by demonic spirits.

And please, when I say this, what I'm saying is that I believe that on the face of it, Satan and his cohorts oppose us in the area of prayer than in just about any other area of our lives.

He opposes us generally, they oppose us generally, but in particular in this area of prayer we face incredible spiritual opposition. So we are called to pray steadfastly and the reason is because of the very nature of the spiritual opposition that prayer attracts.

Now this spiritual opposition that we face in our efforts to pray leads me to the next characteristic that Paul says should mark our prayers.

He says that we should pray with watchfulness or he says we should watch as we pray. Notice how he says it in verse 2 again.

[12:51] Continue steadfastly in prayer being watchful in it. So we have to be steadfast in prayer and we have to be watchful in prayer. Now why does this issue of watchfulness come up?

Why should it mark our prayers? Well first of all let me define what I mean by watchfulness what I think the Bible means by watchfulness. It is to be alert.

That's the way the New American Standard Bible actually translates the word. it translates it as alert but rather translated as watchful or alert it means to be spiritually awake to be spiritually aware.

And here this watchfulness or this spiritual alertness is a clue to us about spiritual warfare in general that we face in our efforts to pray.

and I believe that it is fair to say that the reason that we are called to watch is often connected to situations where danger lurks or where the stakes are high.

[14:09] I think this is a thing we can see in scripture. It's an interesting study actually to undertake to see where we are called to watch where we are called to be alert and to see what is being communicated by that.

Let me just give you a couple of examples that we find in the New Testament concerning this call to watch or this call to be alert. The first one is in Matthew 26 verse 41 and the occasion was when Jesus was in Gethsemane praying and he asked his disciples to watch with him while he prayed. And he came back and he found them sleeping and he said to them watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation the spirit is indeed willing but the flesh is weak.

So what we see is that spiritual forces of darkness are associated with all of our temptations and watchfulness and prayer will help us not to fall into those temptations.

And then in Acts 20 verses 29 through 31 was the occasion when Paul had called for the elders from the Ephesian church and he was speaking to them and prophesying about what would happen after he would depart from them and here's what he said to them I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them and then he says this therefore be alert remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears now the word that's translated alert here in verse 31 is the exact word that is translated watch in verse 2 of Colossians chapter 4 so what we see is Paul called them to be alert because danger was lurking a danger that he foresaw would come when he left he says you need to be alert because of this danger and then in 1st

[16:22] Peter 5:8 we read be sober minded be watchful your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour so here Peter calls us to be watchful and he employs the same word again that calls us to be on guard against the devil and then the last one is in Ephesians 6 and 18 this one is a little different the words are keep alert but it's a different word from the one we encounter in Colossians 4 verse 2 but nonetheless it is a call to keep alert and I want us to see how Paul employs this so let's turn to Ephesians chapter 6 that's two books to the left from where we are in Colossians Ephesians chapter 6 the apostle Paul is concluding this letter and he's talking to the church about the issue of spiritual warfare and I want us to go down to verse 17 and we'll see in verse 17 he says and take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God praying at all times in the spirit with all prayer and supplication to that end keep alert with all perseverance making supplication for all the saints now these instructions that Paul gives we can see that prayer is part of the armor of God it is the offensive part of the armor of God

and notice this clause it says which is the word of God which is the word of God now these words are will be called parenthetical words so they can be taken out of the sentence and the sentence will still make sense it wouldn't do any violence to what is what is there so we'll take them out just to see what

Paul is really communicating to us so here's how the sentence would read if we take those words out and take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit praying at all times in the spirit with all prayer and supplication to that end keep alert with all perseverance making supplication for all the saints so notice that this command to keep alert is connected to our engagement in spiritual warfare that Paul describes here in Ephesians 6 and this is obviously true of real life warfare that alertness is very important because if in war you're not alert it can cost you your own life and also the lives of others let's turn back to Colossians chapter 4 so what's my point in all of this here's the point the point is that the call to watchfulness or alertness is connected to situations where danger lurks or where the stakes are high and prayer is one of those situations where danger lurks it's one of those situations where the stakes are very high well in addition to calling us to have our prayers marked with steadfastness and watchfulness the third and last aspect that

Paul says our prayer should be marked by is thanksgiving and it's interesting how during the prayer time this morning and during our time of singing and even the word that Myrna brought we were reminded about being thankful to the Lord so Paul says that we are to pray with thanksgiving as well and I think we would agree that often times when we are reminded to give thanks we are aware of how often we don't do that enough and sometimes we rush to petitions we rush to asking God and aren't even mindful of what God has already done for us and sometimes behind our asking is actually complaining not mindful that God has already done so many good things so we are reminded in Psalm 103 this morning that God has loaded many benefits on us and we are to bless his name for those many benefits!

we see in the psalms this jewel approach of thanking God giving thanks to him for who he is and also for what he has done and our prayers should be the same we need to cultivate this thankfulness before the Lord as we pray so in these few words in verse two we are called to pray! continually and we're reminded of these three characteristics that should mark our prayer steadfastness watchfulness and thankfulness but in this passage before us the apostle Paul not only calls us to pray continually he also calls us to pray specifically he calls us to pray specifically and we see the specific ways that we are called to pray in verses three and four notice what he says he says at the same time pray for us also that God may open to us a door for the word to declare the ministry of Christ the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak Paul could have simply said you know pray continually and leave it on its own but instead he called the

[ 22 : 31 ] Colossians and he by extension calls us to pray specifically and he tells us that the most important aspect of our specific prayers is to pray for the advance of the gospel that's the most important aspect of praying that we can engage in to pray for the advance of the gospel and let me try to explain why that is the case the God of the universe has sent his son to be a sacrifice for sinners he died a cruel death on a Roman cross suffering untold agony shame and degradation to reconcile sinners back to God that's the extent to which God has gone to reach lost men and women and

I think when we consider that it should be obvious that we can do no greater thing than to pray for the advance of the gospel to reach these men and women there's no greater act in our prayer there's no greater focus in our prayer than to pray for gospel advancement for men and women's souls!

And so Paul calls us to pray specifically and see this is why I believe this watchfulness this alertness is so important as we pray this having the presence of mind to pray having the awareness that we need to pray because the stakes are so high when we go to pray we can do as Paulus said pray about these non-requests have words that are just words but toward no end but what the apostle Paul says as he calls the church as he calls us to pray he says we have to be steadfast in prayer we need to continue in prayer but he says you need to specifically pray and here's how you are to pray first Paul says pray for gospel ministers he says that in verse 3 when he says at the same time pray for us as we pray in an ongoing way we should specifically pray for gospel ministers especially those to whom we are connected!

we pray to God for gospel ministers based on our general awareness of their circumstances I had a friend many years ago he was a track athlete and they were going up against this really good school and the coach was trying to encourage them that they could beat this school he said guys these athletes they put their shorts on just like you do and my friend said he remarks but coach they put it on faster than you do and you know I say that because it's easy to lose sight of the fact that I'm flesh I'm human I put my pants on the same way there's no holy way to put your pants on you put your pants on you live life you face this same world that we all face so I need prayers I need prayers we need prayers in this effort of speaking God's word to God's people this awesome task of speaking the words of life to dying men and women being aware of general circumstances Paul was in prison as he wrote these words and for the Colossians to be aware of his circumstances for the Colossians to pray for him in a helpful way they could have prayed that he would not feel abandoned that he would not feel discouraged and sometimes God's ministers get discouraged John the Baptist when he was in prison sent his disciples to Jesus and said are you the one or should we look for another here's the man who said behold the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world and he got to the place in his own ministry where he was so discouraged he said go ask him if he is the one or if we should look for another friends we need prayers because the enemy seeks to frustrate and thwart the advance of the gospel because it is the advance of the gospel the hearing of the gospel the believing of the gospel that saves men and women and so [ 28 : 46 ] Paul says pray for us second he said to the Colossians and now says to us now just pray for gospel ministers but pray for gospel opportunities look at how he says that in verse 3 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 he says pray that God will open a door to declare the mystery of Christ and the word mystery doesn't mean what we think in terms of some hidden thing something that is not known but in the New Testament when we encountered this word mystery it actually is a technical word that is referring to something under the old covenant dispensation that was hidden but is now made known was hidden in the old but now

God has made it known and Paul refers to the mystery of Christ as one of the ways that he refers to the gospel so he's saying that we are to pray for the gospel to be advanced that God would open a door of opportunity for the gospel and brothers and sisters we must do the!

Notice in verse 3 how we see as a prime example of divine sovereignty and human responsibility functioning side by side God is the one who opens the doors for the word that's divine sovereignty he opens them but we are the ones who are called to pray for him to do so that's human responsibility God is sovereign but he has ordained means by which he will bring to pass his sovereign purposes he has ordained ordinary means that he would use and the ordinary means that he said that he would use to advance the gospel is prayer that his people would pray the doors of opportunity would be open and he would open those doors now does it mean that God doesn't sovereignly open doors even where people are not praying does it certainly means he ordinary way that he has chosen to work through human responsibility to pray and his divine sovereignty ultimately to open the doors when and how he chooses even

Jesus said to us that we are to pray to the Lord of the harvest that he would send laborers into his harvest and you think about that you think well God would automatically want to send them and he would just send them but the means that he uses is our price so he said to those disciples pray to the Lord of the harvest that he would send laborers into his harvest not only did Paul call the Colossians and us to pray for gospel ministers and for gospel opportunities but we see also in verse four that he called them to pray for gospel faithfulness again notice how he says that in verse four that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak this is the great apostle Paul praying and asking that people would pray for him that he would make the gospel clear as he ought to speak he was calling for gospel faithfulness he needed prayer to encourage him to be faithful to proclaim the gospel and friends this morning we need the same we who bring

God's word we need the same support to be faithful and here's why Paul would pray would ask for prayers in this particular way in the context in which Paul preached there was a price to be paid to preach the gospel faithfully to preach the gospel clearly his imprisonment wasn't evidence of this he tells us in verse three the reason he was in prison was because of the gospel because of the mystery of Christ and Paul's day if you preach the gospel vaguely alongside Judaism you were fine if you mashed the two together and said in addition to Christ you need to be circumcised you were going to be fine but when you declared that by the works of the law no flesh is justified in God's

sight and that circumcision and law keeping could never save you has no spiritual value you upset [ 33 : 46 ] Pharisees in that day and in that context and they did things like stone you and that's what happened to Paul in Acts 14 at Lystra and Paul's day if you preached alongside idolatry and paganism you would be fine but when you preached it clearly telling people to turn away from their long held idols whole cities would riot and oppose you as was the case in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19 so it's easy to see how Paul could have faced this temptation this temptation to not be as clear to perhaps hold back on some of the things that he would say the temptation to not be as bold and so he asked for prayer and I think when we consider our own context today there is the need for gospel clarity there's a need for gospel faithfulness there's a need for gospel boldness because ministers today face similar challenges

I think most of us would be aware of the challenges for many to be faithful to proclaim the biblical view of human sexuality to proclaim the biblical view of marriage and for many the issue of the gospel and homosexuality and the gospel of marriage is an incredible challenge and it's an incredible temptation to not be as clear to be vague because of the persecution the increased persecution that is attended upon those who would be clear on these issues in some countries today the risk of imprisonment is real the risk of someone getting a hold of a message where you're being faithful to what scripture teaches is real and it could and it has landed some in prison and as this increases and it will increase so with the temptation to not preach the gospel clearly telling sinners whoever they are and whatever they have done to repent and to turn from sin and brothers and sisters this is one of the ways that you can pray for the elders of this church and same for you new life it's one of the ways you can pray and your setting

I would venture to say is even more hostile than ours it's one of the ways that you can pray for your pastors to be faithful so Paul in this example of calling us to pray specifically he raises these three important issues of prayer and the gospel he says pray for gospel ministers pray for gospel opportunities and pray for gospel faithfulness and as we pray for the advance of the gospel we should recognize that that is really the most important way to pray but it's not the only specific way that we can pray we can pray again just being aware of circumstances and pray specifically and thoughtfully concerning those circumstances so how can we apply these three verses on prayer that call us to pray continually and pray specifically let me suggest two simple ways that we can do that first of all let's take time to ponder these words let's really take time to consider these three verses of scripture that we find in

Colossians 4 2 through 4 and let us consider them in light of this morning's message and be great verses to commit to memory as we go through our day to ponder them and think about the implications for us and what God is calling us to do and then second in addition to taking time to ponder them let's take time to pray about them wherever you might be in prayer wherever your prayer life stands with the Lord this morning pray and ask the Lord to help you to make these three verses on prayer more real in your life this year!

As I close this morning I want to especially encourage us to think about and pray about the extent to which whatever current paralysis we have in our prayer lives might be due to spiritual warfare might be due to the very direct work of the enemy causing us not to pray because of what is at stake because of the strategic place that prayer holds for the advancement of the gospel for the support of ministers in their various ministries let's think about the extent to which spiritual forces may be causing us to be spiritually drowsy to be spiritually dumb and to be immobilized when it comes to prayer and then if and when we see that that is indeed the case that we would cry out to [ 40 : 06 ] God to give us grace to pray you know Jesus disciples asked him he said Lord teach us to pray and I believe they were asking him two things teach us how to pray and he did he laid out gave a model prayer that they could pray but the other part of that is Lord teach us to do it Lord teach us to pray teach us to pray and I believe it is when we understand what is at stake in prayer when we understand that it is God's ordained means to do what he said he would do I believe that teaches us to pray but we need to do this we really need to pray and brothers and sisters it is a privilege to pray it is a reminder to us that we are no longer alienated from God we've been reconciled to God that we can have communion with God in prayer not just rattling off our wish lists and our to do lists to God but communing with him as friend with friend enjoying the fellowship that we have with him as our father and if you're here this morning as an unbeliever someone who does not know

Jesus Christ this fundamentally and foundationally is the gift that we receive when God forgives us when we turn to him in repentance when we become one of his children this ability to just commune with him to pray to him to talk with him is the foundational gift that we receive in salvation let's pray together