

An Open Door

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[0 : 0 0] You'll often hear people say in the media, it's a regular thing in response to some kind of a tragedy. Our thoughts and our prayers are with their loved ones.

I've heard it even from the mouths of avowed atheists tweeted. Our prayers are with you. Our thoughts and our prayers are with you. And I'm kind of thinking in that moment, what does that mean for you?

The word prayer in that moment. You see, most people on this planet pray at least some time in their lives. It is true, I think, that prayer is practically a worldwide activity.

But what prayer actually means is vastly different from individual to individual. The difference in what prayer means or what it is or how you go about it is determined by what we think the God or the being is that we're praying to.

What we think that relationship is with our God will determine what prayer is like for us. So, in other words, when a Buddhist spins his prayer wheel or the Hindu sits in mystic silence or the Muslim with his prayer mat faces Mecca five times a day, all are reflecting the character of the God or the gods to whom they're praying to and what that relationship with that God or that being is like.

[1 : 3 6] And it's exactly the same for the Christian. Our prayer is shaped and defined by the being to whom we pray. And what the Bible reveals about God shapes our prayer life in two major kind of ways.

First of all, for instance, Jeremiah 32 is a great little passage, 32 verse 17, which says, That verse alone shapes the way you pray and your expectations when you pray.

Or take it from that and go to, for instance, Romans 8. And you get this stunning picture in Romans 8 of the Christian life where it says that we were once slaves to sin.

We were slaves to death and fear. We were hostile to God. We were unable to please God in any kind of way. And now we are free sons of the Father and co-heirs of his kingdom in Christ.

That is, through being united with Jesus, who died to free us, we now live a new life in which God himself dwells with us by his Holy Spirit.

[3 : 0 3] It's because of the saving work of God that we are raised up from our low position of being cut off from God and being granted free access to the almighty, true and living God, which Jeremiah says nothing is too hard for him.

He's the one who creates everything and sustains everything. And according to Romans 8, there's no barrier between us and this God because of Jesus.

It's been torn down. It's like Jesus, through his life and death and resurrection, has reconnected the phone lines. And we can start communicating with God again.

What that means is that prayer is not an addition. It's not an appendix to the Christian life. It's not sort of sitting over here, one of these things that we get to do when we get around to it.

But our prayer life is, in fact, at the very heart of who we are as Christians. It's the very heart of who we are as Christians and how we relate to our heavenly Father.

[4 : 10] It is phenomenal that the most famous of prayers, the Lord's Prayer, simply starts with our Father or quite literally, my Dad.

It's phenomenal. And our prayer life is, therefore, one of the greatest indicators of our spiritual health, individually and corporately.

It shines light on whether we know about God through theological concepts or actually in communion with our Father, our Dad.

That relationship is operating, working, communion with God. So what an incredible privilege that we have as Christians.

One of the photos I love is JFK in the Oval Office with a bunch of the heads of the United States at that time, having obviously a very important meeting, and little John Jr. coming into the Oval Office, having direct access to the Commander-in-Chief, unquestioned, not stopped by anyone.

[5 : 28] Everyone else in that room needs to make an appointment, except the son. At any time, he wanders in. What a privilege we have in prayer.

And so it is one of the greatest indicators of our spiritual health. Not your Bible knowledge. How well are you communing with God?

And so as we kick off this new year of ministry, as we do for, and have been doing for a number of years, we begin the ministry year in a week of prayer.

And it's just a week, and a week of 52 weeks is one thing, but I think what I want to do every year is at very least symbolically to start the ministry year on our knees and to independence upon God, seeking His agenda, His will for our church, His enabling for Him to do His work, and to continue the year on our knees.

So we do this every year to make a statement as a church. It's a statement to God. It's a statement to this world in which we live. It's a statement to our own consciences that we exist as a church to do things that we cannot do without the supernatural grace of God.

[6 : 52] Everything good, everything worthwhile, everything eternal, and God-glorifying that we seek to do as a church, we cannot do without the supernatural grace of God.

And so this prayer week, as it does every year, proclaims that we exist as a church here at St. Paul's mainly to do the humanly impossible.

The humanly impossible. I love what Jacob said just a moment ago and how that shapes the organisation of IJM. I communicated at our heartbeat night in November that for the next three years, we're going to make a concerted effort into breaking what is known as the 200 Barrier.

It's details that I'm going to talk about a lot and have talked about a lot, breaking this 200 Barrier. We've hovered around as a church for at least a couple of decades, and so we're going to put energy and focus into taking steps, deliberate steps, to move beyond that.

And the intention and the vision behind this concerted effort is to see people know and treasure the Lord Jesus Christ for the first time through the ministry of, and the people of this church.

[8 : 15] And our vision statement says that we are desperate for people to encounter the Lord Jesus. And the word desperate just implies for me sweat, labouring, sacrifice, change for God to be glorified.

Our Lord has not called us to an impossible mission. He's called us to a demanding mission. And I chose Colossians 4, 2-4, for the beginning of prayer week for this very reason.

Because we cannot be comfortable sitting the size of the church we are and not making desperate moves for more people to see Jesus. If God chooses not to grow, that's His business.

But it's another thing where there's moral and spiritual apathy not to want to change. That's reprehensible as far as I'm concerned.

And so we're making deliberate changes. Nick's alluded to them. They're going to start next week of moving forward as a church. But I want us to know that we're moving forward, seeking God to do what we cannot do as we work forward.

[9 : 38] Yes, there is sacrifice, there is sweat, and there is thoughtful strategy, there is risk on our behalf. But it is a deeply spiritual and God-dependent activity that we are doing.

And so if I understand Colossians 4, which hopefully got in front of you right now, open that is, if I understand this text correctly, the human key that might unlock the blessing of God's power and grace in our mission to Chatswood is devoted, watchful, and thankful prayer.

You see, this text here gives me a strong hope that God will open a door to His word in Chatswood and that faith will come to many people if we pray desperately for Him to do that.

In Colossians 4, 2-4, Paul is urging the Colossians to pray just like I am urging us today to pray.

In fact, to pray for something quite specific. And I see two things here in these verses that he wants them to pray for. We'll look at those first, those two things first before I will then turn our attention to how it is that we pray for those two things.

[11 : 04] The two things are for an open door and for a powerful word. An open door and a powerful word. Paul here wants God to work both in the recipients of the message and him, the preacher of the message.

So in verse 3, he says, Now there are at least three other times in the New Testament that Paul uses this same image that he does here of an open door.

He uses it in Acts 14, 27, in 1 Corinthians 16, 8, 9 and in 2 Corinthians 2, 12. And each time this open door means, seems to be a remarkable set of circumstances that would have been very effective for the gospel.

That's what he's praying for. Remarkable circumstances for the gospel, reception of the gospel. And so when Paul says in verse 3, Pray for us too that I may, that God may open a door for our message so that we may reclaim the mystery of Christ, I take him to mean that God changes things and changes people's hearts and changes circumstances and does a remarkable work when people pray.

When Christians pray. Circumstances and attitude and receptivity of the gospel change so that instead of hitting a brick wall again and again and again, the gospel finds an open door and becomes inexplicably effective.

[12 : 58] Give you some, one example of this was a case of Duncan Campbell. He's a minister last century in the United Free Church of Scotland.

And on the Monday of Easter 1952, Campbell was seated on the platform of Hamilton Road Presbyterian Church in Bangor, Northern Ireland and it's a church that Nat and I have visited twice and I've spoken at and he had just finished speaking.

He's sitting on the platform, just finished speaking to the Faith Mission Convention when he sensed an inner voice say to him, Bernare.

Now Bernare is a small island in the Hebrides and in that moment Duncan bowed his head and he prayed silently and again came the name Bernare.

He prayed on and it came again Bernare. And so in that moment sitting on the platform Campbell turned to the chairman of the convention and whispered in his ear brother you'll need to excuse me the Holy Spirit has just told me that I've got to go to Bernare.

[14 : 26] Chairman objected mildly you're the speaker for tomorrow. What are we going to do? But nothing would stop Campbell.

He'd never been to Bernare before. He had never known anyone from Bernare before. He had never received any correspondence from anyone from there.

He went straight back walked off the platform went straight back to his hotel packed his two suitcases and contacted the airport. The airport said we don't have any connections with that island.

It's too small. It's too far out of the way. No one flies there. So he said fly me to the nearest island. So he flew him to the nearest island and when he got to the nearest island he went down to the coast and asked how do I get to Bernare?

And the answer from fishermen was there's no commercial route between here and Bernare but as it happens I'm going that way and I'll take you there on my fishing boat for a certain amount of money and the certain amount of money was exactly what he had in his pocket in that moment.

[15 : 40] Got to Bernare fishermen dumped him on the beach he climbed up a hill on the beach found himself alone sitting up there except he's on the edge of a ploughed field where the farmer's doing some work he called the farmer over and said can you go and tell your pastor of this island that Duncan Campbell has arrived and the farmer said we don't have a minister do you have elders Campbell asked yes well then go and get the nearest elder and tell him Duncan Campbell's arrived so the farmer somewhat puzzled as you would be headed off across the field and Campbell sat there on his suitcases and waited for him to come back the farmer comes back after some time and says he's expecting you he's been waiting for you to arrive he has a place ready for you and he's already announced the meetings are beginning at nine o'clock tonight you see while Campbell had been speaking at that convention in northern

Ireland three days earlier this elder had spent his day praying in his shed for God to send revival to this island and his wife heard him from the house praying in the shed and his wife heard him say Lord I don't know where he is but you know where he is and everything is possible for you according to Jeremiah 32 so you send Uncle Campbell to this island and he knew that God was going to do it he was so sure of it that he would be there in three days that he made all the arrangements to use the local church and announced all the services and from nine o'clock that night great revival came to the island of

Bernare great door had opened to the word that no man could shut because God had opened it beyond expectations do you pray like that desperate for people to know Christ desperate for revival to come to Chatswood so the first thing we should pray for this year is that God would work in all the circumstances surrounding our people and our ministry including the hearts of everyone who hears the gospel to open wide and effective the door of the gospel let this sink into your minds and your hearts today the key to opening the door of God's blessing on our vision is in seeing people come to Christ is that kind of prayer prayer but it's risky isn't it it is risky trustful hopeful prayer and that's the first thing that Paul mentions for prayer and the second thing for prayer is for clarity of the message and boldness of the messenger have a look there in verses 3 and 4 pray for us 2 that God may open a door to our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which

I'm in chains and pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should so Paul exhorts the Colossians here to persevere in prayer and follows it immediately with a request for them to pray for himself and his co-workers and the content of his prayer is not for personal benefit for Paul it's not about his retirement plans it's not about his superannuation it's not about his family it's not about you know his work scenario it's it's for Paul and his companions to preach the word of God clearly and he mentions specifically here that he is in chains for his preaching but he doesn't ask for prayer to be released from the chains in order to go on preaching he's not asking for that he's not asking God you know guys pray for me that God will solve all these issues so that I'm now set free to proclaim his gospel doesn't pray for personal benefit he prays for the effectiveness of the message going out and we see at a number of points in the

New Testament that Paul places a great importance on his converts and other Christians partnering with him through prayer as he seeks to win the Gentile world for Christ see that in Romans 15 Ephesians 6 1 he earnestly desired their help and support as he labored to see the gospel spread to the ends of the earth and I want to suggest there is no better way to express this partnership than intercessory prayer no better way to express this partnership we exist in a materialistic world that is so obsessed with doing partnership is me doing stuff I want to suggest to you if you cannot fill a roster here that in no way is prayer at all a secondary activity when he calls these

[22 : 03] Christians to pray for him and his colleagues he's calling them to an ongoing activity this is a prayer for the preacher for the evangelist for the community group leader for the music director for everyone every Christian who has the word of God on their lips can I say that as your senior pastor here at St.

Paul's that I am aware constantly every day that I need your prayers the the the longer I have been in pastoral ministry which is over 20 years now I am becoming more and more aware that the work that God has called me to do is very demanding and I can't do it I barely know my own heart let alone yours and God is in the business of shifting people's hearts and minds to align themselves to Jesus that's a work that he does and so Paul needed their prayers because he could imagine himself speaking the gospel in a way that was not clear that was not bold that was not powerful I got to say how much more can I imagine that for myself of needing that prayer the greatest preacher and missionary who ever lived said that the effectiveness of his preaching depended on the prayers of the church so if you're sitting here and you're going

I'm not being gripped by this preaching it might be your fault I'll just put that as a side if it's true for Paul it's true a hundred times over for me I put that aside slightly as a humorous thing but it's actually true I sort of emphasize that it actually is true preaching is a two-way activity I'll preach on this one day once upon a time one day sometime in the future it's a two-way activity if you've not prepared your heart don't expect me to be able to prepare it for you we're gathered for worship your heart needs to be prepared so what what happens right now even as we have the word of God open in front of us in Colossians 4 2 4 depends in great measure on how you have prayed for me or us as we gather have you ever thought about that these are

Paul's two prayer requests for a door to be open in the lives of unbelievers and secondly for a clear and powerful gospel message to go through that door and it is with a real sense of urgency that I call you to devote yourselves to those prayers in 2018 so this brings me to how we are to pray and Paul mentions three things in verse 2 devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and thankful pray with devotion with watchfulness and with thanksgiving the call of God's word here is to devote yourselves to prayer it should not come as a surprise given what Paul has requested we pray for in verses 3 and 4 if prayer is so great and central to unlocking God's purpose for the universe and for your life and for my life it's not surprising that God would command us to devote ourselves to prayer and to this prayer specifically the word be devoted to or persevere in or continue in occurs six times in the

New Testament in relation to prayer Acts 1 14 they all join together constantly in prayer Acts 2 42 they that's the early church devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to prayer Acts 6 4 the apostles said that they would devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word Romans 12 12 be joyful in hope patient in affliction faithful in prayer they go all together those three things can't have one without the other joyful in hope patient in affliction faithful in prayer Ephesians 6 18 pray in the spirit on all occasions it means to pray often it means to pray regularly prayer prayer is not infrequent and prayer is not hit and miss being devoted to prayer means that you are not haphazard you're not forgetful it means that you take steps to see that it is part of your regular life in the same way that eating and sleeping and going to the toilet are part of your regular life and I think this is also implied in the word watchfulness to describe the sort of prayer life that we are called to watchfulness is often used in reference to the second coming of Christ and the final judgment in the

[27 : 29] New Testament the vision of the future God's plan his purposes the coming of the Lord Jesus and the final ushering in of the kingdom of God is to govern not just the content of our prayer life but the devotion to our prayer life God is working out his purposes and he will bring it all to completion so don't go to sleep at the wheel direct your mind to Christ and his coming and the fulfillment of all our hope and joy labor against the distractions labor against the hindrances and the temptations towards prayerless praying prayerless praying is when we go through the motions we're not actually communing with God we're ticking off a list but we're not actually communing with God that's prayerless praying and you may as well not pray be vigilant my friends like a sentry on duty outside the camp at night knowing that if you go to sleep in this job the enemy will overthrow the mission this is the tempo of prayer that is often missing when the church has settled into the world and is just using prayer as a domestic intercom system instead of a battlefield walkie-talkie and is so serious the battle is heaven and hell hang in the balance for potentially people sitting in this room right now but a whole bunch of people who are not sitting in this room right now and it's hanging the balance for those people this year.

This year, it's hanging the balance for them. So be watchful, awake, vigilant and pray. Pray the way you would if you knew that two of your unbelieving friends would hear the gospel for the very last time next Sunday.

Pray that way. And finally, Paul calls us to pray with thanksgiving. It doesn't seem right to pray for God, to open a door of faith for others without remembering that that's the very thing he has done for you if you're a Christian.

Through remarkable circumstances, someone has prayed that you would receive the gospel, and God has done it. And you didn't do it.

You didn't know about it. God did it. When we pray for the salvation of others, isn't the fervency of our prayer a mirror of how thankful that we are of our own salvation?

[30 : 44] That is, if there's not fervency in prayer for the gospel to go out to others, then maybe the issue is not my prayer schedule or the devotional book I'm using, but in actual fact, my grasp of the gospel itself.

My own gratitude for it. I suspect that as we grow in thankfulness for our own rescue, for our own salvation, we will pray with a new zeal for others.

Now, I wrote a core value of devotion to prayer based on this passage in Colossians 4. It's a core value for us as a church written on board just outside the door there.

But I want to be honest. I need this core value to further penetrate my heart and shape my life in 2018. I've always, in my 20-something years as a Christian, always found prayer to be hard work.

It's partly because of my sin, and it's probably mostly because of my sin, but it's also partly the way God has wired me, although I'm not blaming him for wiring me in a particular way.

[32 : 07] I'm not doing the Eve, Adam and Eve issue there. You gave me that woman. It's your problem. I'm an activist, which means that when my feet hit the ground first thing in the morning, they generally don't stop.

I get busy on stuff. And so what I've got to do is I have to take steps to ensure it is incorporated into my daily life. And I do this in a number of ways in terms of meetings with staff and other things like that.

But for me personally, there's a window of quietness in my household and in my life at the beginning of every day, somewhere between 5.30 and 6, but definitely by 6.30 when I get up and the first thing I do is I put the kettle on and get a cup of coffee.

And then I sit in a quiet spot and I immediately engage with God through his word and prayer in that moment. I need it before everything starts happening for me.

And I've got a scheduling. And because it's so crucial, it's in my diary and alarm goes off. Bing, bing, bing, bing. To make sure that it's happening every day. Our core value says that as a church, we are committed to consistently bringing all things to God in prayer, intentionally building prayer into the center of our life together, developing a culture of natural and instructed prayerfulness when interacting with each other, encouraging and equipping for prayer on a personal and family level, and incorporating prayer into every church activity.

[33 : 46] So let us join together in seeing this core value, which is written on the wall, be written, in fact, into our hearts in such a way that it shapes our actions and our attitudes, which is what values actually are meant to do and do, in fact, do.

But in the immediate, will you join me in this prayer week and throughout this year in being devoted to praying that a door would open to the gospel among many, many precious unbelievers and that we would proclaim the gospel with clarity and with power.

So two very simple things to do this week, this coming week. Come to Heartbeat on Wednesday night and be reminded of our vision and some of the strategies and risks that we're taking to reach people and then we're going to pray for those things.

So come to Heartbeat this Wednesday night here. And this week, as Nick has already said, in this coming week, we're sending out prayer points via email. The staff are going to be gathering for prayer at 10 o'clock each day and if you are here on site, then please come and join us.

But if you're not, which I suspect majority are not, then set an alarm, put in your diary, do whatever it is that you need to do, wrap string around your finger and wherever you are, wherever God has placed you, stop and pray in that moment at 10 o'clock each day.

[35 : 26] Another thing you could do is join the team here, nine o'clock every Sunday morning and we pray not that the music will go well or people would come.

We pray for the proclamation of the gospel. Hearts will be open in all of our corporate gatherings each Sunday. And so, brothers and sisters, pray for a door to be opened to the gospel as we labour, take risks, sacrifice to make the gospel known with clarity and boldness in our mission field in 2018.

Amen. Amen.