

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Revelation

Pray for a revelation of God's love that will inspire the church to fellowship and compassion.

For myself

Pray about the passage of time. Each of us has feelings about the way time passes, and what is happening to our bodies and our spirits as time goes by. Place these things into the Lord's hands.

For others

Lord Jesus, my heart bleeds for those caught up in the evils of war and violence. I cannot comprehend the hatred and supreme evils by which war grips people, so that terrible things are done on both sides, with dire consequences. Help us Good Lord, we pray! Shine Your Light on us we pray! May the Gospel be proclaimed for all, we pray, yes, despite war! Father, save us, Lord, save us, Creator God, remake this world in Your likeness we pray: AMEN

Meditation

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the wonder, majesty and greatness of creation;
speak to me through the quiet whisper of a breeze,
the wonder of colour, or the flight of a simple butterfly.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through history, and through the lives of great people;
speak to me in the everyday events of my own life,
both in all that seems important, and in what seems small.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the power of music which touches the soul;
speak to me in the psalms, hymns and songs of praise
that linger in my mind and teach me truth from day to day.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the epic world events unfolding all around us;

Speak to me in trials and joys of life, each and every day
and show me Your care for everything, including me.

Bible Passage

Colossians 4:2-6

² Give yourselves to prayer, and be watchful in this, with thanksgiving.

³ At the same time, pray for us as well that God will open up for us a door for the word, that we may preach the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, ⁴ that I may reveal it as clearly as I should when I am able to speak.

⁵ Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time available. ⁶ Let your words always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to respond to anyone.

Review

We are coming towards the end of the letter to the Colossians, and Paul has finished making the main points he wished to put to the church. It was customary for Paul to conclude a letter with greetings to the church from those who were with him at the time of writing. However, before Paul finishes this letter, he offers a final further comments about Christian living. Our passage today appears like a random collection of ideas, as if they have come into Paul's mind only briefly, but these are no random thoughts. They are the fruit of everything on his mind as he wrote the letter, and they reflect his desire to provide memorable teaching that would summarise what he wanted to say to the Colossian church.

The passage falls neatly into three sections; firstly, advice about prayer (4:2), secondly an appeal for support in the proclamation of the Gospel (4:3,4), and thirdly some concluding advice to the Colossian church (4:5,6). Some think that verse 2 is really part of the previous passage in the letter about family and household relationships, following Paul's advice to slaves (3:20-4:1). I suggest that it is straightforward advice to the Colossians, suggesting that they live a life of prayer and thanksgiving, typical of many of Paul's letters. However, he adds 'be watchful', as if he knows that this advice will be difficult for some. It has always been easy for Christians past and present to pray about personal matters in a way that reflects our own feelings rather than the Lord's will. Yet this is what Paul wants his readers to guard against. True prayer focusses on the will of God and submits to His leading, it does not merely present feelings to God as a desire to be met, as if by demand.

The next two verses (4:3,4) ask the Colossian church to remember Paul in his ministry of evangelism. This comment is fascinating, because it appears that Paul is writing this whilst bound in prison, yet he still considers himself 'on mission'. He asks for prayers so that he might continue his preaching of the '*mystery of Christ*' despite his circumstances, and the extremely limited opportunities open to him to preach the Gospel while in prison! The beginning of Paul's prayer request is astonishing, given that he may have been bound as he dictated these words; '*pray for us ... that God will open up a door ...*' (4:3). Was Paul recalling a famous incident at Philippi when God had performed a miracle and he had escaped through the doors of a prison after an earthquake, only for the guard to be converted with his entire family (Acts 16:25-34)?

Nevertheless, Paul appears to have been a patient man. During many years of imprisonment, he waited patiently and dictated what he wanted to write to a secretary, possibly sitting on the other side of his prison bars (see 4:18). Some suggest that Paul was in Rome when this letter was written, hoping for the opportunity of the ultimate Christian witness, which was to stand before the Emperor of Rome and testify in person to Jesus Christ. We do not know whether he ever managed to do this, but it was certainly what he wanted.

The last two verses are Paul's last words of instruction to the Colossian church. They have been chosen with care, for the majority of his letter has been about how the Colossians had handled the problems of heretical teaching. The church needed to know who were the 'insiders' and who were the 'outsiders' (4:5), and now, at the end of this letter, there is no doubt that Paul regards 'outsiders' as those who have not accepted the teaching about Jesus Christ, as first received by the church from Epaphras (1:7).

Paul also appeals for graciousness within the Christian community. This is a valuable spiritual commodity at any time, and He commends to the Colossians the wisdom of knowing how to '*respond to anyone*' (4:6) with a defence of the faith, by which he means the teaching of the Gospel that has been passed down. Heresy always creeps into the church when the people of God do not know how to answer questions put to them about what they believe!

Going Deeper

This is only a small text, but there is more to discover and apply. Paul's advice about prayer reminds us of Christ, and his comments about his own mission and the duties of the church are a fascinating insight into his thoughts about the role of the missionary and the local church. As we look deeper, what he says is not what we might expect.

Paul's final advice, and prayer.

Everything Paul had written to the Colossians was designed to call the church to stand firm against heresy and identify with the Gospel of Jesus Christ; a message that bound together the churches of God throughout the world. It is extraordinary to think that God used Paul's letters to establish orthodoxy amongst the early churches of the first century, but this is a reminder to us that God uses practical and real means to accomplish his will. The Gospel was the unifying truth of the early church, but as the individual churches to which Paul wrote received his letters, they quickly saw in what he wrote the distinct truth of the Gospel as something which stood out from the culture of their day and bound them together with other Christians. It is no wonder that as time went by, early records from the second century onwards list the four Gospels, Acts and some of the letters of Paul as the earliest collection of what the wider church regarded as 'holy'. This formed the basis of what we now know as the New Testament which was gradually accepted by most Christians over the first three centuries AD.

When it came to deciding what writings were part of the New Testament and what were not, one of the important features of the letters of Paul, and all other letters that were considered for inclusion, was the connection that could be seen with Christ and the stories of his life that had been passed down. Paul himself was not one of the twelve apostles, but he had spent time with some of them (Gal 1:18f.) and also claimed a special vision and experience of the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:8). However, it is doubtful that these claims impressed the people of the early church about his personal connection with Jesus. Rather, they saw that in his words, he reflected what they knew of Jesus, and of his life and death. In verse 2, for example, Paul wrote in a way that strongly reflected the most powerful moment of prayer

recorded in the Gospel stories of Christ; the occasion when the disciples were with Jesus on the night before he died, and Jesus called on three of them, Peter, James and John, to come with him while he prayed, and asked them to 'keep watch' (Matt 26:38 etc.).

The Colossian church were well advised to 'be watchful' through prayer. They had been infiltrated by false teachers, and their only defence was their Lord; if they knew His will, then they would not have to ask for Paul's advice about what was right and wrong! Indeed, if they had been watchful in prayer, they should have known the difference between true and false teaching. From that day to this, watchfulness in prayer is an important hallmark of the authentic Christian life.

Advice for missionaries

It is at this point in the letter to the Colossians that we learn that Paul was a prisoner whilst he wrote. Apart from brief spells in jail (such as that at Philippi – see Acts 16:16f.), it is commonly reckoned that Paul may well have spent some time in prison whilst at Ephesus because of the stir he caused there, even though imprisonment is not specifically recorded (Acts 19,20). After this, he was arrested at Jerusalem and held in Caesarea (Acts 24f.), and finally, after being escorted there, he was imprisoned in Rome (Acts 28:17f.) where Paul was held in a kind of house arrest, with access to personal assistance and people who came to see him awaiting his trial before the Emperor.

For a variety of reasons, mostly due to the timing of his association with the various people named in the last part of this letter (see tomorrow) and the passages of time needed for the picture to emerge that we have in the letter to the Colossians generally, it is most likely that this letter was written while Paul was in Rome awaiting a hearing before the Emperor. For reasons we do not know, Acts does not tell us more of what happened after Paul arrived at Rome and lived under house arrest there for two years, and we wish that we knew more! The generally contended picture presented by the last few verses of Acts may not have lasted, and there are some indications in later traditions that they did not. The uncomfortable reality of waiting on the Emperor, possibly for years, may well be the circumstances that lay behind this letter and its writing.

Even so, Paul felt that he was commissioned by God to bring the Good News of Christ to the Gentiles of the world; he was a 'missionary', and an apostle sent by God with a specific task. This is clearly shown in his words here in verses 3 and 4, which speak of Paul's sense of duty to the evangelical mission even though he was still in prison. What 'open door' could the Lord give him for the preaching of the Gospel (4:3)? He could preach to his jailers of course, having previously had some success with this (Acts 16:31), but it is most likely that Paul still hoped that after appeal to the Emperor, he would be freed from the charge of soliciting religious violence in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27f.) and be able to re-commence his active missionary activity. We know from his letter to the Romans (15:24,28) that he intended to go beyond Rome as far as Spain; a journey that would take him to the very edge of the known world. He wanted to fulfil his mission to the uttermost, even if he was not able!

Advice for the local church

However inspiring this is, it is important for us to notice that Paul thought of the church as having a completely different role in the continuance of the Gospel than his own calling as an evangelist. His was the gift of the evangelist and missioner, seeking to go further to spread the Gospel. For him, a local church could not do this. It could witness in its own locality but not do the same pioneering work that he was called to do. His advice to the Colossian church in the Lycius valley of Galatia was to establish itself in being the true church of God in its own locality. This is what lies at the heart of verses 5 and 6.

Paul spent no further time discussing the internal affairs of the church, such as the relationships of families (see 3:20f.) or of slaves and masters (3:22-4:1); rather, he talked of

its local role in testifying to the Gospel. The most important thing was to act 'wisely towards outsiders'. I have already commented on the need to know the difference between insiders and outsiders, but it appears as if Paul knew the truth of the maxim that if a group of Christians demonstrates godly qualities to those who are not part of the fellowship then people will come looking for what it has to offer! The church of God has always been called to demonstrate a quality of love within its own ranks of a kind that only Christ can give ('love one another' – John 13:34f.), and this is the most effective evangelistic tool at its disposal. Indeed, in parallel to this, we know to our cost that the most effective way to put people off the church is to demonstrate exactly the opposite, dissention and strife!

Paul taught in his letter to the Colossian church that their duty was to be united in their adherence to the Gospel they had been first taught, and wisdom required that they discern the evil distraction of all other philosophies and so-called 'mystery-cults' which were being introduced into their ranks. The unity of God's people the church would be their ability to 'respond to anyone' (4:6) who wanted to know what they believed in a manner that was clear and 'gracious', also 'seasoned with salt'. This was a phrase which simply meant something like 'plain logic', and is found in many writings of the times, yet it summarises very clearly what many people long to be able to do even today, which is to be able to explain their faith simply in a world of doubt.

Discipleship

Application

The nature of evangelism today

It is a common presumption today that every church should be involved in pioneering evangelism, and through support of missionary activity, many are. Two things are obvious from these few comments by Paul in our passage today. Firstly, that not everyone is called to the apostolic tasks of evangelism which come from a special gifting, calling and vision from God. Secondly, the main work of a local church in evangelism is to practice the basics of Christian faith in a manner that makes the church commendable in the eyes of the local community. This is not a matter of pandering to the society of the day, but of standing out from it by exhibiting the qualities of love to which we are called in Christ; founded on love and caring for one another. People will always want to be a part of a group of people who outwardly demonstrate those characteristics. Further, it is the job of all Christians, as Paul makes clear so often in his letters, to be able to account for their faith in straightforward ways, whenever asked.

The witness of the church

Too often, we shy away from our obligations to both these calls, and some churches today regard the job of evangelism as done by them if they appoint someone to that 'task' or financially support some project in another country. The early church was founded on the dual thrust of evangelism; firstly by the great evangelists and apostles such as Paul who were specially called of God, and secondly the requirement placed on the local churches by the letters of Paul (which became Scripture) to be consistent and public in their witness to the truths of the Gospel through the quality of their lifestyle which could be seen by others.

The passage we have read may seem to be a very simple one, and in many ways, it is. It does however, expose some powerful truths about the life and witness of God's people which transcend time and are an example even to us today.

Ideas for what to do

- It may be that one or two of you who read this are those God has called to be pioneering evangelists and missionaries for the Gospel. If so, this is something that the Lord will be revealing to you in special and distinct ways. If this is so, you may know this in your heart, and you need to pray and act upon what He is saying to you.
- Pray for those who are imprisoned for proclaiming the faith. Many such people exist but we do not know about them all. Pray that their plight might be made known

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss ways in which the church can remain 'watchful' in prayer, individually and corporately.
2. Who are the evangelists and apostles who are bringing the word of God to the world today?
3. Is the church of God attractive to other people generally in the society in which you live? If not, why not?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, call each one of us according to the plans You have for Your world and for its future. May we be prepared to play our part in whatever you may require of us, so that Your Gospel may be proclaimed throughout the world, and to Your glory! Thanks be to God; AMEN