

Prayer and Proclamation

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[0 : 0 0] My name is David. I'm one of the members here, and it's my privilege to speak to you today. Let me just get some height here. Okay, you'll find the passage. Neil's been doing this with us in page 4, Colossians chapter 4, verse 2.

And if you've got a Bible or a phone, please open it up. We love the Bible here. At Cornerstone, we love speaking about it and talking about it.

So, Colossians chapter 4, verse 2 to verse 6 this morning. I love living in Edinburgh for various reasons, and one of the really fascinating things about Edinburgh are the buses.

There are so many of them, and they're really quite cheap. I mean, £1.70, and you can go absolutely anywhere. But another thing that's really quite extraordinary about the buses is that they are incredible reading material.

Have you ever read a bus? The reading material on the Lothian buses are really quite astounding, especially the backs of the buses. This morning, I read that there are now preschool places available in Loretto.

[1 : 2 1] So, you can sign up if you want to put your little child into Loretto. I read this morning, indeed, on the side of a bus that Subway have now got a new vegan range, and that really should satisfy many of the folk here.

But one of the things that I noticed as well, that last week there was an extraordinary thing, and it's all over Edinburgh, not just on the buses, but outside churches, and it's kind of try praying.

Have you seen that? Yeah. And try praying is one of these phrases that I, like you, am kind of ambivalent about it. On the one hand, it's great.

You know, we are Christians. As Anna Lauren says, praying is simply talking to God, and we love when folk talk to God. So, it's good to try praying. On the downside, you think, well, you know, it's kind of try praying along with everything else, along with getting your Ouija board out.

You know, along with that, try praying. Or, you know, try praying. Who knows? It might work. It might not work. So, you see how that phrase is. It's kind of got good elements in it, and it's got kind of not so good elements in it.

[2 : 3 4] Well, this passage this morning, it talks about two things. And first of all, it talks about prayer. Look at verse 2. Devote yourselves to prayer. So, last week, Neil was in the kind of domestic arena.

He got the short straw, looking at wives, submit yourselves to your husbands. Husbands, love your wives. And children, fathers, and in the world of work. So, there you have moving from the family to a word there, which we'll look at in verse 4, the outsider.

Isn't that interesting here? Because we see here, just by way of introduction, that faith is not a private thing. In other words, our faith is not something that's hermetically sealed.

And, you know, we've got our Sunday lives. We do our thing inside here. That our service this morning is like a time capsule. And we don't kind of get out there.

But the use of that word outsider means that our faith, our philosophy, our life, our loves, are shared with the outside world.

[3 : 41] So, what we have here is really quite simple. We have a call to prayer and a call to proclamation. I didn't make up the words because in verse 2, you've got that word prayer.

And in verse 4, you've got that word proclaim. So, it's really very simple. You've got a call to prayer and a call to proclamation. There are lots of interesting jobs in the world, aren't there?

And I wonder who the guy or the girl is who wrote the kind of subtitles for the NIV. Those of you who've got a Bible in front of you will notice that the NIV version has got kind of subtitles.

And whoever wrote them does not deserve a bonus. Because verse 2 to 6 has got the heading, further instructions.

How bland and benign can you get? He's talking about prayer here. John Wesley said prayer is where the action is. And someone else said, you know, that prayer is not a domestic intercom.

[4 : 46] It's a walkie-talkie in a war zone. And so, really, the idea of prayer and the excitement of prayer, the energy of prayer, the necessity of prayer, deserves something a lot more than further instructions.

So, what we have here in verse 2 to 6 is significantly more than just some sort of postscript in the end of a theological letter.

Because Colossians is all about that. The first section is about theology. It's about Jesus. It's about the supremacy of Jesus. And the fact that Jesus is God in every sense of that word.

But he also talks about the application of that to the church. So, two things this morning. Again, it's real simple. Number one, as I said, a call to prayer.

And number two, a call to proclamation. So, it says there, devote yourselves to prayer. One or two things there. Number one, devote. Words have to be unpacked and uncovered.

[5 : 50] And the word there, devote, even in English, you know, devote has that sense of passion. It's got that sense of really something that we are boldly persistent about.

So, when it says there, devote yourselves to prayer, it's linked to work and to persistence. One of the marks of our culture is dumbing down.

It's to make everything easy. And so, you've got a series of, you know, books, something for idiots. Or an idiot's guide too. Or something made simple.

Macroeconomics for idiots. Or, you know, quantum physics for folk who are not too bright. And everything is made really, really simple.

It's all about time-saving and simplified ways of doing things. Everything from painting to baking. But the reality is that some things are just not like that.

[6 : 50] Some things in life just don't easily fall into place. But they demand hard work. And that's how he uses this word, devote yourselves. To be boldly persistent.

It means that there's an element of energy required. There's an element of effort required. And so, if, like me, you find prayer difficult, and who doesn't?

Be encouraged. That's the way it's supposed to be. That's the way it is for pretty much everybody. We find prayer is a struggle.

So, remember, those of you who have been brought up with the Bible, or those of you who know the Bible, there's a story in Luke's Gospel, chapter 11, about a guy who comes to a friend at midnight, and he's wanting something.

And he hammers the door because the friend is fast asleep. But he is persistent. He keeps going on until the friend gets up and opens the door. And Jesus says, how much more will God delight to open the door and give you good things?

[8 : 01] But that often comes as a result of this process. Indeed, if you've got a Bible, verse 12 says, Epaphras, who is one of you, and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings.

He is always wrestling in prayer for you. So, that's what the idea there is. He's wrestling in prayer for you.

That alludes to another story in the Bible, in the Old Testament. A man called Jacob wrestled with God, and wrestled with God to such an extent that he was left with a limp.

It had an effect on him wrestling away with God. So, if prayer is something you are involved in and you find it difficult, we're finding here that Paul is saying, join the club.

And if you are someone who really doesn't pray and you want to try praying, don't expect it to be easy. That's how he says, first of all then, when you pray, you've got to devote yourself to prayer.

[9 : 09] Now, we don't need to do this on our own. Romans 15.30, Paul says here, join with me in my struggle. There's a football team in Glasgow.

It's a kind of minor team. What's it called again? They play in green and white stripes. Celtic, yeah, that's what it is. And they're known for a huddle, the Celtic huddle, when they kind of get together before a match.

Prayer is tough. Prayer is easier when you get into a huddle. I don't mean a physical huddle, for those of you who are not into the tactile stuff.

But just one or two of us getting together, that helps us to persist in prayer. So, it's a call to prayer. And he's saying here, number one, first of all, the first word there is devote.

The second interesting word there is the word watchful. Being watchful. Now, watchful doesn't just mean staying awake.

[10 : 16] Top tip. Don't make your regular prayer time on your bed just as you're about to fall asleep. Because you will probably fall asleep within a few seconds.

It's probably not the best way. So, that's not what it means here when it says be watchful. But we can be distracted. That's why he's saying here, every single one of you, listen, watch out.

There's a preacher called John Piper. He's quite an interesting character. And he ironically tweeted recently or did something on social media.

He said this, quote, One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the last day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.

He's got a point there, I suppose. That's how we have to be watchful. Be watchful. Because there are other things cram into our prayer lives.

[11 : 26] But there's something else going on here. Be watchful. Because there's the battle. Are some of you kind of spooked by supernaturalism?

You know, the idea that all is not as it seems. The idea that there are powers and influences beyond us that we cannot control. Does that kind of spook you?

Someone said recently, Don't drink too deeply from this culture's anti-supernaturalism. Because there are forces out there.

And the forces are out there to stop us. To stop us from praying. To stop us from thinking. Read C.S. Lewis's Screwtape Letters and get a little insight into what's going on in the realms that we cannot see.

Colossians assumes a battle. Neil brought out that there was a battle with false teachers. The legalists who were trying to reduce the Christian faith into a tick box philosophy.

[12 : 37] There was a theological battle. Within the church at Colossae, there was a battle for truth. There was a battle for the very soul of the church. And there's a battle for the soul of this church.

Without being too melodramatic, there's a battle for our souls. That's why we have to be watchful.

How is it that we can pick up almost any magazine and we can read it and we can be engrossed in it. And the minute we pray, we feel that we are dozing off to sleep.

So, he's saying here, as I call to prayer, the first interesting word is devote. Second interesting word is watchful. The third interesting word there is thankful.

You see it there in verse 2? Being watchful and thankful. Because that transforms our prayer life. As we sit down, as we just think, as we just close off other things, as we just meditate, all sorts of things come into our minds.

[13 : 53] Yes, there are cares, there are concerns, but there's also many reasons to be thankful. Remember that little ditty that some of us may have learned when we were young.

Does it come from a hymn? Count your many blessings. Name them one by one. And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

Here we are as a church, as a church family. Four or five years ago, started off with absolutely nothing. And yet God has provided so much.

Here we are. It's true in our own lives. We count blessings. And the fact that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. And so there is reason for thankfulness.

There's a hundred thousand reasons, ten thousand reasons above to give God thanks for so many good things. So what we're seeing here is, number one, a call to prayer.

[14 : 57] And so Paul is talking to this young church plant that's just moving on in life and it's saying, devote yourselves to prayer. Now what he's saying here is, as a church, God is calling us and encouraging us to have a prayer culture.

Now, a prayer culture is more than a big prayer meeting. A prayer culture is that folk feel free just to pray with one another. That it's a natural thing to do.

A group of folk get together. They've got a lovely evening together. They just come together and at the end of evening. They just pray. There's issues in the room. There's things that are worrying them.

They just naturally pray. Prayer's not weird. We don't need to adopt a different tone of voice or start to shake and tremble when we pray.

We just talk to God. It's natural. And the paradox is it's also supernatural. A call to prayer.

[16 : 07] The second thing we notice here is, verse 2 and 3, is the call to prayer. Verse 4 is going to bridge, but it's leading us into a call to proclamation.

Sorry, at the end of verse 3. Pray so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains. We'll unpack that a little bit later.

If you're into what the text is saying there, some folks say there's a difference to the way Paul proclaims and the way the ordinary punter proclaims. So, he says in verse 4, pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should.

And notice he says there about us, let your conversation be always full of grace. So, some say there's a difference between proclamation, it's what I'm doing here, I'm on a platform, and conversation.

But, I think they're parallels, they're not enemies. Where's Paul writing from? He's writing from prison. He's in jail because of his faith.

[17 : 11] And yet, that informs our expression that says here, pray that I will be able to proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains, pray that I may proclaim it clearly and that the God may open a door.

That's interesting that God would open a door. Paul's not wanting the door of his prison open. He's wanting a door in two other areas open.

Number one, I think he's talking here about a door of opportunities. So, maybe some of you find yourselves working in the strangest place. And there's not a good work culture, it's pretty godless.

You know, your work culture is not really saturated with godliness, it's really difficult, it's really materialistic, it's really hard. And you may say, what am I doing here?

God has opened that door and you are there for that particular reason. I love Leonard Cohen, of course, I love Leonard Cohen because he's a bit depressive, I'm a bit melancholy at times, but the line of that great song, there's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

[18 : 36] And even in your work situation, you're there, there's God has created that crack and the light comes in. So, an open door is an open door of opportunities, but what's the phrase again that God may open a door for our message?

I think there's a second reason there, that's God opens the doors in our hearts. People are not kind of by nature naturally responsive to the gospel.

There's an old writer called John Bunyan, famous for a book called Pilgrim's Progress. He's written another less famous book called The Holy War.

And in The Holy War, John Bunyan pictures an ordinary human being as an individual, like a city under siege. And all the senses are like massive gates holding out against the call of God.

Do you know somebody, or maybe you are, the most unresponsive person to the gospel?

[19 : 48] Maybe you know someone and you think they will never, ever show signs of coming to Jesus. A kind of Richard Dawkins figure. someone who has blatantly said, I will never, ever believe.

The wonderful thing is that through prayer and through God working, the doors can slowly open and the besieged city can be invaded by the grace of God.

There is nobody too tough, too hard, to have melted hearts by the Holy Spirit. Like Lydia, whose hearts the Lord opened.

I read last night again, I love the conversion story of C.S. Lewis, the Oxford academic who was resisting for years, God's kind of whispering into his life.

And C.S. Lewis wrote this, he says, you must picture me alone in that room in Magdalene, Magdalene College, night after night, feeling whenever my mind lifted, even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of him who I so earnestly desired not to meet.

[21 : 16] I love that expression. He said, there I was dreading the unrelenting approach of him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I feared greatly had come upon me in the Trinity term of 1929, I gave in and I admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

the door had been opened. And so there we have an example of the supernatural power of God, God opening our hearts, God making us open at least to question things, God allowing us to think about that which we had never thought about before.

Do you believe in miracles? What's a miracle to you? A miracle is something like someone being raised from the dead. A miracle is something like an arm growing where there was no arm before.

Is it not for some folk here a miracle that you're here? You know it's a miracle. Sitting in a kind of Victorian hall in the middle of Edinburgh listening to someone that looks like a worn out geography teacher talking to you about the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is a miracle. God's in the room. God's in your life. And it looks so ordinary.

[22 : 58] What else does it say here? Well we've got a reminder of human responsibility. We've got a reminder of supernatural power. We've also got a reminder of human responsibility.

Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should. There's a clarity. There's no fog. There's a logic to it.

There is a clarity to proclaiming the gospel. Notice what else he says. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. I just want to hover a little bit over that word outsiders because it's in the Bible so we can't reject it.

At one level, here at Cornerstone, the word outsiders is strange to our spirit. In my daytime job, I kind of work with churches to make them a little bit more outgoing and an expression often folk use is strangers when strangers come into the church.

And I often think, what's meant by that? Folk with two heads or someone carrying their head under their arm? You know, what's a stranger? So, nobody's a stranger.

[24 : 13] Neil said that at the beginning. That's the culture we want to create here. Everybody is welcome. Nobody's an outsider. And yet, some are outsiders.

Jesus spoke about a feast. And I hope we've got a bit of a feast going. But there are some folk who just won't take all of that. He says, well, when you meet folk who are really reluctant, who have good questions, who are still outsiders, he says, make the most of every opportunity.

Be careful how you act. Make your conversation full of grace. Season with salt so that you may know how to answer everybody. And so, God is speaking to us through our word here.

how in our conversation with others, there should be grace. In other words, we've received grace, so we show grace.

We've got wisdom, emotional intelligence, hopefully, and salt. There's a bit of spark. There's a bit of kind of seasoned nature to our conversation.

[25 : 25] Be wise. That's difficult for Scots people. I know not everyone here is Scottish. But maybe here's a little word for Scottish males. If there's five Scottish males here, I don't know.

Scottish male humor can be very sarcastic and reductive and banter. You know, the more we insult you, the more we love you. Sometimes it can go a little bit over the line.

And so, Paul's saying here, hey, in your conversation, be wise. Be kind. No one was ever nagged into the kingdom.

Two minutes left to go. Let me just summarize this with a story. He says, let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

There's a really fun author called Brennan Manning. Brennan Manning's most famous for a book called Ragamuffin Gospel.

[26 : 30] And he wrote fairly recently about an encounter he had in New Orleans. So, he's walking through Bourbon Street in New Orleans, and let me tell you Brennan's story.

He says, as we, that is, Brennan and his wife, rounded the corner at Bourbon Street, a smiling girl, around 21 years of age, approached us.

She pinned flowers on her jacket and asked if we would like to make a donation to support her mission. When I inquired what her mission was, she replied, the Unification Church.

Brennan said, your founder is Dr. Sun Myung Moon, so I guess that means that you're a Mooney. Yes, she answered.

Manning writes, she had two strikes against her in my book. Number one, she was a pagan who didn't acknowledge Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.

[27 : 39] Number two, his words, not mine, she was a witless, naive kid who had been mesmerized by a cult. I said, what's your name?

She said, Susan, you know something, Susan, I said, I deeply admire your integrity and your faithfulness to your conscience. You're here tramping the streets, doing what you really believe in.

You're a challenge to anyone who claims the name Christian. my wife reached out and embraced her. I reached out and embraced the two of them.

Are you Christians? said Susan. We nodded. She lowered her head and we saw tears falling on the sidewalk. A minute later, she said, I've been on mission here in the quarter for eight days now.

You're the first Christians who've ever been nice to me. The others have either looked at me with contempt or screamed and told me that I was possessed by a demon.

[28 : 55] One woman hit me with her Bible. Folks, this is the redeeming gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's speak to God about our people and let's speak with grace to our people about our great God.

Father, thank you for your word. We pray that you will bless it and help us to honor you in all things. Amen. Amen.