

Encouragement to Pray

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[0:00] And our scripture reading tonight is Colossians 4 and verse 2 to verse 6. Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

! And pray for us too that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Make sure you obey. Listen to Grandma. Don't fight. Have you ever said words like that as your kids were going out the door?

Or maybe if you're a child, you've heard those words. So the kids are staying over for the weekend and Mom and Dad are looking forward to some kids' free time.

[1:08] But even as the kids head out the door, there's some important things we need to say. Last minute things. Things that, you know, we've already said.

We've said those sorts of things lots of times. So why do we say it all over again? Why do you say it all again? It's because you want them to remember. And of all the things that they're doing and all the things that they're thinking about, you want them to have those last minute reminders in their head.

Now whether it works or not, I don't know. But we still do it. But Paul is about ready to say his last goodbyes to this Colossian church.

And the bags are packed. The van's in the driveway. He's almost ready to say goodbye. But he says, Now remember. Remember to pray.

Remember to be wise in the way that you act toward outsiders. So these are these last minute words of Paul. Now, today we're going to look at prayer. And next time we'll look at being wise.

[2:14] So prayer. Last minute, most important thing. We all know that. Prayer is one of those few topics that a preacher can touch on and can preach on.

And pretty much everyone starts to feel a little guilty. A little trouble. There are a few topics where almost everyone feels a bit ashamed.

So if I talk about forgiveness and how we need to forgive people, everyone can probably think of a secret grudge. Or maybe you can think of a secret grudge that you're still holding.

If I talk about sexual purity, people flinch inside. If we talk about sharing the gospel with outsiders, making the most of every opportunity, or things like that, most people will instantly wish that we were talking about something else.

And then there's prayer. And we all have our secrets. And for many, many Christians, our little, immature, undeveloped prayer lives is one of those secrets that many Christians carry with them.

[3:32] And when it's those sorts of things that we're talking about, it's easy for a pastor to load up on the congregation's conscience, to go really hard after it, to load it up, to work it up, hoping to get everyone to pray.

If I can only make you feel how bad you're doing and how you need to do better. To some degree that might work, but it doesn't work very well.

Shaming and cajoling a shy child to speak to strangers doesn't help that child not to be shy in the long run. Shame doesn't work that way.

It only puts more fear into their lives. And you just notice that Paul doesn't do that in Colossians.

The word of God doesn't leave us just feeling bad or just leave us determined to do better.

It does speak to our conscience. And it does speak to our will. But it doesn't leave us all alone

without a helping hand. It doesn't leave us all alone just relying on our own resources or feeling bad

about our past experience.

[4:42] And so what I want you to see is that this passage is a helping hand. It's there to help you. It's God reaching down and coming beside you and giving you a hand in this hard area of prayer.

This area that we all struggle with. The Olympics are very full of high drama and personal stories. And that's why NBC pays millions and billions of dollars to air it or to telecast it every two years. And one of the most poignant, one of the most moving scenes of the Olympics happened in 1994 at the Barcelona Summer Games. Derek Redman was running the 400 meter, one time around the track, for Great Britain.

And as he was about halfway through that race, maybe some of you remember what happened. His hamstring popped and he collapsed to the ground.

And the runners just ran away from him. And as he looked up, they are just far, far down the track.

[5:58] And this isn't chariots of fire. There's no getting up. There's no overcoming them. There's no winning the race. He's done. He's out in all of his dreams with it.

And he got up and he hobbled and he hopped. And he tried to get further down. He can't win, but he wants to finish. And as you watch that little video clip, most of your concentration is on watching the runner.

And all of our eyes were on him if you saw it. But in the background, it is interesting. You see cameramen taking pictures as they go along. And cameramen are just taking pictures, taking pictures.

And everyone is standing back watching this runner hop along and watching this sad, tragic scene. But there was one person who wasn't just sitting back watching.

There was this one person that wasn't taking pictures. He wasn't interested in getting the best shot or seeing how this sad scene played out. Derek's father wasn't watching and he wasn't taking a picture.

[7:03] He was trying to get to his son. And you can see it as it happens in this video of him pulling away from the guards and the security people are trying to grab him and he's yanking himself away from them.

And he pushes them out of the way. He pulls away from their grasping hands and he runs up to his son and he puts his son's arm around him and he holds him up.

And as they start walking together and Derek is sobbing. And one official comes up and you can hear him or you can see him saying, you know, you have to, you can't do this.

You got to get away. You don't belong here. And you see Derek's father yelling at the guard saying, I'm his dad. Go, go, get away. I'm his dad. Well, his son sobbed and his dad just kept walking with him, helping him to the finish.

That's our father in heaven. That's our father in heaven in this matter of prayer. Our prayer lives are broken because we are broken.

[8:11] We're struggling to trust. We're struggling to pray. It's not, we didn't come out of the womb praying. It's something that only happens as you become a Christian. And so we're, we're struggling in this area and our God breaks through and he helps us to the finish.

And so you're hurt. None of us here are going to win some sort of prayer medal for our championship prayer lives. But God has determined that we finish the race, determined that we are going to learn how to pray.

And so I want you to see this passage as a helping hand, a shoulder to lean on. And I want it to be encouragement in your ears. Encouragement from your father saying, come on, son.

Come on, daughter. Let's learn how to pray. You can do this. I'm here with you. Don't give up. I will teach you how to pray. Now I have three points this evening. And here they are.

One, you can learn to pray. Two, how to pray. Three, what to pray for. Four. So one, you can learn how to pray. Two, how to pray.

[9:19] Three, and what to pray for. It's very easy. So you can learn how to pray. The disciples came to Jesus and they said, will you teach us how to pray?

Will you teach us how to pray? And he didn't say, well, I can't do that because prayer is one of those things that you have or you don't have. You either get it, you got it, or you don't have it.

It's either you either have it or you don't. Prayer isn't like dunking a basketball. Where you can either have it or you don't.

Jesus didn't say anything like that. He said, when you pray, pray like this. Then he told us how to pray. When you pray, pray like this.

Now, you know what kind of, what level of teaching that is? Where you say, now this is what you do. Now, when you do this, do, when you get dressed, this is what you do, little two-year-old.

[10:22] This is what you do, little three-year-old. You want to know how to answer the phone? When you answer the phone, do it like this. Webs, whatever, however you answer it at your family.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray. He taught them how to pray in a way that the youngest child can learn how to pray. And so I just wanted to draw your attention to this point that if your prayer life is not what you want it to be, here's the encouragement.

You can learn how to pray. And so now here in this passage, God our Father comes to us through the Holy Spirit and says, now this is how you pray. And the fact that God our Father is bothering to teach us tells us that we can learn how to pray, that he has instructions for us, tells us that we can learn how to pray.

God is not fuming and pouting or fuming and brooding in a huff because of our lack of prayer. He's not standing back saying, I wish these kids of mine would get their act together and start talking. No, if anything, he's more concerned with you. He's here, he says they need help. And maybe that sounds strange to you to think that instead of God being angry at you for your lack of prayer, he actually moves towards you and says, no, they need help.

[11:43] But when your children are young, aren't you always wanting them to speak to you? And if they are young and they aren't speaking like they should, if they're not hitting those milestones like they ought to be, they aren't where they should be, do you take them into the bedroom and spank them?

Are you in a huff because of that? No, you don't because you're not a monster. Well, what do you do? What do you do if your children aren't speaking to you like they ought?

They're not learning how to talk. They're not hitting those milestones. Well, put yourself into that position. Or maybe you don't even have to imagine what it's like. This is something that you have faced.

You're living it. So what do you do if that's the situation? Well, you as a mom or dad, you don't give up. You don't give up. You try harder. You speak more to them.

You move closer to them. You get help. You take them to a specialist. You go online. You get tools. You get educated. You put them into a special program. You give them more attention, not less.

You give more of your heart, not less of your heart.

[12:52] And if you, being evil, do that, how much more are your Father in Heaven? So often we have a higher opinion of ourselves.

Than we do of our Heavenly Father. So here we are. We're these Derek Redmonds. These injured prayer warriors.

And our prayer legs are hurt and our hearts are slow to trust. But God is on our side in this matter of prayer. It's not a matter of him against us. It's him for us.

And he's on our side. And that's why we can learn to pray. Because he is on our side. He is for us in this matter. He wants us to learn to trust him. He wants us to learn to open up to him.

And learn to speak to him. Something my whole adoption story has taught me.

[13:52] It is in this matter of God's fatherly love and prayer. Because adopting, at least in our situation, is not like having a baby. Babies, you have them from the very beginning.

And adoption, at least in our case, was not like that. He had a past. He had a history. He had a life before me. And that life was very different than the life that he had when he became into our family. It was all women. There was no men. They were all black people. No white people. And when K-Man came home, he didn't trust me. Not at all.

He wasn't safe around me. He didn't want me to hold him. He didn't want anything to do with me. But I was going to get him in the end. I was going to get him in the end.

And so for weeks, he didn't let me hold him. But I kept after him. I kept talking to him. I kept loving him. I kept living with him. I kept involving myself with him.

[14:57] And finally, one day, I remember it clearly. I was sitting there in my study, eating a hamburger at lunch. And he toddled in, or walked in, and he came and crawled up on my lap.

And victory. I got him. Success. Well, his heart was slow to trust. His heart was slow to trust.

And our hearts are slow to trust. We saw it this morning. It's the hard thing to do is to wait for the Lord. It's the easier thing to take it in our own hands and do it our own way.

Well, we had a life before God, too, didn't we? And we had ways of doing things and handling things that didn't involve him.

But he is our father. And he is devoted to winning us. To having our hearts. And he's going to teach us that we can trust him.

[15:57] And he's going to teach us that we can talk to him. And we can expect to be heard and answered and helped when we do. So we can learn to pray because God, our father, is our teacher. Because he's involved in our lives.

And we can learn to pray because this command to devote yourself to prayer and all the rest isn't here all by itself. Paul doesn't just send this little portion of Colossians.

It's attached to everything that we've talked about in Colossians so far. And so you can learn to pray because you are God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. You can learn to pray because you are God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved.

There's access. There's access to the Father. He loves you. His heart is inclined to you. So you can learn how to pray. You can learn to pray because you aren't part of the old dead humanity.

There's a new you. You put on the new man, Christ Jesus, and so you aren't alone. Christ lives in you. Christ lives in you so you can learn to pray.

[17:02] You aren't the old you anymore. See, prayer is foreign to the old man. But prayer is the natural breath of the new man. And so when Jesus told Ananias to go see Saul of Tarsus, he's up and he says, go for he is praying.

So how do we know that Saul, something really happened in Saul, Saul's life? Well, Ananias, this is what you need to know. Now Saul is praying. He's praying.

He said his prayers before, but now he is really praying. He's having interaction. Saul, a one-day, two-day-old baby Christian. And he's praying. And so that's you, dear believer.

You were once alienated from God, but now you are reconciled to him. You are friends with him. He is your father. You are his son. So, of course, you can learn how to pray.

All your sins are forgiven. He took away the sentence written against you, nailing it to the cross.

And so you can pray. You can learn how to pray.

[18:09] Do you see what I'm saying? The gospel makes prayer, talking with God, having interaction, sharing our heart with God, trusting God. The gospel makes not all those things possible, but it makes it natural.

In the gospel, he wins our hearts to him. And so it's going to become a reality, not just for some.

Prayer is going to be a reality for all of God's children because of what Jesus has done.

Because now our hearts are changed. Things are different. And that's the way this command to devote yourself to prayer comes to you.

It comes to you off the lips of your loving husband, Jesus Christ. There was once a young man who had a housekeeper.

It must have been well-to-do, but he had a housekeeper. And a young man liked things in a particular way. Very particular way, this young man. He wanted all the coffee grounds out of the coffee pot by 8.30 a.m. sharp.

[19:14] And carrots needed to be cut long ways, never diced. And the mattresses need to be flipped long way every Tuesday. And on and on it goes, these things.

Now the housekeeper thought all these rules and these guidelines, she didn't like them. They were just a nuisance. They were a bother. She didn't see the point to them. So exact. And she didn't like them at all.

But then something happened to that housekeeper. However, she fell in love with a young man and married him. And now things are different. Her husband still has all the same likes and dislikes.

And the rules are all the same. But her heart has changed. Her heart has changed. And now she wants to please him. And now she sees the sense in it.

She understands what he's talking about. And she wants to do what he says. Now we used to all have hearts that hated to pray. But does Christ love you?

[20:23] Does he have affection for you? Does he have goodness stored up for you? Is he married to you? Do you love him? Do you love him for what he's done for you?

Then his desires. His call to pray. Is not burdensome. It's a delight. And that's why we can learn how to pray.

Because. It's for Jesus sake that we're doing it. So you can learn how to pray. For all those reasons. And a lot more. Now.

To our second point. How to pray. How to pray. And you see that in verse 2. Look at verse 2. He says. Devote yourselves to prayer.

Continue in it. Keep praying. Earnestly attend to it. That's the idea. So how should we pray? Well. Let me tell you about. Two people from Plymouth.

[21 : 24] They teach us how to pray. The first one is a guy. I don't know his name. But he's tall. And he's skinny. And he's balding. And if you lined him up with a hundred different people.

Or a thousand different people. I could pick him out. And the reason I know him so well. Is because. I see him running. All the time. All the time.

I go to the bank. And I see him out running. When I go to the library. He's running. I go to the store. And I see him running down the sidewalk. And I go for a walk.

And he goes for a run apparently. And it's cold. And you know what he's doing? Running. And when it's hot outside. He's running.

Running. He's devoted to it. No one is telling him to run. I don't think so anyways. No one is telling him to run. No one is making him run.

[22 : 21] He doesn't have a partner who runs with him. It's just him. Running. And he's always at it. Now there's another lady. There's another lady from Plymouth.

And she's middle to older age I would say. And she's really, really tan. And she's really skinny. And I worry about her joints. Because they don't look very good. But she's just the same.

She's always running. So on Blueberry. At the Blueberry Festival. There's this race. And there's a lot of people running. But you know what? I always can notice these two people.

I can pick them out of the crowd. Because they aren't doing it for the money. They aren't doing it for the glory. They're there. Because they were going to run somewhere that day.

And so it might as well be here. Now, that's how we should pray. With devotion. They don't say, oh, it's raining.

[23 : 21] They didn't say, oh, my leg is kind of hurting me. So I'm going to stop. They don't get discouraged. Rain. Shine. They run. Heat. Cold. Dogged.

Determination. They are going to run. And that's the kind of attitude. That's the direction that Paul is saying. This is what your prayer life should be like. Always praying.

Continuing in prayer. Not having days go by without prayer. The idea is that we are getting there so that we are devoted to this. We give ourselves to it.

There's nothing that stands in our way. We are going to pray. That's the first thing. Then Paul says, being watchful. Watchful.

Now, this isn't a devoted runner. This is a century on duty. On guard duty. And so he's on guard. He's alert. It's dark.

[24 : 16] But he is watching. Now, his mind is engaged. You know, in the army, when there's, if you're on night watch, they don't last the whole night.

They last just a few hours. And the reason they only last a few hours is because it's not just standing there that counts. It's being mindful. It's being thoughtful. It's being sharp.

It's being there. And all your faculties that counts. It takes mental concentration. And that's what Paul is saying. That's how we should pray. With mental concentration, we are thinking about this. With our wits about us. Watching for sleepiness. We just sang that song. Watching for opportunities to pray. Watching for an onset of dullness. Watching for a spirit of prayerlessness that can creep into every single one of our lives.

Where our prayer life just sort of withers away and it's hardly there anymore. Watching against that. And we all wrestle with that. We all go through that. And where we don't want to pray.

[25 : 21] John Owen, the famous Puritan, the wonderful Puritans, sometimes said he felt like he would rather die than pray. Everything was against it.

And so what do you have to do against that? You watch it. You make sure it doesn't come on your heart. And when you start to feel that prayerlessness. That place where it's like there's a wall between you and God.

And you don't feel like it. That attitude. He's saying watch against it. Watch against the complacency that can come in. The complacency.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed. His disciples weren't watching. You know why they weren't watching? Because they thought everything was going to be okay.

They thought we don't need to. We've got this under control. They had no idea how bad it was going to be. And so they were complacent. They were tired.

[26:30] They didn't really need to pray. Everything would be okay. Some sleep would be good. But Jesus said, men, now is the time to watch. Now is the time to watch.

Now is the time to be alert. Stay on the alert and pray. Put your mind to it. And so it was the hour of temptation. But instead of watching, they were telling themselves, it's all good.

It's okay. I'm strong enough. I have what it takes. Remember Peter. He's full of confidence. He can handle this. Whatever that situation is going to be, I've got it.

And down they went. So you have the picture. A devoted runner. A sentry on duty. Watchful. Protecting himself. Guarding his heart. Watching in prayer. Then a third picture. And this one is the picture of a healed Samaritan leper.

[27:30] Remember Jesus healed ten lepers. How many came back to say thank you? Just one. Not a very good return on investment, was it?

Ten healed. And one thank you out of it. That was the Samaritan leper. He falls at Jesus' feet and he says thank you. He was loud in asking.

And he was loud in saying thank you. Thank you. We do have a lot to be thankful for. We have a lot to be thankful for.

Every morning, mercy's new. Fall is fresh as morning dew. New mercies. Old mercies. Big mercies. Small mercies.

It's this simple. We would have a lot more to pray for if we were more thankful. We would pray more if we counted our blessings. More than what we do.

[28:34] And so you know when a good time to say thank you to God is? All the time. All the time. Because God has thrown us into an ocean of grace and mercy and help.

And if we aren't saying thank you, it's because we're not thinking straight. It's just that simple. We're not thinking properly. We're not thinking properly. But that Samaritan, he had it right.

He was thinking straight. He saw what had happened to him. He saw the blessing. And he didn't just go on his way. He came back and he said thank you. And so we need to learn to come back to God.

When we have prayed. Or even when we haven't prayed. And he gives us something good. To come back to him like that Samaritan. So three pictures of how to pray.

That devoted runner. The sentry on duty. And this thankful Samaritan. And now, what do we pray for? What do we pray for?

[29:34] Well, the sky's the limit. Right? I mean, we could do a whole study on everything that Paul prays for. And that would be very beneficial. But what Paul turns his attention to is praying for the spread of the gospel.

Praying for him as a missionary. So he's getting ready to say goodbye to these people. And now he wants them to know how they can serve him. How they can help him. And he says, pray for me.

And so, what should we pray for when we pray for missionaries? Well, two things. And the first is a door. An open door. An opportunity.

An opportunity. So how can we pray for the Stearns in the Middle East? How can you pray for the Vons in France? How can you pray for us in Indiana?

For people in our neighborhood? For ourselves? Well, God, open a door that your message can go in. Open a door where your message can go in.

[30:32] Give them a chance to speak. Give them an opportunity where the natural thing to do is to speak the gospel. Or create situations where there is a good reason for them to tell people about Jesus.

Give open hearts. Give open hearts. So that there's a chance to speak. The gospel needs proclaimed. It needs an open door. It needs opportunities.

Communities. And so, Paul says, when you pray, pray that God would open a door. See, God is the one who can open doors and no one can shut them. And when he shuts a door, no one can open it.

So, he says, pray for an open door. Now, what else should we pray for? Clarity. Clarity. That's the second thing. Clarity. An open door and clarity.

An open door is no good if we don't speak to people in a way that they can understand it. So, you can have a whole house full of open doors. But, if the words aren't clear, if the truth isn't plain, then it doesn't do any good.

[31 : 38] And so, Paul doesn't just want an open door and lots of opportunities. He wants clarity. Simplicity. Plainness. And do you notice that the gospel deserves plainness?

That's what verse 4 says. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should. The gospel, if it's going to get its due, needs to be proclaimed clearly.

It deserves clarity. It deserves plainness. Not philosophical, mumbo-jumbo, not highfalutin language. The gospel deserves better than that. It deserves simplicity and clarity.

So, the gospel without clarity. It's like, have you seen that movie Gravity? It's that wonderful space movie and it's all up in outer space.

It was made to be watched on IMAX theaters and seen on the big screen. You know what the gospel without clarity is like? It's like watching that grand movie on a little itty-bitty, black-and-white, old, old TV.

[32 : 43] It's not going to do it justice. The gospel is the good news of God. It's the good news of Jesus Christ. It's the greatest story that the whole world has ever heard.

It's the story of how people, anyone, anywhere, can be saved. How they can go from a future in hell to a future in eternal bliss.

And it's a story that's personally relevant to every single person that that missionary is going to see. It's the story that is personally relevant to everyone that you see and meet.

So to hear it and to believe it is to be welcomed into eternal life. To miss it is to be lost forever.

And so it needs to be preached with clarity. Pray for Pastor John and I that we would be able to speak the gospel clearly. We don't want to be smart.

[33 : 43] We don't want to sound wonderful. We want to be clear. We want to be simple. We want to be able to get out of the way and let the gospel shine.

And so would you pray for us that we would have clarity when we're speaking? And then if you're lost, would you believe that gospel?

Would you believe that gospel? Well, you see, more than anything, a pastor, a missionary wants to see people saved. Wants to see them saved.

Our great work, the whole purpose of our life is to see sinners saved and to see saints sanctified.

It's just those two things. And that's what we want. That's what Paul wanted.

And so the gospel is one that you, if you are lost, you need to believe. So you have heard it and you know it.

[34 : 49] It's the good news about Jesus Christ. So the gospel is just very simple. One, it's about your sin. And it's about a savior.

And that savior is not you. That savior is him. And it's good news about what he did. So he died to be able to save you from your sin, to save you from your guilt.

And Jesus rose to welcome us to heaven. The gospel is very simple. It's him in my place. Him for me.

Not me saving myself, but Jesus saving sinners. And it's so simple that little children can hear it and understand it. And when they trust, they can pass from death to life.

They can put their confidence in him and then they're saved. Will you believe it? It's not complicated. Will you believe that message?

[35 : 48] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you how it comes to help us, not to run us down and to discourage us.

But you come by the Holy Spirit to build us up, to show us where we've gone wrong, to correct our thinking. And so I pray that you would bring us into fellowship, into a closer fellowship with you, into a more vibrant prayer life, a living prayer life, where we do these things of being alert, being watchful, being devoted.

I pray that everyone here would sense that you want them to pray, to pour out their hearts to you.

That you would bring those who are dead in their sins, awaken them, and show them how good you are, how kind you are, how full of grace you are, and how the gospel is a very simple message.

Will you open blinded eyes and bring salvation tonight? Thank you that you hear us when we pray.
We ask these things in Jesus' name.
Amen.