

X. Colossians
The Preeminence and Prominence of Jesus Christ
“Prayer & Partnership for the Advancement of the Gospel”
Colossians 4:2–18
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September 3, 2023 • Sunday Evening Sermon

Receive God's Word. Colossians 4:2-18 says [2] *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. [3] At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— [4] that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.*

[5] Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. [6] Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

[7] Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. [8] I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, [9] and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

[10] Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), [11] and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. [12] Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. [13] For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. [14] Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. [15] Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. [16] And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. [17] And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”

[18] I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. This is God's Word.

In this study we come to the very end of our series in the book of Colossians. I must say, from the perspective of a preacher, it is a difficult task to try to preach a single sermon in a series because you have no control over things like the flow or continuity or what may or may not be touched upon in the previous passage and so forth. But I would like to commend our pastoral staff because I think they have done a wonderful job not just preaching on their given texts, but preaching it within their given context. In keeping with that spirit, let me help you grasp the logical flow of Paul's letter leading up to our passage in this study.

In Colossians 3, Paul writes that you have been raised with Christ. Therefore, the necessary implications of this new life is that you will put to death the things that are earthly. You will put to death the things that are sinful, and you will put on what is heavenly or what is Christ like. This was described as the formula for sanctification and the application of the preeminence of Christ. Starting in Colossians 3:18, Paul applies this now within the context of the household and the workplace. When you consider the reality that the home and the workplace

are the two most time-consuming spheres of your life, you can understand why the Apostle Paul makes it a priority to spell out what this resurrection life looks like specifically in those settings.

In the last study it was concluded like this; if you clothe yourself with Christ, then people will take notice and you will have evangelistic opportunity. So, when you put off sin and put on Christ in your home and in your workplace, your life will bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So then what's the logical flow? What's the connection to our passage for this study? How does Paul now end his letter? He does it by exhorting the Colossians to pray for that very end, to pray for evangelistic opportunities.

This passage in Colossians 4:2-18 is actually two separate passages. Colossians 4:2-6 brings the main body of the letter to a conclusion and Colossians 4:7-18, the final greetings brings the whole letter to a conclusion, and they may be two passages, but both of these are interwoven by Paul's concern for the advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To put that differently, virtually the entirety of Colossians 4 is about one thing – evangelism. I don't really have points in this study but versus 2 through 6 is about prayer for the advancement of the Gospel, and versus 7 through 18 is about partnership in the advancement of the Gospel.

Prayer;

Father in heaven, we come before Your Word, and we desire to bear our hearts and our minds to this Word, for we recognize that You speak authoritatively in it. Lord, we thank You so much for the letter to the Colossians. We thank You that You have guided us by the illuminating power of Your Holy Spirit through this series and now You've brought us here to the end. Help us understand this letter holistically and not just understand it in our minds, but help us apply it in our lives. We pray these things in the strong name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Colossians 4:2-4 says [2] *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.* [3] *At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—* [4] *that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.* Colossians 4:2-6 can be further divided up into two sections. Colossians 4:2-4 focuses on Paul's witness and evangelism while Colossians 4:5-6 will focus on the Colossians witness and evangelism. Let's get started with Colossians 4:2

Paul ends now in the same way that he began, namely with prayer and thanksgiving. When we first started our series covering Colossians 1:1-8 you will see that there too, Paul gave thanks to God in his prayers. What did he give thanks for in Colossians 1? He gave thanks for the faith of the Colossians and the way in which the word of the truth, the Gospel had come to them had borne fruit amongst them. Here at the end, Paul instructs the Colossians to pray that the same thing will happen for others. To continue steadfastly in prayer means to be devoted to it. It means to pray continually, as Paul says in I Thessalonians 5:17, it correlates to what Paul himself does and Colossians 1:3 when he says, 'We always thank God.' So Paul is exhorting the Colossians to pray without ceasing, just as he himself prays without ceasing.

David Garland, New Testament scholar, who wrote a commentary on Colossians says, 'If we expect our prayer life to have any effect in our lives and in our world, it cannot be sporadic or haphazard. We cannot fall back on prayer only when we think we need it. We must devote ourselves to it.' We know that to be true, don't we? We may oftentimes feel like prayer doesn't work and God doesn't answer them, but if we pause and think about that, even with a modicum of honesty, we would likely acknowledge that the problem isn't prayer. The problem certainly is not God. The problem, to use Garland's words, is that our prayer life is sporadic and haphazard. It's kind of silly, isn't it, that you would expect your prayers to be effective when the only time you ever pray is when you need something, when you treat God like a genie. The converse is true

as well. People who testify to the power of prayer are more often than not, people who don't just sometimes pray, but people who always pray.

This command to pray is a general command in Colossians 4:2, but it becomes focused on Paul's ministry in Colossians 4:3. What is it that Paul is instructing the Colossians to pray for? To put that differently, as Paul now wraps up this letter and as he prepares to say farewell to the Colossians, what is his parting prayer request? Colossians 4:3 says [3] *At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—*

When Paul asks the Colossians to pray that God may open to us a door for the Word, that phrase does not just refer to an opportunity to share the Gospel, but it also refers to success in evangelism. That phrase, an imagery of an open door, is used a handful of times in the New Testament, and it consistently refers both to the opportunity as well as success in evangelism. So, for example, Acts 14:26-27 says [26] *and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. [27] And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.* Here, it is explicit, isn't it, that the open door is an open door of faith. So Paul provides a missions report to the church in Antioch and shares about how he proclaimed the gospel and how that resulted in the Gentiles coming to faith.

In Colossians 4, Paul is not just asking for opportunities to share the Gospel, but he is asking the Colossians to pray for conversions, to pray that people might be saved. I'd like to pause and dwell on that point because it is massively important. As I've already said, this isn't just Paul's prayer here, but this was the focus of Paul's prayer at the start of the letter as well, that the Word of God might bear fruit and increase not just amongst the Colossians, but indeed in the whole world.

Observing this parallel, Dr. Beale says this about the structure of Colossians. Beale writes that the way in which Paul bookends or brackets the entire letter by repeating this prayer in particular underscores “the importance of unceasing prayer in relation to people being converted to Christ.” That might not be the most eloquent sentence you've ever heard, but make no mistake about it, it is capturing a profound truth. For the Apostle Paul, prayer was indispensable when it came to his evangelism. Paul is basically saying, without prayer, unbelievers will not come to a saving knowledge of Christ. Consider that. You can labor all you want. You can be as persuasive as you want. You can be as kind as you want. But if you do not pray, people will not come to Christ.

Why is that the case? It is because Paul may have planted, Apollos may have watered but who gives the harvest? Who determines whether the seed will yield its fruit? God does. So why is this the case? It is because, as all the saints from every nation will one day say, ‘salvation belongs to the Lord’ from Revelation 7:10, and it is precisely in prayer that you actively depend upon God's power, not your power, but God's power to save. Is this your conviction? If it is, I'll tell you what you would do. You would continue steadfastly in prayer.

Returning to Colossians 4:3b it says ‘pray also for us that God may open to us a door for the word.’ Notice the role of *the word* in that phrase. Paul is not asking that God might open a door so that he might walk through it. In this verse, it is the Word which is here personified that walks through this open door and then produces the faith that leads to salvation. The content or the substance of this Word is referred to here as the mystery of Christ. Back in Colossians 1:5, it was called the Word of the Truth, the Gospel. Paul says, it is on account of this Gospel that he is presently imprisoned. With that, we have the first of many allusions to Paul's imprisonment in

our passage. In fact, I count no less than six either explicit mentions or veiled references to Paul's imprisonment in Colossians 4. It is the focus of the entire chapter – the advancement of the Gospel, Paul's evangelism, which has led and resulted to his imprisonment.

I've heard some people say that while Paul was imprisoned, it was only house arrest so it wasn't as bad as it sounds. Hear how one scholar describes what Roman imprisonment was like. This is a historical study. "The wearing of chains and or stalks while securing prisoners from escaping was an additional physical rigor. Weighty iron chains, restricted prisoner mobility, and were also frequently the cause of untold sufferings. Rusty, they chafed and corroded the skin too tight. They were an innovation in torture, too heavy. They would pain or even cripple their wearers. In addition, they contributed when the prisoner moved to the general din and sleeplessness of the whole prison environment. Furthermore, prisoners had to tend to their own needs. They had to rely on provisions from family and friends. If they had none of those, they had to buy their food. If they were too poor, they received official rations which were severely restricted."

With that in mind, hear Paul's own description of his circumstances in prison in II Corinthians 11:27 which says [27] *in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure*. Does that sound not that bad to you? So, this is Paul's parting prayer request, and this is Paul's present situation. If that doesn't challenge you, then I don't think that you're paying attention. In the midst of his imprisonment, Paul's request is that the Colossians pray for an open door, not for his deliverance, that he might escape prison. This is not a door through which he might escape before the word so that it might go forth and continue bearing fruit. Paul prays for more opportunities to do the very thing that got him put in prison in the first place. To quote Garland again, here's how he frames it; "Proclaiming the mystery of Christ is more likely to open the door to a prison cell instead of the door to social success."

Here's a question that I have for you. When you pray, how often are your prayer requests about personal matters – about how you're doing, about what's stressing you out, about your physical health, about your workplace challenges, about your marriage, about your children, about your finances, about your future? If you're like me, your prayer requests are very often about those things – personal matters. That's not necessarily bad. You ought to share your burdens with one another and lift up your petitions to God but your personal matters should not dominate your prayers, especially not at the exclusion of everything else.

As for Paul, read through his letters, read through his prayers – what dominated the Apostle Paul's prayers, even in the midst of great personal sufferings, was the advancement of the Gospel that the name of Jesus might be lifted high. Let me phrase that differently. What dominated Paul's prayers was his desire that in everything Christ might be preeminent. Can you see why Paul decides to conclude this letter to the Colossians with this focus on evangelism – a letter as our pastors have been emphasizing all summer, that is all about the preeminence and prominence of Jesus Christ? What is, after all, the purpose of taking the Gospel to the end of the earth? What is the end goal of evangelism? Colossians 1:18 says [18] *And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent*. That's the goal.

Starting in verse 5, Paul's focus now shifts to the Colossians witness and evangelism. Colossians 4:5-6 says [5] *Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time*. [6] *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person*. As I was studying this text during the last few weeks, I realized

that Colossians 4 is a treasure trove for evangelism training. You could use it almost like a manual if you wanted to and if I had more time, we would walk through 6 to 7 principles of evangelism.

Due to time I want to just focus on one just one of these principles and that's using a very interesting clause from Colossians 4:5, 'making the best use of the time.' The English translation there is trying to capture a figure of speech and in the Greek literally what the original says is 'buying up the time.' This is the manner in which the Colossians are to be engaging with outsiders. In other words, this is how they should be evangelizing, by buying up the time. So, what is the idiom mean? The English captures it sufficiently enough. It is making the best use of the time but let me tease that out a little bit more for you. The idea is that the opportunity to evangelize is so valuable to you that you are willing to pay money to have that opportunity before you. What is it that you're buying up, so to speak? It's the time.

There is a parallel passage in Ephesians 5:15-16 which Paul says something similar; [15] *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, [16] making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.* The time carries an eschatological tone and nuance. It's not referring to time in general, but the time, the end times, the last days in which we are in. Why is the opportunity to share the Gospel so valuable that you ought to be willing to pay money for it? It is because we're living in the last days, and while we don't know when Christ is coming back, we do know that He's coming back soon. Revelation 22:7 says [7] "***And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.***" This figure of speech is underscoring the urgency with which you ought to be sharing the Gospel, understanding that there's not always going to be an open door for the Word so that when that door is open, you are capitalizing upon every moment to bear witness to Christ, not letting a single opportunity slip through your fingers.

I'm not an expert on Briarwood Presbyterian Church history, but I know this much. Briarwood became a 4000 member church, not because of its pastors, not because of its staff, not because of its resources, not because of its programs, but because of one thing, and that is the church took evangelism seriously. All our members bought up every opportunity in your homes and in your workplaces to share the Gospel with unbelievers that God had placed in your lives. This is the tradition that Frank Barker planted and Harry Reeder watered but neither of them came up with this. This is the tradition that we've received from the Apostles themselves to proclaim Christ as though He is coming back tomorrow. That is the manner in which we ought to be evangelizing, sharing the Gospel with all that God places in our lives.

Now let's look at Colossians 4:7-18, the final greetings. We don't have time to go through this verse by verse so rather than providing you with a micro analysis, I'm going to provide you with a macro analysis. I'd like to draw out three observations about Paul's ministry from the final greetings as a whole. The final greetings is all about partnership. So observation number one from the greetings, we can observe that Paul's missionary effort was always a team effort. As heroic as Luke portrays him in the book of Acts, there is no way that Paul could have done what he did by himself and I don't just mean that Paul couldn't have done what he did without the prayer material support of distant churches. What I mean is, that we never see Paul in the actual mission field itself, sharing the Gospel by himself. He always worked with co-partners in the ministry of the Gospel. If you comb through all the salutations of Paul's letters, you can begin to reconstruct who the members of his team were.

In this Colossians 4 passage alone, we have 10 people who are listed by name; Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Nympha, Archippus, and

let's not forget Timothy, which makes that 11 who was mentioned in the opening of the letter. When you go through all of Paul's letters, you will count no less than 75 names with whom Paul had a partnership. That is remarkable to consider.

Macro observation number two, not only did Paul work with a team with co-partners, but his team reflected the very power of the Gospel that they proclaimed. When you slow down and pay attention to the names in Paul's greetings, unlike what we're doing right now, you'll begin to see how diverse Paul's missions' team was and how it reflects the way in which the Gospel penetrates into every circle, every sphere, every walk of life. In just our passage alone, we have Jews and Gentiles. That's what Paul means when he says in Colossians 4:11, 'These are the only men of the circumcision.' So Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus Justus were Jews, and presumably the next three names he lists, Epaphras, Luke and Demas, were Gentiles.

There are also men and women. Most of the names are men, obviously, but Paul also mentions Nympha, likely a widow who hosted a church gathering in her home. There are free and slave, rich and poor. Again, with Nympha by virtue of the fact that she's hosting a congregation in her house, we can safely surmise that she has some means. Furthermore, we see that the famous physician, Luke, was present with Paul, but on the other end of the social scale, we also have the famous runaway slave, Onesimus, who was once the bond servant of Philemon, ran away from him, but whom Paul returned to Philemon, not as his slave, but as his brother in Christ.

Lastly, we have pastors and laypeople. Tychicus, Epaphras and Archippus from their descriptions here and elsewhere, we're likely what we might refer to as paid professionals or full-time missionaries or pastors, while the rest were gifted lay members of the body of Christ who likely had other vocations. When Paul preaches a Gospel that breaks down the dividing wall of hostility, as he says in Ephesians 2, when he claims that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, as he says in Galatians 3, that is not cheap talk for him. He didn't just teach that in his letters, but he modeled it in his ministry and he applied it in his team.

Last but not least observation number three, this greeting is not just about partnership. It's about partnership *in* the advancement of the Gospel. I said at the beginning that the whole of Colossians 4 is really about one thing, namely evangelism and you may have been wondering, how is the final greetings about evangelism? It is repeatedly clear what Paul's primary concern is, even as he sends his final greetings.

Colossians 4:7-8 says [7] ***Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.*** [8] *I have sent him to you for this very purpose, **that you may know how we are** and that he may encourage your hearts.* Paul is not saying that Tychicus will update them about his general well-being. The phrase is actually pointing to Paul's missionary activities and he repeats the sentiment yet again at the end of Colossians 4:9 where he says, *They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.* In other words, the report that Tychicus and Onesimus will give is specifically a mission's report.

This is confirmed in Colossians 4:10 where he refers to Aristarchus as his fellow prisoner and in Colossians 4:18, where one of the very last things that Paul writes is, 'Remember my chains.' Paul is not asking there for sympathy. To remember in that context means to pray. He is reiterating his prayer request that God might open a door for the Word. So, what is Paul's concern throughout the entirety of the greetings? It is all about the ministry of the Gospel that has led to and that is taking place in the midst of Paul's imprisonment. When we notice this overriding concern, we understand that Paul's relationships with all these people who are named is not just any partnership, but it is a partnership for the advancement of the Gospel.

Here is the final life takeaway for the letter to the Colossians – your missionary efforts. Let me make that a corporate take away by saying the missionary efforts of Briarwood Presbyterian Church will be strongest and most successful when it is underwritten by prayer and executed in partnership with fellow servants of Christ. As I conclude here, I think to myself, what an appropriate way for us to come to the table.

The Westminster larger catechism points out that the Lord's Supper does not just point us to the fellowship that we have with our Lord, but it also reminds us of the mutual love and fellowship that we have with each other. We don't just approach the table as individuals, but as members in the same body of Christ so perhaps in light of our passage, when you partake of the elements, do so with thanksgiving in your heart for the brothers and sisters that are sitting next to you with whom you co-partners in the ministry of the mystery of Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Transcendent God of the Universe, it is our desire, just as it was Paul's desire that in everything You might be preeminent and prominent, first in our own lives, but also in the whole world. Lord, we desire to see the day when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. We recognize that even now Christ is already preeminent. He has ascended to the right hand of the Father. He sits on His throne, rules His church and rules the world, yet, in an incomprehensible way, Lord, You have invited us, Your people, to participate in Your mission, Your ongoing plan of redemption, so that over the course of history, until You come, You might be made preeminent in everything. Lord, what a weighty task that You have entrusted to us. We recognize we cannot do this on our own so we ask that You would empower us, empower Briarwood church by the power of Your Holy Spirit to take the Gospel to Birmingham, to larger Alabama, to the end of the earth until Your Son comes again. May we proclaim that Gospel as though You are coming back tomorrow. Lord, we yearn for that day. We pray all these things in the strong name of Jesus Christ, Amen.