

December 10, 2006 by Steve Brandon



Be Devoted to Prayer

Colossians 4:2-4

1. Pray with Alertness (verse 2b).
2. Pray with Thanksgiving (verse 2c).
3. Pray for Open Doors (verses 3-4).

One man said, "If I wished to humble anyone, I should question him about his prayers. I know nothing to compare with this topic for its sorrowful self-confessions." [\[1\]](#) Prayer is something that all know that we could do more. In my years as a Christian, there have been very few people I have ever met that have admitted to me that they were satisfied with their prayer life. And as we acknowledge our lack of praying, our hearts are often filled with discouragement, because Paul addresses it head on! This morning, as we near the end of our exposition of the book of Colossians, we will look at the topic of prayer. My message this morning could be a great opportunity for you to leave this place this morning discouraged at your lack of faithfulness in prayer. But, that's not my heart this morning. I don't want for you to leave discouraged. Rather, I want for you to leave this place this morning with a fresh outlook on how to live and prioritize prayer in your life.

Colossians 4:2-4

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

The main idea of these verses comes right at the beginning of verse 2, where Paul writes, "Devote yourselves to prayer."

People devote themselves to many things. There are those who are devoted to their work. They work every day. They put in long hours. They are the first to arrive at their place of work. They are the last to leave their place of work. They can hardly think about taking a vacation, as it would take them away from their work. We have a name for these types of people. We call them workaholics.

Last night, I was in the store and happened to see several men walking down the aisle together. One had in his hand a few 12 packs (or 24 packs) of Bud Light. The other man had in his possession a large bottle of some hard liquor. These men appeared to be typical of those who are devoted to their alcohol. These types of people drink on the weeknights. They drink on the weekends. They work only so that they are able to purchase their liquor. We have a name for them. We call them alcoholics.

There are those who are devoted to following their athletic teams. They read all of the newspaper clippings. They memorize all of the stats. They travel to all of the games. They schedule their time around the games. They talk about their team all the time. We have a name for them. We call them sports fanatics.

Here in Colossians 4, Paul is calling those who believe in Christ to be "devoted to prayer." Perhaps we ought to come up with a name for these type of people, like "prayermaniacs." If you are a believer in Christ, you ought to be committed to prayer. Take time for praying. Arrange your schedules to insure that you have time for praying. Think and plan in your praying. Be consumed with praying. Caught up in this idea of being "devoted" is the idea of a struggle -- a fight -- a difficulty. The easiest thing about praying is to stop praying. But, there's no room for giving up in this verse. The verb here is in the present tense, which means that the activity is on-going. Rather than quitting, it's a call to hang in there and to persevere through the work of prayer.

For any of you have made efforts to spend long seasons of time in prayer, you know the struggle and the difficult that it is. Personally, it is one of the most difficult of tasks that I do as a pastor. There's always the cry for activity. There's always the pull of the flesh to quit. There's always the lack of faith to believe. And yet, prayer is of vital importance for our Christian lives. J. C. Ryle says it very well in his little booklet entitled, "A Call to Prayer." He writes, ...

I commend to you the importance of watchfulness over your prayers. Prayer is that point in religion at which you must be most of all on your guard. Here it is that true religion begins; here it flourishes, and here it decays. Tell me what a man's prayers are, and I will soon tell you the state of his soul. Prayer is the spiritual pulse. By this the spiritual health may be tested. Prayer is the spiritual weatherglass. By this we may know whether it is fair or foul with our hearts. Oh, let us keep an eye continually upon our private devotions. Here is the pith and marrow of our practical Christianity. Sermons and books and tracts, and committee meetings and the company of good men, are all good in their way, but they will never make up for the neglect of private prayer. Mark well the places and society and companions that unhinge your hearts for communion with God and make your prayers drive heavily. There be on your guard. Observe narrowly what friends and what employments leave your soul in the most spiritual frame, and most ready to speak with God. To these cleave and stick fast. If you will take care of your prayers, nothing shall go very wrong with your soul. [\[2\]](#)

In Colossians 4, Paul is calling us to be diligent in our prayers. This isn't the only place that such a statement is made. There are many places in the Bible where we are told to consume our lives with praying. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, the command comes, "Pray without ceasing." In Ephesians 6:18, we are told, "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit." In Philippians 4:6 we read, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Jesus told parables to show His disciples "that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

Examples abound in the Scripture of those who were devoted to prayer. Immediately, the example of **Daniel** pops into my mind. When his enemies wanted to bring him down, they did it by making laws against his religion, making it illegal to pray. Knowing this, Daniel "entered his house ... and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously" (Dan. 6:10). **Nehemiah's** testimony was that he was praying before the LORD "day and night" concerning the people of Israel (Neh. 1:6). In the days of Jesus, **Anna**, the prophetess, served "night and day with fastings and prayers" for decades, perhaps as many as 50 years. Luke's testimony is that she "never left the temple" (Luke 1:37). **Jesus** Himself, spent days in prayer to God (Luke 4:1-13). He spent nights in prayer to God (Luke 6:12). Luke says that "Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray" (Luke 5:16). The example of **Paul** abounds as well, even here in the book of Colossians. Look back at chapter 1, verse 3. Paul wrote to those in this small church, "We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you." (And now, down to verse 9, ...) "Since the day we heard [of your love in the Spirit], we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9). And I love the example of Epaphras. Look over in chapter 4, verse 12, "**Epaphras**, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in the will of God."

"Time will fail me if I tell you of ..." (Heb. 11:32), ...

- ... Moses, whose prayer kept the LORD from destroying the unfaithful people of Israel (Ex. 33:12-17), or of ...
- ... Hannah, who prayed so fervently for a child that Eli thought her to be drunk (1 Sam. 1), or of ...
- ... Samuel, who knew that it would be a sin to cease praying (1 Sam. 12:23), or of ...
- ... Elijah, who prayed fire down from heaven (1 Kings 18), or of ...
- ... Hezekiah, whose prayer protected Israel from the onslaughts of Sennacherib (2 Kings 19:20), and who was healed because of his prayer (2 Kings 20:5), or of ...
- ... Jeremiah, who wept in prayer to God for Israel (Jer. 9:1ff).
- ... the Psalmist who said, "my eyes shed streams of water, because they do not keep Your law" (Ps. 119:136).

All of these people were devoted to prayer. And the Lord is calling us today to be devoted to prayer as well.

Why were these people so devoted to prayer? I believe it's because they knew of their ultimate dependence upon the Lord for all things. Prayer is simply an expression of our dependence upon God. If you are looking for a definition this morning of prayer, this is as good as it gets: prayer is an expression of our dependence upon the Lord. Prayer isn't so much about form as it is about function. Prayer isn't so much about words as it is about feeling. It is a noteworthy fact here that Paul says nothing about the form of prayer here with these words. He's not calling us to repeat specific words over and over and over again, like most religions do. No, this is a call to be diligent in expressing our dependence upon the Lord. When you come to realize how dependent you are upon Him, your only response will be a commitment to pray. When you feel it, you will express it. I love what Edward Payson said, "You cannot make a man that is full cry for food like one that is hungry; no more will a man who has a good opinion of himself cry for mercy like one who feels that he is poor and needy." [\[3\]](#)

The early church knew this well. Shortly after Jesus left His disciples, ascending into heaven, His disciples gathered together and "with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). They prayed because they were desperate. Their leader had left them. They didn't know what to do next. They had nowhere else to turn, but to the Lord, which they did with much devotion. Note that the words translated here "continually devoting" is the same word used by Paul in Colossians 4:2 to describe our devotion to prayer: *proskartarew* (*proskartareo*). In Acts 2:42, we are given a glimpse into the core commitments of the early church. We read that "they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). The church grew by 3,000 in one day totally apart from any marketing strategy or grand plan to reach Jerusalem. Peter stood up to preach and 3,000 souls responded to Christ and were saved. They had no idea how they were going to assimilate the church together or what they were going to do, and so, they did the only thing that they could possibly do: they prayed. Again, this same Greek word was used: *proskartarew* (*proskartareo*). In Acts 4 and Acts 12 and Acts 13, we get glimpses into the prayer meetings that the early church had. They are filled with passion and heart and desire and desperation. In fact after one prayer meeting, we read that they were so passionate in their prayers that the ground shook (Acts 4:31). In Acts 6, we see how important it was for the Apostles to "devote themselves to prayer" (Acts 6:4). (Again, the same word is used as Paul did in Col. 4:2).

Why did they do these things? They understood their total and complete dependence upon the Lord for all things. It was only natural for them to devote themselves to prayer before the Lord in this way. If we only know of our great dependence upon the Lord for all things, we too would be devoted to prayer. You may be at a point in your life where you are desperate, but don't know how to pray. Be encouraged. In Romans 8:26, we read, "The Spirit ... helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." What good news this is! Our part is simply to express our need with groanings. The Spirit helps in praying for us. Help comes to us through prayer. "Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

Some of the help that comes through prayer comes in blessings. If we would know of the great blessing that would come upon our lives by praying, it would help us to be devoted to prayer. In this way, I believe that prayer is a bit like marriage. For those of you who are married, I want to ask you a question: "Are you devoted to your marriage?" (I trust that all of you are, and that is a good thing!) But, doesn't your marriage take effort and work and discipline? So, why are you devoted to your marriage? Because you love your spouse, because you know the blessings of a happy marriage, because you love your children, and because you know the tensions created when your marriage isn't

functioning so well. Certainly, there are times where it is difficult to be devoted to your marriage. There's a big project on the job that's requiring many hours of overtime. Both you and your spouse know that it's only for a season. But, it's difficult as you can't devote the amount of time you want to your marriage, and your marriage suffers a bit. One of your children needs special attention. Perhaps it's a long-term sickness. Perhaps it's a area of disobedience that needs to be addressed with many late nights of conversations. It's a problem in the home that needs to be addressed, but it takes time away from your marriage, which suffers as a result. But, as you are devoted to your marriage, the difficulties that work at hindering your relationship with your spouse will be overcome, because you have greater things in view -- the blessings of marriage. Being devoted to prayer is the same way. It ought not to be a huge drudgery to pray. It ought to come from your understanding of the blessings that will come upon you if you pray. Food is to the body what prayer is to the soul.

God works through the prayers of His people. He delights to hear us pray. He delights to answer prayer. Would the full truth be known in eternity, it would not surprise me at all to see how many of the ways in which God worked through history was precisely because of the prayers of His people. James, the brother of our Lord, said, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:2b-3). The implication here is what Jesus said, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). Do you want God to work in your life? Do you want the Lord's kingdom to prosper here upon the earth? Do you want your children to grow up serving Christ? -- then pray.

A friend of mine did an informal study through his observations and questions of those who have grown children who are walking with the Lord. He said that the most common thread in all of these families wasn't their methods of child-rearing or their schooling choices, as good and as helpful as these things were. Rather, he has observed that the common thread of children growing up to serve the Lord has been husband and wife who were committed to praying together daily for each child and for each other. Now, please understand that this is far from a scientific study. It was merely an expression of some observations that he has made. In general, he has found that those children who followed in the faith of their parents do so, because the parents are trusting in the Lord to work in their hearts. They are demonstrating their trust by praying together for each child.

If we only knew fully and believed our great dependence upon the Lord and the blessings of praying, I believe that we would be more and more devoted to prayer. We would be devoted to prayer like we are devoted to our marriages. When circumstances are busy and our heart is cold and we neglect our praying, we would soon pick it up again, because we know of our need and the blessings that come from it.

Let's turn our attention now to the particulars that Paul gives us in praying.

1. Pray with Alertness (verse 2b).

This comes from the middle of verse 2, "Devote yourselves to prayer, **keeping alert in it.**" Paul knows what it's like to pray. He knows how easily our minds can wander. He knows how easy it is to grow tired and weary in praying.

"Have you ever fallen asleep while you have prayed?" To my shame, I have on many occasions. It's the habit of Yvonne and I to pray in bed together, just before we go to sleep. We get in bed, take a few moments to talk about the day, and then, I usually say something like, "Let's pray." And I begin to pray over the issues before us. And then, when I finish, Yvonne prays. And then, we drift off to sleep. On many occasions, my sleep has come before the end of her prayers. She's praying along, and she hears "zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz." There have even been occasions, when I have been so exhausted, that I have found myself sleeping in the midst of my praying out loud. This is the type of thing that Paul is advising us against. We are not to be sleepy in our prayers. Rather, we are to be vigilant and watchful.

These words draw us back to the time in the garden of Gethsemane, only a few hours before Jesus was arrested. He took his disciples with Him to the garden. He left eight of His disciples to sit in the garden, while he took Peter and James and John to another place in the garden. He said, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me" (Matt. 26:38). He went off and prayed for an hour and then returned, only to find them sleeping. And then he rebuked them, saying "You men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:40-41). Jesus knew the weakness of our flesh. Paul knew the weakness of our flesh. That's why he told us to pray by "keeping alert in it."

As I look back upon my seminary training, one class stands out in my memory above all others. It was a class I took on prayer (which was a requirement in my days. I believe that it still is.) Certainly, there were some academic requirements. We had a little book to read and a short paper to write. But, the biggest requirement was to pray. Our homework was to pray for an hour every day. Some might object and say, "That's legalistic." But, the point wasn't to reach some ideal standard. Rather, the point was to teach us how to persevere in an extended commitment to pray for long periods of time. I wish that I could stand before you and say that it is a commitment that I have kept since that time. To my discouragement, and the humbling of my soul, it's not been my practice, but it is my heart -- to be devoted to prayer.

Here is some practical advice to help you keep alert in prayer.

a. Pray out loud.

I find that when I pray to myself, without words, that I often end up drifting into thoughts about a phone call I need to make, an errand I need to run, something I need to tell my wife, ... These thoughts keep coming. But, as you pray out loud, such a mental drift is more difficult. I do this all the time throughout the day. Should you be able to come into my study during the week (without me noticing), you would hear me constantly talking out loud, offering up prayer requests to God for various things. I don't suggest that you men do this at work with others around. Nor do I suggest that you do this in the presence of your family. But, as you are alone, with no one listening, speak out loud -- it will help reduce your mental drift.

b. Have a plan.

A real simple plan that is good to follow is the ACTS plan (A. C. T. S.), which stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Following this plan would find you spending some time worshiping and adoring God. Then, spending some time confessing your sins to Him, proceeding to expressing your thanks to Him, finally finishing with requests. In giving direction to your prayers in this way, you will be enabled to keep your attention throughout your times of prayer.

Now, there are many other ways that you can break down an extended time praying into manageable times of focus. You could spend a period of time in worship. You could follow this with a time of meditation upon the Scriptures. You could follow this with a time of listening to the Lord in silence. Then, spend time with confession or singing or praising or thanking or meditating upon Scripture or making requests. There are many types of ways to do this. Through the years, I have used different plans at different times. They have always helped to keep me alert in prayer.

c. Have a list.

This list can be broad (family, church, neighbors, world). This can be specific, like a prayer journal. I like to use a church directory, where I go through all the names of all the people in church, praying for you all as intelligently as I know how. Perhaps you want to pray in circles. By this, I simply mean that you pray in ever-increasing circles of influence. You can start with your relationship with the Lord. Then, you can pray for your spouse and then to your children. Then, increasing your circle, you can pray for the church family, followed by your own extended family. Then, your prayers can continue toward your unsaved neighbors, and governmental leaders. Your ever-increasing circle could continue on by praying for influential pastors in our land, missionaries that you know of, and countries that are difficult.

Perhaps you could even set things up so that you focus on different areas each day of the week. Sundays are spent praying for the church body. Mondays are for Missionaries. Tuesdays are for the lost around you. Wednesdays are for World Missions. Thursdays are for those in authority. Fridays are for family. Saturday is for the shepherds and pastors of the church. Any sort of list will help you stay alert in prayer.

d. Pray through the Scriptures.

Read through a verse and transform it into a prayer request before God. For instance, take Colossians 3:12, "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." Follow the pattern of Pray, ... "Oh, God, I thank you that you have been gracious to me in choosing me to be one of your children, not on the basis of anything that I did, but according to your sheer mercy. I am grateful that you have made me holy through the blood of Christ and set your love upon me. Now, I pray that you would work in my heart. Make me to be compassionate this day to those around me. Give me the wisdom to know how to express kindness to others. Humble me this day and show me my sin. Give me gentleness and patience as I deal with my children and those I encounter throughout this day."

Pray through Psalm 1, "Make me to know the blessing of staying away from the counsel of the wicked. Show me the path of sinners to avoid. Keep me far from the seat of scoffers. Give me delight in Your law. Oh, let me meditate upon Your words. Make me like a firmly planted tree. Prosper me in the things that I do, that I may give great glory to you." Robert Murray M'Cheyne, a Scottish pastor in the mid 1800's, wrote a letter to a young man in his congregation giving the following advice: You read your Bible regularly, of course; but do try and understand it, and still more to feel it." ^[4] This is good advice. This is helped by praying through the Scriptures.

e. Pray with others.

Pray with your spouse. Pray with your family. Pray with your roommates. Pray with others in the church. Pray over the phone. Develop a relationship with a prayer partner. There is something about accountability in praying that helps to encourage you on to prayer. When you are weak, others are strong, encouraging you to pray. When their flesh is weak, you can be strong to encourage them.

2. Pray with Thanksgiving (verse 2c).

This comes at the end of verse 2, "keeping alert in it **with an attitude of thanksgiving**." This book of Colossians has been filled with exhortations to be thankful. In chapter 1, verse 3, Paul was the first to express His thanks to God for those in Colossae, "We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you." By the time Paul gets to verse 12 (of chapter 1), he is praying that the Colossian believers would be "joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light." In chapter 2, verse 7 (at the end of the verse), we are called to be "overflowing with gratitude." In chapter 3, verse 15, he calls the entire church body to "be thankful." In verse 17, we read, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." Our prayers should be saturated with an attitude of thanksgiving. As I read earlier, "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God" (Phil. 4:6).

The simple reason why we are to be thankful is simple: we are not in a position to order God around. We are beggars. We are to be thankful for what the Lord has done. We are simply begging Him to continue his work. There is a modern chorus that has the phrase: "Every blessing you pour out I'll turn back to praise." When this is our posture, blessings will come upon us, because the Lord is delighted to receive praise.

Let me give you a few points of practical advice here as well.

a. Reflect much upon your salvation.

Remember where you were before Christ found you. Think upon where you would be without Jesus Christ in your life. Apart from Christ, your sins were unforgiven (Col. 2:13). Apart from Christ, you had a date with the Devil in eternal torment. Apart from Christ, your only hope was in the things of this world. Apart from Christ, you were an enemy with God (Col. 1:21). Apart from Christ, the wrath of God was upon you (Col. 3:6). Think of what Christ has done for your soul. God has “transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). In Christ Jesus, you have been forgiven of “all our transgressions” (Col. 2:13). In Christ, you are not at peace with God (Col. 1:20). Your life is hidden with Christ in God, as a pure vessel before Him (Col. 3:3). In Christ Jesus, you have been made complete (Col. 2:10). He has transformed your life. Think of His grace in choosing you to be His child (Col. 3:12). Think of His love in calling you His beloved (Col. 3:12). Think of what awaits you in eternity. You will enjoy the benefits and privileges of being a citizen of the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13). You will share in the inheritance of the universe (Col. 1:12). You will be sinless. Think of how much you did to receive all of these blessings. NOTHING! Salvation is all of His grace, freely given to you. Such thoughts can only serve to draw your heart to express great thankfulness to Him.

b. Review God's blessings upon your life.

Think of the country in which you live. You are free to worship as you please. You have more material comforts than 90% of the world. Our country has gone to great extents to give all of us the opportunity to be educated. This brings untold blessings upon us, as we are an educated people.

Think of the godly examples that have been placed into your life who have helped you grow in your Christian life: members of this church, members of other churches, the one who initially shared the gospel with you, those who have discipled you, those who have given you Biblical counsel. Your heart should be eternally grateful for these people.

Think of the physical blessings that you have. Your home, your car, your computer, your telephone, your television, ... Think of the modern conveniences that you enjoy to make your life more comfortable: your microwave, your washer and dryer, your dishwasher, your garbage disposal, your snow-blower.

Think of the family that God has given you. Many of you have many children, which are a gift from the Lord (Psalm 127:3), and are the cause of great blessing in your lives (Psalm 127:5). Many of you have extended family who are in Christ. Many of you have seen the Lord working in your family.

When you put all of these things together, it ought to be easy to express your thanks to God in prayer for the many blessings that He has given to you.

3. Pray for Open Doors (verses 3-4).

This comes in verses three and four, where Paul writes, “praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak for the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak” (verses 3-4).

Notice how Paul begins this request. He says, “praying at the same time for us as well.” This tells us a few things about the object of the prayer requests given in verse 2, because now, Paul is requesting prayer for himself. Verse 2 seems to be directed mostly at the Colossians praying for their own circumstances, whatever are the peculiar difficulties that they were facing. It’s worthwhile to point out that Paul didn’t mention any specifics concerning what to pray for. That’s why I didn’t spend much time in verse 2 talking about specifics of what you should pray for, because Paul was silent on this. The only parameters that Paul placed upon them was how to pray (1) with alertness, and (2) with thanksgiving. He left the particulars of their prayers to be up to them.

In many ways, Paul knew that praying is somewhat natural for every believer in Christ. You don’t need to teach a baby to eat. You don’t need to teach a child to run. You don’t need to teach someone how to cry out in pain. In many ways, you don’t need to teach a child of God to pray. Crying out to Him in difficulties will be natural. Certainly, there are ways in which the Scripture teaches us to pray. We can learn much about what to pray for by following the Lord’s prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name. Thy kingdom come, They will be done, n earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation. But, deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and power and glory forever, Amen” (Matt. 6:9-13). We can learn much about prayer by following the pattern of many Psalms or by following the pattern of Paul. But, in many ways, Paul merely assumed that these Colossian believers would pour out their hearts to the Lord is seeking His help in their particular circumstances.

Here in verses 3 and 4, we have a tangible request that Paul is making. He requests prayer that “God will open up to us a door for the word” (verse 3). This phrase, “open door” is used three times in the Scripture. Each time it occurs, it is in a missionary context, in which God gives a climate of spiritual receptivity to the gospel. The first time is in Acts 14:27, when Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey and reported to the church at Antioch of everything that “God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). In other words, the gospel was received well by the Gentiles. It was an open door. The second time this phrase occurs in 1 Corinthians 16:9. In this verse Paul is explaining how he will “remain in Ephesus until Pentecost” (verse 8), because “a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (verse 9). From the book of Acts, we know of the ministry that Paul

enjoyed in Ephesus. He remained there three years serving them (Acts 20:31), as they were open to the gospel. The third time this phrase, "open door" is used in Scripture is found in 2 Corinthians 2:12, when Paul spoke about the door of ministry that was opened for him when he came to Troas. People were receptive to the gospel. Each time this phrase is used, it describes an opportunity that God creates for the advancement of the gospel of Christ. Paul wants the Colossian believers to pray for Paul to have opportunities to preach the gospel, "that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ."

Back in chapter 1, Paul explained the mystery in detail. It was the "mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but now has been manifested to His saints." (Col. 1:26). It's not so much a mystery in the fact that it was unknown. Rather, it was a mystery because it had been hidden previously. But now, it has been made clear: Christ is "among the Gentiles" (Col. 1:26) and in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." This was his passion: to make known the saving riches of Christ.

Let's finish this morning by making two observations.

a. Paul's spiritual focus

This isn't exactly the prayer that I would pray if I were Paul. I would pray for release from prison. Paul prayed for opportunities (Col. 4:5). His spiritual focus was typical of almost all of his prayers. Note them carefully. You will search in vain for Paul praying in any of his letters for physical difficulties. It is almost always for spiritual advancement. [5] As Paul wrote this, he was probably in a Roman prison, seeking opportunities with the gospel of Christ. The wonderful thing is that his prayers were answered. We read at the very end of the book of Acts that his imprisonment was a house-arrest in which he "was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered" (Acts 28:30-31).

b. Paul's spiritual dependence

Here was the greatest evangelist that the world has ever known. He was the boldest of proclaimers, who was in prison, precisely because of his bold proclamation of the gospel. Here was a man, ready to die for the cause of Christ (Acts 21:13). He was arguably the most knowledgeable Christian the world has ever known. Here he was, asking prayers for God's help in making the message of the gospel clear. In effect, he was saying, "the effectiveness of my preaching is dependent upon the earnestness of your prayers."

I have a friend who is a missionary, who has said, "Evangelism is 90% prayer." I believe Him. It is God who grants us boldness. It is God who opens the minds of the unbelieving, that they might believe in the gospel. If Paul expressed such a dependence upon the Lord for his evangelism, ought you do the same as well?

Do you pray for opportunities? Do you pray for wisdom in what you say? Paul did. And so should we.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 10, 2006 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Dean C. J. Vaughan, as quoted in J. Oswald Sanders' book, "Spiritual Leadership," in the chapter 11, entitled, "Prayer and Leadership."

[2] J. C. Ryle, "A Call to Prayer." This can be read here: <http://www.rvbc.cc/ResourceLibrary/A Call To Prayer.htm>.

[3] Edward Payson, as quoted by Iain Murray in Revival and Revivalism, p. 219.

[4] Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, pp. 49-50.

[5] Consider the following prayers: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Col. 1:9-14; Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Rom. 15:14-33.