

Colossians 4:3

And pray for us, too

We come to our last look for the time being at the letter to the Colossians

- this rather small New Testament book runs to just 2,032 words in English
- (I know because I counted – happily with the help of the computer)
- it was written the better part of 2,000 years ago (probably in about A.D. 60)
- by a man who was imprisoned because of a religious dispute
- to Colossae, which was situated in the mountains of what today is modern Turkey
- By New Testament times it was a rather insignificant market town and today the area is uninhabited

While it is unlikely that Paul ever visited the church, the letter concludes with a number of personal greetings

- Second in length only to the greetings sent to the church at Rome
- This latter part of the letter is in effect an applied Christian theology, appealing for consistent living
- as it considers: the Christian and Christ; the Christian and the Church; the Christian at home;
- the Christian at work and now the Christian and the outsider
- the very fact that Paul addresses the subject of the Christian and the outsider
- Shows that he is not teaching the kind of religious asceticism of total withdrawal from the world
- This can exist in monasticism (as a physical withdrawal from the world)
- It can exist in a sect, such as the Plymouth Brethren (in a sociological withdrawal)
- But also in ordinary ‘Christians’, who are so ‘other-worldly’ that they cannot interact with others
- Making it a boast that they do not have any friends who are not part of their church
- But we must know Christ and make him known – and we do that first through prayer

I PRAY TIRELESSLY

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful (4:2).

There are three interesting words in this verse relating to prayer, ‘devote’, ‘watchful’ and ‘thankful’

- Our English word ‘devote’ is not a bad translation as such but it lacks a bit of bite
- the original has the sense of ‘persevere’, ‘continue in’, which gives more insight into the verse
- believers are to pray, not just when they feel like it, or when there is a crisis
- but to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17), constantly
- the word ‘persevere’ is helpful because it suggests that prayer is not easy
- if we are looking for a reason as why there are so many commands in the NT to pray
- it is partly because it is God’s will for us and partly because it is not easy

‘Persevering’ in prayer does not mean to say that God needs to be worn out or worn down by our prayers

- sometimes it is just a matter of learning to work on God’s timescale not ours
- delay sometimes strengthens our faith, as Archbishop Richard Trench of Dublin said:
- Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance; it is laying hold of his willingness

‘Being watchful’ literally means ‘keeping awake’

- I have yet to meet a Christian who says that they have not fallen asleep while praying
- But this is not the major meaning of being watchful
- ‘keeping awake’ suggests constant spiritual alertness

It was the returning people of Judah to Jerusalem with Nehemiah

- Who were first taught to 'watch and pray'
- Jesus also used the expression (the disciples fell asleep while praying at Gethsemane)
- Christians must be watchful and active in prayer
- Alive in the fullest sense, never careless or mechanical, dull and heavy
- There is no power in dull, listless praying

Being thankful refers to the spirit in which prayers should be offered

- the Bible translator Moffat put it, 'Maintain your zest for prayer by thanksgiving'
- if all we do is ask and we are never thankful then we are selfish, unlike Jesus

The theme of thanksgiving is important in Colossians

- as Paul says that believers should be thankful in prayer
- it is interesting to note the things for which Paul was thankful
- the letter opens with Paul's thanksgiving in prayer
- because he has heard of their faith in Christ Jesus
- and the love they have for all the saints (1:3-4)
- he gives thanks to the Father, who has qualified them to share in the inheritance of the saints (1:12)

From this more general injunction to pray

- Paul moves on with a more specific prayer request
- It is a prayer for the preaching of the gospel, effective evangelism begins with prayer
- And one way of evangelism is preaching

II PREACH FAITHFULLY

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.

(Colossians 4:3-4)

This is purposeful prayer

- even while imprisoned, Paul's concern was that he might have opportunities
- his concern was that he and his associates might have opportunities for proclaiming Christ
- the word 'proclaim' is literally 'make manifest' (make clear)
- It was more important to Paul to be faithful than free
- His concern was always for spiritual character and blessing
- Similarly, John Bunyan, the tinker of Bedford, and writer of *Pilgrim's Progress*
- was imprisoned for preaching illegally
- he was told that he would be released if he would promise to stop preaching
- But he replied, 'If I am out of prison today I will preach the gospel again tomorrow by the help of God.'
- These are men whose sole concern was for the advancement of the gospel, not their own blessing

It is possible even as Christians to allow selfish motives to creep in

- That in every meeting, every activity of the church that we should be blessed
- When Paul and others show us that the most important thing is to be faithful
- Paul's consuming interest was for the advancement of the gospel

Paul demonstrates that prayer and effective proclamation are inextricably linked

- perhaps, the greatest preacher of the Victorian era
- was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, minister of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London
- while Spurgeon preached to thousands, hundreds of believers were downstairs praying
- it is a mystery as to why God has appointed it to be this way, but we must remember
- prayer is not the least that we can do – but the most that we can do
- The congregation need to pray for the preacher
- Paul could take the easy way out and stop preaching (and be released)
- Instead he asks for their prayers, simply that he should be faithful

In bygone generations, the church was very restrictive over who could do what

- Now the pendulum has swung too far the other way
- the priesthood of all believers, and the ministry of the whole people of God
- rightly emphasise that every believer is part of the priestly body of Christ
- that the whole people of God share the ministry of Christ in the world
- but this does not mean that everyone is equally called to take on every task
- the task of the preacher is clearly such a task; not everyone is called to be a preacher
- the gospel is not served by people preaching who are not called to be preachers
- not everyone should become a preacher, but everyone should pray for the preacher
- it is by human speech that divine truth is made clear, in public proclamation (preaching)
- and in:

III (PERSONAL) WITNESS WISELY

Be wise in the way you act towards 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 (4:5-6).

A witness is someone who tells of what they have seen and heard, so it includes witness and testimony

- one of the great weaknesses of much personal witnessing and testimony today
- is that it all too easily become preaching; when revival comes we will have more salesmen (preachers)
- but what we could do with right now is more ‘free samples’
- Christians, who in word and deed, bear witness to Christ, at home, in the workplace, at college, in school

In actual fact Paul makes a distinction - be wise in the way you act towards outsiders

- make the most of every opportunity, let your conversation be always full of grace
- First there is the way in which the believer acts; second there is the way in which the believer speaks
- This is different from preaching. Dick Lucas calls such faithful service ‘responsive evangelism’
- Act and speak in a Christ-like way and when they ask what you’re about – be ready!

I don’t remember who first said: I cannot hear what you are saying because your life is drowning it out

- When Dr Will Houghton was appointed pastor of the Baptist Tabernacle in Atlanta, Georgia
- A man in that city hired a private detective to follow him and report on his conduct
- The pastor’s life so matched his ministry that the man became a Christian
- That really is testimony, yet that is not to belittle the spoken word

We need witnesses and testimonies, at home, in the workplace, at college, in school

- But that is not where we need preachers. To preach on a preaching occasion is fine
- To preach not on a preaching occasion is a very anti-magnetic witness
- What we need is responsive evangelists, people whose lives and testimony are convincing
- It is not a matter of the correct technique but scriptural teaching applied by the Spirit
- Making the most of every opportunity (the word is *kairos* – ‘significant moment’)

Grace seasoned with salt is an interesting expression

- some time ago Methodist ministers received a directive on how to handle the press
- the particular circumstances were when the church was receiving adverse publicity
- in order not to fuel the story the advice was ‘work at being bland and boring’
- I wondered whether that was good advice for today’s minister
- In this context ‘full of grace’ seems to indicate attractiveness or charm
- ‘seasoned with salt’ while not exactly ‘wit’ has the sense of zestful and lively
- ‘loyal godliness’ is not to be confused with being ‘dull, graceless and insipid’ (Moule)
- certainly, no one has been won for the kingdom by being bored out of their minds

In an age where so much emphasis is put on evangelistic method

- we come back to the scriptural basis which is prayer
- we pray tirelessly and especially for our preachers and all who proclaim the message
- we preach faithfully and offer personal witness wisely, always ready for the decisive moment
- when others can see the good news of Jesus revealed