



The New Man Prays

[4:2-4]

Chris Bullard

“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God may 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; in order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak” (4:2-4).

Tombstones are an interesting way of learning about people and what made them tick. High on Iron Mountain in Tennessee, an old weather-beaten gravestone reads:

Uncle Nick Grindstaff
Born Dec. 26, 1851—Died July 22, 1923
Lived alone, suffered alone, died alone

Nick Grindstaff was orphaned at the age of three. The older he got, the less he wanted to be around other people. Finally, he chose to live out his last forty years as a hermit in complete isolation from others.

What a striking contrast between Uncle Nick and the writer of Colossians! Reared in the religious and racial separatism of strict first-century Judaism, Paul found his attitudes towards others shattered by the gospel of Christ. The gospel of new life in Christ caused him to become intensely involved in the lives of men and women, regardless of whether they were Jew or Gentile. If we could read Paul’s epitaph, we would find these words inscribed there: “Lived for others, suffered for others, died for others.”

Perhaps we often view Paul as the great missionary apostle, inspired by God, strong, independent of needing to rely on anyone other than Jesus. That image is wrong. Not only was Paul deeply involved in the lives of others, he also needed others to be involved in his life. He, too, was a new man in Christ, and he knew that new life was not to be lived out in isolation.

Prayer is to the new man what breathing is to our bodies. Prayer is a natural and necessary part of our spiritual lives. The new man should have a new mouth, one that should be filled with the speech of prayer.

Prayer is the most important conversation you will ever hold, the most significant speech to ever occupy your lips. In prayer, we confess sin to God. Through prayer a grateful soul pours out its thanksgiving before the throne of God. Prayer is the voice of a weeping soul calling on our sympathetic High Priest in times of need. Prayer is the concerned Christian interceding before the heavenly mercy seat in behalf of another’s trouble.

THE OBLIGATION OF PRAYER (4:2)

Prayer is so vital to the new life in Christ. Paul speaks of the obligation of prayer that is ours: “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (4:2). “Devote” translates an ancient word that was used to describe an army’s persistent, continued assault upon a city. Aggressiveness in prayer represents

the idea. Right here is where most of us fail. Paul does not say, "Pray." Rather, he commands, "Stay at prayer!" That is our obligation.

This responsibility to always be engaged at prayer was a constant theme for Paul. "Be on the alert with all perseverance and petition," he wrote (Ephesians 6:18). "Pray without ceasing," he admonished the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5:17). "Devoted to prayer" was the attitude enjoined upon the Romans (Romans 12:12). Prayer is not a spiritual act reserved for big crises and momentous tasks. More than something to do in the aftermath of some disaster in our lives, faithful prayer keeps us on the cutting edge of our spiritual lives.

Two attitudes must be a part of an aggressive prayer life: *alertness* and *thankfulness*. Paul's word for "alert" basically means "to stay awake." The night of His betrayal, the Savior went to the Garden of Gethsemane with His disciples for a final time of prayer before Calvary. Along with Him a little farther into the Garden, He took Peter, James, and John and went on alone. After struggling in prayer, Jesus took a break, when He made a startling discovery. "And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, 'So, 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'" (Matthew 26:40, 41). "Watch" means literally "stay awake." That is its literal usage. Yet Paul means much more than that in 4:2. We are to be on the lookout for what we need to be praying about continually. No room for generic catch-all prayers here! Constant vigilance to stay alert to needs that must be carried to the throne of God in prayer, for ourselves and for others, is our mutual obligation.

Often in the Bible prayer is pictured as a fragrant incense that ascends to God. Remember, if no fire is on the altar, the incense will not rise! Routine prayers, empty prayers, vain prayers are unanswered prayers. If there is to be a fire on the altar of your heart, if you would pour out your heart for someone, then you must know what needs to be prayed about. We must be watchful, alert people concerning situations that require prayerful attention and carry them before our heavenly Father.

Alertness must be balanced with thankfulness. If all we do is ask and never thank God for His answers, for His providence in our lives,

then we are selfish. To put fervor back into your prayer life, begin with sincere expressions of gratitude to Jesus for the blessing with which He has already surrounded you.

THE "OTHERNESS" OF PRAYER (4:3, 4)

In 1533 Mary Tudor came to the throne of England. Quickly she led England from Protestantism back to Roman Catholicism. She did so through a reign of terror that earned her the nickname "Bloody Mary." One of the individuals Mary set her sights on for elimination was a scholar named John Rogers. Not only was he an outspoken opponent of Catholicism, but he carried on the illegal work of publishing the Bible in English for the common people. In 1555 Bloody Mary had John Rogers burned to death at the stake, along with his wife and ten young children.

During the months Rogers and his family lived in fear of arrest and execution, he wrote a prayer for his family to use. The words are simple:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Tragically, through the years this simple prayer has come to represent the worst of prayers. Many adult Christians never get beyond praying for their own needs and their own concerns. Paul challenged us to move beyond ourselves into the "otherness" of prayer: interceding on behalf of other Christians. He used himself as a case in point. "Praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, . . ." (4:3).

Look at Paul's prayer requests. He did not ask them to pray for his personal needs. He did not say: "Pray for me that I will hold up under the stress of being here in prison at Rome." What did he ask that they pray for? *A chance for evangelism*: "Pray that God may open a door for our message" (4:3; NIV).

The new man not only prays, but he has a heart for evangelism as well. The mouth of the new man will speak the gospel. Because of some inhibition, some fear, we are often lost to the effort of sharing our faith in crucial situations unless we are prodded continually.

Paul wanted these Colossians (and us) praying about soul-winning. It would be an absolute

impossibility for them to fervently petition God to open a door of evangelism for Paul and at the same time remain blind to doors God was opening all around them.

Praying for open doors can be frightening because God will open them. When someone new moves in the neighborhood, a door is open for friendship. When sickness comes to a neighbor, a door is opened for compassion and love. When casual conversation indicates frustration and a lack of meaning in life, a door is opened for talking about the hope of the gospel. Doors of opportunity are opening—and closing—all around us. It takes courage to speak for Jesus. We need to be praying about those opportunities beforehand.

Paul also requested prayers for *clarity in his presentation of the gospel*: “In order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak” (4:4). We have not discharged our duty to tell others about the gospel until we have taught them in a way that they can understand it.

Sometime ago I had a Bible study with a certain woman. We began at Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

“Isn’t that marvelous?” I declared. “Let me show you how that can be true in your life.” For forty-five minutes we studied through the earlier chapters of Romans, seeing how Jesus died for her, explaining how she could accept Jesus’ death as her own by faith. We ended up back at the glorious promise of Romans 8:1. When I was through, I asked her if she had any questions.

“Only one,” she replied. “What does ‘condemnation’ mean?” That ruined it all! If she did not understand that, she could not possibly appreciate Jesus’ death on her behalf. My task was not done. Evangelism is not evangelism until the hearer can comprehend what is taught and make a decision about what Jesus has done.

Preachers sometimes talk over people’s heads and then blame the unsaved for not responding to the truth. We must pray for the gift of clarity in presenting the gospel!

CONCLUSION

This kind of prayer is not a part-time activity of the Christian. It is the very essence of the new life. We are to live and breathe this communion with God. Paul reminded the Colossians of the prayer

life of one of their own members: “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God” (4:12). Epaphras had a fire on the altar of the incense of his prayers. There was no mediocrity in his spiritual walk. He wrestled with God in prayer like Jacob of old until he got a blessing from God for these his friends in the faith.

What would happen to the Lord’s church if it had 25, 50, 100, or 1,000 like Epaphras? Christians are needed who pray with zeal and concern. The transformation in our fellowships would be astounding!

The new man prays. Prayer becomes the spiritual breath that helps him face the day with its burdens, struggles, and opportunities.

I met God in the morning,
When my day was at its best,
And His presence came like sunrise,
Like a glory in my breast.

All day long the presence lingered;
All day long He stayed with me;
And we sailed in perfect calmness
O’er a very troubled sea.

Other ships were blown and battered,
Other ships were sore distressed,
But the winds that seemed to drive them
Brought to us a peace and rest.

Then I thought of other mornings,
With a keen remorse of mind,
When I too had loosed the moorings
With the presence left behind.

So I think I know the secret
Learned from many a troubled way:
You must seek Him in the morning
If you want Him through the day.
—Ralph S. Cushman

A Parable of the Church

Suppose a group of people want to sing. They can all sing different tunes and the result is discord and cacophony. They can all sing the same tune; then they can sing in unison, but unison singing is not the highest form of singing. They can form themselves into sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses; then each can sing his own line, and there is a glorious harmony in the difference. That is a parable of the church.