

## **The Instrumental Means of Prayer**

Colossians 4:3-4

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Colossians 4:2-6

"Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile praying also for us, that God will open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains; that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one." Lord, help us. Right now, we ask to be drawn into the truth of Your word and to be lifted up and to be strengthened in our faith as we seek to understand the very things that You have for us here. Help us, Lord, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Last week, we considered the subject of prayer, and verse number two was our text that said, "continue earnestly in prayer." And as we were considering that, we considered how important the issue of prayer is for believers in Jesus Christ. And as I was preaching it, I felt the weight of the message myself. As I was preparing it, I felt the weight of the message myself. The call to prayer is a call which I think, if all God's people are honest, we don't all reach to as much as we should. There's so much to be praying for, and there is so little prayer.

But what we didn't, what we were not able to get to, is the requests of the Apostle Paul, which he has in this text that we just read. And he makes two requests that deal with the subject, particularly of evangelism, and how the relationship between prayer and the work of the gospel is linked together. But as I was preaching last week, a thought came to my mind that helped me think that I need to just before we go into the prayer requests themselves, but help me just to think a little bit about some of the mysteries that are associated with prayer and the perceived problems, and I say perceived problems because they're not real problems, of prayer.

And as I was going through Luke chapter 11, and I was talking about the fact that we ought to be persistent, and I was mentioning how that the Father is not like that reluctant friend that doesn't give bread. He is different

from that reluctant friend. He gives good things to those that ask Him. I was thinking about the mystery of prayer, that the questions that arise with prayer, that if God is good and He's omnipotent, then why do we need to ask Him for things? Meaning, if God is good, He's always good, and He has the power to do whatever He desires, and He desires to give us good things, then what is the necessity of prayer in relationship to those things?

I started to think a little bit of this was happening as I was preaching. The rest of this happened throughout the week, but I started to think these are important questions, and when we are engaged in prayer on a regular basis, seeking the face of God, there are certain doubts that enter into our hearts about the efficacy of prayer, about the nature of prayer, and those doubts are usually in connection with who God is and who we are.

Whenever we look at a doctrine of Scripture that exalts the greatness and majesty of God, especially in relationship to finite men like prayer, we are praying to this infinite God, we are immediately confronted with certain mysteries, things that may not appear to make full sense to us, but nevertheless are important to understand. Otherwise, we fall into traps of doubt.

And I'm going to just address some of these problems to begin before we go into the prayers themselves that Paul's requesting because these can be roadblocks, hindrances to fervent praying. These can be roadblocks and hindrances to persistent praying, and I feel that if we don't work through these things now, eventually they'll come to us, and we'll find ourselves not persisting in the very thing that God has called the church to do, which is to pray.

And so, what are these perceived problems with continuing in prayer? As I said, it's a combination between God's goodness, God's power, and even God's knowledge. Questions arise. For example, if God knows what we're about to ask before we ask it, why ask it? Ever thought that thought before? Maybe it's just my complex brain that thinks these things. But if your Father knows what you have need of before you ask Him, the flesh says, then why pray? Am I telling God something new that He does not know? And if I'm not telling Him something new that He does not know, then why do I ask Him? And some of these thoughts come and plague our minds as we persist in prayer.

These thoughts are not of God. They are not even found in Scripture. But what happens is we take a truth about God, that He knows all things, and then our fleshly hearts and Satan, even himself and his demons, will seek to cause us to doubt the goodness of God, the greatness of God, and even our call to obedience in these areas. And what about this: If we know God keeps His promises, so God is faithful, He keeps His promises, then why

are we praying His promises?

You know, these are questions that may arise in your mind. If God isn't reluctant to do good and He wants to do good, why are we trying by prayer to stir Him up to do good? If you know, my wife has to stir me up to do good because, you know, to help her around the house or do whatever it is because I'm not good. You understand that I'm not perfectly good. If I was perfectly good, I would see the need and fill it, right? I would do it. I'd be proactive. But is prayer then trying to make God active in good because He's not already active in doing good?

Some of these doubts come into the mind. Some of these doubts may plague our mind in prayer, and what they are, are hindrances and stumbling blocks to fervent, continuing prayer. I don't know if you've ever experienced it, but they take the heat out of praying. They take the fervor out of prayer. They take the persistence out of prayer. And there are three ways that I want to answer this today, three arguments.

The first argument that I want to give in response to these problems or perceived problems is the argument of the authority of Scripture. And you might say this is a copout. You're just going to tell us God says it, that settles it. Well, it's important to realize that that is true. If God says it, that does settle it, and it's important to understand that the argument of authority is a very important argument.

The first problem to the perceived problem of prayer or to the mysteries that are related to prayer is to recognize that the God who told us to pray knows what He's doing, and that these mysteries are not unknown to Him, although they may not be fully comprehended by us. And we have to realize that the Christian faith is a faith that depends upon the revelation of God and that takes in the Word of God and submits itself to the authority of God.

So immediately when we're confronted with this question, our immediate response should be, "Hang on, if God commands us, as He does in this text, to continue in prayer, no matter the pragmatic results of prayer or the lack of the pragmatic results of prayer or the potential outcomes of prayer, we should pray." You see, sometimes what happens in our hearts and lives, we work in a pragmatic way. We think, "If it works, I'll do it. If it doesn't work, I won't do it." And therefore, if we have doubts about something working or not, we think, "Well, we shouldn't then do it."

But the biblical way is that we ought to submit ourselves to the authority of Scripture, to the wisdom of God, and God will do the work as He wills according to His plan. And so, first and foremost, we have to come to grips with the reality that the Christian faith is a faith that rests on God's

authority. And the reason why I say this is because some of our questions and objections actually arise from a moral problem, a moral problem. We don't see the moral problem immediately, but sometimes our reluctance to pray, our reluctance to pursue God that comes from these argumentations, actually are arising from a heart of unbelief, actually arising from a moral problem that we don't believe God as we ought to believe Him, or we don't want to submit in prayer because it's a difficult task. So the flesh seeks to create arguments against it. And so, I'm not saying that's always the case, but I'm simply saying that is a reality.

And so, coming back to the authority of God's Word is the first place that we need to come to, that we never seek to escape obedience, whether we think the obedience works or doesn't work, but we are a people that are yielded to the Word of God. And if God says, "Ask of Me," we are to ask of Him. If He says, "Pray," we are to pray. It's a true test of our obedience to the authority of Scripture.

Secondly, a very important argument I want to spend more time on is the argument of means. When we have a view of God's knowledge, we have a view of things being fixed. What I mean by that is this: If God knows the end from the beginning, that means the end will be as He knows it to be, as He has always known it to be. We may think to ourselves, "If God knows what's going to happen here and He knows what's going to happen there, then what's the point of all the stuff in between?" We think this way: "What's the point of everything that happens in between if God knows the end result and He knows the end result before the end?"

Sometimes our view of a fixed future brings us to these doubts. But the point we need to realize is that God not only ordains the ends, but He also ordains the means. God will accomplish His purpose, but not without means, which is a huge difference. God will achieve the ends that are known to Him – known unto God are all His works from the beginning – but He will achieve those ends through instrumentation, through means. This entire process by which God achieves His ends includes all the moments that exist from the beginning unto the end.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we should not fall into the trap of thinking in terms of ultimacy. Just because the ultimate end is fixed, it doesn't mean that what happens in between has no relevance. God is a God of means, and that is all over Scripture. Think about it for a moment: In the salvation of sinners, He saves them by the Word of God. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17). God didn't have to use the Word of God, but He chose to use it. The Apostle Paul says in that same text of Scripture, "How shall they believe unless they hear? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless

they be sent?" (Romans 10:14-15). The end is the salvation of sinners, but without people sending, without a voice, without the Word, it's not going to happen. God has ordained not only the ends but the means, and this is important to recognize.

God sanctifies His people; He is the Sanctifier of His people. But the Word of God says, "Sanctify them through Your truth; Your Word is truth" (John 17:17). We see that God gives the church teachers and preachers for the edification of the body of Christ. God gives gifts to the body for the purpose of edifying and building up the body of Christ. We know that God is predestining all He foreknows to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). But if you think that you're going to be conformed to the image of His Son apart from the means of spiritual disciplines, my friends, you are kidding yourself.

The truth is that God is a God of means, and that means that what happens between the beginning and the end is important and something to which we are also to be engaged. This is all through Scripture, and the text we're going to look at today shows that God advances His gospel by use of means – the means of prayer, the means of preaching, the means of prayer. These are all vital for our comprehension.

The plagues in Egypt were almost all removed by the prayers of Moses. God was using the prayers of Moses. Pharaoh said, "Pray that these things will go," and he prayed, and they went. What about the parting of the Red Sea? It didn't just happen. God told Moses, "Lift your rod over the sea, and it will part." The priests were told, "Put your feet in the water, and it will part." The 185,000 Assyrians that were slain in one night were slain by the prayers of Hezekiah. Yes, by God, but by means of his praying, God then moved in response to his prayer.

You see, God delights in the use of means. Now, the means are not everything, but they are important. In fact, Paul says this in Corinthians: "Who is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom, through whom, you believed?" He says, "So he that sows is nothing, and he that waters is nothing, but it is God that gives the increase." But Paul's not saying that the means are not important, because you know how he finishes that passage in verse number nine: "You are laborers together with God."

You know, that should revolutionize the way that we live out every moment of our day in service toward God. The means are efficacious. God makes the means effective in the lives of those as we obey Him, as we follow Him, as we seek Him.

You know, I'll give you a classic example of this: Jesus and Peter before

Peter's denial. Jesus said to Peter that, "You will betray me. This will happen, Peter. You are going to betray me. I know you're going to betray me when that comes through. You're going to deny me." Peter says, "I'll never, never ever deny you, Lord." But He says, "No, no, you're going to deny me, and I know it's going to happen. But I have prayed for you that your faith fail not. And when you are turned around, or returned, or converted, go and strengthen your brethren."

I want you to see this for a moment. Jesus is telling Peter, "Listen, you will betray me. That's the end. And you will be converted, meaning you will turn around, Peter. You will repent." But you know what Jesus puts right in the middle there that makes all the difference? Prayer. He says, "But I have prayed for you. You will turn, Peter, back to me again because I am praying for you." Jesus wasn't thinking in terms of ultimacy; He was thinking in terms of means. Jesus was praying for Peter, and Jesus's prayer was efficacious for Peter to bring him back to where the Lord wanted him to be.

Part of Peter's denial and return was included in that prayer. And so that's the argument of means that are very vital. And the last argument I want to touch on is the argument of experience. What I mean by experience is this: that personal experience, prayer does not only work in the accomplishing of God's ends – the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much. Beyond that, what prayer does is it changes even us. It's not one-dimensional; it's multi-dimensional. It doesn't just work in the accomplishing of God's purpose, but it also works in us. It draws us near to God. It brings us closer to Him. It strengthens us. We enter into this relationship whereby we pray, and we see God work, and our faith is strengthened, and we're built up in our most holy faith by praying, by the means of prayer.

So not only is there a personal experience for us, but even the history of the church testifies to the reality that prayer works. Prayer works. You can track in church history that all the men and women that prayed most saw God work most in their lives. I can't help but think of George Muller when I think of this. He recorded 50,000 answers to prayer in his journal. 50,000 answers to prayer! He said 30,000 of those answers to prayer came within the hour of the prayer or within the day of the prayer itself.

Muller understood the reality of the power and the efficacy of prayer. In fact, it is estimated that in today's currency, there was about half a billion dollars that went through the hands of George Muller, funneled through the hands of George Muller, to feed 10,000 orphans. And all every dollar that came in came in by prayer. He never made his needs known. He never asked anyone for a cent. In all his life, there were about 10,000 orphans that he was able to bless and minister to, and there were 50,000 prayers

that were answered in his lifetime, 30,000 of those in the hour or the day that he prayed them. In fact, five souls I think that he prayed for even after his death, they all came to Jesus Christ. Some of those last ones that he never saw.

And all I'm simply going to say is this, dear brethren, that those doubts that enter into our mind regarding prayer should not have a place in our hearts and minds. But we should realize the possibilities of prayer, the means of prayer, and the way that God wants to work in our own experience as we engage in prayer. And how does all this then relate to what is being said in verse number three and four? Well, Paul is encouraging the church here to pray, not just generally as he does in verse number two, but he says as you're continuing in prayer, he says in verse number three, "meanwhile praying also for us." And what Paul's saying is that as you're praying and seeking God and coming before God for the prayers and your needs of the community of the church you belong to, of the area around you, he goes, "don't forget us, meanwhile keep on praying for us. I need prayer over here too. I'm in a Roman prison cell or I'm in a Roman house arrest, and I need prayers. Don't forget me. Pray for me also," says Paul. "Don't forget to pray also."

Now what is most amazing about this is that Paul does not ask for deliverance from prison. He asks to pray for us, which shows that Paul's will was so joined to God's will that he understood not that it would be wrong for him to ask for deliverance from prison – I'm not saying that would be wrong – but we can see that Paul's requests are so concerned about the cross more than about his chains. He's more concerned about the kingdom than about his comfort, and he's there in a prison cell, and all he can think about is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the advancement of it. Look what it says in verse number three: "He says meanwhile praying also for us that God would open to us a door for the word to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may make it manifest, as I ought." Paul is asking that God would open a door to us, but the door is to be opened for the word. Paul was concerned not necessarily about the door being opened for his exit, but rather that there would be a door open for the advancement of the word of God, that although he is bound, the word of God is not bound. In fact, Paul refers to this in a similar thing in 2 Thessalonians 3:1, he says, "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you." And what Paul's concerned about is the liberty of the word of God, of the advancement of the gospel of God, that that word for which he is in chains, that word would continue to have effect, that there would be an open door for the word, and yes, for us to speak that word, as he says in verse number four.

And so, Paul is concerned that there would be an open door for the word, not a mere opportunity, an open door doesn't refer to a mere opportunity but an effective one. He's talking about the importance of prayer in relationship to the advancement of the gospel, and what he's saying is to the church at Colossae, "Pray, pray that God will open a door for us, and openness will open a door for the word, but it'll open it to us that we may speak for the word of God." And Paul is more concerned here about the word of God going on and on and on. And you know what's amazing here is that Paul is essentially telling the church at Colossae that their prayers are part of the answer to the Word of God advancing. He is connecting their prayers to the advancement of the Word and is hinging it on their praying. He says, "I want you to pray." He puts the Colossians there, praying for an open door for the Word. He is praying for an open door for the Word that will be open to them, and he is basically saying that they should pray for the Word to have advancement in the hearts and lives. This is a beautiful prayer that we should also be praying for the gospel.

Not only does Paul ask for an open door for the Word of God, showing the importance of the advancement of the Word of God and how prayer affects that, but he is also asking for a prayer for himself. The prayer is that he may make the Word manifest as he ought to speak. Paul knew that he had a command given to him by God by which he ought to speak the Word of God, and he wanted grace to manifest that Word clearly. Paul understood that in only a matter of time, he would stand before kings, as was prophesied upon him, stand before governors, and proclaim the truth of the Word. He was going to be on trial and have the opportunity to speak for God. Paul was concerned about perhaps even those around him and the Roman guards themselves, that he would be able to speak the Word of God and make it manifest, make it clear.

Paul talks about this Word as the mystery of Christ. In verse three, he says, "Open a door to us for the Word to speak the mystery of Christ." The mystery of Christ is the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed as it is in the New Testament, in all its majesty and beauty. Even though the mystery has been revealed, Paul says, "Pray that I may make it revealed, that I may make it manifest." What does he mean by that? He is simply saying, "I want to speak this Word with such clarity. I need to speak this gospel to people in such a way that they would understand its truth, that I would know how to convey it to certain people at certain times in certain circumstances in such a way that it would become clear to them."

Paul says this of the church of Galatia in Galatians 3:1, "When we came to you and preached, we preached Jesus Christ, and your eyes saw Jesus Christ clearly portrayed among you as crucified." The people at Galatia never saw the crucified Jesus. They were in Asia Minor; they were not in



Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion. But Paul says, "When we preached to you, it was like Jesus was placarded right before your eyes, like a billboard, and you saw the cross of Jesus Christ as if you were there when they were crucifying Him." He realized that there was such an efficacy in his preaching and such a clarity in his message because of the grace that was given to him when he went to Galatia, that they themselves saw Jesus even though they did not see Him with their naked eye.

Paul, the most witty and wise preacher that perhaps the world has ever known, says, "Pray for me that I can make the gospel clear." Talk about the man who knew all the strategies, who had all the wisdom, asking for prayer to make clear the gospel of Jesus Christ, asking for prayer for an effective opportunity. Paul, you are very effective; you have it down pat. "No, no, pray for me. Pray for the Word of God. Pray that I will make it clear. Pray that the Word will have free course in the hearts of the lost, and that we would see an effective work of the gospel in the people that we address." Paul says, "I have been called to do this, but I will not do this effectively without your prayers, O church of Colossae. So pray for me, pray for me, pray for me as I seek to carry out the commission."

The applications here for us are clear. Firstly, we need to consider the command to pray and realize the difficulties that exist around prayer. We should ask the Lord to help us break through these wrong views of prayer that perhaps are keeping us from effective praying. We should make no excuses for prayer. We should see ourselves not as spectators but as participants in the work of God through our praying. God wants to engage us in His work through the means of our prayers. He wants to unfold His purposes in the world, and He wants to engage you, myself, and the church here in the unfolding of His purposes for the people of Camden Valley, for the people of Sydney, for our families, and for our friends. God wants to involve and engage us in His work. He does not have to; He does not need us, but He delights to use means, and brethren, this is a great privilege for us, this is a joy for us.

We have to be careful that we don't let our inferences and our deductions from certain parts of Scripture undermine the clear teaching of Scripture. It is okay to make deductions from Scripture. It's okay to say, because the Bible teaches God knows the end from the beginning, therefore God knows everything, and He knows what's happening everywhere and everything. Fine, but it's wrong to go from there and say, therefore, I do not need to pray. That is making a deduction that the Scripture does not make, and it flies in the face of the clear teaching of Scripture where we are commanded to pray.

Dear people of God, it's so easy to fall into satanic tricks right at this point.

It's so easy to be influenced by bad thoughts and thoughts that are even theological, but theological thoughts that would lead us away from the clear teaching of Scripture, certain deductions that will lead us away, a pushing of the balances, if I could say so, that we no longer have the fervency of prayer that we have because we have a lopsided view of God's sovereignty or a lopsided view of God's knowledge or a lopsided view of God's character, not understanding how those things are to play into the commands of Scripture.

Now, I'm simply saying by this, brethren, we must examine our hearts whether we have fallen prey to a misapplication of God's Word and His character that will keep us from obeying the Word of God. Very subtle form, but I don't know where you are in your heart and mind when you come before the Lord, but if they have kept you from prayer, then it's time to repent from those things and come to the Lord and say, "Lord, even though I don't understand it all, what I do know is this: that You are wise and You are good, and You have said in Your Word, 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened unto you.'" (Matthew 7:7)

Lord, give us a simplicity that will hold fast to the Word of God and not lose sight of the plain teaching of Scripture. But secondly, Paul's requests here, by way of application, really speak to us. If he's calling upon a church some 2,000 years ago to pray for him for the advancement of the gospel, how much more in these last days, as the world is darkening and the resistance to the gospel is increasing, are we as God's people to be engaged in the advancement in prayer for the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

We need to pray. We need to seek the Lord for our outreach, even as we do as a church. Not only that, our individual outreach. I mean, all of us as Christians, we go, we meet people from day to day. We live and work, and we go to school, and we go to university, or we go to our workplace, and we engage with colleagues and students and all kinds of people that God has put before us. What prayer should I be praying day by day as I'm engaged with the lost? "Lord, open a door for the Word. Lord, open the door for the Word. Lord, give me clarity in my gospel outreach. Lord, help me to know how to speak to this person at this time and make manifest the truth of Jesus." That's a good prayer to pray day by day in our individual engagements.

We all meet with people, we all engage with people, and I'm not saying make it artificial. I'm not saying just pounce on them and shove it down their throat, as it were. I'm just simply saying, ask the Lord, "Lord, I'm here, I'm ready, I want to speak Your Word. Open a door for the Word in my workplace. I'd like to see an effective work of the gospel happening in

my workplace, even amongst my unsaved friends and family. Lord, open a door for the Word that I may speak the Word of God and help me to do that clearly."

That's individually, but we also have collective outreach efforts. It's understandable that not everyone in their work schedules and even with their gifting and ability and things like that are able to come out to all the things that the church does in regards to evangelism. But one thing that every Christian can do is pray. Pray at 3:30 on a Friday afternoon. It doesn't have to be a long prayer. Just bow your heads or bow your heart, even say, "Lord, help the gospel to be advanced there at the Campbelltown station as our brothers and sisters preach Christ Jesus."

At 2 PM on an afternoon on the last Saturday of the month, just simply say, "Lord, help the brothers to preach Christ Jesus and to make Christ clear." It's hard. You're opening the word of God out to such an audience that has mixed problems and mixed things. "Lord, help us to make it clear."

Oh, I tell you, every time we go to preach the gospel, there's always a sense of resistance, there's always a sense of uncertainty, there's always a sense of how are we going to approach this, what shall be the response of the people? There is a spiritual warfare that takes place in the preaching of the message of the cross, and we need your prayers.

As the Lord leads you, but pray, "Lord, help them to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ." Unless we think so insulated of ourselves in our own little area and even our own little city, what about the gospel advancement in the world? We have missionaries throughout this entire globe, some in prison right now just like Paul, that need our prayers. We have people ministering in the Middle East that are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ, or in China, and they're on the ground. They don't know what to do, and how can the gospel advance in such a place, maybe our question, if there's such resistance from the government? How can the gospel advance?

It advances the same way God has always advanced it: by means of the prayers of God's people and the faithful proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ. Yes, they have a particular context, but they need our prayers. Not only for China, not only for India, not only for Africa, not only for the islands, we must pray for missionaries throughout the world that are preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are met with all kinds of hurdles, all kinds of cultural contexts that we have no idea about, and they need our prayers that God would open a door for them and give them boldness to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, even though it may cost them their lives.

You might say, "I have no time to pray." If you have time to drive, you have time to pray, because as you drive, you can pray. If you have time to walk, you have time to pray. If you have time to breathe, we have time to pray. Whether you're washing the dishes, whether you're at work working on the job site, whether in your closet there in the morning seeking God or in the evening, we can pray. And God calls us as His people to pray. There is time to intercede for others.

What Paul wants us to see today is that the work of the gospel is important, and an important part of the work of the gospel is the prayers of God's people. Therefore, God's people, let us pray and engage in the gospel work in that way. Let's come before the Lord in prayer.