

## I. A “pocket handbook”

Well, we’re down to the last 2 weeks in our study of Colossians. I hope you’ve all enjoyed this book. I certainly have. It’s one of my favorite epistles, and I’ve learned a lot as I’ve explored it over the past few months.

Colossians is a short letter. (By the way, many people don’t realize that in the New Testament, Paul’s letters are arranged roughly from longest to shortest epistles to churches, then longest to shortest letters to individuals. Someone decided to order them by scroll length. Colossians comes near the end of the “church letters” because it’s one of his shortest.)

It’s a short letter, but packed with good stuff. In fact, I think Colossians is the best 1-book summary of Christian faith in the whole Bible.

Some of us are old enough to remember the days of the “pocket handbook.” Back in ancient times, when we didn’t have internet and smart phones, we got our information from books. On some topics, there were a lot of books to cover! Of course, nobody could carry all those books around, so—if the subject was important in daily life—you might buy a little book that summarized the essentials while being small enough to fit in your purse or pocket. A “pocket handbook”! We had them for first aid, for survival in an earthquake or zombie apocalypse, for writing papers, for making a good impression on a date.

In a sense, Colossians is a “pocket handbook” for Christian faith.

So far, in four short chapters it has covered many truths:

- About *God’s work to save us*, reconciling and forgiving us and adopting us into His family.
- About our *hope for eternal life*.
- Especially about *Jesus*: who is Creator, God among us, the supreme one, the source of our salvation through His death and resurrection; long promised and now revealed; our absolutely sufficient source of life.
- And about *faith in Christ*, which includes dying to our own selfish selves and embracing His new life; having Christ live in us; experiencing this by God’s grace and not because of our efforts to impress Him.

Colossians has also given us some very practical guidelines for Christian living:

- We need to *understand the Christian message*, grow in it, let it transform us as it fills our hearts and minds.
- We need to *stay faithful to that message*, not be led astray by “Jesus-plus” gospels.
- We need to “*put off*” *old ways* of thinking, speaking, and acting that displease God and harm us.
- We need to “*put on*” *a new way of living* marked by things like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace, and thankfulness.

- We need to live this way *when we gather* as a church to learn and worship, *and in every moment of our lives*. It should be especially evident in our basic relationships: our marriages, parent/child interaction, and in the workplace.

Colossians doesn't tell us everything about being a Christian. But if you could only have 1 little pocket-sized handbook on Christian faith, it covers things pretty well.

Now this raises a question as we approach the end of our study. Are there any important topics that Colossians hasn't talked about yet? Any essentials for Christian faith that still need to be discussed? A good "pocket handbook" can't get into every detail, but it should hit all the "big ideas" we need to know.

I can think of 2 key things that still need a bit of attention before Paul says "goodbye." He hasn't forgotten either of them. In these last verses of instruction, he speaks to the church about prayer and witness—how we talk with God, and how we talk to others about God. Paul has already told us some things about his own prayer and his efforts to share the message of Jesus. Now, before he rolls up the scroll and hands it over to the courier, he reminds us that these things aren't just tasks for Apostles; the whole church needs to be faithful in prayer and wise in our witness. In effect he says, "On top of all these other things, don't forget these last 2 important dimensions of Christian living."

## II. "Devote yourselves to prayer"

Paul begins very simply: *Devote yourselves to prayer.*

In a longer letter he might say more about what prayer is and how it works. Instead, he assumes the church has already had some good teaching. After all, the Bible talks a lot about prayer. If we had time to explore it more widely, we'd learn things like these:

Prayer is not:

- *A religious routine.* It's not memorizing a bunch of words and quoting them without thinking. (Remember Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees.)
- *It's not a semi-magical power in which people "create reality" with our words.* Prayer is talking with a powerful God; it's not about any power I have in myself. "Praying in faith" is not the same as drumming up a confident feeling, then expecting my feeling to stop the rain or part the seas.
- *It has nothing to do with using exactly "the right words,"* as if I were pronouncing a magical formula or impressing God by my eloquence. He is listening to my heart; He doesn't particularly care what phrases I use or what language I'm praying in.
- *And prayer is not making God do what we want,* as if I were the master and He was my servant. God has promised to hear and answer us, and He does all the time—because He loves us and loves it when we join in His work. But His promises to answer, like everything else, need to be read in context. We pray "according to God's will" and "in Jesus' name" (which, by the way, is about our relationship with Jesus and learning to pray what Jesus would pray—it is not the Christian equivalent of saying *abracadabra amen*).

So what is prayer, as the Bible describes it? Here are a few dimensions:

- *Prayer is a practical expression of faith.* We take the time to speak with God because we believe He is there and He is listening (see Heb 11:6). Real faith naturally produces prayer, and prayer in turn helps to build faith.
- *Prayer is an acknowledgement of our need.* We bring petitions to God because we have practical needs and we recognize we're not in control. More fundamentally, we're acknowledging that God is the source of our life and wholeness—the One we can't live without. And, as fallen people we need God's grace and forgiveness, so a healthy life of prayer involves confession and repentance, as modeled in the Lord's Prayer.
- *Prayer is a vehicle for relationship with our Lord.* Language is part of human life, and speaking and listening is essential to all our relationships. So of course our relationship with God should include speaking to Him and listening to Him. This is beautifully illustrated in the Psalms and in Jesus' life.
- *Prayer is listening, not just speaking.* It involves times of silence, of reflection, of meditation on God's Word, on His creation, and on the helpful words of His people. Even as we speak, we should be listening for what the Spirit might be saying to us. This is modeled throughout Scripture, especially in the prophets.
- *Prayer is a recognition of God's presence and a demonstration of our reliance on Him.* The Spirit of God is always with us, though sometimes we forget. Prayer is a discipline that makes us freshly conscious that He is with us and in us. Prayer also communicates—not just through our words, but through the *fact* that we are praying. It communicates, to us and to God, that we really are placing ourselves in His hands, trusting that He is willing and able to meet our needs.
- *Prayer promotes a thankful, worship-filled life.* It's far too easy to treat the good things that happen in life as happy accidents, as if God wasn't involved. When I acknowledge my need to God and ask Him for help and provision and so many other things, it prepares me to respond with "Thank you!" to Him as He answers and provides. A prayerful life naturally flows into a habit of thanksgiving and worship.
- Finally, *prayer nurtures community.* When I pray for you, I have the privilege of being part of what God is doing in your life. In the process, my love for you grows. (It's also really hard to be angry or unforgiving toward someone when you are praying for them.) Of course, our relationships grow stronger as we pray together with one another, which should also be a regular part of the church's life.

The Bible says more about prayer, but that's enough to give context for today's passage. Paul tells us, "*Devote yourselves to prayer,*" because he knows it's an essential in the church and in every Christian's spiritual life. He can't close this letter without a call to prayer. He doesn't do this to make us feel guilty. He does it because it's an area where we all need to keep growing.

### **(1) "Devote yourselves"**

Let's look a little more closely at Paul's words.

He starts with the phrase, “**devote yourselves.**” The word Paul uses here is not about intense emotion, as if God hears us better when we shout or weep. (Though there is a place for both.) His point is that the church needs to make prayer a *lifestyle*. Not just something we do now and then, when we’re in trouble or gathered on Sunday morning. It should be as much a part of our normal rhythm as eating and drinking and sleeping.

This is a common theme in Scripture. In Philippians 4:6 we read: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* Compare Paul’s final instruction to the Thessalonians: *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus* (1 Thes 5:18).

Like Colossians, Ephesians ends with a call to prayer. There, Paul urges: *Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel* (Eph 6:18-19).

Paul isn’t suggesting that we become monks and nuns who spend all day on our knees doing nothing but praying. We have to work, and cook, and drive our kids to events, and care for our gardens, and exercise, and do the regular “life stuff” God created us to do. The goal is to live in constant awareness that God is here, speaking with Him regularly, sometimes on the go and sometimes in quiet moments. It’s a discipline. But it’s not impossible. Imagine what would happen if we simply spent as much time talking with God as we spend on our phones ....

## (2) Being watchful and thankful

Paul recognizes that it takes some effort to build a lifestyle of prayer. We’re busy, and our minds get filled with other things. So he adds: “**be watchful.**” “Don’t fall spiritually asleep.”

You may recall that Jesus told stories about servants who “fell asleep” rather than being alert and ready for their Master’s arrival. Jesus used the image to describe people who were no longer excited about His return, and also to warn us not to be careless about temptation. I suspect that if Jesus were teaching today, He might use the illustration of a person who gets tired and dozes off while driving down the highway. After all, we’re on a spiritual journey, and it’s important for us to stay on the road.

The main point of the Bible’s “stay awake” imagery is not to suggest that we always have to pray early in the morning or late at night. Those are good times for focused prayer; but we’re to make a lifestyle of prayer all the time. The point is to be spiritually alert, not letting our minds become so consumed by other things that we forget our need to be in conversation with Christ.

Paul adds that it is important for us to “**be thankful.**” This is the 7<sup>th</sup> time he has mentioned thankfulness in this short letter. A moment ago I read some examples from other epistles as well. *In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God* (Phil 4:6). *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances* (1 Thes 5:18). So thankfulness is a big deal.

Without it, prayer can become an exercise in pious complaining. “Lord, I’m angry about this, and I’m frustrated about that. When are you going to fix them?! And why haven’t you answered my prayer

yet about that other thing?! Oh, and while You're at it, can't you please fix so-and-so—he's really irritating."

It's OK to express our concerns and hurts honestly to the Lord. The Psalms do this often. God knows our feelings anyway, and He cares about them. But if my prayer life is mostly complaints, then it isn't accomplishing its purpose. Complaining prayers don't really express faith, or create deeper love for the Lord, or listen closely to the Spirit's voice. They certainly don't express worship, nor do they build community in the church.

If my prayer life is to be healthy, it needs to be filled with thankfulness. Thanks that I can come to God through Jesus. Thanks that He hears and cares and is able to answer. Thanks for all the good things He has done, and for more that He will do. I can't always control how I feel. But I can and must follow the advice from Colossians 3:1-2: setting my heart and mind on Christ and His kingdom. When my focus is in the right place, thankfulness follows, and prayer becomes life-giving.

### III. Prayer and witness

Paul goes on: *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.*

Prayer is conversation between us and God. But a Christian's prayer life can't be limited only to self. Through prayer God allows us to participate in what He is doing in the lives of others. Paul has already modeled this, sharing how he prays for the Colossian church. A little further down he will mention Epaphras, who *always prays earnestly for you* (Col 4:12). Prayer is an important part of our ministry to one another.

Paul specifically asks the church to pray for him. (Compare Rom 15:30-32, Eph 6:19-20, 2 Thes 3:1-2.) Yes, he is an Apostle, a gifted and mature leader. Yet he needs the support that comes from the prayers of these new believers in Colossae. We all need the support of prayer from other members of Christ's body. We need it even when we are serving in our areas of strength. Paul is an effective missionary with years of experience, yet he knows that God must remove the obstacles and create opportunities for his ministry, and God's Spirit must enable him daily as he seeks to spread the message.

It's worth noting that the things Paul asks for are exactly the things Jesus has promised to do. Jesus said He would build His church (Mat 16:18). He said that the Spirit would enable His people to be witnesses wherever they go (Acts 1:8). Jesus promised help, guidance, and fruitfulness. The fact that our Lord has promised these things is not a reason to say, "Ok, then we don't need to pray about them." Quite the opposite. God's promises should guide our prayer. Again, the goal of prayer is not to convince God to do things He doesn't want to do. Through prayer we join God's work and become part of what He is doing.

This is why Paul often mentions prayer and witness together. Jesus has given His church a mission. He wants us to be His hands and feet and voice, sharing His message and spreading His kingdom. One of the ways we pray "according to God's will" is by praying in support of that mission. At the same time, we cannot accomplish that mission unless we are listening to the Spirit and depending on Him—which is the attitude we express as we pray.

#### IV. Witness is everybody's business

That takes us to Paul's final comment. He has said, "Pray for me as I share the gospel." Now he adds: "Make sure you share the message well, too." *Be wise in the way you act toward 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).

Sometimes people get the idea that prayer is a substitute for action. Instead of actually doing something to help or contribute where I am able, I can just pray and then walk away. It's not my problem; God will take care of it.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan tells us this isn't how things ought to work. I'm sure the priest and the Levite said a prayer for the injured man as they crossed the road and went past. But Jesus calls us to be like the Samaritan who stopped to help.

Sometimes prayer is the only thing we can offer. Fair enough. But often God uses prayer to help us see what we need to do. In fact, God often calls us to be part of the answer to our own prayers. I meet a new neighbor named "John." I begin to pray for John: "Lord, would you touch his life and help him to meet Jesus?" The next thing you know, John is sharing his struggles with me: arguments with his wife, trouble at work, headaches with his kids. In fact, John starts to become a downright nuisance. Why is he eating up so much of my time? I didn't ask for this. "Lord, would You please help John .... Oh." Oh. I prayed that God would work in John's life, and now God is giving me the opportunity to share with him.

This happens all the time. Prayer touches others. It also grows us and involves us in God's work. So pray for your family and neighbors; then don't be surprised if God opens doors for you to bless them. Pray for our church and its ministries. Then don't be surprised if He nudges you to get involved in some new way. He will do other things, too, of course. But often He ends up using us to help answer our own prayers.

When Paul invites the church to pray for him as he shares the gospel, he is also reminding them that Jesus' great commission, and His promise that "you will be my witnesses" is for the whole church. For every member of the body. We have different gifts, different personalities, different situations and opportunities, so this will look different for each of us. But witness is the task of the church, of all members of Christ's body. So when you pray that the message will spread, don't be surprised if God uses you to help. Be ready to share well.

Paul offers some practical advice. *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders.* They will see your lives before they listen to your words. Live in a way that really reflects Jesus, "putting off" the old and "putting on" the new.

*Make the most of every opportunity.* Older translations describe "redeeming the time." Paul uses a word that means getting the very best deal for your money—something everyone who has ever bartered in a market understands really well. We only have so much time, only so many opportunities to rub shoulders with our neighbors and to share with them. Use the opportunities well.

Again, this doesn't mean we're supposed to spend every waking moment of every day passing out tracts to people we meet. (In most parts of Canada that will make all your neighbors hate and ignore you.) But again, we need to be spiritually awake, paying attention, looking for opportunities to show and tell about Jesus, not wasting the chances God brings.

*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt,* answering everyone appropriately. We are representatives of God all the time, so our lives and all our words should be gracious as He is gracious. We are entrusted with the message of Jesus. That especially should be shared in a way that reflects Jesus' grace and goodness. The gospel is life-giving and beautiful. When we invite others to taste it, we need to be sure that what we are offering is attractive, not bland and dull, and not so covered in salt that it makes everyone sick. A wise chef knows how to season his food; and a wise witness makes the message of Jesus smell and taste delicious.

#### V. Don't forget these ...!

When I leave home in the morning I have a little ritual. I quickly double-check a few things before I head down to the car. Is the stove off? Check! Is the food back in the fridge? Check! Lights off? Check! Door locked? Check!

I have a slightly longer version when we go aware on a trip. Are the taps turned off in the sinks? Patio doors and windows closed and locked? Is the alarm clock turned off? Check!

I double-check things that are important, that I might have overlooked. I don't worry about whether I'm wearing shoes or pants. Of course I'm wearing pants! I've never forgotten that! But sometimes food gets left out and it goes moldy, or a window is open and rain comes in. (Or maybe a family of raccoons!) And my neighbors don't want to hear my alarm ring, ring, ring, ring every morning while we're gone.

So before I drive away, I make sure I've taken care of some things that are important but easily overlooked.

Paul does this in Colossians 4. He's already given a very good summary—a "pocket handbook"—of Christian beliefs and the Christian lifestyle. He's about to say goodbye, to roll up the scroll and give it to the courier. First, he stops to make 2 really important points. Christians need to be faithful in prayer, and wise in their witness.

These things aren't new. Jesus taught them from the beginning. Like the Colossians, we all know about them. Yet they are very easy to overlook in the busyness of life. So Paul reminds us again at the very end of his letter—the last instruction, the place of greatest emphasis. Prayer and witness don't require a long explanation. But they are essentials for every church and every follower of Jesus. So before we finish with Colossians, remember:

*Devote yourselves to prayer. Be wise in the way you act toward those who are not believers.*