

A WORD TO THE WISE

by Ray C. Stedman

The letter to the Colossians was written from Rome by the Apostle Paul during his first imprisonment, the one which occurs at the close of the book of Acts. Paul was living in his own rented house, chained to a Roman guard day after day. He wrote to some people whom he'd never met, as far as we can tell. Colossae was a city in the Roman province of Asia, in present-day Turkey. The Christians in Colossae had been brought to Christ, and the church established there, by a man named Epaphras, who had ministered with the apostle. But Paul is concerned about them, and so he is writing to them about their spiritual welfare. I like this, because it suggests to me that we can include ourselves in this letter very easily. Paul has never visited our church either. I have never met Paul; neither have you; but he is writing to us. And what he has to say to us is very important, because I am facing, and you are too, the same problems that these people in Colossae faced some two thousand years ago.

They were disturbed, first of all, about the evil that was rampant in their day. They were discouraged because it seemed as if evil had the upper hand. As the poet put it, "Truth forever on the scaffold; wrong forever on the throne." That is how it looked to them. Paul answers that in this letter by showing that Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the visible image of the invisible God, and Lord over every force in the world, whether men realize it or not.

Some in Colossae were deluded by philosophy. The brilliant mental achievements of the great thinkers of the Greek Golden Age had penetrated area and through the city, and some of the Colossians were overawed and carried away by the ideas of men. Paul points out that in Jesus Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. All the secrets which lie behind the mystery of life are explainable in Jesus Christ, and his wisdom far surpasses all the thinking of men. It forms a gauge by which you can judge and evaluate what men are thinking and saying.

Some of these Colossians were deceived by legalism, by the notion that, if you really want to please God, you must give up certain practices, and observe rigid regulations in your life. Paul sets all that aside, and says in Jesus Christ there is liberty. When you come to know him, your spirit is free. The motives of the heart are what God is reading, not what the body does.

Finally, some of them were divided by conflicts like the ones you and I have between parents and children and husbands and wives, and between masters and slaves or employers and employees. Paul says that Jesus Christ is love, and that if you have his life in you, you can live in love with each other, no matter what your relationship may be.

Near the close of this letter, in Chapter 4, Verses 2-4, he adds an admonition on the subject of prayer:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; and pray for us also, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison, that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak. {Col 4:2-4 RSV}

The apostle has two things to say about prayer. The first is: "Keep at it" -- "continue steadfastly in prayer." The reason, obviously, is that prayer is essential to your Christian life. Prayer is dependence on God, and that is the name of the game! If you don't pray, then you are not expressing any dependence on him at all.

But, though it may seem so at first glance, he doesn't mean, "Now, set aside a certain part of your day for prayer; set a schedule, and be sure to keep it." I am not demeaning that; some people are able to do it, and it is

an excellent practice, but that is not what he is really saying.

The Greek word the apostle chooses for *steadfastly* means "to be ready at all times." In Mark's Gospel, there is an incident which illustrates this. In the third chapter, Verse 9, we read that Jesus told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they should crush him. The word for *ready* is the same word translated *steadfastly* in Colossians. That is, "Always be ready to pray, because prayer is such a vital link with the Heavenly Father, whose life is available to us continually, that in every circumstance you need to pray." That is what Paul is saying. "Be ready to break into prayer -- in your thought life -- instantaneously, at all times, because that is the way we ought to live."

This week I ran across an interesting little article which recounts the experience of a Christian who went through the recent earthquake in Los Angeles. This is his description of it:

The hands stood precisely splitting the illuminated face of the bedside clock from top to bottom [That's a fancy way of saying it was six o'clock in the morning!]. The doors rattled incessantly. Picture frames flapped against the walls. The rumble increased in intensity. Earthquake!

You are instantly awake. You hold your breath and wonder how much your house can take. What happens to your emotions is almost impossible to express. Terra firma, earth, the epitome of steadfastness, has betrayed a frightening instability at its very core. [He goes on to describe a bit more of it, and then he says:] When one experiences the ease with which regional disaster and destruction can intrude into man's experience, the Bible's message moves out of the camels, caravans, and oases of Palestine and takes its place without apology in the teeming, smoggy sophistication of the Los Angeles Basin. When that happens, Revelation seems less apocryphal, and very modern. When that happens, it's good to be all prayed up, and not have to start from scratch! When that happens, it's good to know the One for whose hand you reach, without needing to start with an introduction.

That is exactly what Paul is saying. Be ready for prayer, so that you won't need an introduction when some demand suddenly comes upon you and you realize you need God. "Keep at it," he says, "and keep wide awake while you are keeping at it" -- "Be watchful." That is, "Don't go to sleep. Be alert for opportunities to pray." Remember what Jesus said to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Watch, and pray that you enter not into temptation" {Matt 26:41 KJV}, with the clear implication that if Peter had observed the demand to watch and pray in that hour, he would not have denied his Lord in the next hour. Prayer is a way of drawing on God's strength to meet the pressures which are pressing upon you, with temptation inherent in every one.

This is Paul's word: "Keep awake." But in that very practical way the apostle has, he tells you how to do it: "Keep awake in it with thanksgiving," -- by means of thanksgiving. If, when you pray, you practice giving thanks to God for what he has given you, you will be much more alert and awake while you pray. And also, if you practice thanksgiving -- as the Scriptures say, "In everything give thanks" {1 Th 5:18 KJV} -- you will discover that there are opportunities for prayer and thanksgiving in almost every situation you enter.

The second thing Paul says about prayer is, "Include others in it." "Keep at it, and include others in it -- especially me," he says. "Pray for us also that God may open to us a door for the word." Here he recognizes the body of Christ and the fact that we are members one of another. We need each other. This great apostle says that the opportunity for him to declare the message of Christ will be given to him by others: "You pray for me," he says, "and that will open a door. God will open a door when you pray for me."

The opportunity of opening doors for each others' ministry is given to every one of us. You can open a door for me; I can open a door for you -- if we pray for one another. Because prayer is addressed to the One who is able to open doors. Remember the scene John describes in the book of Revelation. He sees Jesus, risen from the dead, Lord over every force the world knows, and with the keys of death and of hell hanging at his girdle. And the Lord announces, "I am he who opens, and no man shuts, and shuts, and no man opens," {cf, Rev 3:7}. And as you and I support one another in prayer, "he who opens" will open up opportunities to minister. And so the apostle says, "Pray for me, that I may have an open door and an opportunity to preach Christ."

This is still true today. Doors are opened only as people pray for one another.

In anticipation of the forthcoming Billy Graham Crusade, letters and bookmarks and other notices are being circulated which bear this message from Billy Graham himself:

The secret of each crusade has been the power of God's Holy Spirit moving in answer to the prayer of millions of his people around the world. If we did not believe that there would be this same prayer support for the Northern California Crusade, we would not dare to attempt it. We are depending on your prayer support.

You can open a door for Billy Graham in this area if you pray for him. You can open a door for others in our congregation, in their ministries in neighborhoods and other places, if you pray for them. God will open doors into human hearts, if you pray for one another. This is what the apostle is stressing here. How greatly he senses his own need in this regard!

The message he wants to declare is what he calls "the mystery of Christ." This suggests that there is something hidden about it. I often refer to the message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, as "the lost secret of humanity" because it is what man everywhere is seeking. Humanity has lost the secret which makes life exciting, vital, and worth living.

This secret, says Paul, is Christ. He is the One who turns life on. This all too often has become the missing element in the declaration of the gospel. Far, far too often we Christians have made the gospel sound as if it is only a pattern for going to heaven when we die. It does embody that element, but that is not the heart of it. The heart of it is that not only is Jesus Christ in heaven, but the really great news is that he will make himself available to you right now! His life will come and dwell in you, and you can know him and can have all that he is available to you -- right now!

This is the great mystery, and this is what excites people. Yet I am constantly amazed, as I travel around, to see how few churches are declaring this good news. People can attend church all their lives and never learn this great secret. But it is as Paul describes it in this very letter: "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27 RSV}. It is the only hope you will ever have of experiencing the glory that God intended for man.

This hope, Paul says, is an offense to people, sometimes. "Because of it," he says, "I am in prison." It causes no particular offense to tell people, "Try to do the best you can. Be good, and someday God will let you into heaven." That is ordinary religiosity. But when you come along and tell them, "God himself has provided the means of doing what is right," many people don't want to accept it, because it cancels out all our efforts to do it on God's behalf. They resent that, and it was for this reason that Paul was in prison -- because he told people that the cross of Christ sets the natural man aside.

Paul concludes his prayer request with these words: "... that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak." Paul never got away from that sense of owing men something. As he looked at the broken, fragmented character of humanity, as he saw people's heartache and sorrow, their injustice and cruelty and maliciousness toward each other, and as he sensed the hunger and the longing of their hearts, it awakened in him a deep sense of obligation: "I know how the hunger of their hearts and the longing of their souls can be met, and I owe it to them to, tell them." And so he asks these others to join him in the great ministry of opening the door of the gospel to a needy world by praying that his declaration might be clear and forthright.

Will you make it your ministry in the days ahead to pray for each other, that we all may be ministers of Jesus Christ?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for this good news, which has lost not one bit of its power nor of its appeal to the human heart. Thank you for Jesus Christ, who has come to set us free, who died for us that he might live in us. Lord, we pray that we may be living examples of his life at work, changing us, redeeming us, correcting us, forgiving us, healing us, meeting all our needs. We give thanks for this glorious message you have given us to declare, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

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