

“Continue Steadfastly in Prayer”

The Tenth and Final in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

Texts: Colossians 4:2-18; Daniel 2:1-13

Whenever we preach through a letter such as Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae, we can become so preoccupied with its message and application to our own situation, it is easy to forget that these letters were intended to be read aloud to a congregation composed of first century Christian believers—our brothers and sisters in Christ—with whom we will spend an eternity. When we come to the end of a New Testament letter such as this, if we take the time to consider this material, we can gain a fascinating glimpse into the lives of those people who served this church, who worshiped in this church, as well as learning of their comings and goings while at the same time witness our Lord’s faithfulness to his people two thousand years ago in the midst of a very pagan first century Greco-Roman world.

Paul was imprisoned in Rome when his letter to Colossians was written. Not sure of the outcome of his appeal to Caesar, Paul he makes no comment on whether or not he plans to visit the cities of the Lycus Valley (Colossae, Laodicea, and Hieropolis). Paul had never been to Colossae (2:1) and did not know personally many of the Christians there—in contrast to his letters to Philippi or Ephesus, cities in which he had stayed and therefore knew well many of the members of the church to which he was writing. In light of the present uncertainties, Paul’s messengers Tychicus and Onesimus will come to Colossae in person and fill them in the details which Paul is not able to include in his letter. But it becomes obvious that as we read Paul’s closing words to the Colossians, we are indeed reading someone else’s mail.

We now wrap-up our ten part series on Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Next time we’ll begin a new series on Galatians, likely the first canonical letter written by Paul, as early as 47-48 AD. As we wrap up our time in Colossians this week, we will do something a bit differently. Given the personal nature of this closing section, we will begin by looking at Paul’s closing comments (vv. 7-18) before we turn to Paul’s exhortation to the Colossians to continue in prayer and to be faithful in their Christian witness, found in vv. 2-6. The application in this section speaks directly to us and our situation, so verses 2-6 are a more suitable place to end our time in this epistle.

The closing material (vv. 7-18) contains a number of directives to the Christians in Colossae as Paul has much to say, but little space and time to do so. He commissions two messengers to take this letter to Colossae (vv. 7-9). He also sends a series of greetings (in vv. 10-15). Next, Paul directs that this letter is to be forwarded to the church in Laodicea (v. 16) because, presumably, as a neighboring church to Colossae, the Laodiceans faced the same false teaching as the Colossians. Finally, Paul exhorts a man named Archippus about his ministry (v. 17), before sending his blessing to the Colossians (v. 18).

Paul wraps up by endorsing the messengers he is sending back to Colossae, two men named Tychicus and Onesimus. In verses 7-9, Paul details that “*Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.*” Tychicus plays a prominent role in Paul’s later ministry. According to Acts 20:4, Tychicus was from “Asia” (Asia Minor—Turkey) and accompanied Paul on his final visit to Jerusalem (to bring famine

relief to the Jewish Christians from their Gentile brothers and sisters in Greece). Paul speaks quite highly of Tychicus, calling him a beloved brother and faithful minister. He too is a fellow servant of the Lord—recalling Paul’s previous discussion about how all Christians are servants of Jesus, their true and heavenly master.¹

Paul’s mention of Tychicus essentially repeats Paul’s directive in Ephesians 6:21-22. “*So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts.*” That Tychicus is the messenger bringing Paul’s two epistles from Rome to Asia Minor is important for dating this letter to the Colossians, tying it to the time Paul composed his circular letter sent to the church in Ephesus (Ephesians)—in the early sixties. Tychicus was likely Paul’s chosen messenger to take this same letter to Colossae and then on to Laodicea.

Tychicus had made his way to Rome to visit Paul during his imprisonment. As someone Paul trusts, Tychicus is given the two-fold task of delivering Paul’s mail to the churches (one letter to Ephesus and another to Colossae and Laodicea), but was also responsible to inform the churches of all the troubles that Paul had endured which culminated in his appeal to Nero Caesar—a series of legal hearings which began with Paul’s arrest in the Jerusalem temple and his subsequent appearances (on appeal because he was a Roman citizen) before the Roman authorities in Jerusalem, then the Roman governor Felix in Caesarea, then before Agrippa and his wife Bernice, before heading on to Rome for his final appeal to Caesar. Paul’s series of legal appeals and his compelling apologetic arguments for the truth of Christianity made to the various government officials hearing his case are recounted in Acts 21-28.

Luke’s account (the author of Acts), ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28), the same period when Paul composed the “prison letters” of Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. Presumably, since Tychicus was with Paul on his trip to Jerusalem where Paul was arrested, he is well familiar with the facts of Paul’s appeals to high government officials. No doubt, Tychicus was to recount these events to the churches, along with a status report on Paul’s appeal to Nero.

Paul also mentions Onesimus, a slave, whose circumstances are spelled out in more detail Paul’s letter to Philemon. It appears as though Onesimus met Paul in Rome and was converted through Paul’s ministry. Paul only says here that Onesimus is faithful and beloved brother, who is “one of you,” that is, a member of the church in Colossae. Paul speaks of him with the same glowing and affectionate terms as he does of Tychicus and Epaphras, which reflects Paul’s prior comments about slaves and masters.² A Christian who might be a slave is no slave in the kingdom of God, because as Paul told the Colossians (3:11), “*here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*” Onesimus will also help Tychicus recount Paul’s situation in Rome.

In verses 10-15, Paul extends a series of personal greetings. The first comes from “*Aristarchus my fellow prisoner [who] greets you.*” Aristarchus is a Greek name, but he may have been a Jew prior to his conversion (from what Paul says later). He too was associated with Paul previously and is also mentioned in Philemon (v. 24). In Acts 19:29, he is mentioned as Paul’s traveling companion in Macedonia (Greece). In Acts 20:4, we are told that he is from the city of Thessalonica. We also know

¹ Bruce, Colossians, 176.

² Moo, Colossians, 336.

from Acts 27:2, that he is with Paul during the first part of his voyage to Rome. We are not sure if Paul means that Aristarchus is literally a prisoner (under house arrest like Paul), or if he is a captive of Jesus (in the metaphorical sense). The former is likely. He is imprisoned in Rome like Paul.³

The next person to be mentioned is “*Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him).*” Mark (also known as John-Mark—whose mother was among the first Christians in Jerusalem) is the one and the same man, who, when, after traveling with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch, turned back when the others went on to Pamphylia. This led to Paul’s refusal to bring Mark on the next missionary journey (about A.D. 49), which, in turn, led to some sort of a rift between Paul and Barnabas.⁴ We also know that Mark later made his way to Rome, became closely associated with Peter, and then composed the canonical gospel which bears his name. Mark has likely checked in on Paul, but it appears as though Mark has left the city of Rome for parts east. Should Mark make his way to Colossae, he is to be welcomed, according to Paul’s instructions. Whatever concerns Paul may have had about Mark earlier, have long since evaporated. All is well.

Next on the list is “*Jesus who is called Justus.*” From his name, we know him to be a Jewish Christian—Jesus is the Greek form of “Joshua,” and that his family took a Latin surname, “Justus.” He is with Paul in Rome, but is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. Mark and Jesus (and perhaps Aristarchus) are “*the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.*” “Men of circumcision” identifies them as Jewish believers in Jesus. Paul has the highest praise for these men as fellow workers (servants of Jesus) and participants in the kingdom of God—a reference to the in-breaking of God’s kingdom into the present age, which results from the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ in his act of new creation. It is but another way of saying that they have been active in the preaching of the gospel, likely among the Jews.

Paul moves on to mention one of the Colossian pastors, Epaphras, the man who brought Paul the news and details of the Colossian Heresy then seeping into the churches of the Lycus Valley. “*Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.*” Epaphras, who was converted under Paul’s ministry when Paul had been in Ephesus, is also “one of them,” a member of the Colossian church and was one who labored throughout the region, Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. It is he who very likely was the first to preach the gospel in the region.⁵ Paul speaks affectionately of him as “a servant and fellow minister of Christ Jesus.”

Paul can testify of him that Epaphras regularly prays for his Colossian brothers and sisters while he has been in Rome away from his congregation. He wrestles and contends for the Colossians—Paul uses athletic metaphors to demonstrate Epaphras’ zeal and concern for the Colossian congregation. His prayers on their behalf have focused upon their maturity, and assurance of God’s favor in Jesus Christ in the face of the challenges raised by those advocating the Colossian Heresy. Epaphras wants nothing for the Colossians other than that the will of God be realized in their midst. His efforts are apparent to Paul,

³ Moo, Colossians, 337-338.

⁴ Moo, Colossians, 338-339.

⁵ Moo, Colossians, 343.

who, in turn, commends him to his congregation. This man is a faithful servant and pastor, he cares greatly about his flock, and is not only devoted to prayer for them, but all can see how hard he has worked on their behalf. Paul has seen this first hand and wants the Colossians to be aware of it.

Next, Paul mentions two others, Luke (the author of the Gospel and the Book of Acts) and a man named Demas. “*Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.*” Luke was a medical doctor—it is from this single reference we know Luke’s occupation. It is Luke who was with Paul in the “we” sections of the Book of Acts. He is currently with Paul in Rome, likely tending to Paul’s needs along with the other brothers imprisoned with him. Luke is clearly a Gentile. As for Demas, he is mentioned along with Luke as co-senders greetings in verse 24 of Paul’s short letter to Philemon. He is also mentioned again in 2 Timothy 4:10-11, where we are told sadly, “*Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*” Whether this means Demas had departed from the faith, or whether he left Paul when Paul needed him is not explained. We hear nothing more of him.

In verse 15, Paul adds, “*give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.*” Although this letter is sent to the Colossians, it was to also be sent on to Laodicea to be read there too. This congregation met in the home of a Gentile woman named “Nympha.” It is easy to overlook (since we are used to churches meeting in larger buildings specifically designed for the purpose of worship and church life) that at this point in history, Christian congregations frequently met in homes—many of the large homes had a private walled-in area at the front suitable for banquets or conducting business. People of means allowed the churches to meet in these spaces.

Sometimes the church in a given city was small and one home was sufficient for all of them to meet. We know from Paul’s letter to Philemon that the church in Colossae met in Philemon’s home, as the church in Laodicea met in Nympha’s. Yet, in other instances recorded in the New Testament—as in Jerusalem—several house churches are mentioned, but all of which maintained close ties and fellowship with one another. The reason for this was Christians could not safely meet in public places, and the courtyards of large homes were not only private but also quite suitable for church meetings.

Paul instructs the Colossians to make sure this letter is to be read aloud, and then passed on to the church meeting in Nympha’s home in Laodicea. “*And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.*” This latter comment raises quite a mystery. What is this other letter from Laodicea? Some wonder if this was yet another letter from Paul which has now been lost to us, or may have been the original letter we now know as Ephesians (since the designation “at Ephesus” in Ephesians 1:1 is possibly a later addition).⁶ We simply do not know more about this letter other than it was lost early on and no trace of it or citations from it have ever been found.

In verse 17, Paul sends a specific message. “*And say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.’*” We know from Philemon 2 that Archippus was a member of Philemon’s household, possibly his son.⁷ But we do not know the nature of his ministry, nor whether he was to fulfill it in Colossae or Laodicea. There are as many guesses as to what Paul means as there are commentators who comment upon this epistle.

⁶ See the discussion in Baugh, Ephesians, 32-35.

⁷ Bruce, Colossians, 185.

The Letter to the Colossians closes with Paul's apostolic blessing. *"I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you."* Unlike his epistle to the church in Rome, when he employed a professional secretary, Tertius (16:22), Paul wrote down this letter himself. This was no small task in an age with poor writing materials (parchment or vellum) with the need to carefully organize your thoughts so that when written down they fit within the confines of the available material. His request for prayer is an important reminder of all that Paul has suffered, *"remember my chains."* This prayer was answered when Paul was subsequently released by Nero, and then probably undertook a fourth missionary journey to the Western Mediterranean possibly getting as far as Spain. But Paul eventually returned to Rome where he was put to death by Nero just outside the city about 66 A.D. As is typical for him, Paul extends a wish that God's grace be with the Colossians, something they will need if they are to continue their struggle against those advocating the Colossian Heresy.

With the concluding matters wrapped up, we now turn to the previous section of Colossians (vv. 2-6), when Paul exhorts the Colossians to live out their submission to the Lordship of Christ in very practical ways, to be steadfast in prayer and continue their witness to the gospel. These exhortations apply to the Colossians in their unique circumstances, but also extend to the church in every age, including our own.

Paul first exhortation in verse 2 is simple and direct. *"Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving."* Prayer is not to be an afterthought for a Christian. Nor is it something Christians are to do occasionally. Paul tells us to be devoted to it. One of the ways the Reformed tradition has emphasized this is through our church order when the duties for elders, ministers, and deacons are set forth. The first item on the list of duties for each of these offices is prayer. Our church order directs that all church-related meetings are to begin in prayer, and our council and consistory keep a discrete prayer list from which we pray during every meeting.

Historically, the Reformed churches have placed significant emphasis upon the pastoral prayer—the so-called "long prayer." I use the written version because it includes all the things in the New Testament for which Christians are instructed to pray. As a congregation we assemble to hear God's word, receive the sacraments, and offer back to God our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. But we also gather together to pray for those things which Scripture exhort us to pray, but we also add particular needs of our congregation. This is one of the most important things that we do together on the Lord's day—pray.

Our catechism describes prayer as the chief exercise of thanksgiving (Q & A 116) and it is something to which each individual Christian should be devoted—whether that be regular set times of prayer, or as part of your internal mental dialogue, or both. Jesus taught that the Lord's Prayer is to be the model for all Christian prayer, so it is not as though it is a mystery for what and how to pray. One thing I would suggest that everyone do is join the Christ Reformed prayer chain so that whenever anyone requests prayer, you can pray for the needs of your brothers and sisters in our church family as well as make your own needs known.

In verses 3-4, Paul asks the Colossians for specific prayers for himself and for the on-going success of his ministry. *"At the same time, pray also for us, 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, which is how I ought to speak."* When the Colossians pray, Paul wants them to pray for several things. The first is to pray *"for us,"* that is for those in Paul's circle, including those imprisoned with Paul, or those in Rome (like Timothy and Luke) who are supporting him.

Specifically they are to pray for the ongoing success of Paul's mission, which is to take the gospel to the

ends of the earth. The Colossians are to pray that God opens a door for the word—that is that the gospel may be preached in those places which are resistant to it. Widely used in the ancient world, an “open door” is a fitting metaphor for Paul’s evangelistic efforts. Paul wants the Colossians to pray for the spread of the gospel, and that as the word is preached it might have great and on-going effect.⁸

As Calvin reminds us, “we have a remarkable example of modesty in Paul calling others to his assistance, so we are told that it is a most difficult thing to persevere steadfastly in defense of the Gospel, especially when danger presses. . . Consider, too, [Paul’s] amazing zeal. He is not worried about his own safety . . . He makes his own life secondary to the glory of Christ and the spread of the Gospel.”⁹ The application for us is to make sure that we pray for the success of the gospel. First, around the world—that Christ’s kingdom would advance to the ends of the earth. Second, we are to pray for those missionaries we support as a congregation—that their ministries would find open doors to preach and share the gospel of Christ crucified. Third, that Christ would enable/cause us to preach and share the gospel, not only in our preaching and teaching as a congregation, but also that each one of us would be willing and bold in our sharing of the gospel with others within our own spheres of influence. Paul’s ministry has run its course, so we ought not pray for him. But our ministry—both corporately and individually—is on-going. Let us devote ourselves to praying for “open doors” that we might see people come to faith in Christ, and that Jesus would be pleased to add people (especially new converts) to our congregation.

In verse 5, Paul exhorts the Colossians to “*walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.*” A number of commentators have noted that Paul’s statement echoes the Greek text of Daniel 2:8—“*you are trying to gain time*”—a portion of our Old Testament lesson. This is of interest to us for two reasons. For one thing it indicates that Paul is well familiar with Daniel’s prophecy, a fact which chips away at the reasoning of those critical scholars who argue that Daniel was a late and rather obscure prophecy. Paul was familiar with enough with the Book of Daniel that his exhortation reflects a passage in Daniel 2 found on the lips of king Nebuchadnezzar. The other important fact is that this may mean that Paul understood that the messianic kingdom foretold by Daniel, is fulfilled, in part, by Paul’s Gentile mission.¹⁰ That Paul echoes Daniel like this is no small thing.

The Colossians are to consider how outsiders see them. The pagans are watching us. They smell self-righteousness a mile away. They laugh at church scandals, they mock us when we speak of the Lord’s return (2 Peter 3), and when we do dumb things. While we cannot change our message to make Christianity’s rough edges more acceptable to them, nevertheless, we must be careful in their presence. Because our message is offensive, they are looking for excuses to reject it. Let us not give them any. How do we deal with sin—firmly but with mercy? Do we practice what we preach? Do we spend all our time on irrelevant matters and foolish preoccupations. Wisdom dictates that if non-Christians are offended by our message, well then, so be it. If they are offended by our actions, well then, that is a different matter, and something of which we should be well-aware and always striving to improve.

Finally, then, Paul exhorts the Colossians, “*let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*” Nothing turns people off to the gospel of

⁸ Moo, Colossians, 322.

⁹ Calvin, Colossians, 357.

¹⁰ Carson and Beale, New Testament Commentary on the Old Testament, 868.

Christ more than harsh words, or self-righteous “know it alls” who are here to correct them. At the same time, our best witness to them is to trust the power of the Holy Spirit to convert folks through the preached gospel. But Paul adds to this that we must all be prepared to interact with others outside the church. That means being able to answer the silly and/or thoughtful objections non-Christian raise when we share Christ with them. I think I’ve heard it said somewhere, “know what you believe, and why you believe it.” That is not just a ministry slogan, but an exhortation from Paul. Trust me, the time you spend reading your Bibles, studying our confessions and catechisms, and reading thoughtful Christian writers, will pay off when you talk with those outside the church. Are you ready to answer others?

Paul’s exhortations to the Colossians clearly apply to us. We do not need to be professional theologians or apologists to be steadfast in prayer or answer objections from non-Christians. We can start by praying for open doors, for the success of the gospel, and for the wisdom we need to be faithful witnesses to Jesus in our dark and increasingly secular and pagan age. We can begin with Paul’s simple exhortation, “*continue steadfastly in prayer.*” Jesus is our mediator, and the Holy Spirit intercedes for us when we know not how to pray. So we start where we are, and pray zealously that God will open plenty of doors to proclaim the gospel—Christ’s death for sin, his resurrection from the dead, and the summons to trust him for the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of imputed righteousness.

So let us devote ourselves to prayer and be watchful with thanksgiving. Amen!