

The Conversational Life: Why Prayer Matters

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[0:00] So, I got to tell you a little bit about me as kind of a lead-in into the sermon this morning, because this actually fits. So, I think I've been here long enough.

I'm secure enough in my role here and in our relationship that I can tell you something about myself that some of you might be offended by. I am not a fisherman.

Just not my cup of tea. Don't tell Ben Bergen and the kids. It'll probably ruin our friendship forever.

But I just never understood what is the appeal of fishing.

Why would you do that? I don't understand. And yet I know men I deeply respect and admire, Jim Potter being one of them, Ben being another one, who love to fish. What's the appeal?

I just don't get it. So, and truth be told, because I'm kind of an irreverent guy, I may have made fun of fishermen a time or two. So, 10 years or so ago, I was driving a car for one of my kids from Seattle to Colorado, I think.

[1:03] I don't remember where I was going. But it was a beautiful morning. I was just east of Twin Falls, Idaho, which is a beautiful part of the country. The sun's just coming up, and I just, I'm at peace with the world.

I'm thinking about my family. I'm thinking about responsibilities at work. I think I worked for a church at the time out in Seattle. I was praying.

And as I was driving, I thought, oh my goodness, I'm fishing. Now I understand. It's not about fishing.

Maybe a little bit about fishing. But it's more about the time to be reflective and peaceful and have something else going on. Men, I think, in particular, need something to keep our hands busy, to allow our minds to think and to drift, and to focus on things that we need to learn.

And so, for me, I realized driving is that for me. That when I'm driving, it's really a good chance for me to think, to pray. Oftentimes, I'll have either music or a book I want to get better acquainted with to drive my thinking.

[2:10] But it's really helpful to me. I've had some great times just thinking about the Lord while I'm driving. So, why is that relevant? Because I'm going to ask you to pray for me this next few days, which is the topic of our sermon this morning.

Right after church this morning, Eric and I are going to grab something to eat, and then we're headed to Chicago because I am flying to Seattle tonight to drive Mike and Maureen Lytle's truck all the way back here.

So, for me, it's a time of prayer and reflection, but I'd really appreciate you praying for safety on the road. I think this is a great illustration of what Jesus said. We leave the 99 to get the 1.

Well, that's what we're doing. That's how we work here at Tri-State. So, Mike and Maureen will be here, I think, next week. Is that right? They'll be here. Speaking of which, on Thursday, we are going to have a moving party at their new house.

So, set aside Thursday afternoon. We're going to start at 2. If you can get there at that time or any time after, come on over. Libby has the address. Eric has the address. And we will happily accept your help to get the truck unloaded into their new home.

[3:19] But be praying for them as well. This is a big transition for them. Libby grew up in that home that they're leaving in Seattle. And so, to move to Dubuque is a big deal. And they know you well.

You know Mike and Maureen. But we want to make them feel loved in the scene. So, prayer is the emphasis this morning. That's what we want to have our focus on. So, let's think a little bit about Paul's flow of thought.

One of the things that I have learned over the course of my life is it's very easy when you're teaching the Bible or you're reading the Bible or studying the Bible to pigeonhole yourself on what's called a proof text.

A proof text is a verse often, not always, but often taken out of context to make a point. And it might be accurate. What you're saying might be true.

But in focusing narrowly on a particular verse or passage, we miss how it fits into the broader context of the chapter, the book, and even the flow of the entire Bible.

[4:18] A great example is a passage we're going to be studying this morning. I have taught on prayer from Colossians 4, 2 through 4, more times than I can count. It's a very important passage.

But I got so tunnel-visioned on, I don't know if that's a word, but so tunnel-visioned onto that particular passage that I failed to see that it really fits in with a broader teaching that Paul is doing through the book of Colossians.

And that's part of what I want you to see today is that that broader scope is really important. And it will hopefully flesh out your understanding of what it means to be a man or woman of prayer.

Because prayer is absolutely essential for us as believers. So let's take a look at this and see how it fits in. Now if you recall, one of the themes of Colossians is this idea of mystery.

The Colossian heresy was formulated to address the mystery of life. Why do we endure the things that we endure? Why do bad things happen to good people?

[5:22] Why do good things happen to bad people? Why do I experience the things that I do? Sometimes, oftentimes we feel like we're a victim. Why is this the way it is?

What is going on? What's the mystery? Why am I here? The bigger questions. Why do I exist? What's my purpose? Why do I exist? And so the Gnostic heretics, and let's be honest, we do the same thing if we're not careful.

This is part of the human condition apart from Christ. We're trying to figure out the solution for the mystery of why we face the things that we face. And for the Gnostics, the whole idea, and this is what underlines every approach to solving mystery other than in Christ, is at some point it becomes about me.

I'm in control. I'm the one who's determining the pace. I'm the one. And that was the heresy in Colossae. What did they have to do?

They had to keep all these holy days. They had to adopt an ascetic lifestyle, denying themselves, having extra fasting days, and restricting their diet, and having certain holy days.

[6:35] And then they had to go into this type of spiritual warfare where they're going and assaulting and climbing the mountains to get to heaven to earn the right to appear before God, to demand an answer.

What is the answer to these big questions? And so it becomes all about me storming the gates of heaven to get the answers that I deeply need.

Those needs are core to our identity of who we are. That mystery is woven into the fabric of our being. And so these heresies, including the one in the first century, we talked a bit about deconstruction.

That's a current one. This idea of completely throwing away the Bible and only keeping the parts that we like, that seem to fit. It's our way of trying to figure out the answer and come to some sort of peace in the face of terrifying mystery.

We're terrified by the unknown. It's overwhelming. Part of what leads into this predisposition that we have to create our own answers, to create heretical solutions, is we don't understand the problem.

[7:55] Several months ago, I was reading a book called *The Meaning of Your Life* by Arthur Brooks, and he talked about complicated challenges in problem solving versus complex challenges in problem solving.

If you don't remember, it doesn't hurt my feelings because I'm going to remind you. But they're very different. But contemporary research is showing that this is a really good picture of how our brains work and how we approach problems.

The problem is, actually there's a lot of problems, but one of the major problems is that we oftentimes take complex problems, but treat them as if they were complicated.

Let's talk about what that means. Eliana, give me that first slide, please. So this is going to give you a quick outline of complicated challenges. First of all, complicated challenges are challenges that we solve with the left hemisphere of our brain.

The left hemisphere is very analytical. We look at all the problems. It's procedural. We want to process. I overheard somebody this week, I think it was Pete Langlois, talking about the fact that he looked at a YouTube video that Tim Biang had done explaining how our presentation software works, and he could see, boom, boom, boom, boom, the steps.

[9:07] That's a complicated problem and a complicated solution, and the right application at that moment. So in our brain, we're on the left hemisphere. It's analytical. It's procedural.

It's linear. So A, B, C, D. We follow a process. It's focused on how to and what do we do. Doesn't that sound like what we described with the Colossian heresy?

They came up with this whole formula that people had to follow in order to gain access to God. So the nature of this type of problem is that it's hard and intricate.

Sometimes it's very complicated. But with enough technical knowledge, data, and computational horsepower, our own brains or our brains together or artificial intelligence or whatever, we can solve these problems.

They're surmountable. We can wrap our hands around them and our brains around them. And the nice thing is once we solve them, they're solved. We now know how to address that particular problem.

[10:09] That's complicated problems. We face those every day. My car is making a funny sound. Step A, call Brian Smith. No, just kidding. You go through this process of thinking through what's the problem?

Where do I take it to get it solved? Or how do I solve it? That's our whole life. That's a big part of our lives. But it's not the sum total. And complicated challenges are not the biggest questions that we face.

The existential questions, the who am I? Why am I here? Those questions can't be answered this way. But we try. Eliana, give me the next slide.

The big questions about ourselves, about God, about why the world works the way it does, are complex problems. That's on the right side of our brain.

That's the more creative side. It's more, it takes a different approach. That's where the arts are found. Music. It's holistic. It's holistic, meaning it looks at the entire problem, not just the narrow focus.

[11:20] It's transcendent. What does that mean? It means it sees beyond the tangible, the right in front. It can look beyond to find solutions.

It's intuitive. And ultimately, it's focused on why. Why am I here? Why am I in the circumstances I'm in? Those are the questions that are complex.

Now, the nature of the problem is, they're easy to understand intuitively. Because we all have these questions. All of us. At every age. I can remember, I think I was 10 years old, laying in my bed out in Colorado, and thinking about being on this dust speck of a planet, actually, before I even got to that point, being one of four billion people spread across the face of the earth.

There is this nondescript planet in a nondescript solar system that's in the backwaters of a galaxy, that's in the backwaters of the universe. Who am I?

What am I? Who cares? Who cares? I was 10. I think even some kids come up against those questions. Because, again, they're hardwired into us.

[12:40] They actually direct us to God. It's not surprising that several years later, because that nag at the back of my mind, I found Jesus. But I don't want to get ahead of myself.

So the nature of the problem is, it's easy to understand intuitively, but impossible to permanently solve. You can't just put together a procedure to figure out, why am I here? They must be managed and lived through.

You actually experience the answer. It's a process of thinking and examining and experimenting and working through the experiences of our lives in community, in relationship with God.

Now, I'm definitely getting ahead of myself, but that's okay. We process these things in an entirely different way. And as far as permanence goes, these problems continue to come up.

They're dynamic and recurring. That means they shift constantly. They resist final formulas.

Because here's the reality. Ten-year-old me was confounded by the question of, why do I exist?

[13:41] How did I end up here? And I tell you, it scared me. I mean, truly scared me. And made me feel insignificant and nothing. Little. And then, as I went through my life, even as a Christian, I faced those questions again.

I'm 20. Why am I here? What's the purpose of my life? Then I was 30 with four kids. What do I do now? How do I continue?

What's my purpose now? And then I'm 40 and my kids are growing up and I'm 50. And you understand. These questions continue. And the problem is formulas don't answer them.

We know that. You know that. I've got a ton of books in the self-help genre on my shelves in my office back there.

And many of them say, we are not going to give you a formula to solve XYZ problem. Because there isn't a formula for these problems. And you're going to see as we go through this morning that prayer is an absolutely essential part of addressing complex problems.

[14:48] Because it invites God into the conversation. And that's where we need to focus. But the problem that Paul is addressing in Colossians and the problem that we face is a temptation to make these complex, most important questions into complicated problems that we think we can solve.

And we can't. And that's the fundamental point that Paul is making in this passage. So give me the next slide, please, Eliana. We've quoted this verse many, many times.

This is Colossians 2.23. These are matters, the complicated solutions. These are matters which have to be sure the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body.

We're sure this will work. I just know it will. Even Christian answers. I'll just read my Bible more. I'll listen to more worship music. Maybe I need more intense worship music.

Maybe I need older worship music. I need to do these other things. They appear wise. But, what's Paul end with? But are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

[16:00] I keep saying this because you've got to get this point. This is so critical. Changing these things. Giving yourself rules. I don't care how disciplined you are.

You're not disciplined enough. You're just not. I'm not. You're not. We cannot do it. These are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

None whatsoever. But then, we start to see the answer. Actually, Paul gave us the answer before this passage. Next slide, please, Eliana. Colossians 1.27.

Paul addresses this idea of mystery. What is the mystery revealed? What gives us the answer? God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this majesty, of this mystery.

If you recall, early in this series, we spent a lot of time looking at the middle portion of Colossians 1. Looking at the character and work and person of Jesus.

[17:08] Jesus, we camped there because he literally is the answer that our heart craves. And look at these words.

It's the riches of the glory of this mystery. We talked about standing. When we're looking at Jesus, we're standing at the summit of Mount Everest and seeing everything spread out below us.

And everything makes sense when we see Jesus. God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

If you have put your trust in Christ, Christ literally is within you. And he is the hope of glory. He is going to answer these questions and show us the path and continue to answer them as they come up again and again and again, because they will over the passage of our lives.

Christ in you, the hope of glory. So now chapter 3. Hey, Catherine, could you hand me my water, please, the one that's got the fancy straw? Thank you.

[18:27] You girls have got fancy boots this morning. Thank you. All right, now I'm better. So now we're into chapter 3.

And I'm just going to give you a quick overview. In verses 1 and 2 of chapter 3, there's not a slide for this, Eliana. You know, verses 1 and 2 of chapter 3, and actually, the passage we're going to study this morning, our bookends, where Paul is revealing to us, okay, great.

The mystery revealed is Christ in you, the hope of glory. What does that mean? How do I access that power? How do I get, how do I take advantage of this thing that supposedly is being offered to me?

Well, the bookends essentially say the same thing in different words. In verses 1 and 2 of chapter 3, Paul says, keep seeking the things above where Christ is seated. Verse 1.

Verse 2 says, set your mind on things above, not on the earth. So we shift our focus from here to there. And of course, the centerpiece of heaven is Jesus himself.

[19:35] And then in Colossians 4, which we'll get into in a minute, devote yourselves to prayer. Well, that's how you seek the things above. And then sandwiched between those two bookends, to mix the metaphors, Paul first looks at what we've left behind, our old identity, are the consequences of trying to pursue my way of doing things.

The sinful flesh is died with Christ on the cross, and we put it aside. And then the next verse is, talk about what we put on. Because of who we are in Christ. Now remember, this is the other passage I want to just hammer into your head.

One is, 223, your rules can't change your behavior. chapter 3, verse 12. You really should memorize these verses. Chapter 3, verse 12 is about your identity.

So as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved. That's your identity. We are operating out of our identity. We are new people in Christ.

And what we're exploring is how to see that identity find its fullest expression in our lives, in a moment-by-moment, lived-out basis. That's what we're talking about here.

[20:50] And so in the verses that follow, down to verse 17, Paul is painting a portrait. This is what that person looks like. If you're in Christ, you have these things.

You are compassionate. Now you might not be perfect. You may have to grow in it. But God is developing a heart of compassion in you. Kindness, humility, gentleness, patience.

Gee, that sounds like Galatians 5, 22 and 23. The fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, etc. It's God's work in you to bring out that identity.

We learn to bear with one another. And boy, do we have to put up with each other, don't we? One of the things I always say when I mention that passage, it's easy to go, yeah, I have to put up with you. Truth is, you have to put up with me.

I'm sorry. We need to have that mindset. It's reciprocal. But we bear with one another. We forgive each other. We let complaints go. We put on love, which is a perfect bond of unity.

[21:47] We speak truth to each other based on the Word of God. We sing songs to each other because God has wired our brains that music imprints truth into our brains.

These are the characteristics and the behaviors of somebody who's living out their life, their identity in Christ. Christ. This is the new you.

And God is at work in you to bring that new you into being. And he summarizes in verse 17 with whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to him to God the Father.

And then the next verses, 3.18-4.1, he's giving us common examples. He's telling us marriage is a great example of what it means to live out your identity in Christ.

It's a good context. Do you have to be married to understand that? No. Because all of us have had some collision with marriage, good or bad, over the course of our lives because we're alive.

[22:49] We understand the relationship between husbands and wives. We understand the relationships between fathers and children. children. That's a great picture. And then he takes us to the marketplace and Paul shows us in the marketplace.

This is how you live out your identity. I'm retired. I don't have a job. I'm 12. I don't have a job. But it's still a way, it's an example to give us a context.

Yes, these apply to those specific arenas that Paul talks about, but they're also principles that we should be thinking about. How does this apply to all of my life? We want to look at where does that find expression?

And then we come to chapter 4, verses 2 through 4. Let's read that together. Starting at verse 2. Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving. Praying at the same time for us as well that God will open up to us a door for the word so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ for which I have been imprisoned, that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

[24:03] Father, we want to be people who are immersed in prayer, that are devoted to prayer, because we truly, deeply understand that in prayer we commune with you, we have the opportunity to hear your voice, we get access to your wisdom, which is greater than ours, your strength, that's certainly greater than ours, your perspective.

You see things that we don't see. Lord, as we talk about prayer this morning, I pray that we would be moved to pray, individually, collectively, that prayer would become a priority for us.

God, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So I want you to think about this. In chapter 4, verse 2, Paul is looking at general principles as they relate to prayer.

Prayer is essential to our practice of following Jesus because it brings our master's wisdom and power to bear on the complex challenges of life. We need to remember it's complex problems, primarily.

We also want to pray about the complicated ones, but especially the complex. We want to take these things to God. Now, one of our core values, actually the very first one, is following Jesus.

[25 : 18] We have decided that we're going to follow Jesus. And we talked about this months ago, that following Jesus is putting ourselves under his authority as apprentices.

We are his disciples. We're following him. We want to become like Jesus. My son, as you've heard me say, is an apprentice. He's almost ready to be an apprentice. He's not quite to that level yet, so he's really low on the totem pole.

But he is becoming an apprentice electrician. He is joined at the hip to the master electrician who employs him. I mean, literally, they drive to work together.

They talk about work together. They're constantly talking about the principles of electricity and how not to shock yourself and how not to burn down homes and how to meet the codes and all that stuff. But it's a constant dialogue. Micah is watching his master. He's listening to his master. He's asking questions of his master. He is getting reviewed by his master as he does the work himself.

[26 : 23] That's the picture of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And prayer is essential because that is part of our communication with God. Micah has to go, his boss's name is Grayson, Micah has to go to Grayson and say, okay, you asked me to do this task.

You forget how little I know. So can we go over this again? And Grayson, most of the time, patiently says, yep, remember this goes here and that goes there. And remember this code that we talked about in class?

And so there's that dialogue. Prayer serves that purpose. And because it's so essential, Paul commands us to devote ourselves to prayer.

Devote ourselves to it. What does it mean to be devoted to something? First of all, the idea is to be steadfastly attentive to something.

Think about somebody who's learning to play an instrument or has mastered an instrument and continues to grow. They practice and practice and practice and practice. And it's not just random practice. It's a very deliberate practice that involves watching what I'm doing, that it's evaluating what I've done, correcting behavior that's off the mark.

[27 : 38] It's really focused on improvement. And it's very honest with myself. Wow, that was terrible. I need to change this behavior.

This was great. I need to change that. Every week, sometime during the week, I listen to my sermons. And I watch and I cringe. And I, okay, we need to change that.

We need to fix that piece. Because I want to be able to communicate effectively to you. That's being steadfast. That's being devoted to my craft of communicating God's truth.

Paul wants us to have that attitude toward prayer. We'll come back to that. The other idea behind this word devoted is to give unremitting care. Think of somebody caring for a loved one whose health is failing, needs focused attention.

Or a baby. We have a baby in our house. An adult is occupied if Benji's eyes are open, an adult is engaged.

[28 : 39] It's a little annoying. Because if you're the only adult in the room and you've got to go to the bathroom, how long can you hold it? Start yelling for an adult or texting or whatever.

But that's the idea of care. We love Benji, little guy. We're praying for him to be potty trained someday. But we care for him.

Every adult in our house knows how to interpret his cry. Oh, that's a poopy diaper cry. Oh, that's a need a bottle cry. Oh, that's just I need to go to sleep cry. And you learn to assess and to care for him.

That's part of being devoted to prayer. That we're thinking about prayer. We're taking care in it. We're focused on prayer.

Let me give you another example of where we see this word devotion used. A familiar passage. You don't need to turn there because I've got slides. It should be the next slide, Eliana, in Acts chapter 2.

[29:41] This is a description of the early church. So to set the stage, Pentecost had happened. The 120 people in the upper room were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter went out, preached a sermon.

People thought he was drunk. He said, no, I'm filled with the Holy Spirit. And 3,000 people came to Christ. And then the end of chapter 2 is describing what emerged from that burst of revival in the temple square on the day of Pentecost.

And so in verse 42 of Acts chapter 2, I'm going to turn there real quick. Whoops. That's a New Testament. Acts chapter 2, verse 42.

They, this is the new believers, the early church, were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

And then down in verse 46, day by day, continuing with one mind in the temple, in breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.

[30:57] And the Lord was adding to their number, day by day, those who were being saved. Now if you look into that passage, give me that next slide, Eliana.

What's described in Acts chapter 2 is this image that we've been using for discipleship. They were, continue devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching. That's the Bible.

To fellowship, that's community. We need each other. To the breaking of bread, that's worship. To prayer. To having meals together. That's back to community. And then, the Lord was adding to their number day by day, those who were being saved.

They were on mission. They weren't just this insulated group that was all in a holy huddle in the corner of the temple doing Christian things and pushing other people aside. No, no. They were on mission.

They were inviting people in. They were saying, we've got the answers. We know what the answer to your questions is. It's Christ in you, the hope of glory. They were devoted to those things.

[32:03] The focus this morning, going back to Colossians 3 and 4, is prayer. But if you look in Colossians 3, these things are there.

What are we doing as believers? We are sharing, speaking to one another in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, teaching the Word of God to one another.

We're devoted to the Word of God. We're praying. We're in worship together. We're in community. We're on mission. We're becoming like Jesus.

And prayer is essential to that. We need to be devoted to prayer. Now, there's a phrase that I want you to take in mind and really contemplate it and own it.

You have been invited into a conversational relationship with God. That's what Paul means when he talks about prayer. You've been invited into a conversational relationship with God.

[33:01] What does that mean? That means, when you're facing those big, complex questions, what is my purpose here? God, what are you teaching me here? What is your goal?

What should I be seeing? You should be talking to God that way. And God will answer. You want to see a great example. We don't have time to go there.

But in Nehemiah chapter 1, Nehemiah gets, Nehemiah's in Babylon, which is in southern Iran today. Nehemiah's brother comes from Jerusalem with a really bad report.

The temple's been destroyed. The walls are destroyed. The people are demoralized. And Nehemiah is overwhelmed with compassion for his people and a desire to see God's people come back together as God's people.

And he spends the entire night praying to God. The whole night. And you see his prayer outlined in Nehemiah chapter 1.

[33:59] That's devoting yourself to prayer. That's a conversational relationship with God. But the other cool thing is, later in the story, I think it's in the next chapter, it might be the end of chapter 1, I can never remember.

But the next part of the story is Nehemiah, who's a very influential member of court. He's a cupbearer of the king, which means he's highly, highly trusted by the king because his job is to make sure the king doesn't get poisoned by tasting the wine and making sure it's safe and holding it safe for the king.

So he's trusted. He knows the king. He's depressed. He probably looks weary because he just spent all night praying. And the king says, Nehemiah, dude, what's your problem? I've never seen

you look downcast like this.

Why are you sad? And here's the great piece. This is a conversational relationship with God.

Nehemiah says, I spoke to God and I addressed the man.

Just like that. I turn to God, I answer the king. That's the way we should live. In the big questions, in the small questions, we should be praying in our quiet time, in our closet, my case this week, while I'm driving, bringing these questions to God and asking him to speak to us.

[35 : 24] But in a moment of crisis, our inclination is to say, I look to heaven, I address the situation. That's a conversational relationship with God. And it comes when we're devoted to God, devoted to prayer.

prayer. Let's continue. Keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving. What does it mean to be alert? Very simple. You're vigilant. You're focused. You're scanning to look.

Where are things that need to be prayed about in my surroundings? We've got to be watching and looking and addressing. I'll give you one that popped on my radar this week.

I was at Charlotte's, big surprise, and there was a young woman who was blind. And I walked around her to get a glass of water, a coffee, whatever, and went back to my seat.

Well, I happened to notice something unique about this young woman. I could see out the window, and she was with a coach who was showing her how to use her cane to navigate a busy intersection.

[36 : 28] Because my guess is she was newly blind. She probably just lost her eyesight. And so she had to learn, okay, I found the post or the pillar for the streetlight, but she was facing the wrong way.

And her coach turned her and told her, okay, you touch this, touch the curb, touch here. So what does that have to do with prayer? I paused and I prayed for her.

I can't imagine what it would be like to lose your eyesight. That would be devastating to me to lose my eyesight. I can't even imagine. And so I prayed for her.

It wasn't elaborate. It wasn't long. But I prayed for her morale, just her feeling of having lost her eyesight and what that must be like. and the difficulty of learning an entirely new way of addressing the world around her.

I prayed for the coach for wisdom to guide her. And then they went their way, went out of my vision where I could see them and I went back to what I was doing, reading whatever I was reading. That's being alert.

[37 : 39] That's being vigilant to look for opportunities to prayer. Now that's one that I'll never, this side of heaven, I'll have no idea if anything happened there. No clue. Brothers and sisters, we have those opportunities every single day in our midst.

We need to be paying attention to each other. We need to be looking. asking yes, but here's the reality of how we are as American Christians. We're too cool to admit that we have a problem. I'm fine. Lie. Everything's great. Another lie. No problems in my life. Lie. Because we don't want to get into it for whatever reason.

But you know what I've discovered? If you just watch, usually we can figure it out. If you care enough to be vigilant and focused, we need to be looking. And don't ask. Just pray.

Pray about what you observe and see where God leads you. So keeping alert equals a predisposition to act. Oftentimes, when we pray something, God will say, cool, now go do something about it.

[38 : 42] You're the answer to the prayer. I'll give you a great example. I think Jesus was doing bait and switch. This is in Luke 10. Again, Jesus has got the 72.

He had just sent out the disciples. They came back. Now he's sending a bigger group out, two by two, to heal, to proclaim the gospel, to testify throughout Galilee. Now, he hasn't sent them yet. He's teaching the 72. Look, the fields are white with harvest. There's need everywhere. Pray for workers.

Now, okay, we've heard that plea, pray for workers, and we think, cool, I can pray for workers and I'll go to work tomorrow and I'll just go about my life. But the next verse, literally the next sentence is, and go.

Jesus said, pray for workers. Oh, by the way, that's you. Off you go. This afternoon, tomorrow at the latest, you are going somewhere where there is somebody who needs to be prayed for.

[39:51] Guaranteed. Pray for them. Ask God to show you and have the boldness and the courage to act, to step into an uncomfortable space, to ask, you look sad.

You okay? Can I pay for your coffee or whatever? I spend a lot of time in coffee shops. Or, you look really happy. What's going on? Tell me about that.

Step into whatever God is directing you to pray for because that opens doors for divine appointments. And divine appointments are so much fun. One of the things I want you to get a hold of is our following Jesus is somber.

It is, Paul didn't say be sober for the purpose of godliness, but at the same time, it's fun to meet people, to connect, to bring the life of Jesus into somebody else's life. I don't want you to discover that and to experience it.

So then also, keeping alert in prayer with Thanksgiving. Oh, sorry. Keeping alert involves Thanksgiving and I'll tell you why. This is really important and I'd never thought about this until this week.

[40:58] Thanksgiving has all sorts of benefits for us. Brene Brown, who is a very well-known, she's a, she's got a master's in social work, she's a counselor, she's done a lot of research and writing in this space about mental health and a core piece of her teaching is gratitude makes an enormous difference in our mental health.

It's transformative in how we approach the world if we're just thankful. And that's, I think that's absolutely true, but that's not the whole story. I'll tell you something else. If you are truly being alert in prayer, if you're scanning, if you're looking, you're looking wherever you go, where's somebody I can pray for?

Where's the circumstance I can pray for? Who has this need? You know what you begin to become sensitive to? Hurt, wounds, brokenness, injustice, sin.

You know what happens when you're immersed in that? If you're not careful, you become cynical. you become hopeless and it ends in despair because you have trained your senses to be looking. But you know what elevates your eye back to where it needs to be? It's gratitude. Remember to be thankful. We are immersed in a hot mess.

[42:24] That's the state of the world. And the more we get to know people, Christian or not, the more apparent it is that not only am I a hot mess, so are you. We all are.

And if we are not careful, focusing, being alert in prayer without thanksgiving will lead us to quit, to give up, to actually pull back to ourselves and I'm just taking care of my mess because yours is too much.

But if we're grateful, we see the confirmation that God does in fact work. God does in fact answer prayer. This isn't all on my shoulders because prayer isn't a magic trick.

It is engaging with the God of heaven who knows more about the situation you're facing than you could possibly know. Oh, you think it's bad? It's worse, probably.

But you're talking to God who knows that. He knows that about you. And as we talk to him, we are bringing in resources, divine resources, to address the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

[43:35] That's living out the gospel. And in the process, the Holy Spirit uses that to shape us into the person of Christ. So those are broad principles in prayer. Now, in verses 3 and 4, Paul asks for prayer specifically for himself, praying at the same time for us, as well, that God will 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, that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

Sharing the gospel is hard. It's almost like speaking a foreign language to somebody. It's not foreign to you, it's foreign to them. So Paul is saying, would you help me? Would you pray? We need to pray for each other that we will have gospel fluency, gospel eloquence to bring the truth to bear on people's lives.

Next week, we're going to go in depth about the impact of our prayer life on our life as lights in the world, sharing the hope of the gospel with people. But for now, your assignment is to devote yourself to prayer.

Work at it. Cultivate that conversational relationship with God. Listen. I want you to approach God assuming he answers.

Assume he answers. Listen. And then tell somebody how he speaks to you. And then be on the alert with thanksgiving to pray.

[45 : 06] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, thank you that you have given us everything we need that truly these complicated and complex issues we face in life find their answer in you.

Lord, help us to learn what it means to live out our identity. What it means to access the power of the gospel because that is Christ in us. That's the hope of glory.

God, let us be a praying people. Pray in Jesus' name. Amen.