

Parting Words

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[0 : 00] You'll be aware, because you've been working through this particular letter, that the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the church at Colossi, had actually never visited the church.

But he did feel some responsibility for its existence. An old student of his, a guy called Epaphras, had gone out from under his teaching.

See, Paul had spent a lot of time in a place called Ephesus. He had based himself there. He did teaching there. And from there, Epaphras had gone out and established this church that was about 100 miles to the east.

And so inevitably, you can see that Paul is keeping some degree of interest in how this church is faring. So much so that when Epaphras visited him in Rome, it seemed the most natural thing for Paul to write to that church in Colossi that Epaphras had founded.

And to encourage them to keep Christ central. And over this series, you'll have seen how Paul dealt with some of the dangerous new teachings that were beginning to infiltrate into church life there in Colossi.

[1 : 12] He was listening to what Epaphras was reporting back to him. For there were those who were suggesting that they needed Jesus plus a works-based ritual.

Whilst others suggested they needed Jesus plus the mystical experiences that were going around the Roman world at the time. So Paul in this letter emphasizes the complete wonder and sufficiency of who Jesus is and what he's done.

And for us this morning, the question as we come to towards the close of our series in this letter is how does Paul now draw things together?

What are the words that he wants to leave ringing in their ears? What are his final instructions?

Well, we're going to divide up this passage under three headings.

And please forgive me if alliteration drives you crazy. I'm afraid it is alliterative. But if God had never intended us to alliterate, he would never have given us the letter P. So, look, it is going to be alliteration.

[2 : 21] Forgive me for that. But maybe it means you will just remember it a fraction longer. So, my first point is this. Paul longs for worship that confirms the gospel.

Paul longs for worship that confirms the gospel. Because there in verse 2, he says, Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

Hang on, Andy, hang on. That's talking about prayer. Andy, look, it says prayer, not worship. How could you have such a heading? Look, when we see how Paul describes this type of prayer, we realize that he's not talking about a particular action, but a regular attitude.

He tells them that they are to devote themselves to prayer. And in the Greek, this has the sense of something that is passionate and continuous and devoted, something that you strive towards with all your energy.

It's a very strong word in the Greek language. So, Paul's not talking here about those occasional times of prayer that you might set aside each day for deliberate and focused and concentrated prayer.

[3 : 39] important and good though they are. He's rather thinking about an attitude that sees the whole of life lived in dependence upon God, where every moment we're conscious that all we are and all we do is in the hands of our gracious, loving, loving, heavenly Father, where the most natural action is to lift everything before him.

That's prayer. That's worship. That's actually the gospel in action, for that's where we demonstrate that we've seen how sin-stained and foolish and needy we are, where we've learnt not to lean upon ourselves, but the super-abundant grace of our wonderful Saviour.

And that's what I pray for you, and it's what I long for myself, that we'd increasingly be liberated from our pride, from our self-sufficiency, that we would live with our hearts and minds fixed on the knowledge of his sovereign rule and mercy.

And when I have that gospel-shaped attitude of prayer, it's going to inevitably come over in two ways, and Paul talks about them. Firstly, you see, he says, my praying is going to be full of praise. It's going to be full of gratitude. It's going to be full of thankfulness. How could it be anything else as we live in the shadow of the cross?

[5 : 22] We're not going to be those who are full of complaints, but rather our hearts are going to be full of thanks that I've been saved, saved, that I've been rescued, an undeserving sinner like me, and that I've been adopted into the very family of God.

Actually, this is what Paul was getting at when he wrote to the Thessalonian church. There in 1 Thessalonians 5, verses 16 to 17, he says, Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Thankfulness. Does this characterize you? Does it characterize your praying?

Or maybe the first thing you do when you come to prayer is you come with your shopping list and you say, Dear God, I want this, I want that, because it's all about me. So God, I've got this need and a bit of a headache.

God, come and just help me. And I could do with a bit more money. God, give it to me. No, no, no, no, no. I'm not going to be that sort of person. When I understand what Jesus Christ has done for me in his grace and mercy, I'm going to be a person of praise and thankfulness.

[6 : 39] But secondly, it's not just thankfulness that will characterize this attitude of prayer, but also watchfulness. He writes there in verse 2, Devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and thankful.

And to be watchful is also a gospel mark, for it reveals we understand something of the spiritual battle that is raging. So as I journey through life, I'm going to be sensitive to where Satan is attacking and to where God is working.

I'm going to be prayerfully responsive in that situation. Let me just give you an illustration. It helps me. I love some of the old World War II films.

I don't know why, but I do. I like watching them. And in some of the scenes, particularly when you're dealing with the RAF and the Battle of Britain and stuff like that, you have scenes where there's a sort of this, the central command, and you've got the WAF who have a map of Britain and radar in its early stages would pick out that you've got some of the Luftwaffe coming over.

And so they would then, the phone would ring and they'd say, OK, we've got to respond to this. And you saw the WAF sort of pushing a particular squadron towards where the attack was coming.

[8 : 03] It was a situation of where they were responding to the attacks when they understood them. And could I say, that is what, in one sense, Paul is getting at here.

That's why corporate prayer is so vital. That's why I long that all of us would treasure the privilege we have of meeting together with our brothers and sisters.

Not only to cry out to God together, but also to listen and sense where he is prompting us to pray.

There is something very special when God's people gather for prayer, where they seek to understand what God is saying, where we should be praying, what is happening.

We don't come with the same prayer list that we had 30 years ago. We come with our open Bibles. We come with our open hearts and say, God, please, by your spirit, would you show us how we should be praying?

Lord, what are you doing? What are you doing in our city and in our country and in the UK? Lord, what are you doing? We want to be responsive to that. We want to pray there. We want to be thankful. We want to be watchful.

[9 : 11] So Paul longs for worship that confirms the gospel. But secondly, Paul longs for words that clarify the gospel, for words that clarify the gospel.

As Paul continues talking about prayer, he focuses down upon gospel communication, highlighting not only the ministry of evangelists like himself, but also the witness of the believers that he was writing to and his passion was that the gospel message should be clearly articulated and proclaimed.

Now, you may have heard someone try to quote St. Francis of Assisi. Preach the gospel and if necessary, use words.

It may sound clever, but it's wrong. And actually, there's no record that Francis of Assisi ever said that. It's quite spurious.

For words are vital and it's essential that every believer is ready and able to share the life-saving message of Jesus.

[10 : 26] It's what Paul was conscious of as he worked as a pioneer evangelist. There in verse 4, he says, pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should.

And it's what Paul wanted for those believers at Colossi. There in verse 6, he says this, let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Yeah, we should be those who pray for evangelists and preachers that they might be able to accurately and clearly and boldly and persuasively communicate the good news about Jesus. We should pray that they would speak those words in the right way. And by the way, could I say we have no excuse complaining about the preacher if we ourselves have not been in prayer for him. We need to pray that they would have the courage to expose the sin and the shame that separates so many from God.

[11 : 29] And we need to pray that they will have the wisdom and insight to share Christ in the most appropriate and winsome way possible, pointing all the time to Jesus.

And we need to take a look at ourselves. We need to be those who are ready to communicate in words what Jesus has done for folks like us.

See, this isn't just the job of the professional. It's not just the job of the evangelist. It's not just the job of pastor. If you think about communicating the gospel and you say, well, it's all right, they're doing a Life Explored thing on a Monday and Graham will preach the gospel on a Sunday and say, we don't have to do anything.

No. No. How would you explain the gospel? How would you tell someone what Jesus did? Or if someone, for example, asks you about suffering, if you do get into conversation with someone about the Christian faith, they might ask you about suffering.

How do you explain suffering? How can a holy and a loving God allow suffering? Well, how do you deal with that? If that's going to be the major objection and you want to share Christ, you're going to have to have thought it through.

[12 : 45] Have you? Or the accusation we increasingly get, oh, Christianity is homophobic. How would you answer?

And would you be able to do it in such a way that avoided cliches and Christian catchphrases? You see, there's no point having a conversation with someone and say, oh, I know the answer to your problem.

You need to be washed in the blood of the lamb. And in one sense, you and I, if we know that sort of language, we go, that's brilliant, that's great. I love what the Bible speaks about.

I understand it, but they don't. And to say to someone, be washed in the blood of the lamb, they go, you are weirdos. You are nutters. That is not the language that we are to use to communicate effectively with people who know nothing of the Bible story.

No, the right words are essential to communicate the right message. But Paul doesn't leave it there.

[13 : 56] So I'm trying to say that his prayer is that we should be those who have words that clarify the gospel. But thirdly, finally, I noticed that Paul longs for works that complement the gospel, works that complement the gospel.

See, today, the most potent evangelistic tool the church possesses is the transformed lives of Christians. The reality is, actually, that people don't stop to consider the truth claims for the Christian faith.

You may have the most brilliant apologetic answer. But often, folks will never even ask you. They'll rarely, if ever, examine the facts or consider the arguments.

But what does make an impact is a deliciously different life. A life of consistency and purity and of integrity and of joy and of peace.

That will attract. That will draw the questions. That will provoke the attention. And that's why Paul instructs them.

[15 : 10] They're at Colossae in chapter 4, verse 5. He says, Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity.

You see, gospel words are essential, but they must be accompanied by gospel works. Now, I grew up in an age when evangelism was all about getting someone to attend church or a gospel crusade. The cry was, Get them in. And so we'd be going around the doors and we'd be taking leaflets and stuff and we'd be going, Come in. Come in to the building. Come in and hear the gospel.

Whereas, actually, the cry of the church today should be, Get them out. Get them out. Actually, you see, we don't do our main gospel work in this building.

We do it in the relationships that we've established in our community. Very rarely will anyone just wander in off the street and hear the gospel and be saved.

[16:17] Now, you may have just wandered in off the street. I don't know. I'm a visitor here. You're a visitor here. If you have, well, that's great. But can I say, it would be really unusual. Folks, don't do that.

However lovely a building you have, however great a location, it just doesn't happen. You see, it's only as people see the difference that Jesus makes to your life that they will start asking the questions that will lead to gospel conversations.

And maybe they might attend a Life Explored or a Christianity Explored course as a result of the relationship that you have built up because you have been living a life which is under the Lordship of Christ and which is so radically different that people go, tell me why you tick.

But it's not only what we do individually. Could I say it is also what we do corporately as a church. You see, church is believers. The church, Bruntsfield Evangelical Church is not this building.

It's you. It's the believers who are committed to this church. And as a group of believers, it is your responsibility to look for ways that you can bless this community.

[17:38] See, this isn't just a place for hit and run evangelism. Listen, this building is a resource to be used for the glory of God. This isn't holy space. This isn't the tabernacle.

This isn't the sanctuary. It's a building. And you've got a great building in a great location. And the responsibility of you, the church, the people who are committed to this church, to say how can we use all that God has given us for the glory of God and for the sharing of the gospel.

This is a resource to be used for the glory of God. As I close, let me, let me, no, I, I, you see, too often we fail as churches to say what can we do to bless the community in which we're based.

Now, I'm assuming that most of you are within five, ten minutes of the building here, the church building here, that there should be a particular concern for Bruntsfield.

I know we've got Holy Corner up the way and I know that's a, you know, there's a bit of an overload of churches, but the point is you are here, God's put you here to witness to his grace and glory. And the question always the church must be asking is how do we connect with this community?

[19:05] What can we do to bless this community? That's where there needs to be wisdom and insight and a sharing with the leadership to understand what you can do more effectively for the glory of Jesus Christ.

But look, as I close, let me point out again why Paul had to write this letter. Okay, the church planter Epaphras had shared with Paul how a number of people had come into the church.

They'd started to question whether Epaphras had told them the whole story. One group came from the Jewish tradition of rules and regulations and they were telling the new believers that faith in Jesus wasn't sufficient in and of itself.

No, they needed to strictly follow their Jewish rule book. And that happens today. Maybe some of you here have had experience of such churches which is more about the rules than Jesus.

Whereas you've got to do things in a particular way and dress in a particular way and act in a particular way. The other group had been influenced by the mystery religions that were particularly popular at that time within the Roman community, particularly the Roman army.

[20:20] And they were teaching that you needed particular experiences to supplement to supplement what you had in Christ. And maybe some of you have come across similar churches today where what matters most is having experiences and feelings and where the Bible comes a distant second.

So in responding to this, Paul emphasizes that when you have Jesus Christ, you have all that you could ever possibly need or desire.

And so in this letter, gloriously, he lifts Jesus up. In this letter, he exquisitely speaks of the worth and majesty of Jesus. He reminds the Colossians that true believers are united to Christ.

and because we're united to Christ, we have everything in Christ. And there's nothing better or higher that I could leave you with as a church family than these glorious words that Paul penned in response to all the challenges that the world was throwing at that church.

You'll have looked at these verses already, but let me leave you with them. Colossians 1, 15 to 20, and then chapter 2, verse 10. Paul writes, he, that is Jesus, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for by him all things were created.

[21 : 51] Things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together and he is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

Chapter 2, verse 10. for in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form and you've been given fullness in Christ who is the head over every power and authority.

Let me pray. Father, we thank you as we close that we are able to again worship and adore the Lord Jesus Christ for everything that he is.

May he be our joy and delight. Forgive us if other things become more important. Forgive us if our affections are not anchored in him. Forgive us, Lord, if the idols and fake gods of this age have dominated our thinking.

[23 : 14] Have mercy upon us, we pray. Make Christ increasingly precious. Help us to cultivate that heart love for him. Help us day by day to meditate upon his grace and mercy, to read and study his word, to respond to him in prayer.

And Lord, grant that as a result our lives might be transformed, evidently transformed in ways that will provoke questions and give opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For we ask it in his name and for his glory. Amen.