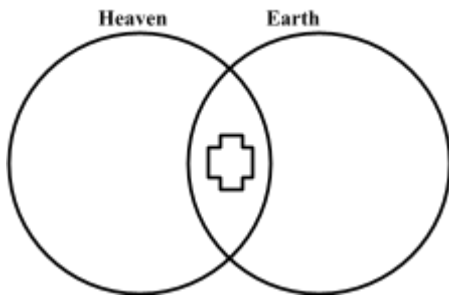


Colossians
Week 8
Col 4:2-6

Go ahead and open up your Bibles to **Colossians 4:2-6**. And you guys....this is the last one of the series! Pour one out.

And to catch us up to speed the big question this letter has been addressing is: **How do we bring Heaven to Earth?**



As we shared previously, this was one of the main themes of Colossians: God's intent for all of creation is to reconcile Heaven and Earth together - and through Jesus this begins to happen through his life, death and resurrection and as the Church, the mantle now falls to us as we follow Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, to live in this Heaven and Earth overlap and to bring it to the world.

So for this whole book, Paul's been speaking at length about how we as the people of God make this happen in our lives and in our families.

How we think about it in regards to culture and the systemic power structures.

So Paul wraps up the way he does in chapter 4:

Colossians 4:2

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

That phrase "continue steadfastly" means to be attentive to something. Diligent. To persevere and not grow weary. So this is not some casual, "Hey one last thing, don't forget to pray."

And he doubles down on this by saying, "be watchful" in our prayers. This is a callback to the Old Testament, how there were people called watchmen, whose sole job was to be on the watchtower, often in the middle of the night, to keep watch over the city - to sound the alarm if anything or anyone was coming their way. To not fall asleep but to stay alert lest the whole city fall under destruction.

So again - not some low-key "Oh yea, don't forget to pray." But this is a call to press in and persevere, to commune with God, lest we become so consumed by the world and our souls fall into destruction.

Paul goes on and says in v.3:

Colossians 4:3-4

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— 4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

So I want us to notice Paul has this expectation for us: that as we strive to live in this Heaven and Earth overlap, that we would keep our eyes attentive, noticing others and their needs, and praying for them too. People who don't know Jesus, who need Him so that Heaven might spread into their lives.

He assumes that as we're watchful and diligent in prayer, we're also watchful and diligent in praying for others. Lest they're consumed by the world and they fall into destruction.

This is what's called intercessory prayer. Praying in a way that says, "God help!" "Help others!" You see the world filled with all the pain and brokenness and you want Heaven to invade the world and you can't do it on your own so you say God make it happen! Help!

I think about how Jesus calls us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done" (who remembers the next part....?) ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.

This is what intercessory prayer is all about.

I don't know about you, but as I think about this, I can't help but wonder, is this an accurate description of my prayer life? Do I think of prayer like this?

- Again I don't know about you, but I would imagine for some of us, the moment you figured out this was a sermon about prayer, you might have got real hype. Maybe you love prayer - and the idea of communing with God and asking Him for stuff and seeing God work in and through your prayers is an expectation and a reality - and sermons on **prayer just sets you on fire**. Prayer for you feels like breathing.
- And I would imagine there might be some of us here who see those types of people that are on fire about prayer and for you, and you're a bit **skeptical**, like "Are they for real? Because that's not how I think about prayer." Because for you, prayer doesn't feel like breathing, it feels like trying. So sometimes when you sit down to pray, you begin to overanalyze and think, "Well if God's in control, why should I pray anyway?" And "I heard about God answering this prayer in someone else's life, but...if they didn't pray, I kinda think it still would have happened." Or maybe you're like, "People fall into destruction if I don't pray? Dude. Wut?"
- And then there's some of us who are a bit **frustrated** when it comes to prayer. You're not quite the skeptic, but your defenses come up with a command like this and you think, "Yo, what are you talking about being watchful in prayer? I have to work. I have kids. I got responsibilities that need to get done, so what are we talking about praying all the time?"
- And I would imagine some of you have this **low-level of guilt** about prayer. That the moment I brought the topic up, you're like, "Yeah yeah, I know, I should do better. Add another thing to the list of things I know I should do but I don't do." (Which, for the record, I'm not here for that - because I don't think guilt is actually a great motivator to help people grow to love Jesus for the long-haul.)
- And I would imagine there might be some of you who have grown **disappointed** with prayer. Confused - where you've prayed for something for so long, and God didn't answer the way you wanted Him to. So you stopped praying with the same passion that you used to have. Maybe you still pray but you're going through the motions.

And I'll go ahead and tell you, I can feel like all of the above depending the day or what's happening around me. And to all of these different hangups and issues, the invitation of Scripture over and over again is simply to keep praying. Be steadfast. Committed to the practice. Diligent. Unswerving. Faithful. Obedient.

So my kids have been learning more and more about prayer and I love it. We're teaching them about what's called **intercessory prayer - asking God for help**. So I remember our son once skinning his knee on his bike and he was whimpering later that night, saying it hurts, so I said, "Let's pray for God to heal that." So I would listen to him pray and then a week later it's all fine and I hear him squeal "Dad! My knee's better! God answered my prayer!"

But then they are learning that there are times when God doesn't answer their prayers the way they want Him to. We're coming up at the year mark in our family but for a long time we had been praying for us to adopt a baby, and then we were chosen by a birth mom and our kids had been praying for about a year for all this to work out. And almost a year ago, the adoption fell through and it did a number on our family but especially our kids. It was disorienting for them to pray to God for something, and in particular, someone, and it didn't happen.

What do we do with that? What do we do we ask God for help and keep showing up when it feels like God doesn't seem to show up?

So what I want to do is give us a fly-by overview of what prayer is and what it does and then offer some quick practicals. (And with this, there's so much we could say about this topic, but I want to specifically speak to those of you I mentioned earlier...)

1 - Prayer draws us into the heart of God

It often feels, the way the Bible talks about it, that our frustrations and disappointments and our weariness are actually prerequisites to draw near to Him - and as we draw near to Him, He draws near to us.

Matthew 11:28

"Come to me all who are weary, and I will give you rest."

Matthew 5:4

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Psalm 34:18

The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

Jesus intends for us not to be self-sufficient human beings, capable of solving all our problems, and to come to Him only when things are tough.

- He recognizes the weight of the world is crushing.
- He knows your burdens and your bruises and knows you are utterly unable to make it on your own.
- He knows your disappointments and frustrations in every category of your life - whether that be your sin struggle, your family, your marriage, your health, and even your prayer life - and it's impossible to think you can manage it on your own.

The good news is that God knows this, and loves you, and wants to do something about it. The good news is Jesus has taken all our sin and burdens and frustrations on Himself, and conquered them by conquering death which means there is no burden or problem too big that isn't inevitably swallowed up and defeated in resurrection hope.

The good news is He has given you His Spirit so that you may cast your burdens onto Him with whatever it is - whether it be the family member you've praying for years to come to know Jesus, or you're praying for that health scare to recede or you're at the end of your hope and you're begging God to help you. Prayer tells us He hears you and is with you and draws you into Himself the way a loving father embraces their child who realizes they can't do it on their own.

One of my favorite descriptors of the Spirit, it's in the Gospel of John, it's this compound Greek word, "Parakaleo." Literally means - to call alongside. My favorite English translations of this in the Bible is the word Helper. God has given you His Helper because He knew you can't do this on your own.

And when we go to Him in prayer, we are calling out to God to come alongside us, but we can't do this on our own, we turn our hearts towards Him and say, "God I can't do this. Will you help me?" And He does, by first and foremost giving you Himself.

2 - Prayer sends us out in the power of God

The beauty of the gift of the Spirit is that not only is God with us, and in us, but God hears us. We now have unmitigated access to the one who holds the universe in His hands. Listen to how Jesus talks about it:

Matthew 7:7-8

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."

Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Go to Him and ask whatever it is in prayer. And Ephesians says He is able to do whatever we ask and more. It's this idea that when we go to God in prayer, asking for His help to work in us and around us, we unleash the power of God to go out and work. God uses our prayers to help shape the world, to bring Heaven to Earth.

Walter Wink

Intercession is spiritual defiance of what is, in the name of what God has promised. Intercessors visualize an alternative future to the one apparently fated by the momentum of current forces. Prayer infuses the air of a time yet to be into the suffocating atmosphere of the present. History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being. Even a small number of people firmly committed to the new inevitability on which they have fixed their imaginations, can decisively affect the shape the future takes. These shapers of the future are the intercessors.

I love that. The future of the world is shaped by the prayers of God's people. Ask, ask big, bold prayers, and see what God will do with it.

And for those who err on the side of the skeptic and ask, "But how does that work? How do my prayers coincide with God's plans to order the world?" To which I would answer, and I'm not saying this as a cop out, it happens by faith. Because Jesus said to do it and things will happen when we pray - both in us and in the world. And if Jesus rose from the dead and proved He is the King of all creation and tells me to do it - then I'm going by faith. I'm trusting and expecting that God can and will use my prayers because He says so.

And even if he doesn't answer the way I thought He would, I trust by faith that He is still using my faithfulness in prayer to help bring more of Heaven into Earth.

And if I know God hears me and moves in my prayers, I wanna pray for God to help me. There is no prayer too big and no prayer too small. I want to pray for anything and everything.

This is what Paul in this letter to the Colossians knows, and wants them to experience for themselves. If in prayer you're drawn into the heart of God and sent out in the power of God to shape the future, then prayer can't ever be overstated and emphasized. Go to Him. Seek His face. Wrestle with God in prayer. Be persistent and never let go. Be watchful and diligent.

Now for the rest of us, when it comes to how we can practically do this, I want to offer a couple things:

Whatever your struggle with prayer, I think we can draw two particular helps from this passage that enables us to obey this command.

1) Focus on interceding for others.

Praying for yourself, for your needs and desires are certainly necessary. I'm here for it - and - if all we do is pray for ourselves we might find ourselves in a spiritual rut - and praying for others helps us out of that - to get the eyes off of us and see the people God has placed around us.

And when we pray, we tune in to the heart of God, and we start to see reality for what it really is and your neighbor for who they really are.

This means when you see your neighbors or your coworkers, you don't just see an annoying or frustrating person, but a person made in the image of God who needs Jesus just as much as you do.

So your heart breaks and you beg God to do exactly what Paul prays for. Pray for an open door for the gospel into their lives. Pray for God to do supernatural work in them. Pray for their salvation, for an opportunity to have a meaningful conversation with them, to invite them to LifeGroup, etc.

This is why Paul goes on to say this next in Colossians:

Colossians 4:5-6

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

The connection seems to be when we pray for others, for them to know Jesus, God slowly uses those prayers to shape us and slowly use us so that we might be the hands and feet of Jesus in their lives. Our minds and words are so touched by the stuff of Heaven that we're expecting God to give us opportunities to speak and act.

In a world where we are all bent over our screens for hours a day it seems, constantly drawing in on ourselves, I can think of few healthier habits to start than a robust habit of praying for others. Being drawn out of ourselves, noticing the needs of others around us. Seeing where the kingdom of heaven has yet to invade, where the brokenness of Earth still reigns, and asking God to do something about it.

Because intercessory prayer emerges from love for others. And you can't love someone that you don't notice. This is one way we stay steadfast in prayer.

For some of us you might ask, "How do I remain steadfast in prayer when I have so many other responsibilities? How is it possible to be praying all the time when you have to live your life?" Because when I hear "continue steadfastly in prayer" that feels vague. Like, how much? How often? And then because its so vague, I end up feeling guilty...which again, I don't think guilt is a great motivator to change people over the long haul.

This leads me to my second point...

2) Build a structure for prayer to grow on.

Hear me out. One thing that I've been thinking on for a bit, is how their culture 2,000 years ago was way different than ours. And Paul's understanding of Jesus and prayer was fueled by his Jewish context. And one prayer practice that emerged out of his Jewish context was the idea of **fixed-hour prayer**. It was basically a prayer that happened around certain times of day, specifically morning, afternoon, and evening.

So fixed-hour prayer becomes the practice that we see in the Old Testament and later on in the life of Jesus, and his disciples and the early church still keeping to this fixed-hour prayer. It was a way to schedule their lives around this concept of prayer and to go to Him.

And these weren't necessarily long-drawn out prayers, they could have been prayers that took under a minute **but my point in bringing this up is**, in our modern world, we tend to view rituals and traditions with some amount of suspicion. Like, we crave authenticity and spontaneity and in the back on my mind say things like "Well I don't want to fake it."

But to that, I would say if I want to be devoted to anything, we need structure to grow - regardless of my feelings on the matter. My feelings are not a prerequisite for doing something I think is important.

So I think that's something for us to wrestle with. If this is true of prayer, and Jesus and his disciples and the early church scheduled their days around this, what structure might we put in place for us? And I don't know your schedule or season of life so I'm hesitant to prescribe anything to yall. But to get some wheels turning:

- I know of one church that for a season asked everyone to recite the Lord's Prayer in the morning, pray for the Lost in the afternoon, and in the evening to pray prayers of gratitude
- Maybe for you, you have some ideas of what you want to pray for regularly and you can schedule around meals - like before you eat, to not just thank God for your food, but to use that time to pray out loud over things that are on your mind and to pray for others
- I have a friend of mine, I remember borrowing his laptop once to check my email and noticed on his Google calendar he had prayer prompts at certain times of day to pray for missionaries and friends of his and it synced up with his phone
- If you're a parent, your structure could be praying with them as you get kids ready for school or camp, to pray before you pick them up from school, and to pray when you put them down for bed
 - That's what I've been doing - I'll say the Lord's Prayer out loud with them in the morning on the way to camp or school, on my way to pick them up I'm praying for the lost by name (which is primarily praying for my kids to come to know Jesus), and then in the evenings me and my kids pray out loud together of the things we need to ask God's forgiveness for, things we need God's help with, and things we're thankful for that day

Again I don't want to overly prescribe so much as set you and your family and your LifeGroup to have further conversations about this. But I do want to ask if this is true of prayer and if we prioritize, what might God do in us and around us?

Conclusion

I think about how Paul closes the chapter. If you read you see the fruit of what God is doing in and through the intercessory prayer. What began with Jesus and 12 disciples, slowly spread throughout the Roman Empire to reach a guy like Paul who in turn reached others - and the foundation of it was prayer. You see at the end of chapter 4 women and men whose stories we don't know from Scripture, but who are working and laboring to help bring Heaven to Earth. All of which is the fruit of answered prayers.

And 2,000 years later on the other side of the world in Columbia, SC, you and I are the fruit of answered prayers. Whether it was your family members, or your spouse, or your pasor, or someone you don't even know, the fact that you're following Jesus is the fruit of prayer whether we know it or not.

And where the church will be in the next 2,000 years or whether Jesus comes back before that whether how much Heaven comes down to Earth, will rest on whether we take up the mantle of prayer like Jesus, Paul, and the Colossians, and the global Church that has gone before us. Will we take up the mantle of prayer and pray the future into being?

Let's go to Him now and let's get to work.

Pray