

I once heard a pastor say that one of the reasons we often feel weak in our efforts to pray, is that we have tried to make a home intercom out of a wartime walkie-talkie. Prayer is not designed as an intercom between us and God to serve the personal comforts of believers. It’s designed as a walkie-talkie for the spiritual battlefield. It’s the link between soldiers and their command headquarters, with its unlimited firepower, air cover, and strategic wisdom.

This is the picture that I think can help us capture the spirit of prayer in Colossians 4:2-4. *“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.”* Paul is saying that he wants to make the mystery of Christ clear and speak as he ought to speak. That is an apt prayer for any person who stands before a gathered congregation to proclaim the word of God!

One way to picture what is going on here is that Paul and Timothy (named in 1:1) and Aristarchus (a fellow prisoner of Paul’s named in 4:10) and Epaphras (named in 1:7 and 4:12) are the unique team of front line troops in the spiritual battle to recapture the hearts of the Colossians. They have made a strike at the enemy lines and met a tremendous counterforce. Paul and Aristarchus are prisoners of war. And it looks as though the enemy may have a tactical advantage at this stage of things.

But Paul manages to smuggle a letter out of the prison camp to some fellow soldiers stationed at the rear of the battlefield—that would be the Colossians. In the letter he asks them to get on their walkie-talkie, call command headquarters, and ask headquarters to fire a missile that will blast open the prison wall, and in the enemy’s front line, so that Paul and his squad can get on with their mission to release people from the power of the enemy and bring them back to God through the grace of Christ which is the gospel message.

The main point here that we should not miss is this: The soldiers at the rear guard with the walkie-talkie of prayer are crucial to the frontline success of spreading the gospel. If they weren’t, this part of the letter would be an empty plea on Paul’s part. Of course, all analogies are imperfect. So, let’s look straight at the message to see what we can see. What I see are at least three things that tell us *how to pray* and three things that tell us *what to pray* in support of the front line and the overall spiritual battle. Pray...

1. Devotedly. Diligently. Verse 2 says, *“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”* or as *The Message Bible* translates verse 2, *“Pray diligently. Stay alert, with*

your eyes wide open in gratitude.” Prayer is not like a cell phone we have to charge when we aren’t using it and runs out of battery power as we use it. Prayer is just the opposite. It increases in power the more it is used, and when we hang up, the power drains from it. If we want to have a crucial role in the spiritual warfare of these days, we need to always keep our walkie-talkie with us, keep it on and ask again and again for God to give us bearings and to guide us through the mine fields of temptation making us alert for every opportunity to witness to God’s grace and power. Pray...

2. Watchfully. The second part of *how we pray* is watchfully. Verse 2 says, “...*being watchful*...” This means that the enemy of God knows the danger of keeping in touch with our Commander with prayer walkie-talkies. He will try to jam the airwaves or steal the transmitter or just put us to sleep with some drug. He jams the airwaves by filling the atmosphere of our lives with the clutter of nonessential things. He steals the transmitter by deceiving us that it is broken and won’t work. He puts us to sleep by tempting us to stay up so late that we cannot concentrate. The only way to get victory over Satan’s devices is to be *watchful*. The reason I stress this wartime analogy of the Christian life is because I don’t know of a better way to keep this utterly essential truth before us—namely, that vigilance must mark our spiritual lives every day. Without it we are sitting ducks for Satan’s constant barrage of flaming darts. Pray...

3. Thankfully. The third answer to *how* we are to pray is to pray thankfully. “*Being...thankful*” (v. 2). In case the wartime analogy gives you the jitters, this word is added to take them away. Watchfulness and devotion might signify a lot of nail biting and perspiration and heart thumping. But it would be a mistake to think that because occasionally our hearts will thump and our hands get sweaty, that is normal for a soldier of Christ.

What we are supposed to perceive normally is a sense that command headquarters in heaven is in control, and progress is being made on all strategic fronts. The battle is the Lord’s! The decisive engagements of Christ and Satan in the wilderness and in Gethsemane and on the Cross and at the empty tomb have all been won! The Lord Jesus is leading his church in triumph to a day of consummate goodness and grace. And so woven through all our walkie-talkie requests for cover, should be sentences like: “Nice shot, Sir, thank you.” “The door ahead blew wide open, Sir, thank you.” “We made it through, Sir, thank you.” “Aristarchus’ arm has healed, Sir, thank you.” “Coming home with 20 happy prisoners that are now free.” “Thank you, Sir.”

When Paul says that our praying is to be done with *thanksgiving*, he means that we should keep our eyes on the glory of God. We do not fight as losers or even as those who are

uncertain. We know that God will win! And if we have eyes to see, we will recognize the path of his power again and again. In verses 3 and 4 Paul goes on to tell us at least three things regarding *what to pray for* in support of the frontline work of the Gospel. We pray...

#1. For those on the front lines. God has called some people to give most of their time to direct Gospel work. All Christians are engaged in the battle. All have walkie-talkies (sometimes we refer to this as the priesthood of all believers). But there is a differentiation of roles on the battlefield. Paul's point in verse 3 is that *all* Christian soldiers should use their walkie-talkies for the sake of the frontline troops. Everyone should have mission workers, pastors, Christian educators, church leaders, etc. that they are praying for. We pray...

#2. For Gospel opportunities. Pray for Gospel opportunities to open to us in the world. We read in verse 3: "*And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message...*" Paul is aware that there is a difference between ordinary times of speaking about Christ and extraordinary opportunities for effective proclamation. In his closing words to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "*But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me...*" (16:9–10). This should be our constant request over the walkie-talkie of prayer for front line troops here in Pittsburgh and among the unreached peoples of the world. And we pray...

#3. For the mystery of Christ to be made clear. Pray for the whole mystery of Christ to be made clear when God opens a door. Verses 3 and 4 put together these two words: "clear" and "mystery." The goal of evangelism is to make the mystery clear. The gospel is not a mystery because it is confusing or obscure like a tricky riddle. It's a mystery because no one would ever think that it is even possible unless God made it clear; things no one would have ever dreamed of. They are the mystery hidden from the ages in God, but now revealed in Christ and made clear to the world—through the Gospel. And that is what we should pray would happen in the world today.

The wonderful thing about Paul's advice here is that the best way for us to be an advertisement for the satisfying taste of Jesus is to enjoy him ourselves. Verse 6 says: "*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*" Through prayer and study we can discover reasons why knowing Christ is the greatest thing in the world. The answer to the question of *how* to use every opportunity for making the mystery known is to give to another person individual attention. Paul's point is simply this: each person is different, and each situation is

different. The Gospel is the same and Christ is the same, but there are countless ways to serve a meal. We need wisdom in how to serve and wisdom in how to season it.

This morning I've been telling you what it means to be *part of an army*. Clarence Forsburg tells a story about what it means to be *part of a team*. It's a story about Al McGuire and Butch Lee. McGuire was a great basketball coach, who retired from Marquette after winning the NCAA tournament in 1976. Butch Lee was a kind of prima donna player on that team. The story is about McGuire trying to teach Butch Lee about team basketball. The coach shared this word. "Now, Butch, the game is forty minutes long, and if you divide that between the two teams that means there are twenty minutes when one team will have the ball and there are twenty minutes when the other team will have the ball. There are five players on each side. That means each player will have the ball for about four minutes. Now, Butch, I know what you can do with a ball in four minutes. What I want you to show me, is what you can do for the other thirty-six minutes."

There is more than one lesson here and it goes beyond basketball to the whole of life. What do you do when someone else has the ball? When someone else is in the limelight? When you are the supporting member, not star of the game?

In his play *The Cocktail Party*, T. S. Eliot spoke to these questions: "Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don't mean to do harm, but the harm does not matter to them, or they do not see it, or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves." That is the problem—the endless struggle to think well of ourselves, the absorbing quest for significance.

Paul's final greeting to the Colossians speaks to this struggle and quest; it also addresses the question about what we do when someone else has the ball. When we hear this list of names—Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Nympha, and Archippus—it is not readily apparent that these people are serving on the front lines, but they are. Apart from Mark and Luke, it is rare to even hear their names. So, let's celebrate Paul's supporting cast. We too are behind the scenes, so to speak.

Yet we can always support those on the front lines by picking up the walkie-talkie, to pray devoted, watchful, and thankful prayers. And each one of us can make the most of every Gospel opportunity through our wise conduct, gracious conversations and salty speech, and by giving our individual attention—together in prayer. Amen.

(Thanks to John Piper for sermon ideas)