
and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

(Ephesians 6:19–20)

Introduction

Strangely, one of the most awkward moments for Christians is when another asks us, “What can I pray for?” On two occasions very recently, my wife and I were asked this very question.

Let me say, I don’t think there are many demonstrations of affection that are more meaningful than this. When someone sincerely asks, as these two couples did, for prayer requests, they are demonstrating care and love—the kind that ministers deep encouragement. By asking such a question, Christians are saying, “You matter to me and I want you to know that I want to share your burdens; I want to enter your life, giving my time to speak to God our Father on your behalf. I want you to know that I *care* and that I want to do something to relieve you of some of *your* cares.” To demonstrate this kind of prayerful concern is *godly* (see 1 Peter 5:7). We need to do more of this. If you are tempted to stay home rather than to gather with your brothers and sisters to pray, perhaps reflecting on this will be used of God to get you to where you need to be.

But back to the main point: When you are asked for prayer requests, do you find yourself feeling awkward? Why is this?

So often, it is because the question makes us feel rather self-conscious. Each of us has needs, burdens and desires, and to share these sometimes makes us feel, well, *naked*. And nakedness makes us feel like Adam and Eve: ashamed. Our response to the question often reveals our deepest desires – and these may or may not be so noble. In fact, sometimes when we find ourselves in such a situation, our responses may make us feel rather shallow. “Please pray that I win the Lotto” may be just such a situation!

But more seriously, our response to the question does make us a bit vulnerable as it highlights the reality that we have needs. And for those of us who struggle with the temptation to self-sufficiency, the question functions like the tearing away of those fig leaves.

Our answer reveals what is most important to us. If this is true, and I believe it is, then listening to Paul as he shares his prayer requests shows us not only what was of greatest import to *him*, but it also confronts us with what should be paramount to *us*. In fact, Paul’s

prayer requests serve as a thermometer to measure our spiritual temperature. It can also function like a thermostat to move our spiritual temperature.

In vv. 18–20, Paul gives an exhortation to all the church to be praying all prayers at all times with all persistence.

But Paul, having exhorted the church to pray for “all saints,” adds the request “and for me.” He was one of the “all saints,” and he needed prayer.

Paul’s prayer request is instructive. It is precisely what we should be praying for. We are to prioritise prayer for the proclamation of the gospel. Evangelism is to be very high on our prayer list.

May this text impact you and me by informing and transforming our prayers.

We Must Pray for the Messenger

In vv. 19–20, Paul gives several things that we need to pray for. The first is in v. 19a: “and for me.” He wanted his readers to pray for the messenger. And each of us should find ourselves, at some point, being the messenger in need of such prayer.

Vulnerability is the operative word here. When we think of Paul, we think probably of a fearless man. Historians tell us that he was very short, perhaps only about one-and-a-half metres tall. Yet what a punch he packed. Think of Paul as a theological, missiological, ministerial “Baby Jake”!

And yet he asked for prayer. If Paul needed prayer, how much more do we?

Remember the Context

We do well to remember the context here – on several fronts.

First, we should remember the literary context. Paul was concerned with the matter of spiritual warfare. He was aware that kingdoms are in conflict. He was aware that the welfare of the church is under attack. Specifically, he was aware that the unity, and therefore the maturity, of the church is under attack. And when this is the case, so is the mobility of the church. And though, as we have been reminded, we can do more *than* pray, we can never do more *until* we pray.

Paul’s request highlights our need for divine assistance – always, but particularly regarding our stewardship of the gospel. As Hodge comments, “That even Paul should solicit the prayers of Christians that he might be able to preach the gospel aright, shows the sense he had at once of the difficulty and of the importance of the work.”

This is precisely the problem with many Christians. Many Christians say that they want to mature in Christ but then they complain and murmur about how others are failing them. But you never—or, at least, rarely—see them at prayer. They want some kind of magic button that they can punch that will make all things well. They want some formula—some spiritual pill—that will make them well. But they do not make much of prayer. I heard a man say decades ago, “All failures are prayer failures.” That may (or may not!) be simplistic, but it carries a lot of truth.

In other words, how desperate are you to change? Equally important, how desperate are you for the welfare of others? Yes, we can do much more than pray. And many of us are committed to doing more. But if we are not praying, then we are trying to row a boat without oars. And on the river of life, that is both foolish and dangerous.

Second, we must remember the historical context. Paul was incarcerated (3:1; 4:1). He was a prisoner, and this was a somewhat common occurrence for him (see Acts 16:25–27; 23:18; 25:14, 27; 28:16–17; 2 Timothy 1:8; Philemon 1, 9).

Paul, of course, did not have an easy life. He faced enormous sufferings for Christ, for his gospel, for the extension of his kingdom, and for the glory of God. He would have scratched his head at the claims of today’s prosperity preachers. He would have been bemused (not *amused*) by the simplistic claims of Angus Buchan. He knew that to serve Christ *with* passion meant to suffer with him in *his* passion (2 Corinthians 1:5–7; Philippians 3:10; Colossians 1:24–29).

Paul’s suffering as a prisoner made his prayer request all the more remarkable. Though it is not wrong to pray for a change in circumstances (as Paul did on other occasions [Romans 15:31; 2 Thessalonians 3:2]), the apostle here has a greater concern: freedom and faithfulness and fruitfulness in the proclamation of the gospel of God.

Again, we must see that Paul did not request prayer for his liberation; no, he prayed for proclamation. As Foulkes observes, “What concerns Paul most ... is not that his wrist may be unchained, but that his mouth may be opened in testimony.”

Paul understood his dependence upon the Lord for his devoted life to him. He wanted to be faithful, wherever and in whatever circumstances he found himself—including when he was incarcerated, bound to a Roman soldier.

This is odd because, as he points out, he was an “ambassador” (v. 20). Apparently, the Roman imperials did not respect the principle and practice of diplomatic immunity!

Paul understood that he was on a mission for his King. And so he prayed that he would be faithful in his providentially-provided gospel opportunities. His prayer request was that, in

his providential position and location, he would prove faithful and fruitful. Though he was imprisoned, he dared not be silent.

Philippians 1:12–20 highlights this truth:

But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defence of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

(Philippians 1:12–20)

This is such an instructive text! Paul's supreme concern was the purpose of God and the welfare of others. Apparently, his desire was for the effective proclamation of the gospel more than it was for his personal comfort. In other words, he did not make his sufferings about him; rather, he made them about Christ. As MacArthur comments, "Even when he requested prayer for himself, Paul's response and motive were selfless—to further the gospel, to encourage other believers, and to glorify his Lord."

His words elsewhere sum up his outlook: "I suffer to the point of being bound like a criminal. But the word of God is not bound" (2 Timothy 2:9). The progress of the gospel was the passion of Paul's life. And the reason that this is recorded, over and over in Scripture, is because God expects this of all who name the name of Christ. Though very few people in history could be compared to Paul in the depth and breadth of his ministry, nevertheless, each of us should follow his example when it comes to loving the gospel and loving to tell this gospel to others.

I'm not talking about an evangelistic zeal as much as I am speaking about a zeal for the evangel. As Dever observes, "When the message of the cross captures our hearts and captivates our imaginations, our tongues ... won't be far behind. As Jesus said, 'Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks' (Matthew 12:34)."

Third, let us remember our own context. This is all so instructive for us because we all find ourselves at different times in what we might call a “season of chains.” At issue is, what is our greatest concern at those times? Further, what is our looming prayer request?

Proclamation, not liberation should always be paramount. But this will not automatically happen. In fact, we need to prepare ourselves for such a mindset and heart-set.

When it comes to our own incarcerations, I maintain that this is precisely how and what we should be praying for all the saints. Pray for freedom to communicate, not merely freedom from circumstances.

What is filling your prayers and supplications? Are you concerned in your prayers about Gospel and growth?

What, as you read this, incarcerates you? Is it hospitalisation or illness? Are you financially chained, finding it difficult to speak of God’s faithful care? Is your incarceration singleness and extra opportunities to invest in others? Are you chained by political and economic uncertainty and the opportunity to demonstrate something more important than material comfort? Is your incarceration manifested in closed doors to a mission field and new opportunities to preach Christ? Perhaps you are incarcerated in a difficult employment environment, or at school. The question is, are you using the opportunity to shine?

Whatever your chains look like, let them become an opportunity to share the gospel with those you now have providential opportunity with.

If we will use the opportunities set before us well, we must be prepared. We must prepare ourselves by prayer (see 1:16–19ff). We must prepare ourselves by pursuing Christ. We must prepare ourselves by practice. (Because Paul consistently proclaimed the gospel, it was almost second nature to him.) We must prepare ourselves by preoccupation with the glorious truths of the gospel. The more the love of God floods our souls, the more preoccupied we will be with him and with his gospel. Naturally, then, we will be on the lookout for opportunities to share this glorious love with others. Further, we will be hopeful as we do so, realising that if God could and would love me, then he can love anyone.

We Must Pray for the Message

In the remainder of the present text, Paul urges his readers to pray for the message itself: “that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (vv. 19b–20).

Of course, these two points are intertwined, but here we learn specifically what we should be praying for when we pray for those evangelising.

Opportunity to Evangelise

The main thrust of Paul's request is that he will preach clearly, faithfully and fearlessly. But implicit in this is his desire for opportunities to preach this gospel. After all, without *opportunity* for preaching, there will be no need for *clarity* in preaching!

We can translate, "that *when* I open my mouth." In other words, Paul had been taking advantage of his opportunity to "open his mouth" with the message, and clearly had every intention to continue taking advantage of opportunities to do so. Calvin wonderfully speaks of "his resolution that no privilege which the Lord had given him should be overlooked." This should be our daily intention.

In v. 20 we have another hint at this concern. The word "ought" implies necessity. It indicates someone *behoved* to do something. "Moral obligation" is perhaps a good synonym. Paul knew his obligation to preach the gospel (see 1 Corinthians 9:16). Information was not the issue. He was well aware concerning *what* he was to do. What he was praying for is the wherewithal to do it. He was asking Christians to pray that he will be faithful to carry out his calling.

Indeed, the Lord heard the prayers of Paul, and of God's people, for the book of Acts concludes with these words: "Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him" (28:30–31). We may be getting ahead of ourselves, but it is clear that God heard the prayers of his people. God's people prayed for the messenger and he answered!

We read in the book of Philippians how Paul was provided with opportunity to preach when he was incarcerated (1:12ff). He did not want to miss an opportunity to proclaim the gospel. He wanted a providential opportunity to speak, and when it came, he wanted something meaningful to say. It could be argued, in fact, that he saw his circumstances as an opportunity and his prayer was that he would make the most of this God given opportunity.

What is a take-away from this? Simply this: Those entrusted with the message of the gospel should look for opportunities to be messengers. And they must look to God for these. When John Piper was diagnosed with cancer, he wrote a meaningful article titled, "Don't Waste Your Cancer." He realised that he should see that circumstance as a means to minister the gospel.

But evangelism is not only about the *dramatic* providences; rather, more often than not, evangelism is about opening our eyes to the opportunities in daily providence. We must look for them. We must, as it were, knock on the doors set before us. Like a farmer, we should cast the seed.

Clarity as We Evangelise

Paul prayed, further, “that utterance may be given ... to make known ... the gospel.” In other words, when the opportunity came, he did not want to blow it! He desired to speak clearly. He asked for prayer that God would enable him with the precise articulation of the words of God.

The story is told of a woman who said that her pastor reminded her of God: Like God, he was incomprehensible! We need to know *what* we are talking about, and *when* we talk, we need to make sense.

I need such prayers. There is a reason that it takes me a very long time to prepare a message: because it takes me a long time to figure out *what* God is saying. And it takes me a long time to figure *how* to say this to the congregation. I want to be clear when I communicate God’s word—especially when I proclaim the gospel of God.

We should all have this desire. We should look for opportunities to proclaim the gospel and we should aim to do so clearly. There is much confusion about the gospel, and the last people who should be confused is Christians! If you had five minutes to share the gospel, could you? Are you clear in your mind how to do so? You should be.

This is, in fact, another reason that you should pray for those who minister God’s word to you. This is why we must all become apt students of Scripture. This highlights the need to read good books about the gospel. We need to know what is that we are to be proclaiming to others. This highlights the need for the pulpit ministry to clearly communicate the truth. The pulpit should model clarity in evangelistic proclamation. The more that we are exposed to this, the better equipped we will all be. I have asked my church to pray for me to be effective in this regard.

Liberty as We Evangelise

Third, Paul prayed for liberty in evangelism. This is closely connected to the matter of clarity. Paul uses the word “boldly” twice. The word connotes “freely” and thus without hindrance. Hodge defines it as “keeping nothing back, but making an open, undisguised declaration of the gospel.” It is an appeal, says Salmond, for “fearless confidence in making the gospel known.” In short, Paul asks the church to pray for the powerful proclamation of the words of God.

Paul asked the church to pray that he would say what he ought to say without hindrance. He was concerned about being delivered from the fear of man when provided with the opportunity to preach Christ. Can you relate? I can.

We preach a message that is intolerant of other approaches to being right with God. Jesus Christ is the *only* way to be right with God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). This is not a message that is tolerated today. Many consider this “hate speech,” and hate speech carries with it all sorts of threats—even legal threats. To tell someone that his “truth claims” are false claims requires gracious liberty, kind boldness, and meek truth-telling. And as one who has plenty of failures in this, let me appeal: When you pray for all saints, do so for me too!

Kingdoms are in conflict, and the powers that be don’t appreciate it when the cultural prophets of Baal are denounced as false. In some cases, the fear of loss of freedom, and even of life, is a reality for many. For most of us, there is the fear of rejection (family – even close family – friends, work colleagues, etc.). The reality is that most of us want to be accepted – to be *liked* – and evangelistic zeal often mixes with this as water does with oil.

When it comes to the church, to preach the word of God – to preach the gospel faithfully – is not as easy as some may think that it is. To proclaim faithfully the gospel and its implications is to go against the grain of human nature. And without debate, in almost any local church, there is plenty of regenerate flesh that assembles each week. It does not want to be exposed. Spurgeon feared that half his congregation was not saved. There is much opposition to the truth that will arise within the walls of the church building.

The context of these verses (6:10ff) reminds us that to preach the gospel places us in the middle of a battle. This battle is the Lord’s, and we, therefore, need his boldness.

The book of Ephesians is clear: Salvation is of the Lord. Only God can raise those who are spiritually dead; only God can make a sinner into a saint; only God can make a new creation in Christ. The realisation of what we are up against may make us hesitant to evangelise. We may at times be tempted to think that we are on a fool’s errand. Therefore, we need to pray for boldness. In other words, knowing our limitations drives us to pray for God’s power. And in doing so, this provides us with hope. And hope leads to confidence.

If we do not evangelise in a spirit of prayer, we may evangelise in a spirit of self-sufficiency. Most likely, we will not evangelise at all.

All the above should encourage us. If the great apostle requested (because he required) the prayers of God’s people to faithfully and fruitfully exercise his ministry, then we should realise that we too need them – and that we too can faithfully and fruitfully proclaim the gospel. You see, when you consider this request, it is clear that what Paul acknowledged is precisely what we must acknowledge in our attempts at evangelism: our *frailty*.

Our human frailty is more than hinted at in this section. We are exhorted to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. That means that, on our own, we are in serious trouble. The armour supplied is a revelation of our frailty and inability on our own. And yet the Lord provides what we need so that we will stand. So it is when it comes to evangelism. When we are determined to fulfil our obligation to speak the gospel to others, we know that we are not sufficient of ourselves to do so. We sense our frailty (“Am I qualified?” “What if I blow it?” “Do I know enough?”), and we are tempted to not make known the gospel. It is precisely here where we need to rely on the Lord to empower us to speak boldly. And biblical boldness is usually commensurate with biblical clarity.

Engaged to Evangelise

The armour is provided because God expects for us to engage the enemy on the battlefield. Specifically, we engage the enemy when he attacks to plunder his army. This is what evangelism is all about. This is why I love the picture in Philippians of Paul winning to Christ members of Caesar’s household (see Ephesians 3:10)!

We need to observe this purpose and arm ourselves with a mind for hand-to-hand evangelistic conflict. If we don’t, we will become a useless army. And useless armies often end up fighting among themselves.

Here is my application: If we do not look outward – together – then we will bite and devour and consume one another (Galatians 5:15) by petty murmuring, perverse backbiting, and pernicious fault-finding. It is almost axiomatic that church members committed to evangelising are rarely engaged in divisive behaviour. They neither have the energy nor the inclination to do so. They are too busy about the Master’s business. Let us pray for one another, and pray specifically for our stewardship of the gospel, for our sharing of the gospel, and for salvations through this gospel.

Let Austen summarise what we (should) have learned: “Truly spiritual prayer will be far more concerned with the proclamation of the gospel and the growth of the church than it will be about the concerns that dominate many of our church prayer meetings.”

May God grace us with a spirit of prayer by the Spirit – prayer that is focused on the proclamation of the gospel and the spiritual and, yes, numerical growth of his church. The greatest prayer warrior ever was the Lord Jesus. The Gospel records highlight how often Jesus was at prayer. More often than not, those times of prayer were focused on his mission. Specifically, he prayed for the Father’s enablement for his mission to save sinners. We learn from his example of man’s complete dependence upon God. But we should also learn of his interceding ministry for sinners (see Luke 22:31–32).

When we see Jesus at prayer in Gethsemane, we get a glimpse of his love for all whom he came to make saints. As he prayed in the Spirit, he was empowered to go to the cross, fully aware of all that he would suffer.

But he is no longer suffering. He has risen and ascended to the right hand of the Father. What is he doing there? He is “making intercession for all who will come to God through him” (Hebrews 7:25). This should encourage us in two ways.

First, Christian, pray! He will save all that he came to save. And our prayers are a means to that end.

Second, non-Christian, pray! The Lord Jesus Christ will save all who come to God through him. So come to him through prayer now – through the prayer of repentance. Call upon his name to save you from your sins and from the attendant wrath of God. He has promised, “The one who comes to me I will by no means cast out” (John 6:37). You have heard the gospel proclaimed. It is time that you respond. Call upon the name of the Lord today and be saved.

AMEN