

Sermon – 02/08/2009 am

Pray for Me

Study Text: Ephesians 6:19-20

One of the blessings of being in mission is the knowledge that people are praying for you. Some people take a government job to go and help the poor in other countries, while some go to the same people as missionaries. Government workers get good salaries and all the resources of the government but missionaries depend upon the gifts of others. They do not have the resources of the government, but through the prayer of many they know the boundless resources of God.

Before missionaries head off they share with their church what God has called them to do. The church promises to support them with their giving and with their prayers. When trouble comes they tell the church and the people come together to pray for them.

Sharing in the needs of others does stir us to prayer. As Paul wrote *the service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God* (II Corinthians 9:12).

Bound In Chains

Paul wrote this letter from prison. He was probably chained to a Roman soldier constantly. The soldier would be relieved every four hours or so, but Paul had no relief from his chains. Paul had been in this situation for some time. No one likes to be kept a prisoner in this way. Paul would surely have loved to be free (Acts 26:29).

But personal freedom was not uppermost in the mind of the apostle at this time. When he asks the church to pray for him he does not ask them to pray for his release, as we might have thought. He would often have gone hungry in prison because he depended upon his friends to bring him food. He also suffered from the cold (II Timothy 4:13). His prayer request was not about himself but about others, and about making known the mystery of Christ. He does not pray for physical freedom but for spiritual freedom to preach the gospel.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul urges the people to think about the needs and interests of others, and especially the interests of Jesus Christ? So it is that when he prayed, he prayed for others, for their growth in the knowledge and love of God. He prayed for the gospel to be proclaimed and to bring forth fruit to the glory of the name of Christ Jesus. We should have the same focus in our prayers.

Paul called himself an *ambassador in chains*. What does he mean by the word 'ambassador'? An ambassador is a person sent out to represent their nation in another place. They maintain and declare the interests of their people in this foreign place. Many ambassadors came to the capital city of the Roman Empire to represent their people. Paul saw himself as an ambassador of the kingdom of God. Paul was in chains but that did not stop him from being an ambassador of the King of kings. He was sent to this place by Christ the king.

Paul was in prison in Rome because the Jews objected to his preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They brought false charges against him. Yet in beginning the second half of this letter

he calls himself *the prisoner in the Lord* (4:1). He was in chains because of the gospel, and for the gospel.

In the providence of God he was in Rome with access to the heart of the Empire. He was in constant contact with soldiers, not to mention other servants of the Emperor. It was not Paul's desire to be in chains, but in the grace of God he accepted his situation as from the Lord. Do you, by God's grace, accept the calling that you have in Christ to be in whatever situation you are now in?

Paul as an apostle was on the frontline as it were. He stood in the whole armour of God. He stood in the strength of the Lord. He asked fellow believers to pray to the Lord to give him the strength he needed. Missionaries and ministers are also on the frontline and need your prayers.

Too often it is thought a minister's job is to pray for others and that he does not need the prayer of others. This may be the understanding of the minister, or the congregation, or both. He may think it demeaning or in some way an admission of defeat to ask for prayer. But such thoughts were far from the mind of the apostle Paul. He was not too proud to ask believers to pray for him in his ministry. Any great preacher of the gospel will admit to his need of prayer. When asked the reason for his most amazing ministry, C.H. Spurgeon answered 'my people pray for me'.

Boldness to Preach

What did Paul ask them to pray about? He asked them to pray that words would be given him and that he might open his mouth boldly *to make known the mystery of the gospel* (6:19). In the next verse he repeats this request, again referring to speaking with boldness or without fear.

Firstly then for words to be given him: The church at Corinth spoke of Paul as being unimpressive as a person, and in his speaking (II Corinthians 10:10). Paul was not an orator like those who opposed him. Other men had a way with words and were able to sway the crowd. Paul could not do this; and had no desire to do it. He wanted to speak words given him by God. He wanted words that would pierce to the heart not just tickle the ears and stir the emotions.

In his letters Paul often quotes Scripture. We can presume he did the same in his speaking. He knew the word of God to be living and active, sharper than a two edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). But in proclaiming the gospel he had to explain the Scriptures and make known the mystery of Christ. We can now see Christ in the Old Testament, but it had to be explained to us. We can now understand why Christ had to die but many still cannot understand. It is a mystery to them. Paul's task, and ours, is to explain this mystery.

How shall they believe unless they hear, and how shall they hear without a preacher (Romans 10:10). The task of making known the gospel is no ordinary task. It is not believed because of fancy words or great oratory. Of course great speakers can move people to stand up and dance, or to come forward in a meeting. But Paul depended upon words that God gave him. His words may well be foolishness in the ears of the world but he knew that in preaching Christ crucified he was preaching *the wisdom of God and the power of God* (I Corinthians 1:24).

Paul was conscious of the prayers of others and that he was speaking words given by God. He would not compromise the gospel by preaching anything that detracted from it, or distorted it in any way. Anyone who prepares and preaches without prayer will fail to preach the gospel in all its power and glory. They will end up preaching their own ideas, the thoughts of men rather than the truths of the gospel.

Secondly Paul asks for boldness in speech, or courage to speak without fear. Esther asked the Jews to fast and pray for three days before she went to speak to king Xerxes. She needed the right words to say, as well as courage or boldness to say them. When Peter and John were hauled over the coals by the High Priest and his councillors, they prayed for boldness to cling to Christ and the truth of the gospel. They were severely threatened but did not waver. They and the people prayed for boldness to speak the word of God (Acts 4).

As a prisoner Paul had opportunity to speak to rulers and those in authority. After a night of prayer and praise with Silas he spoke to the jailer at Philippi telling him how to be saved. He later spoke to the mayor of the city (Acts 16). While in chains he told King Agrippa his testimony and challenged him to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. He wrote this letter to the Ephesians from prison in Rome where he had opportunity to speak to members of Caesar's household, some of whom believed (Philippians 4:22).

Paul did not start to think that he could speak boldly in his own strength. He asked the church to pray for him that whenever he opened his mouth, whether it was before rulers, before the rich and powerful, before professors and academics, or before the man in the street, that he would make known the mystery of the gospel.

Not only pagans but men in the church opposed Paul. He needed boldness in dealing with them also. He needed boldness to declare the whole counsel of God and not start preaching what itching ears wanted to hear. He shared this concern with the elders in the church at Ephesus. He told them that even from within their own church men would start distorting the truth and drawing people away to follow themselves (Acts 20).

Sinclair Ferguson writes 'there are few more dangerous things in the life of a Christian fellowship than those who are enraged when the truth about them is exposed by the word of God. They may well attack the messenger, and failing to destroy him will seek to destroy the entire fellowship rather than repent'.

Paul was the victim of such attacks and knew the need to stand firm in the truth of the gospel and in prayer. Ministers in the church usually get tested at some time or other by someone in their congregation or the wider church. They may get accused of heresy for not reading a particular version of the Bible, or for failing to maintain church tradition. Members threaten to leave or to withdraw their support if the minister does not preach what they want to hear.

Paul asked for prayer to speak without fear or favour, to *speak boldly as I ought to speak* (6:20). He was well aware of the danger of speaking what itching ears wanted to hear. He wrote to the young preacher Timothy telling him to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and not to fear those who cannot endure sound doctrine. (II Timothy 2:1, 4:3). He prayed for the young preacher just as he asked others to pray for him whenever he opened his mouth to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

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