



COLOSSIANS SERIES  
**PERSEVERING IN PRAYER**  
**Colossians 4:1**  
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## Introduction

I am glad we have the opportunity to return to Colossians. We will focus on just the first verse of this passage. It's a verse we all need to hear. It's a verse I know I need to hear. And I suspect it's a verse you need to hear as well.

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

This is a verse that not only instructs us on the life of prayer but also calls us to pray. Sometimes the Bible simply teaches. At other times it talks directly to us, saying things like: "Do this!" This verse does both: teaches and talks, counsels and calls, instructs us in prayer and invites to actually pray.

This verse helps us understand what prayer ought to look like, what ought to define the life of prayer. Of course, this one verse is not a comprehensive treatment of prayer, but it does identify three critical dimensions to the life of prayer. We are to be, first, *steadfast* in prayer. We are to be *watchful* in prayer. And we are to be *thankful* in prayer.

More importantly, this verse simply calls us—you as an individual and us as a church—to pray.

How true are the words of E. M. Bounds, who said: *"Many persons believe in the efficacy of prayer, but not many pray."* My steadfast prayer this week and my aim with this message, is that you not only learn about prayer but are moved by God's Word and God's Holy Spirit actually to pray.

## We Are To Be Steadfast In Prayer

Steadfastness in prayer is the most important of these three, and it's the main point of this verse. We are, as this verse says, to "continue steadfastly in prayer." We are to persevere in prayer, to keep on keeping on, to stick with it, to not give up.

Continuing steadfastly in prayer is so critical because, as has rightly been observed, the easiest thing about a life of prayer is *quitting*.<sup>1</sup> Giving up on prayer is as easy as falling off the proverbial log. It takes absolutely no effort at all.

Persevering in prayer, on the other hand, is hard work. Ironically, it is hard work precisely because it doesn't feel like work; which is to say that when we pray we often feel like we're not doing or accomplishing anything. Ours is an age of action and results, and prayer can feel like staring into space and talking to yourself. It can feel like a royal waste of time.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Storms, *The Hope of Glory: 100 Daily Meditations on Colossians* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), p. 312.

How foreign is Martin Luther's perspective on prayer to so many of us. The story is told of the great reformer, who, when asked what his plans were for the following day, responded: "Work, work, from early until late. In fact, I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."<sup>2</sup>

You see, we need to be called to continue steadfastly in prayer. Our Lord Jesus Christ knew this about us and so taught us, not only through precept but through example: that we must persevere in prayer. You may recall the Parable of the Persistent Widow in Luke 18, the point of which was that his followers "ought always to pray and not lose heart" (v. 1). You may also know that Jesus exemplified steadfastness in prayer. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that our Lord's life was one continuous and sustained prayer to the Father. He lived his life in steady communion with and dependence upon the Father.

We are all probably familiar with Jesus' practice of rising early to go off to a quiet place to pray, sometimes remaining in prayer through the whole night. I came across another reminder of Jesus' steadfastness in prayer in Luke's gospel, where it says that Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives, and then Luke notes: "as was his custom" (22:39). It was the custom, the regular pattern, of our Lord Jesus Christ to go out to the Mount of Olives. Everyone knew it. Even Luke the gospel writer knew it. And we can be fairly certain that Jesus was not constantly going out to the Mount of Olives to make olive oil. He was going out there to pray: to fall down prostrate and pour his soul out to the Father in prayer.

Because our Lord both taught and modeled steadfast prayer, Christians down through the ages have devoted themselves to prayer. It was this way from the very beginning. We read in Acts that immediately following our Lord's ascent into heaven, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and there "with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer" (1:14).

Steadfast prayer has also characterized the lives of the most eminent Christians; they have been men and women who lived on prayer: women like Sarah Edwards and Amy Carmichael and Elizabeth Elliot; men like George Whitefield and Henry Martyn and Hudson Taylor.

George Mueller, another great man of prayer, had this to say about continuing steadfastly in prayer:

The great fault of the children of God is, *they do not continue in prayer; they do not go on praying; they do not persevere*. If they desire anything for God's glory, they should pray until they get it. Oh, how good, and kind, and gracious, and condescending is the One with Whom we have to do! He has given me, unworthy as I am, immeasurably above all I had asked or thought!<sup>3</sup>

May we not succumb to the great fault of the children of God. And may we, like Mueller, lean upon the Lord in and through persevering prayer.

## **We Are To Be Watchful In Prayer**

This verse goes on to identify two more characteristics of prayer. We are to continue steadfastly in prayer, "being watchful in it with thanksgiving" (4:2b). If the first part of the verse provides us with a call to the act of prayer, then the second half of the verse describes the

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Edward M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1920), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1991), p. 77.

*attitude* of prayer. In particular, we are to be watchful in prayer and to be thankful in prayer. As we continue steadfastly in prayer, we are to have an attitude of both watchfulness and thankfulness.

The word here translated ‘watchful’ literally means to ‘stay awake’. It’s what a tower guard must do through a night watch: he must stay alert, stay awake and be watchful. So, too, we are to stay alert, stay awake and be watchful in prayer.

Interestingly, most of us learned to pray with our eyes closed. And we teach children to pray by folding their hands, bowing their heads, and closing their eyes. This verse reminds us, however, that when we pray we are to watch; when we pray we are to keep our eyes open.

Praying with our eyes open is consistent with what Jesus taught on prayer. In fact, the only other place in the New Testament where we find this word appear with a call to prayer is on the lips of Jesus. The setting is the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is on the eve of his own death. He is just moments from being betrayed by one of his twelve disciples. Jesus knows what’s coming; his impending death and betrayal weighs heavily on his own soul. He therefore takes his three closest disciples aside and says to them: “Watch and pray” (Matt. 26:41a).

But what are we watching for? What are we staying on the lookout for? When we pray, what is it that we should be keeping our eyes peeled to see or spot? Jesus finished his charge to his disciples to ‘watch and pray’ by clearly telling them the reason: “that you may not enter into temptation” (Matt. 26:41b).

*Temptation.* As we continue steadfastly in prayer, we are to do so with a watchful attitude. We are to do so with our eyes, as it were, wide open, on the look out—on the look out for temptation. But temptation to do what? To doubt.

You see, we are in a spiritual battle and we have a real enemy. Our battle, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6, is not against “flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

And our enemy is the Devil: Satan, our Accuser, the Tempter. He is not a figment of the medieval imagination. He is, instead, a supra-human being whose whole purpose in life is to either keep you from faith or destroy your faith. And his weapon is not bullets or bombs, but doubt.

That is why the Apostle Paul goes on in that same passage in Ephesians 6 to say to us:

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; <sup>17</sup> and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, <sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

We are to be watchful when we pray. We are to be on the look out for temptation. We are to keep our eyes peeled for the devil’s flaming darts, his flaming darts of doubt. Prayer is not, as someone has rightly said, a domestic intercom but a wartime walkie-talkie. And we are to keep watch with it: to be on the look out for anything in our lives or the lives of others that might cause us or them to doubt the goodness of God in Christ Jesus.

Understanding this aspect of watchfulness in prayer will, I suspect, transform the way many of you pray. You see, most of us, when we pray, probably spend most of our time praying for

God to change the circumstances in which we or another person finds him or herself. We pray for our health to improve or our situation at work to improve, or the weather to improve. Instead, we should spend more time praying for *faith* to be sustained in the midst of whatever circumstance comes our way.

This means that when you hear about a friend or loved one going through a time of difficulty, you pray not merely or not only for God to alter the circumstances of his or her life for good. But you pray, watchfully, for God to protect the person from doubt and to preserve his or her faith in the midst of whatever difficulty he or she is going through.

Listen to me: You are never more awake, never more alert, than when you are on your knees in prayer. Prayer has a way of cleansing the inner eye so that you can see what's really going on underneath the surface of things. As we continue steadfastly in prayer, then, we are to be watchful. We are to pray with our eyes open rather than our eyes closed.

### **We Are To Be Thankful In Prayer**

As we pray, then, we must be watchful because this is warfare. This life we call the Christian life engages us in warfare so we must be on the look out for our enemy and how he would want to attack us and undermine our faith.

But how do we stay watchful in the midst of this warfare without becoming worried? We do so by praying with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving or gratitude is the other attitude that ought to characterize our praying. We are to continue steadfastly in prayer, "being watchful in it with thanksgiving" (4:2b).

You may recall from our study of Colossians that thanksgiving is a consistent theme in this letter. Paul prays in Chapter 1 that the Colossians "be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, *giving thanks* to the Father" (1:12). We are to continue to "walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, *abounding in thanksgiving*" (2:6-7). In Chapter 3 we are called to "*be thankful*" (3:15), to sing and worship "*with thankfulness* in your hearts to God" (3:16), and to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* to God the Father through him" (3:17).

Gratitude ought, then, to characterize the Christian life. It ought to characterize our prayer life as well. And gratitude or thanksgiving in prayer ought to provide balance to watchfulness and keep us from worry.

The key to prayer that is watchful and yet not worried is this: thanksgiving. Look at what Paul said to the Philippians:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So as you pray take time to give thanks. In fact, when you pray, don't start by expressing your needs and requests but your adoration and joy in who God is, giving voice to your gratitude and thanks for all that he is for you in Christ.

The acronym ACTS really is a helpful tool for organizing and prioritizing prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and then Supplication. Praying in this way will ensure that as we continue steadfastly in prayer, we do it with watchfulness and with thanksgiving.

## Conclusion

Steadfastness. Watchfulness. Thankfulness. These define a well-balanced prayer life. “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

Now let me leave you with three practical keys to see that persevering prayer takes root in your own life. The first key will be, for some, too obvious to mention. I mention it, however, because for many you’ve found it actually to be the hardest part about praying. And that’s *beginning*. The first key to persevering in prayer is simply *starting to pray*. You obviously can’t continue on in something you’ve never really begun. I fear that many of you simply don’t pray or hardly pray. And that’s your biggest hurdle. Learning to pray is like learning a foreign language: just getting started is the hardest part. But, as with learning a foreign language, praying begets more and more praying. The more you pray, the more you want to pray, until you find yourself continuing steadfastly in prayer. So resolve to get started today.

This leads to another key to persevering in prayer. It is this: *persevering in prayer requires having a plan*. I agree entirely with John Piper who said:

Unless I’m badly mistaken, one of the main reasons so many of God’s children don’t have a significant prayer life is not so much that we don’t want to, but that we don’t plan to. If you want to take a four-week vacation, you don’t just get up one summer morning and say, “Hey, let’s go today!” You won’t have anything ready. You won’t know where to go. Nothing has been planned. But that is how many of us treat prayer. We get up day after day and realize that significant times of prayer should be a part of our life, but nothing’s ever ready. We don’t know where to go. Nothing has been planned. No time. No place. No procedure. And we all know that the opposite of planning is not a wonderful flow of deep, spontaneous experiences in prayer. The opposite of planning is the rut. If you don’t plan a vacation you will probably stay home and watch TV. The natural, unplanned flow of spiritual life sinks to the lowest ebb of vitality. There is a race to be run and a fight to be fought. If you want renewal in your life of prayer you must *plan* to see it.<sup>4</sup>

So take time to plan, brothers and sisters. At the very least, identify a specific time to pray. Then, identify a specific place to pray. And identify how you will pray: what procedure or plan you will follow. We will post on our church website some aids and helps to praying and would encourage you to take advantage of those. You should also feel free to talk to me or another member of our Pastoral Staff or our Deacon of Prayer, Mike Jebb, for other resources and help.

In addition, I want to let you know of a plan for us as a body to continue steadfastly in prayer. Our men’s ministry is spearheading an all-church twenty-four prayer vigil in September. You will hear more about this in the days ahead, but it should prove to be a wonderful way to put into practice the calling of this verse.

The third key to persevering in prayer is *seeing results*. If you want to continue steadfastly in prayer you must continue to see the effects of your prayers. Many of us unwittingly short change ourselves by not keeping track of what we’ve prayed for and how God has in fact answered those prayers. It is a truism that we are encouraged to continue when we see the fruit of our efforts. So do two things: make a prayer list from which you pray regularly, and then keep track of both when and how God answers your prayers.

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland, Or.: Multnomah Press, 1986), p. 156.

I have my own prayer list and on the reverse side I have written: “Pastoral search process with Calvary,” which is now crossed out. That pray has been answered. I also have written, “Sale of home in Wheaton,” with the date “1/13,” which reminds me that I probably didn’t start seriously praying about it until January. And I’m still waiting for God to answer that one. I also have: “Preaching plans: Titus?” But that has now been answered; the Lord gave us clarity on that one.

Keep a list and keep track. It will do more to encourage your heart and strengthen your faith than perhaps anything else. And do it, as well, with your family: write out your family’s prayer list, put it on the refrigerator, and then have the kids cross them off when you’ve seen God answer. Nothing will be more effective in passing on your living faith than that.

It was E. M. Bounds who, as we have already mentioned, said this about prayer: “*Many persons believe in the efficacy of prayer, but not many pray.*” He also said this: “Prayer is the easiest and hardest of all things; the simplest and most sublime; the weakest and the most powerful; its results lie outside the range of human possibilities—they are limited only by the omnipotence of God.”<sup>5</sup>

May we, brothers and sisters, not only believe in the efficacy or power of prayer, but may we in fact actually pray. May we be a praying people—a praying church. And may we do so steadfastly, as we trust in the omnipotence of God himself to act on our behalf.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer*, p. 37-38.