

## **New Now**

### **7. With a Little Help from My Friends**

February 19, 2023

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Text: Colossians 4:2-18

Awhile back, a friend of mine told me that the pediatrician had told he and his wife that their baby was underweight and had to come back in for a follow-up visit. The doctor wanted to make sure the baby didn't fall into what's called "failure to thrive." {Photo shown on the big screen.} "Failure to thrive" is when babies' weight is significantly below that of other children their age and sex. Failure to thrive isn't a disease or disorder. It's caused by a baby not getting enough nutrition. My friend and his wife made a few changes, and their baby started to put on weight as normal. Everything turned out well.

In the book of Colossians, the Apostle Paul is trying to ward off spiritual "failure to thrive" in the people of that church. The Colossians were spiritually young. A member of Paul's missionary team named Epaphras had preached the gospel in their town. Dozens of Colossians had put their faith in Christ and received new life in him. Now Paul and his team were working to make sure they grew spiritually and stayed healthy. So, Paul wrote a letter to them, which we know as the book of Colossians. Paul was in jail when he wrote this letter. He might have been in Ephesus, though, we don't know. He closed the letter by highlighting two key conditions for the new life to thrive. As followers of Jesus, we need these same two ingredients in order to thrive.

The first is: **I. Prayer enables us to thrive spiritually.** *Colossians 4:2 Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.* Paul doesn't just say "be sure to pray sometimes." He says DEVOTE yourselves to prayer. That's what the first believers did. After the Spirit fell on Pentecost **Acts 2:42** *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* What does it mean for us to devote ourselves to prayer? When we devote ourselves to a cause or a goal, we prioritize it.

My daughter-in-law recently ran her 19th marathon. She didn't do that by accident. She has devoted herself to it. She gets up at 5:00 a.m. to train with others. She doesn't miss. When she and my son visited over Christmas, she ran for an hour on my treadmill in the morning. She even ran outside when it was 30 degrees. She reads books about running. She is devoted to it. She doesn't run all day, but she makes it a priority.

Devoting ourselves to prayer is similar. Prayer isn't the only thing we do all day. But we prioritize prayer when we're devoted. We have a regular time and place for prayer. We make it a point not to miss it. We join with others in praying. We press through when we don't feel like praying and do it anyway. We're devoted.

Paul tells us to be watchful and thankful as we are devoted to prayer. **1. Watchful in prayer = what is God doing?** To be watchful in prayer means to ask, "what is God doing?" God is always at work all around us, but we can miss it. Many Jews of Paul's day didn't realize that God was creating a new family called the Church. They missed it, and they missed out. Too often I miss what God is doing in my life or in

the lives of people around me. But prayer helps me be more aware. A few years ago, I was praying for direction, and I was frustrated that I didn't sense him answering me. Last month, as I wrote in my prayer journal, I realized God had been leading me and working out his plan, and I didn't realize it at the time.

**2. Thankful in prayer = recognize God's involvement in our lives.** When we give thanks to God, we are recognizing what he has done. Then we realize his involvement in our lives -- that we are not just gutting out each day on our own. Lectio365 is an app that provides guided prayer experiences each morning and evening. The evening prayer prompt asks God, "Where did I see you at work today?" Then we ask God to help us look back and recognize him. Being devoted to prayer lets us see what he has done. Then we live differently because we realize we are in his presence always. Prayer keeps us growing and vital in our faith.

Then Paul asks for prayer for evangelism. **Colossians 4:3-4** *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. 4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.* Even though Paul is in jail for preaching the Gospel, he is anxious to get back at it. And he knows he needs the prayer support of the Church to do it. So, he says, "pray that God may open a door." That was literally the case for Paul. He was in prison and needed the door to open so he could go witness again. When we pray, God can open doors for us, too. He can arrange us to meet an open person, for the conversation to open up, for opportunities.

Prayer leads to evangelism, because it fuels our connection with God and opens the door for opportunities. That's why the "BLESS" begins with prayer. "BLESS" is an acronym which stands for the essential rhythms of being a witness for Jesus.

### **B-egin with prayer**

L-isten

E-at together

S-erve

S-hare

Bless begins with praying for the people around you -- those where you live, work, play, and learn. That's why we urge each Life Group to have a list of people they are praying for to come to Christ. And at each meeting to pray by name for those people. Have an empty chair and pray for someone to fill it the next week.

Then, prayer influences the way we relate to other people. **Colossians 4:5-6** *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* Paul says, "Make most of every opportunity." When we are devoted to prayer, we will recognize more opportunities to be a witness.

Many young men spend a lot of time gaming. [Photo shown on the big screen.] Roman Khripunov saw this as an opportunity to reach them. Roman ran soccer academies for refugees and immigrants in Houston, sharing Christ with children as part of the program. Then Covid hit and he had to pause in-person outreach. So, he had his soccer coaches begin playing videogames on the livestreaming platform Twitch and invite players to watch and ask spiritual questions. On Twitch, participants talk with each other as they play or type back and forth in a chat box. It worked. Teenage soccer players who wouldn't spend 15 minutes discussing spiritual matters in person were willing to engage for 3 to 4 hours over videogames online. Eventually, the ministry opened its Twitch channel to the public and began to establish a

presence on other gaming platforms as well, with coaches talking with people online. The outreach is bearing fruit. One man from the Netherlands professed faith in Christ while gaming, then brought five friends to hear the gospel, too. Khripunov said, “The people that we’re starting to observe on these [gaming] platforms are actually seeking a lot of spiritual things. They’re very hungry for the gospel.”

One practical step you can take is to pray who you could invite next week to the start of our ACT NORMAL. We’re going to be working through the essentials of true Christianity out of the Book of Acts. So, let’s pause right now for a moment of silent prayer and ask God who we might invite. [Message paused for prayer]

**We need Community to thrive spiritually.** We are created for community, but loneliness is epidemic. A few years ago, a large Dutch grocery store wanted to help out, so they created what they call the “chat checkout” line option at their store. [Photo shown on the big screen.] This is the opposite of the express checkout. In chat checkout, customers can stop and talk instead of getting through as quickly as possible. The cashier is sitting down by the register and will talk to the customers about whatever they want. It has been so successful that the chain is expanding chat checkouts to 200 stores across the country. We have a deep need to connect with others.

Paul was not a loner. He traveled with a team and had friends and supporters spread out across the Mediterranean region. As he closes his letter, Paul tries to strengthen the relational ties between his team and the Colossians. He gets personal and starts to speak about the people who were part of his life and mission. You can just imagine him sitting in jail, rattling off names of those around him and wanting the Colossians to know about them. Listen to these names. ***7Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. 9He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. 10My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) 11Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my coworkers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. 12Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. 13I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. 14Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. 15Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. 17Tell Archippus: “See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord.”*** Ten names of people!

Paul lived and worked with others, and it was a diverse crew. **Colossians 3:11** *Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.* That wasn’t just a slogan for Paul; he lives it out. Aristarchus, Justus, and Mark were Jewish, Luke was a Gentile, Tychicus was free, Onesimus was a slave. Most are men, but Nympha is female and leading a house

church. Paul is living out what he wrote about unity in Christ. Paul had a community, and he could not have fulfilled his ministry without his team.

Without his team, Paul may have starved in prison. Back in Paul's day, prisoners were expected to provide their own food, and Paul's team helped supply him. Some churches sent him money, and his team bought the food for him. Without Aristarchus and the others, Paul would have been much more discouraged sitting alone in jail. His team encouraged him while he was in jail, and they relayed information about how the churches were doing.

Without Tychicus and Onesimus, Paul would not have been able to get the letter to the Colossians because they hand-delivered the letters he wrote. Without Epaphras preaching the gospel, the Colossian church wouldn't exist. Paul could not have thrived in life or ministry without fellow believers around him. However, some today try living for Jesus on their own.

Over half of Christians say worshiping alone or online is a valid replacement for regularly worshiping with a body of believers.<sup>1</sup> But is it? I worship the Lord privately almost every day. But, that is in ADDITION to, not INSTEAD of, worshiping with others. Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians intending it to be read in a gathering, and it was. **Colossians 3:16** *After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.* The only way the people could hear it was to be gathered together when it was read. There was no New Testament at the time. Because some of these names show up in other parts of the Bible, we know that the lives of Mark and Demas show the importance of staying in community.

**Demas** began well. In v.14, Paul refers to him as a "fellow worker" in the gospel. He was part of the team. Imagine working alongside Paul, who was the greatest church-planting missionary ever, and with Luke, who wrote more words of the New Testament than anyone? How spiritually dynamic! But sadly, Demas didn't finish well. He disconnected with the church and fell away from the Lord. Years later, in his last letter, Paul wrote *...Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.* **2 Timothy 4:10** Paul doesn't say what lured Demas away from the team. Maybe he got tired of getting attacked. Maybe he wanted the comfort of sleeping in his own bed every night and being around people like him. Or maybe he just lost interest. The Bible just says, "he loved this world."

In the New Testament, "the world" can mean the system that opposes God. **1 John 2:15-16** *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. <sup>16</sup> For everything in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- comes not from the Father but from the world.* Lust of the flesh -- what makes me feel good physically -- sexual sins, gluttony, drunkenness, etc. Lust of the eyes -- possessions I want to make me happy. Pride of life -- arrogance about status, what I've accomplished, how others see me. Demas fell under one of those categories. And he never returned.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/09/19/americans-theological-beliefs-changed-to-suit-post-pandemic-practice/>

utm\_source=ActiveCampaign&utm\_medium=email&utm\_content=On+the+Rise%3A+Why+Christians+are+Changin+g+Their+Theology+%2B+Costco+s+Success&utm\_campaign=2%2F10+-+On+the+Rise+%236

In contrast, the book of Acts tells us that Mark also dropped out of Paul's mission team at one point. He went back home before the mission was over. But in Paul's last letter, in the verse after he speaks of Demas leaving for the world, he says,

*Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 2 Timothy*

**4:11** Mark returned and became very helpful to Paul again. Tradition holds that he went on to write the Gospel of Mark. Community matters.

Prayer and Community are keys to thriving in our relationship with Christ. Our Act Normal growth campaign starts next week, and it incorporates both these elements. You can connect in community by Worship together and participating in a LifeGroup. And you can devote yourself to prayer by taking time each day to meet with God, Worship, Group, Personal time with God. Thrive.