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Praying and Living for the Gospel

ON A DANGEROUS SEACOAST where shipwrecks often occur stood a lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many of those who were rescued and also others from the surrounding area wished to become associated with the station and to give their time, money, and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The lifesaving station grew.

In time some of the crew became concerned that the station was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more commodious place should be provided as the first refuge of those snatched from the sea. The emergency cots were replaced with beds, and better furniture was purchased for the enlarged building. The station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely. Fewer members were now interested in leaving the plush station to go to sea on lifesaving missions. So they hired surrogates to do that work. However, they retained the lifesaving motif in the club's decorations, and a ceremonial lifeboat lay in the room where club initiations were held.

One dark stormy night a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick and obviously from distant shores. The station was in chaos. The event was so traumatic that the people contracted for outbuildings to be constructed so future shipwrecks could be processed with less disruption.

Eventually a rift developed in the station. Most of the members wanted to discontinue the station's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to their normal social life. Some insisted, however, that rescue was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But the latter were ignored and told that if they wanted to keep lifesaving as their primary purpose, they could begin their own station down the coast, which they did. Over time those individuals fell prey to the same temptations as the first group, coming to care more about comforting one another than rescuing the perishing. After a while a few, remembering their real purpose, split off to establish yet another lifesaving station. And on and on it went. Today if you visit that seacoast, you will find a number of impressive lifesaving stations along the shore. Sadly, shipwrecks still occur in those waters, but most people are lost.[1]

"The LifeSaving Station" is a parable with deep historical roots that reach all the way back to the coast off ancient Ephesus. Paul's great fear was that the vibrant lifesaving station in Ephesus, the principal lighthouse in Asia Minor, would put out its light or forget its mission. Indeed, there had been shipwrecks from even their own number, men like elders Hymenaeus and Alexander who had abandoned "faith and a good conscience" (1:19). These interior defections so early in the lifesaving ministry of the church at Ephesus were the reason Paul wrote Timothy, who was to "charge" such men "not to teach any different doctrine" (1:3).

Now at the beginning of chapter 2, Paul gives explicit instructions to the Ephesian churches on how to pray and live so that the lifesaving gospel will continue to go out to all people—praying and living for the gospel. Paul's concern was that false teaching by the likes of Hymenaeus and Alexander was turning the Ephesian congregations into elitist clubs that focused on "myths and endless genealogies" instead of the life-giving gospel (1:4). His concern is easily seen in this section because he uses terms that stress the universal range of the church's responsibility—verse 1, "prayers . . . for *all people*"; verse 4, the divine desire for "*all* people to be saved"; verse 6, Jesus "gave himself as a ransom for *all* "; and verse 7, which emphasizes ministry to "the Gentiles" and not just the Jews. The universality of the gospel—the fact that it is for everyone—is Paul's passion.

A Call to Prayer and Holy Living (vv. 1, 2)

Prayer. Paul begins with a shot at the exclusivist attitudes being taught by the false teachers: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people" (v. 1). Clearly, the scope of Christian prayer is to be expansive and expanding. John Stott, long-time pastor of All Souls in London, has observed how far short of this the church often falls:

> Some years ago I attended public worship in a certain church. The pastor was absent on holiday, and a lay elder led the pastoral prayer. He prayed that the pastor might enjoy a good vacation (which was fine), and that two lady members of the congregation might be healed (which was also fine; we should pray for the sick). But that was all. The intercession can hardly have lasted thirty seconds. I came away saddened, sensing that this church worshiped a little village god of their own devising. There was no recognition of the needs of the world, and no attempt to embrace the world in prayer.[2]

Such restricted sympathies must never be tolerated corporately or privately. Our prayers must embrace the globe as well as our nearest and dearest. I cannot help but recall F. B. Meyer's account of awaking early one morning at a conference with A. B. Simpson (founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance) and discovering Simpson weeping in prayer as he clutched a globe.

Living. Along with this general exhortation to wide-ranging prayer, Paul added, "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (v. 2). This was not a prayer to live a quiet middle-class life, free from stress, as some critics have charged. Paul never encouraged that. Rather, he warned in 2 Timothy, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (3:12; cf. 2 Timothy 1:8). His prayer here for those in authority implicitly asked for peaceful conditions in which Christians could freely live out exemplary lives, so the unsaved would speak well of Christ and their teaching. Indeed, Paul used identical language in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12 exhorting believers "to live quietly . . . so that you may walk properly before outsiders."[3]

The indisputable fact is, the best argument *for* and *against* Christianity is Christianity—or more precisely, how Christians practice their Christianity! Christianity lived out can make inroads where few other things can.

As far as we know, Thomas Huxley, the famous agnostic, never put his faith in Christ, but he did experience some degree of conviction. Toward the end of his life, Huxley was a guest at a retreat in a country home. Sunday came, and most of the guests went to church. Naturally, Huxley did not go. Alone, he approached a man known to have a simple and radiant Christian faith. Huxley said, "Suppose you don't go to church today. Suppose you stay at home and you tell me quite simply what your Christian faith means to you and why you are a Christian." "But," said the man, "you could demolish my arguments in an instant. I am not clever enough to argue with you." Huxley gently replied, "I don't want to argue with you; I just

want you to tell me simply what this Christ means to you." The man stayed and did as Huxley had requested. When he finished, there were tears in the old agnostic's eyes.[4]

When we observe how the church of Christ has prayed and lived down through the centuries, there is little doubt that the slow progress of the gospel is due to prayerlessness more than anything else. God works powerfully through prayer.

In fact, prayer brought down the Berlin Wall. In May 1989 at Leipzig, in the historic Nicolai Kirche (St. Nicholas Church) where the Reformation had been introduced exactly 450 years earlier, a small group began to meet in one of the church's rooms to read the Sermon on the Mount and pray for peace. The group expanded and moved to a larger room and finally began to meet in the church's nave, which began to fill up. Alarmed, the Communist authorities sent officials to attend. They threatened the gatherers and temporarily jailed some. On prayer nights they blocked the city's nearest Autobahn off-ramp. Then on October 9, 1989, some 2,000 individuals crowded in to pray for peace, and another 10,000 gathered outside. And soon the Berlin Wall came down.[5] Coincidence? No. This was the kind response of a caring, all-powerful God to the prayers of his people.

Think what would happen to the witness and power of the church if a great mass of Christians began to pray for everyone with unified passion and focus! Mighty walls of unbelief would fall, and personal witness would penetrate strongholds with incredible power. Lifesaving stations would rescue the perishing.

The Awesome Grounds behind the Call (vv. 3–7)

The grounds for Paul's call to pray for all people are threefold—first, God's desire (vv. 3, 4); second, God's work (vv. 5, 6); and third, Paul's missionary call (v. 7). This triad forms one of the most significant missions and evangelism passages in the New Testament.

God's desire. "This is good," says Paul (referring to prayers "for all people"), "and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (vv. 3, 4). Thus Paul assaulted the exclusivism that had engulfed some of the lifesaving stations in Ephesus—the "Us Four and No More" clubs. Their mission field had become "the frozen chosen," their mission that of instilling a deeper-life chill, lowering the temperature of their souls. This kind of spiritual elitism feeds on the classism and racism and tribalism and nationalism that comes so naturally to us sinful human souls.

It was this kind of thing that so maddened William Carey when his church leadership told him, "Young man, if God is going to convert the heathen, he will do it without your help or ours." That response drove him out of his church and on to India, where he became the father of modern missions. (My wife and I named our youngest son William Carey Hughes in honor of the universality of the gospel and as a hope for his life.)

Now it is a fact that the Scriptures, and Paul in particular, teach divine election. Paul says in various passages: "But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). "[H]e chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:4, 5). "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:30; cf. Matthew 11:25–27; John 6:37–44; Acts 13:48; 1 Peter 1:1, 2).

But the Scriptures also teach the complementary truth so clearly stated in verse 4: God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." This, of course, does not mean that God wills everyone to be saved. If he did, all would be saved because no one can resist his will. What we have here is an expression of the divine desire that brought about the incarnation and Christ's death on the

cross—"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). We see it in the drama on the cross where Jesus, with his arms nailed wide as if to embrace the world, prays over the soldiers who crucified him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). And later he promised the thief, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

This divine desire informed and drove Paul to engage in a worldwide mission. It is not our responsibility or capability to solve the puzzle of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is our task to preach the gospel universally—to every tongue and people regardless of class or rank. It is our mission to proclaim what God wants us to proclaim. Lifesaving was Paul's business—and it is ours.

God's sovereign work. The second ground behind God's call to pray and witness to the lost is the work of God that is here given confessional expression: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time" (vv. 5, 6). Everything rests on God's work.

God's unity. It rests on his unity—he is "one God." This truth has been perverted by some to support their exclusivistic delusion—"He is ours, and not anyone else's!" However, the fact that he is the one and only God supports the universality of the gospel—he must then be the God of both Jews and Gentiles. Our *exclusive* faith (there is one God and no other) leads necessarily to our *inclusive* mission (the "one God . . . desires all people to be saved").

God the Son's mediatorship. Our exclusive God has an exclusive mediator—"one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (v. 5). Literally this reads, "One also is the mediator between God and man."[6] Jesus is the only go-between. Because he is both God and man, he can represent both sides equally. In effect, Jesus answered in his person the cry of Job, "There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both" (Job 9:33). Jesus lays one hand, so to speak, on the Father and the other on his children—he is our "mediator."

God the Son's payment. The final element of God's divine work is the infinite ransom paid by God the Son, "who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time" (v. 6). His payment is effectual for all who believe. As Paul says later in 4:9, 10, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe."

So we see from this pulsing confessional statement that everything is of God! This inspires us to live a life of prayer and mission. The desire of God—for "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"—is to be our desire. We are called to be lifesavers.

Third, Paul's commission. As a final argument Paul referenced his own special role in the spread of the gospel—"For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth" (v. 7). The fact that God chose Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles is proof that God desires to reach all people and proof of his children's obligation to pray for and reach out to everyone.

According to this (vv. 1–7), the local church has a global, lifesaving mission. According to verse 1, the church is to pray for all people. According to verse 7, it is to proclaim the gospel to all people. The universal concern of the church arises from the universal concern of God. As John Stott says so well:

> It is because there is one God and one mediator that all people must be included in the church's prayers and proclamation. It is the unity of God and the uniqueness of Christ which demand the universality of the gospel. God's desire and Christ's death concern all people; therefore the church's duty concerns all people too, reaching out to them both in earnest prayer and in urgent witness.[7]

We are to be God's people, joyfully declaring Christ's glory among the nations!

A Call to a Saving Lifestyle (vv. 8–10)

Paul concludes by saying nearly the same thing he had already said regarding praying and living when he introduced this section.

Praying. "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling" (v. 8). He assumes they will pray with upraised hands, but his concern is not about body posture but about the attitude with which they will pray. He wants them to be free from anger and quarrels. He wants to see unified petitions go up for everyone—for the whole world! What grace this would produce in mission!

Living. He also wants the church to give careful attention to lifestyle—"women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire" (v. 9). Paul is not categorically forbidding women to style their hair or wear jewelry or nice clothing. Rather, he was forbidding the imitation of the elaborate new hairstyles and extravagant dress of the Roman court as depicted on the Roman coins in circulation at that time, as S. M. Baugh has shown in his definitive study of Ephesus in the first century. These styles connoted the excessive luxury and licentiousness of the Roman court. "Today," Baugh says, "it is the equivalent of warning Christians away from imitation of styles set by promiscuous pop singers or actresses."[8] Paul's overriding concern was that the way Christians deported themselves would not detract from but enhance their gospel mission, so that they adorn the message "with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works" (v. 10).

Everything in life is meant to enhance our carrying out God's desire for "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"—down to the attitudes with which we pray and the way we dress.

Today thousands of lifesaving stations have turned into social clubs. Their architecture with crossed masts pointing to Heaven and pulpits at the bow tell us what they were once meant for. Ships still founder on their shores, but no soul has been saved for years. There are no prayers for the perishing. There is no outstretched hand. No one wants to risk their present comforts.

How wonderful, then, are the lifesaving stations where prayers are offered for the lost, where lives are ordered so as to reach the lost, and where people long for "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."