

You throw the last box in the back of the truck and step back for a moment to catch your breath. All finished - it's time to leave. You take one last look at the house you've lived in for twenty years, and then it hits you - what if this isn't the right choice? If things don't go well in the new place, or if, God forbid, something were to happen, and the rest of the family is so far away..."If that happens," you think to yourself, "what can I do?"

A family member has passed away unexpectedly. Your family is reeling, trying to figure out what to do next, and to your horror you discover that they're all turning to you to guide them through. It's too much responsibility - you're not ready! That's when your best friend arrives. He puts a hand on your shoulder and asks you the one question you were hoping to hear - "what can I do?"

"What can I do?" It's the same phrase - same words and everything - but it can mean completely different things! It's the call of the helpless and the overwhelmed, who wonder how they can possibly handle the uncertainties of life. Yet at the same time, it's the gentle offer from the strong, reliable friend who stands ready to help in our time of need. Yet even as striking as it is to see how one simple phrase can carry two drastically different meanings, what's more remarkable is how this one question asked two different ways has the same answer; in all things, in all times, in all circumstances, pray.

Friends, let's consider how someone gets to the point where they use "what can I do?" the first way we talked about - as someone who is helpless and overwhelmed, facing the uncertainties of life. What is it that brings a person to that point? Often, it's when we're faced with overwhelming odds, right? The times when the deck is stacked against us, or that the world is simply too unpredictable for us to prepare for.

What happens when we find ourselves stuck in this kind of thinking? The sad truth of life in this world is not only that it can happen, but that it will - there is uncertainty all around us! Has uncertainty shown itself in your life yet? The job that was so stable and so comfortable one month is gone the next. A dear friend suddenly passes away, forcing you to wonder when your time might come. Plans for a new school year fall through, then change, then change again, leaving your head spinning.

Sudden change forces us to contemplate what happens next, but the unknown is a terrible enemy all its own. When the "what ifs" of life begin to pile up, it can easily lead us into fear - fear of the unknown, of what might happen next. But why is it so easy to fall into that trap? Friends, it's because sinful people living in a sinful world are bound to experience hardship and struggle, and on our own we are completely unprepared to handle it! Sin outside of us brings new troubles and new questions into our lives, while the sin within tries to get us to figure things out on our own, even as we fall further into uncertainty and fear.

And in the midst of all that uncertainty and fear, we find ourselves asking all kinds of questions. What's the point? Sin is everywhere, even within me, and I can't possibly avoid the uncertainty it brings. Why not just give in? How can just one person hope to stand against so many different problems? Against all that...what can I do?

Dear friends, facing down everything this world can throw at us is impossible for anyone to handle alone. So much so that even the thought of what *might* be coming is enough to paralyze us with fear - the unknown is a fearsome enemy all its own. But in the face of this wild inconsistency and uncertainty, there is consistent help and certain hope - we have our help and our hope in Jesus, who encourages us to pray.

The apostle Paul understood what it was like to be caught up in uncertainty. As he wrote the words of our lesson today to the believers in Ephesus, he was sitting under house arrest in Rome, waiting to be put on trial for proclaiming the Gospel. Paul was facing many questions about his future - what would happen to him? Was he about to die in Rome for preaching the Gospel? Would his ministry continue without him?

And yet, even though Paul has every reason to be trapped by the fear of the unknown, he offers hope to the Ephesians instead of uncertainty. How is Paul able to overcome the fear of uncertainty? Not because he was able to tough it out, or because he was so smart that he could guess the future - but because Paul was holding on to the sure hope that comes from knowing who was on his side!

Did you notice what Paul calls himself in our reading? He points out that he is an ambassador for the Gospel, and even though he is in chains placed on him by earthly authorities, he knows that he is a representative of a much higher authority. He knows that he is doing the work he was called to do by his Savior, Jesus, who sent him out with a powerful promise; "I will be with you, to the very end of the age." The certainty of having Jesus on his side overwhelms every uncertainty Paul could feel!

And so, confident in the presence of his Savior from sin, what does Paul encourage us to do? Dear Christian, pray! And just listen to the way Paul encourages us to approach prayer. Pay attention to how many times Paul says the word "all" in verse 18: "pray...on **all** occasions with **all** kinds of prayers and requests...be alert and **always** keep on praying for **all** the saints."

Four times! Four times Paul emphasizes that there is no time, no place, and no reason not to offer prayer to God. It is a precious privilege to pray, to be able to speak directly to our Father in heaven because we have Jesus Christ as our mediator. He became our direct line to God when he paid for our sins on the cross, and brought faith into our hearts by sending his Holy Spirit. With such a precious privilege, bought at such a high price, why not use it as often as we can? After all, the same God whom we pray to is the same God who promised to be with us, just as He was with Paul.

And now that we have this incredible gift, now you might wonder - "what can I do?" How can I use the power of prayer to glorify God? Dear friends, Paul provides us with some excellent examples as a guide. Pray for each other - for all the people of God! Ask for God's helping hand to guide one another through the uncertain times of life. Pray for your leaders - both civil servants and called workers! Pray that God will bless their work, to establish peace and justice, and to reveal the mystery of the Gospel to people everywhere.

Finally, dear friends, if you have time at the end of all your many prayers, perhaps you might pray for your pastoral staff, and for me. Pray that God would grant us courage like Paul's, to proclaim His Gospel freely, boldly, and confidently - just as we should. Paul's last request was that he would be emboldened to do the work he was sent to do - to proclaim the Gospel fearlessly. Pray for your ministers to do the same!

"What can I do?" In the midst of the uncertainties we face in this life, this question becomes a cry for help. Where can we turn when the unknown surrounds us, filling us with fear? Dear friends, on our own we cannot hope to stand against the uncertainties of this sinful world - but we are not alone! Your faithful God is with you, just as He was with Paul, and He has promised to hear your prayers. When you seek to encourage one another, to answer the question "what can I do?" do it with these words; dear Christian, pray! Amen.