

Epaphras: An Example of Prayer

Colossians 4:12-13

15/10/2023

Joshua Koura

Camden Valley Baptist Church

www.cvbaptist.org.au

Colossians 4:7-18

Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts. With him is Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here.

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you. With them is Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision. They have proved to be a comfort to me.

Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house.

Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."

This salutation by my own hand—Paul. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. Amen.

Father, we come before You now asking that You would send the Holy Spirit to strengthen our hearts, to draw us into Your truth, to raise our affections as we sit under the teaching and preaching of the Word of God, that the things that we hear would stir our soul, stir our conscience, that we would be a people that pursue You and seek after You as the deer pants for the

water brooks. Help our souls, O God, so to long after You, and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we're here at the final greetings. Last week we considered the general principles, if we could say, of this final greeting, looking at Paul's companions and the people with whom Paul ministered, and what was important to Paul and what wasn't really important to Paul about the people that he ministered with—the things that he made much of, the things that he didn't make so much of—and we learned about Paul's ministry: how and with whom he ministered. But today we're going to move from the general to more of the specifics, and I'd like to this week and next week just deal with two people that are mentioned here that are given particular focus, that are made as a particular example for us.

The first of those is Epaphras, which we will consider this morning. Now, several weeks ago we looked at the call to prayer in chapter 4 verses 2 to 6, and we considered that God wants us to pray as an instrumental means of accomplishing His purposes in the world. We don't get very far before Paul starts to give us an example of one who prayed. So you have this encouragement to the church to pray for the advancement of the gospel, you have this encouragement to the church to continue always in prayer and use prayer as God has given it to be used as a means of accomplishing His ends. Yet Paul now goes on to give us an example of one who really obeyed those commands, who really did continue earnestly in prayer, and his name is Epaphras.

He was one who lived in the city of Colossae, or should I say he was one who was from the city of Colossae. That was his place of origin in the province of Asia Minor. He lived in, he was born in this city and lived in this city for some time. And if you remember back to our Bible studies, one of the first Bible studies we've had in the book of Colossians, Paul had not ever come to Colossae and had not been there. But the Bible teaches us that Epaphras was there and made known to them the gospel. So there in the city of Colossae, in a town of popular trade, steeped in Gentile paganism and steeped in legalism, there was a person there that was from the city, although the Bible teaches us at this time he was not living in the city. But at the same time, the Bible teaches us that he was working in the city.

I want you to think about that for a moment. Here's a man that's from the city, currently not living in the city, but working in the city. So how does that work? Does he have some emissaries that are going and doing his business, some representatives? Well, no. The Bible teaches us that this man was working in the city by means of prayer. He was one who never left Colossae in one way, although he wasn't there physically. His heart was there, his prayers were there. He was with them in spirit, if I

could say. And he was still laboring among them, and that in prayer. And it wasn't just in the city of Colossae, but the passage teaches us that it was the whole Lycus Valley, which included Hierapolis and also Laodicea, that this man was laboring in.

He was one who appeared before God for the saints there in the Lycus Valley. He was the one who frequented the throne of grace, bringing the names of the people of those churches, the names of the saints of that area, before the very throne of God. And he was tarrying in prayer for them as a watchman who never held his peace until God acted and made Jerusalem a praise in the earth. He was one who was committed to the restoration and the growth of God's people, and that through prayer.

Now his name was Epaphras, and what do we know of him? Well, in chapter 1 verse 6 to 7 of this epistle, Paul talks about this hope of the gospel which came to the believers there at Colossae. It says, "which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth." What does verse 7 say? "As you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf."

And Paul lets us understand just a little bit about Epaphras, that he was the one from whom the church at Colossae learned the gospel, which makes us think that Epaphras perhaps was an evangelist or he may have even been a church planter of the church there at Colossae, which is most often believed: one who is described in this passage as a faithful minister of Christ and who was one who is also described in chapter 4 verse 12 as "one of you," which would indicate his place of origin, that he was a native of the area, just like Onesimus also is called "one of you."

He was one who was a faithful minister of Christ who was from that city but he is also described in chapter 4 verse 12 as a bondservant of Christ, one who was a slave of Jesus Christ, one who was under the lordship and authority of Jesus Christ, whose life was bound to Christ, one who had a Master, a Commander, a King—not one who was independent, not one who did not submit to anyone—rather one who understood that he was joined to the Lord and his relationship to the Lord was one of service: a bondservant, a slave of Christ.

And the Bible presents us with this man, who was a faithful minister and bondservant of Christ, as one who was particularly concerned about the people's condition at Colossae. And one who, burdened by that concern, prayed. Look what it says there in verse 12: "Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers." And the Bible presents to us that this man is a man who always

labored fervently in prayers for you, for the believers there at Colossae.

And those words show us really the depth of this man's commitment to these saints, the depth of this man's love for these believers. Note the word "always," as giving us insight into the fact that this man always prayed for them, that he persevered for these believers. He was concerned, he persisted, and continued appearing before God for them regularly, perhaps daily—we're not sure—but the idea that he was always praying for them means that he was persistent in his prayer for them.

Secondly, we are told that he labored fervently for them, which means if he was always laboring fervently for them, that means there was a sense in which he was always working for them. And the idea of laboring is actually the word from which we get our English word "agonize." It's agonizomai, which is the idea of an athlete who, by strenuous activity, runs his race or wrestles his opponent. And the idea is that there's a sense of agonizing. It's not casual. It's not as if when someone's in an athletic contest, there is a sense in which there is sweat, blood and tears, as is common to our colloquial language today. The idea is that he was one who was laboring fervently and he strove, striving earnestly in his prayers. He agonized for them. He agonized for them always. And he says he agonized always for them in prayers. And he said this he did for you. So not only was this man always working, but he was always working in prayer, not for himself but for the saints there in the Lycus Valley.

The Bible says that this man was not—it shows us this man was not primarily concerned with himself, he was not necessarily venting, letting things out, using prayer as a crutch—but he knew that prayer was, as it's called here, a work. It was a labor. In fact it is a labor that is most often neglected by the Church of Jesus Christ, that was most employed here by Epaphras himself. Makes you wonder. It makes you wonder. Here is Epaphras who believes sincerely that God is the sanctifier of His people, that God is the one who changes hearts, that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much. And so when he gets alone with God and prays for the people of the Lycus Valley, he's praying understanding and knowing that by means of prayer these people would grow in sanctification, that Epaphras understood that prayer wasn't about himself necessarily venting, letting things out, using prayer as a crutch, but he knew that prayer was, as it's called here, a work. It was a labor. In fact it is a labor that is most often neglected by the Church of Jesus Christ today, that was most employed here by Epaphras himself.

It makes you wonder if Epaphras was agonizing for nothing. What he was doing, what is thought of by modern philosophy today, that prayer is just some kind of crutch for us, that we just want to vent, and that's what Chris-

tians do—they've got a bad problem or they're stressed about something so they just vent. Or did Epaphras have a richer understanding of prayer because it seems to me that Epaphras understood that by means of prayer these people would grow in sanctification, that Epaphras understood that prayer wasn't about himself necessarily venting, letting things out, using prayer as a crutch, but he knew that prayer was, as it's called here, a work. It was a labor. In fact it is a labor that is most often neglected by the Church of Jesus Christ today, that was most employed here by Epaphras himself.

He appears to have understood that by means of prayer there could be an effect of holiness, an effect of righteousness, an effect of godliness, a stability that would come into the people of God's lives. He understood that the more that he sought God fervently, the more God would invade their lives with His grace and with His will. And he was zealous for that, he was burdened for that, he was concerned for that. And we just have to ask ourselves as the people of God this very question: How do we respond to the immaturity of the Church of Jesus Christ today? How do we respond to the immaturity of believers in our lives?

All of us are surrounded by Christians, whether they're in church, whether our friends, whether our family members. We who profess to know Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are part of the body of Jesus Christ. And we get frustrated, we look at other Christians and we get frustrated. Why aren't they mature? Why don't they live the way they should be living? How can a Christian do this and be like that and behave like that? Yes, true. But dear people of God, stop for a minute. What did Epaphras do when he saw, when he was concerned for the maturity of God's people? He prayed. He prayed. Here Epaphras recognizes that frustration, discouragement and all these things will accomplish nothing for the sanctification of God's people, but he realized that if he got down on his knees and served them in prayer, that this would serve to their Christian maturity.

When we are confronted with immature Christians that frustrate us, whether it's our children, whether it's our family, whether it's our friends here, whether they gather together, or even friends that are Christians that belong to other churches, the last thing we usually do is labor fervently for them in prayer. We're quick to complain, using a thousand words, speaking to the air in frustration. How much of those words do we direct in prayer to God for them? How much of those words do we bring before the Lord and say, "Lord, I know You see what I see. Lord, I'm zealously concerned for the condition of Your people. And Lord, I'm gonna labor fervently in prayer for them, that they might stand perfect and complete in all Your will, O God."

Dear Christians, is our faith so weak that we do not believe our prayers in the hands of an Almighty God can accomplish great good in the lives

of God's people? Prayer should be the first resort when we are confronted with the immaturity of God's people around us, not the last. We should not have such weak faith that we think "this is not going to work unless someone gets in their face and tells them something." We need to believe that the very God who gave them a new heart is the very God who can continue to sanctify them and transform them by His grace.

We need to come to believe that the very God who created a hunger and thirst for righteousness in our hearts and in their hearts can continue to create a hungering and thirsting for righteousness in their lives. We need to believe that the God who sanctifies us is the God who works in us both to will and to do His good pleasure. Intercession, therefore, should not be the last resort but the first when we see the need in the declining people of God.

I think this very thing was seen in the passage from Daniel that was just read to us today. Here is a man who sees the people of God in captivity, under the judgment of God due to their sins, and he is concerned for them—zealously concerned for them. He is crying out with great passion, "Oh Lord, Oh Lord, Oh Lord!" Listen, he is not saying "they have sinned," he says "we have sinned." "God, help us, restore us, forgive us, Oh Lord!" It is not because of our own righteousness, but it is only by Your mercies that we come to You in prayer. "Revive us, build us up, strengthen us!" Daniel understood that even though it is the people of God's duty to respond in repentance and turn to the Lord, it is God who makes the change. It is God who sanctifies, it is God who revives, it is God who restores, it is God who raises the dead. Therefore, he prays fervently and continually for them.

I would say to you, dear people of God, that the church of Jesus Christ today needs more intercessors—more men and women who, like Epaphras, will stand in prayer before God, bringing the people of God before the throne of God for their sanctification and growth. We need a people who are zealously concerned with the righteousness and holiness of God's people, who are desirous to see revival and restoration, to see God move and breathe life once again into His people. It is our duty as God's people to catch that vision, to bear that zeal, to bear that burden, and to seek the Lord for such revival.

It was William Gurnall who said this: "When God intends a mercy for His people, He stirs up the spirit of prayer in them. Fervency unites the soul and directs the thoughts to the work at hand. It will not allow diversions and denies all foreign thoughts seeking to intrude." Pray fervently, or you do nothing. Cold praying is no more prayer than a painting of fire is fire. How can prayers that do not even warm your own heart move God's? A fervent prayer will never find a cold reception with God. Elijah's prayer called fire down from heaven because it carried fire up to heaven.

I think there is a lot of truth in this statement. How can prayers that do not even warm your own heart move God's? Unless we see that through prayer the declining state of God's people may be restored, that God responds to fervent prayer, we will never find ourselves seeking God as we ought. Our prayer time will become just a matter of routine, ticking boxes as we go through the motions each day.

My question, dear people of God, is this: Does your eye affect your heart when you see the struggling saints of God? Does it drive you to cry out, "Lord, move! Lord, work! Lord, stir!" Or is it an occasion for complaint and murmuring when we see the struggles in the lives of dear loved ones? Does it drive us to our knees in prayer, saying, "Lord, I know You are able. I can only do so much with my words and hands, but Lord, if You would but step down in mercy and touch this person's life, all shall be made new." I believe Epaphras understood this. He knew prayer was the path, so even miles away he would besiege God earnestly and continually for the Colossian believers, realizing they would stand complete in God's will by means of prayer.

Dear people of God, the most comforting thing in all this is that even though our intercession is weak and falters, there is one great Intercessor who stands over heaven and earth and sees His people, pleading daily for them. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, not just the Intercessor of the Lycus Valley but the One who intercedes over His Church worldwide, who carries us on His shoulders and heart before God's throne daily, praying "Oh Lord, that they may be one even as we are one. Sanctify them through Your truth, for Your word is truth." Here on earth, high priests die, but He is a High Priest who lives forever, whose prayers will never fail, whose knees never grow weary, who is never at a loss for words before God's throne. By Him, all who come to Him will be saved to the uttermost; they will find rest and salvation forevermore in His arms. He will bear them up, as He bore Peter in his time of temptation, and when they fall He will pray for them, that their faith fail not.

My dear friends, all our prayers are only effectual due to the One who stands before God interceding for us. It was Daniel who could pray in confidence, not because of his own righteousness but because of God's mercies. So we can pray in assurance for God's people, knowing Christ is also praying for them, that they might stand perfect and complete in God's will.

Christians, pray! Pray that God would stir us, that He would move us to obedience. What should you pray specifically? Think of everything that is God's will, and pray it verse by verse for the people God has put in your life, because He is able to do above all we could ask or think, according to the power that works within us. To Him be glory in the church throughout

all ages, world without end. Amen.