

EPAPHRAS

Col. 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. **13** For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis.

Every church relies on its members for sharing in the work of the Lord. The New Testament contains many great names such as Peter, Paul, John, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Besides these more prominent people though, there were many others who were indispensable to the work. We shall look at some of those who assisted Paul in his ministry. Paul could not have done the work on his own, he had to have help. His co-workers supported and accompanied him throughout the many regions in which he served.

It is a Biblical principle for the Lord's work to be shared. For example, Jesus had His disciples. He also sent them out in pairs. At Pentecost, Peter and John worked closely together. Saul (Paul) was sent out with Barnabas. John Mark was added, as was Luke, Silas, Timothy, and others. And when you read the greetings at the end of some of the epistles, they consist of folks you don't read about anywhere else and yet they were important to the fellowship they served.

The first we shall look at is Epaphras. ... Paul was imprisoned in Rome on two separate occasions. It was during his first imprisonment (c. 60-62 AD) he wrote the letters to the Colossians, to Philemon, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians. Colosse was in south-west Phrygia, in Asia Minor, about ten miles from Laodicea and Hierapolis. It had been a thriving city until five hundred years earlier when Xerxes (Esther's husband) built a main road to Laodicea bypassing Colosse, taking most of its trade away. It was also devastated by an earthquake in 60/61 AD.

Its population was mainly Gentile, but there were some Jews ... and the church comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. The church was being pastored by the Gentile Epaphras who had been taught by Paul in Ephesus, but was originally from Colosse, **Col. 1:5** For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; **6** Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth: **7** As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ. ... **4:12** Epaphras, *who is one of you*, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you. ...

It seems Paul never visited Colosse, as implied in chapter two, **Col. 2:1** For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as *have not seen my face in the flesh*. Instead, the Colossian church was probably established by Epaphras ('lovely', 'charming'). ... Along with Tychicus, he had travelled to Rome to inform Paul and to seek his advice about the trouble he was having in Colosse with a heretical group. The letter Paul sent back to the Colossians with Tychicus, and also Onesimus, addressed that problem, and he told the church Epaphras was staying with him for a while. It seems Epaphras was in prison with him for Paul mentioned to Philemon, **Philemon 23** There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus.

You have heard it said, "Little prayer, little blessing; more prayer, more blessings; much prayer, much blessing". ... Epaphras was renowned for his prayer ministry, as Paul wrote, he was always labouring fervently for you in prayers (**4:12**). ... This was his dynamism, **Col. 4:13** he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis. ... **EPAPHRAS PRAYED SERIOUSLY** and this defined his service for the Lord. Paul described him, our dear fellowservant (**1:7**, σύνδουλος) ... a faithful minister of Christ (**1:7**, διάκονος) ... a servant of Christ (**4:12**, δοῦλος) ... my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus (**Philemon 23**, συναϊχμάλωτος).

Paul paid him the compliment of being **CONSISTENT** for he was *always* labouring *fervently* for you in prayers (Col. 4:12). ‘Fervently’ translates the word which means ‘struggling’, ‘agonizing’ over what the Lord had laid on his heart (ἀγωνίζομαι). It is a word used in the context of competing for a prize or contending with an adversary. It is not used of the fainthearted but reserved for those who contend to accomplish their purpose. It is the same word Jesus used, **Jn. 18:16** My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants *fight*, that I should not be delivered to the Jews ... and Paul, **Rom. 15:30** I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye *strive together* with me in your prayers to God for me.

That is what Epaphras was doing, and that is how he was doing it, his work seeped in prayer. He was leading by example and it brought him from Asia Minor, across the sea and land, by boat and on foot, to Paul in the Roman jail. And Paul witnessed the faithful servant of God for he described the prayers of Epaphras as *persistent*, - always ... and *piercing*, - labouring fervently ... and *productive*, - that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God (Col. 4:12).

Paul also witnessed the *zeal* of Epaphras for his people (4:13), a determination to serve them for the Lord’s sake. Epaphras was trusting the Lord to a measure beyond his capability. He was well-disciplined in prayer and in purpose.

He was **constant** and **consistent** because **he was CONVINCED**. ... He believed he was saved to serve ... and so he was, because the Lord does not save anyone to slack or shirk the responsibilities which come with being a Christian. ... A Christian serves, for that is what it means to follow. ... A Christian who does not serve is a contradiction. ... Epaphras served his church faithfully against the false teachings, and his devotion

took him hundreds of miles to Paul in Rome. He acknowledged his grasp on certain matters was limited, and so he travelled all that distance to ask Godly counsel from the apostle who knew the Word of God better than he did and who knew what the issues were. He knew Paul would give him sound wisdom from the Word of God. Indeed, Epaphras was thoroughly **convinced** about the work the Lord had laid upon his heart.

He was also **CONCERNED** his people would be seduced by the heresies which were creeping in among the believers. As with every false teaching, the primary target was the Lord Jesus. The heretics had a defective view of Christ, denying his real and true humanity, and not accepting His full deity. Epaphras was at great pains to maintain the teachings of Paul and the apostles, and he prayed and laboured fervently towards that end. That was his purpose. Above everything else, he was steadfast in praying and working towards the people in his fellowship standing perfect and complete in all the will of God (4:12). He was for passing on what he had learned.

He was teaching the people not to be careless or at ease but to *stand* up for how they had been taught. They were not to give the false teachers cause to make in-roads into their assembly. Epaphras stood firm on what he had been shown and he zealously worked towards keeping the fellowship standing beside him. He knew God changes the hearts of men and women and that is why he laboured much in prayer.

It *was* a battleground because the teachers and practitioners of false doctrine were the enemy ... and the enemy is always out to demolish what you preach and teach, and to extinguish the pure Biblical teaching. They wanted the Gospel stopped from being preached in Colosse, and they made it their job to infiltrate the people of God and spread their false doctrines. ... It is how many places of good sound Biblical traditions and

practices have been obliterated over the years, and our fellowship here must also be aware of the dangers.

Standing up for what you believe is not belligerence or ‘crooked awkwardness’, but as Paul instructed the churches, **Eph. 6:11** Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able *to stand* against the wiles of the devil ... **14** *Stand* therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness ... **Gal. 5:1** *Stand fast* therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage ... **I Cor. 16:13** Watch ye, *stand fast* in the faith ... be strong ... **Phil. 4:1** Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so *stand fast* in the Lord ... He would not have said it if they did not need to hear it! ... “Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross”. ... In the battle against falsehood, Epaphras valiantly upheld the truth of God’s Word.

He prayed *seriously*, and he also prayed **specifically**. He knew the needs of his people and how to pray for them. He prayed for their **standing**, - to be perfect in the will of God, - ... and he prayed for their **sanctification**, - to be complete in the will of God, and he also prayed for their **security** in the will of God. As long as they were obedient to God, they were **steadfast**.

The words Paul uses are significant for, by the choice of his words, he illustrated how Epaphras was praying for his people to stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. The word translated ‘perfect’ means ‘matured’, ‘ready’, ‘in full bloom’ ... and the word translated ‘complete’ means to be ‘convinced’. God’s will for God’s people is to be mature and confident in His Word, and our behaviour to reflect that truth. ... That was Epaphras’ **concern**.

You can imagine what a blessing and an encouragement he was to Paul. They both, - Paul and Epaphras, - would have inspired each other ... and to think how Paul had been the one who had taught Epaphras in Ephesus, and yet together in the Roman prison, they were equals in the Lord's work, praying with and building each other up. ... They were in it together for as Paul described Epaphras, my *fellow* prisoner in Christ Jesus (Philemon v.23).

And what they prayed for was not new premises for the church in Colosse, or sufficient funds for self-glory, or even the means to return Epaphras back home. No, they prayed *labouring in their prayers* for God's will to exalt the name of the Lord Jesus, and for heresy and error to have no place among the believers in Colosse. He prayed for the work to continue and advance with fellow believers Archippus, Philemon, Appia, Onesimus, and others. He prayed for the salvation of precious souls. He prayed for God's name to be glorified.

We would do well to follow the example of Epaphras. He does not have the highest profile in the New Testament, nevertheless, he was truly a trophy of God's grace. We do not know if he returned to Colosse, - there is no Biblical evidence he did or he didn't ... he probably did, but we don't know. Tradition teaches he was martyred, but again, we do not know. ... Neither is there any evidence of a church named after him, "The Church of St. Epaphras", or a religious order, or sites of pilgrimage which bear his name. His pattern for living was similar to the disciple John who, by this time, was living in Ephesus, who said concerning the Lord Jesus, **Jn. 3:30** He must increase, but I must decrease.

The Bible promises, **Heb. 6:10** God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered [*διακονέω*, *waited upon, attended*] to the saints, and do minister. God notices what we do, and He records our faithfulness. ... Epaphras is a

great example of a servant committed to fervent prayer, and who applied the holy standards and principles of God to his life. He sought to make those same standards and principles known to others among who he had influence so that, along with him, they would strive to build up the church, for the honour and glory of the Lord Jesus. ... He is one of those Biblical characters well-worth imitating, always labouring fervently ... in prayers, ... *to* stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.