**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Cherished Friendships Of Paul (8): “Epaphras, Fellow-Servant**

**And Faithful Minister of Christ”**

**Colossians 1:7-8; 4:12-13; Philemon 23**

**October 29, 2023**

In last week’s study we saw the way in which Paul described Epaphroditus, a man who risked his life for the work of Christ (Philippians 2:25-30). “*Honor men like him*,” he said. But most Christians today don’t even know who he is, and if they do, they are not sure how to pronounce his name.

Sadly however, we do honor those whose names who are well-known, but who rarely have any of the characteristics of an Epaphroditus. Whether they be Hollywood actors, Wall Street wizards, overpaid athletes, mega-church pastors, health and wealth advocates, or best-selling authors, we tend to admire the celebrities rather than those who would hardly get their names on the evening news.

That’s why it’s always important to rethink the criteria by which we deem someone as “honorable.”So, let’s consider Epaphras. Although his name is a shortened form of Epaphroditus, he is a different man from the one Paul mentions in Philippians. But he has the same virtuous character and self-sacrificing heart attitude, which is the reason Paul mentions him in Colossians 1:7-8; 4:12-13; and Philemon 23.

The background to these verses has been well summarized by Dr. Sam Storms: “Paul most likely wrote Colossians while imprisoned in Rome . . . Epaphras, a native of Colossae, probably heard Paul preach in Ephesus and was converted. He evidently volunteered to take the gospel to his hometown and faithfully preached there and in the neighboring cites of Laodicea and Hierapolis (see Col. 4:13). He traveled to Rome to bring Paul news of events in Colossae and, for whatever reason, was imprisoned with him (Philem. 23). Paul now sends greetings from Epaphras (4:12) and commends him to the church that he had faithfully served” (The Hope of Glory).

So what was it about Epaphras that accounts for Paul’s glowing praise? What is it that moved the heart of the great apostle to commend him so passionately, and to speak of him in such lofty terms? The answer is not hard to find.

**First**, he had led the Colossians to Christ. The good news of the gospel was not native to their city. It had to be brought to them, and Epaphras was their first messenger: “*All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you ‘heard’ it and understood God’s grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras . . .*” (1:6b-7a).

It was during Paul’s lengthy ministry in Ephesus, while on his third missionary journey, that the gospel spread throughout the Roman province of Asia (Acts 19:10). It would seem that Epaphras, while on a visit to Ephesus, came into contact with Paul, heard the good news of God’s saving grace, and came to faith in Christ.

Perhaps it would have been exciting for him to stay in Ephesus where so many amazing things were taking place (Acts 19:11ff). But he soon was compelled to share the gospel with his relatives and friends back in his hometown (4:12), so that the Colossians first “heard” the good news from him. This resulted in the formation of the Colossian church, and probably the churches in the neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13).

**Second,** he didn’t simply lead the Colossians to Christ and then abandon them. He discipled them. Having “heard” the message (v. 6b), they “learned it” from Epaphras (v. 7a). The word translated *learned* is closely related to the word “disciple.” It’s the same word Jesus used when He said, “*learn of Me*” (Matt. 11:29), which in effect means, “Become my disciples.” Epaphras knew that the Great Commission does not end with the salvation of the lost, for Jesus also commanded us to teach new converts the Word (Matt. 28:19-20). That is what the fellowship of the local church is all about (as opposed to the “individual Christianity” of today.)

**Third,** he was our “*dear fellow-servant*” (v. 7a, NIV), or, our “*beloved fellow bond-servant*” (NASB). Clearly, Paul loved this man, and so did the Colossians. More than this, Paul also placed Epaphras on the same level as himself; he was a “fellow” servant/bondservant of Christ. He *belonged* to Christ and did His bidding with the same zeal and heart devotion as the Apostle. Thus Paul gladly acknowledged him in this way.

**Fourth,** he was a “*faithful minister of Christ*” (v. 7b). His devotion to serve the Savior was uncompromising, unconditional, and unending. The flourishing churches in Colossae, and in Hierapolis and Laodicea, all testify to the enduring quality of his faithfulness in serving Christ.

**Fifth,** he was a faithful minister of Christ “*on our behalf*” (v. 7c; NIV, NASB). Some Greek manuscripts have “on *your* behalf” (as reflected in the ESV translation), but “on our behalf” is more likely what Paul originally wrote and is more significant. As noted by one author, “It clarifies why Paul had such a deep personal interest in the work at Colossae. Epaphras had not undertaken an independent enterprise; he had gone with the full support of Paul as his representative. Since Paul had felt that he could not leave his fruitful work at Ephesus, he had commissioned Epaphras to minister on his behalf” (Hiebert, In Paul’s Shadow). Because he fulfilled that commission faithfully, he had the apostle’s full approval and support.

**Sixth,** Epaphras was more than a faithful minister, as Paul once again says that he was “*a bondslave of Christ Jesus*” (4:12 NASB). That’s not because he is running out of good things to say about his beloved friend; it’s because of his friend’s sincere love and devotion to Christ. In the first century, being a slave was in most cases grounds for reproach. But Epaphras considered it as “an honor and a blessing, for he was owned by Christ Jesus, a purchased possession, bought with His precious blood” (Storms).

**Seventh,** he was a committed prayer warrior on their behalf: “*Epaphras, who is one of you and a bondslave 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*. *I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis*” (4:12-13).

Among all the friends and coworkers of Paul, Epaphras has the unique distinction of being the only one whom Paul explicitly commends for his intercessory prayer ministry. That’s because

Paul was listening each day as his “fellow-prisoner” was praying for the Colossians during his house arrest in Rome (Philem. 23; Acts 28:30-31). Epaphras may have even shared the same room with Paul. What were the characteristics of this man’s prayer life?

1. He prayed for them *constantly*; “he is *always* wrestling in prayer for you . . .” He didn’t pray only when he felt like it, or when he was asked to pray, as many Christians do today. He was constantly in prayer, entering the courts of heaven each and every day on their behalf. He was a good example of Paul’s admonition; “*Devote yourselves to prayer . . .*” (Col. 4:2).
2. He prayed for them *fervently*; “. . . *wrestling in prayer for you* . . .” (NIV), or “*laboring earnestly in prayer for you*” (NASB). The word Paul uses here is the same one that Luke uses to describe how Jesus prayed in Gethsemane; and “*being in anguish*, he prayed more fervently . . .” Luke 22:44). One gets the impression that prayer was serious business for Epaphras; he resisted any temptation to quit, and refused to let any distractions get in his way.
3. He prayed for them *personally*; “laboring in prayer *for you* . . .” He didn’t pray around the world for everybody in general and nobody in particular (“help the sick, feed the hungry, and mend the broken hearts of the world”). He centered his intercession on the saints in Colossae, no doubt mentioning some of them by name.
4. He didn’t pray for frivolous things; his focus was on their spiritual maturity and discernment; “*that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured*.” Epaphras knew that the more we learn God’s will and how to live it, the more we mature in the faith and become more contented. Full assurance in the will of God is a tremendous blessing! We don’t need to drift in life; we can know God’s will and enjoy it!
5. He “worked hard” in praying for them: “*I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis*” (4:13). He didn’t use his imprisonment with Paul as an excuse for self-pity or to turn his attention to his own concerns. He used this time of imprisonment as an opportunity to labor in prayer for the saints in his home church, and two other churches as well.

So, let me close by asking the same two questions that I have been asking over the past several weeks. First, *do you have* any “Epaphrases” in your life? If so, what steps have you taken to honor them? Have you thanked God for them, and have you let them know that you are continuing to do that? Everyone *needs* an “Epaphras” in their lives!

Second, in whose life *have you been* an Epaphras? If you don’t have an answer to that question, you can start today! Why not commit yourself now to minister on behalf of someone else whom the Lord has brought into your life? Why not work hard – and pray hard – so that they, by God’s grace, might “stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God? Everyone *needs to be* an Epaphras in someone else’s life! So, what are we waiting for?