

# Epaphras – The Entreator

**Colossians 1:7; 4:12**

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## Introduction

We've been thinking together about ministry partners – about the men and women who served the Lord in ministry with Paul. Our aim is to learn the character qualities the Bible highlights so that we can grow in them as well.

What have we learned? Barnabas leaves us an example as the encourager. He ministers for the good of others with a gracious and encouraging spirit. Aquila and Priscilla serve the church as the enablers. They use their resources, their time, their money, their homes and even their vocation in order to make the ministry of others possible. John Mark is an enthusiastic enlister. He is growing from youthful zeal into mature usefulness. He shows us how failing can be overcome with ministry usefulness resulting.

In our final study, we will look at an almost unknown ministry partner of Paul – Epaphras. He is a faithful and humble servant of God and the church.

## Partners in Ministry

Epaphras story emerges from the pages of Scripture. He was possibly a native of the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor. He served the Lord in such cities as Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis in that area. One authority says that his being named before Mark, Luke, and others (Philemon. 23-24) perhaps indicates the high esteem in which Paul held him. [Harper's Bible Dictionary]

### Faithful Serving in Preaching

### Colossians 1:7; 4:12

Epaphras was from the church at Colossae. Because of the reference to Epaphras in Philemon and the cluster of people who are both in the church in Philemon's home and are also in the church at Colossae, it is easy to conclude that the Colossian church met in Philemon's home. There, Epaphras had significant relationships and responsibilities.

He had been *A FAITHFUL EVANGELIST* there, with the converts there coming to Christ under his ministry. They had come to know the grace of God through Epaphras. They are said to have *learned it from him*. He may well have been sent out by Paul and the church to take the gospel there. He had preached and taught. God's grace had been the central focus of his evangelism. They had come to know the word of truth, the gospel (v.5) so that hear and understood the grace of God in truth (v.6)

He had been *A FAITHFUL MINISTER* there. Paul refers to Epaphras as both a fellow *doulos*, servant and a also a faithful *diakonos*, minister. Paul refers to him as our co-slave and your servant. What a commendation of a good preaching and teach-

ing elder – he is the slave of God and the servant of Christ for his people. This is what we desire to be – servant shepherds who preach the gospel so grace brings people to himself and who teach the Bible so that people come to love in the Spirit.

He had been *A FAITHFUL PASTOR* there. How do I know that? Because he had told Paul of their love in the Holy Spirit. Now this is important. Epaphras has a pastor's heart that is not only concerned over the issues in the congregation, but is complementary of the good things about his people. The church needs to see and know that he has not only brought his concerns to Paul, but his complements as well. So Paul relates that highlighting how much he appreciates their own reception and expression of grace, modeled for them in Epaphras.

All of this is called in Colossians 4:12, working hard for the church in Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis. He worked hard among them. God's faithful slaves and Christ's fruitful servants will be men (and women) who work hard. They are willing to sacrifice for others, for their growth and their good. So, Paul observed and witnessed also to the fact that Epaphras worked hard for them.

## Faithful Striving in Praying

## Colossians 4:12

How did Epaphras work hard for them when he was not with them? By struggling in prayer for them and over them. Now why would Paul describe prayer in such terms? Why use the word translated, struggle, strive, entreat or agonize? When would prayer become an agonizing struggle?

When we are gripped by *THE GREAT PRECIOUSNESS AND POWER OF PRAYER*. People who pray in a way that agonies and strives have a deep sense of communicating with God. They expect God to move on their behalf. The sovereignty and supremacy of God does not paralyze them, but energize them to praying for people and situations. They have confidence in God, His promises and His power. This confidence then prizes the access and ability that prayer gives to plead and intercede on behalf of others.

When we grasp that *THE SITUATION IS FULL OF DEADLY SPIRITUAL DANGERS*. Epaphras understands that the errors creeping into the church at Colossae (and possibly, elsewhere under his ministry) are going to destroy the people he loves. He has a deep sense of spiritual priorities. He struggles in prayer because he really knows what is important. He understands their danger. This is why he has come to Paul; why this letter was written; why he is on his knees entreating God for his people.

When *THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD SEPARATES US* from the people we care for and are concerned over. Epaphras cannot be with his people to teach them face-to-face. He is with Paul seeking counsel and authoritative apostolic instruction that will deal with the situation. Until he can return with apostolic deposit of truth and present it and preach it, he can pray with great fervency over his people.

I am struck by two contrasts to our way in the church today.

*OUR PRIORITIES IN PRAYER ARE MUCH DIFFERENT.* We will tend to pass over deadly spiritual dangers and agonize over passing physical difficulties. We are so taken up with the outward that we are not gripped by the inward.

*OUR CONFIDENCE IN PROGRAMS REPLACES OUR DEPENDENCE ON PRAYER.* I have been personally challenged in meditating on this. Do we tend to pray more or program more when all is not well in ministry? Is our confidence in God so strong that we come to Him when there is spiritual trouble?

Paul's commendation of Epaphras to his home church means that:

- They need to hold fast to the gospel of grace he has taught them. This commended servant had brought them the truth of grace. They should seek no other.
- They need to continue to hear and heed the truth he is teaching them. This commended servant was continuing to preach them truth. They should hear no other.
- They must accept the teaching of Paul and reject the errors creeping into the church as Epaphras ministers that word to them. This commended man was bringing them clarification of the truth. They should believe no other.
- They need to truly mature in the gospel and by grace rather than the "secrets of the Christian life" being taught them by the false teachers. This commended man was growing them with the truth. They should trust no other.

So this servant-shepherd returns with the Scripture to the people he loves and more faithful ministry.

## **Faithful Suffering in Persecution**

## **Philemon 23**

We find in the New Testament one other reference to Epaphras. In closing his letter to Philemon, Paul sends greetings to the church in his home, possibly in Colossae, from Epaphras. We don't know how or under what circumstances, we only know that he is now a fellow-prisoner of Paul's. This may not necessarily mean he is imprisoned with Paul, that is, he is a cell-mate. But it does indicate that this great hearted servant-shepherd is now separated from his people by incarceration in prison.

Further, he is in prison because of Jesus Christ. He is a man whose serving has brought to him persecution. He is suffering for the sake of the gospel he loved, trusted and preached. This so often is the lot of God's men down through the ages. It is a great mercy that, right now, we are free to preach freely in our country. But in many, many places all over the world at this hour faithful servants of God are in prison.

## Principles for Ministry

Now let's think about some observations from his character and conduct. Epaphras shows us that ministry partners:

### **Are deeply committed to truth in evangelism and edification.**

We desire deeply to grow here at the Chapel. We hunger to have the grace of God going to more and more people. We long to see the grace of God deepen and strengthen all our people. The leaders here are thinking much now about what that is going to mean for our facilities. And we will not, in our desire for numerical and spiritual growth, give up the gospel for the sake of numbers. We will not water it down. We will not cheapen grace. We will hold high its call to believe and bow.

We are surrounded by churches and preachers who do not see the necessity of calling people to come to Christ the way the Bible does. Almost anything goes in bringing the lost into a church building. Then, in order to keep them coming, the gospel becomes not about their being sinners separated from God needing a gracious and glorious Redeemer and Ruler. Rather it becomes all about their brokenness, neediness, sickness and God is here for them – here to make them whole, meet their needs and heal their illnesses.

Epaphras left us a sterling example of evangelism where people came to know the grace of God in truth because he was committed to preaching and teaching the truth. When error came in, he sought to counter it with the truth. Let us hold fast to truth; let us hold up the truth; let us hear the truth; let us heed the truth.

### **Develop a Biblical perspective on spiritual dangers.**

They have a keen sensitivity to spiritual danger to the people they love and serve. While concerned with their outer circumstances, they are alert to spiritual struggles, to beliefs and wants, to sins and struggles, to error and conduct that is displeasing to the Lord. They understand that people's situations do not cause them to sin, their heart issues do. So they keep watch over themselves and their people for the kind of things that will lead to spiritual decline and deadness.

### **Understand the priority of and our dependence on prayer.**

One thing jumps off the pages of Scripture – Paul and his ministry partners were praying people. They depended on prayer as the energizing power and shaping providences of God in their ministries. They saw the value and worth of praying. They commended people for their praying. They modeled it in their ministry whether in working or in writing.

We need to become this kind of people. We tend to run to programs and organization. While some programs are a part of church life, they can easily become a substitute for real ministry. They can become our ministry crutches. The programs themselves can simply become our ministry. We must depend in God as we pray to Him. Let's not just make this another aim, or mission statement. Let's turn this into real action – praying over our preaching, our Sunday School, our outreach, our worship and music, our people's spiritual needs, our elder's need

for wisdom, unity, faith and courage. Let's set aside times of prayer as we plan and prepare for OACM's house and expanding our facilities. On July 9-10, the Elders will be taking a retreat to pray over and plan for expansion. Why don't a number of you set aside that time to be in prayer for us? As we come to a very important time in our church life, let's take a day of prayer and for those who can, fasting over our church, its outreach and its growth.

### **Search out the Scriptures for solutions to challenges and trouble.**

Epaphras went to Paul to seek the apostolic response to the error invading his church(es). We can still do that. We can pick up our Bibles and there we will find all the answers we need for life and godliness. Faithful servants in ministry will be people who are poised to immediately go to the Bible and seek the answers in its pages. They will tend to reject the wisdom and way of the world so often sought after by the rest of the world and the church. No, we must be the kind of servants of God who trust God and His Word to give us the direction we need. May we more and more become a people who go to the Bible to solve problems, answer error, address issues and do the work of the ministry given us.

### **Understand being faithful may not always produce faithful ministries.**

Consider with me Colossians 4:13 and Revelation 3:14-22. Here is something stunning. Epaphras had labored long and hard with Paul's commendation in the church at Laodicea. Yet, John tells us that it was the least faithful of all the seven churches of Asia Minor. They were rebuked for being neither hot nor cold. There they thought themselves to be rich when they were in fact poor, had spiritual insight when they needed spiritual eye salve.

This is a basic Biblical principle: we are called to be faithful and obedient to God regardless of what it produces. Parents are not commanded by God to produce godly children; but parents must be faithful to obedient and godly childrearing. Servants of God in leadership are to be faithful to the ministry they are involved in. You must teach, lead, serve, give, disciple – whatever you are enabled and equipped for. Your commendation does not rest on whether or not it produces spiritual giants. Praise God for when it does! Pray to God that it does. Examine yourself when it doesn't. But Epaphras can be a good servant-shepherd and still serve a church that turns out like Laodicea.

## **Challenge**

What an example Epaphras is to us. What a high standard of ministry he holds up for us. How we ought to strive to become like this - men and women of the Bible, of prayer, of hard work, caring for people with spiritual priorities and discernment.

Would you commit yourself to becoming a ministry partner? To working hard at developing the character, the concerns, the commitments for faithfulness to God, to His people and to the spread of the gospel.

Please take the ministry partner summary, meditate on it and use the questions on the back for self evaluation and examination.

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# Ministry Partner Summary

## Overview of Principles

From our study of Barnabas, John Mark, Aquila and Priscilla and Epaphras, we learn that partners in ministry for the gospel:

*Have character worth writing about.*

*Have a glad & ready abandonment of the temporal.*

*Have a vision for the spreading of the gospel and the growth of the church.*

*Are cultivated not in isolation, but in personal relationships.*

*Are developed through patient mentoring.*

*Sometimes fail in ministry in spite of the best of intentions and instructors.*

*Sometimes need to be given opportunities to try again.*

*Need to be great hearted towards those who have changed and grown into usefulness.*

*Maintain transcendent ministry relationships.*

*Are theologically equipped and engaging.*

*Practice Christian hospitality as a lifestyle.*

*Possess a proven cling-free materialism.*

*Are open to being mobile.*

*May have a world-renowned yet maintain a church-centered ministry.*

*Often function as husband and wife teams.*

*Are deeply committed to truth in evangelism and edification.*

*Develop a Biblical perspective on spiritual dangers.*

*Understand the priority of and our dependence on prayer.*

*Search out the Scriptures for solutions to challenges and trouble.*

*Understand being faithful may not always produce faithful ministries.*

Will you seek by God's enabling grace to become this kind of servant of our Lord?

**What ministry partner attributes has God already grown in me?**

**What areas am I weak in and need to grow and develop?**

**In what ministries do I serve now and hope to serve in the future?**