

Scripture Sketches

—Christian Service —

A Meditation on the Life of Epaphras

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Preface

The accounts of men and women recorded in the precious Word of God “...were written aforetime... for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). It is the blessed Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” Who “will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself...He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew [it] unto you” (John 16:13,14). He may take, according to His perfect time and will, each of these divinely inspired records and apply to the seeking heart, innumerable precious, vitally important lessons and applications for the blessing and spiritual growth of each of God’s dear children.

It is one’s desire in presenting the following ‘Biblical character sketches’ to consider some of the more obscure figures found recorded in the Word of God. Though we do not know much of them, what our God has seen good to record of their lives certainly contains vitally important lessons. May we prayerfully and humbly meditate a bit on their lives, seeking to learn and profit from these divinely inspired accounts. Moral lessons gleaned from these accounts, because they are part of the Divine Canon of Scripture, present infinite applications for our lives—applications which may only be made good to each individual and their personal circumstances by the blessed Holy Spirit.

May our blessed Lord Jesus be honored in all that is written and may all who read these pages find true “*edification, exhortation, and comfort*” (1 Cor. 14:3) in them.

Christian Service —A Meditation on the Life of Epaphras

Introduction

Very little is mentioned in Scripture about dear Epaphras, but what is mentioned is full of lovely instruction and encouragement for each one of God's dear children, and specially, for the whole church of God. Though his name is a shortened version of Epaphroditus of whom we learn a bit more about in the Apostle Paul's epistles, what little is recorded of Epaphras, a dear servant and prisoner of our Lord Jesus Christ, will surely provide much guidance and spiritual profit to dear believers living in these very dark, confusing and closing days of the church's history on this earth.

By way of background information we might also mention that the name Epaphras and the name Epaphroditus mean the same thing in Biblical Greek—and a very fitting, sweet meaning in both cases—“*lovely*”. The difference in the two names would be similar to the difference between “Jim” and “James” in our English language. We do know, however that they were two different individuals.

Epaphras is mentioned in relation to the Colossian assembly and also in Philemon, who was a Colossian brother. Epaphroditus is connected with Philippians. How sweet to consider that the Christians in Philippi and the Christians in Colosse each had a beloved brother who diligently and lovingly served their loved brethren in such a way that the Apostle Paul, by divine inspiration, was divinely inspired to commend their service to Christ and His own.

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Chapter 1—A Dear Servant

“As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit” (Col.1:7,8).

What had the Colossians *learned* from Paul’s fellowservant (‘bondman’)? They had heard the wonderful gospel of the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ from him! His message was blessed of the Spirit and produced the Colossian’s faith in Christ and love for all the *saints* (believers). In return their faith gave them joy of an everlasting and assured hope, as well as fruit in their lives and ministry for the glory of God. They had heard and believed, through dear Epaphras, *the grace of God in truth* and what a wonderful, bountiful reaping was produced!

Preaching and Teaching

Perhaps many have heard the following advice given referring to how and when Christians (though not all having the *gift* of an evangelist) can most effectively *do the work* of an evangelist: ‘Preach the gospel all the time, use words when necessary!’ How important for believers, as the world might say, to not only ‘talk the talk’, but that we might faithfully and humbly ‘walk the walk’. The lives and actions of a Christian might be the only Bible and the only gospel message some dear lost soul will receive!

We may say that dear Epaphras certainly preached the gospel of our Lord Jesus audibly, but doubtless he also *lived* what he preached and this surely was the means of drawing other dear souls in Colosse to Christ—Epaphras *taught* the gospel and souls in Colosse *learned* of the love of Christ through his teaching.

Sometimes we may think that *preaching* the gospel is most important function of an evangelist. However, we believe that *teaching* the gospel by our actions and words is just as important in reaching lost souls. These dear ones won’t be very interested in hearing what we have to say if we aren’t living the love of Christ. Or as others have said, ‘Your actions speak so loud, I can’t hear what you say!’

Serving Together

Paul’s commendation of Epaphras is very sweet—he refers to

this dear believer as one of his *fellowservants*. Perhaps none (apart from our Lord Jesus) has ever been as faithful a servant of Christ as the beloved Apostle Paul. What a precious privilege to be counted as a *fellow servant* with the beloved apostle!

May we each covet such a spirit, but not to be noticed by others as someone special or outstanding, for faithful servants don't draw attention to themselves. The more faithfully one serves our Lord, the less that servant will want anyone to know of themselves or their service. Yet, what a commendation and joy if our service is, as we may say, done in fellowship with the Apostle Paul's doctrines. Surely this is the means to happy approval of service from our precious Lord Jesus Christ. To have His approval of our ways, to be, as it were a *fellow*, in communion with the heart of Christ, is the supreme and blessed goal of each who would share His gospel and His glorious supremacy with the lost.

Serving Faithfully

There was nothing to rebuke in dear Epaphras regarding his love and service for the Lord Jesus. He was a faithful man and this recalls to our hearts the words of the Apostle Paul concerning one who was given responsibility in the things of God: "*Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful*" (1 Cor. 4:2).

Epaphras' ministry was absolutely vital for he *manifested* in his actions, Christ's love—for individuals and for the church. Dear Epaphras was assured in his spirit that the Lord Jesus Christ was supreme in all things and was to be given that place: "*And He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the preeminence*" (Col.1:18). It was Epaphras' manifesting the love of this Christ, the One to whom all supremacy rightfully belongs, to the beloved Apostle Paul on behalf of the Colossian saints that caused such joy in the apostle's heart. Paul had never met the Colossians, but the Spirit of God so worked in Epaphras that we may describe his love as found in Romans 5:5: "*...the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*"

May such a love, given by the Spirit, display itself in each child of God, in assembly and individual life, for we know that "*God is love*" and "*God so loved...*"! "*The greatest of these is love*".

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Chapter 2—A Praying Servant

A Known Servant

“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” (Col.4:12).

Who better knows how to intelligently pray for other believers than a brother or sister who is related (naturally or, more importantly, through close spiritual fellowship)— or for group of believers with whom that one meets together? As the beloved apostle brings his letter to the Colossians to an end, he has the joy of reminding them the manner in which Epaphras spent his time while with the apostle—in earnest, diligent, fervent laboring prayer for the Colossians assembly—the church in Colosse where Epaphras lived and had preached the gospel. Is it not a wonderful thing for each to be diligent in prayer for those personally known—their trials, their testings, their faults—indeed, everything that effects them in *spirit, soul, and body*? Oh! how important that we might be diligent like dear Ittai who said to David: *“...As the Lord [Jehovah] liveth, and as my lord the king [David] liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be” (2 Sam.15:21).*

A Commended Servant

At the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Colossians he names Epaphras as a *fellow labourer* and a *faithful servant of Christ*. At the close of the epistle dear Epaphras is referred to simply as a *servant of Christ*. Though serving with the beloved apostle surely would have been a very great privilege, nothing remotely compares with simply being known as a faithful servant of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Serving Him, however, requires daily diligence in prayer and reading the Bible in His blessed presence where a soul may learn what service the Lord desires. What a precious and perfect example we have in the Lord Jesus as the Perfect Servant, spoken of prophetically by Isaiah: *“The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: He wakeneth morning by morning, He wakeneth mine*

ear to hear as the learned. The Lord God hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back” (Isa.50:4,5).

A Combatting Servant

It might seem as though praying for others is not an activity that would require much ‘labor’. But it does! The one who is engaged in the loving service of *fervent prayer* is in a *solemn combat* with the forces of evil. Satan surely hates to see believers on their knees crying, beseeching, and supplicating the Lord on behalf of dear souls. The wicked one would desire to destroy souls of the unsaved and, if he can, he especially works to destroy the lives and testimonies for Christ, of those who are saved—their souls safe for all eternity through the finished work of the Lord Jesus, but a special target of the enemy to ruin their life, their joy, their testimony for Himself. How we all need to be found in constant prayer one for another!

The J.N.D. Translation uses this exact word in Paul’s description of Epaphras’ *labouring* in prayer—“*combating earnestly for you...*”. Such vitally needed prayer requires love, time, setting other things aside, a sense of urgency and importance, and above all, a sense of the power of the enemy *and* the infinitely greater power, love and supremacy of the One to whom such prayers are addressed—God—our blessed Father, our God, and our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear, faithful Epaphras was not praying that the Colossians would have good health or would escape trials and persecutions (though it is not wrong to pray for such things as the Lord may lay them on the heart). His prayer for them, however, was of a much, much higher desire—a desire each believer today ought to have in praying for one another and for each member of the body of Christ. Epaphras desired that those he loved and served might be *fully mature* and not lacking in anything that would be according to the will of God. What joy there is when a soul walks according to the known will of God in their life! Hear our Lord’s words: “*Verily, verily, I say to you, The bondman is not greater than his lord, nor the sent greater than he who has sent him. If ye know these things, blessed [happy] are ye if ye do them*” (Jn.13:16,17).

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Chapter 3—An Enduring Servant

A Faithful Prisoner

“Epaphras salutes thee, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus”
(Philemon, v. 23, J.N.D. Translation).

As we close our short meditation on dear Epaphras and his life of service, we turn to the 3rd and last mention of him found in the precious Word of God—the brief, beautiful letter to Philemon.

We find there that Epaphras is called the Apostle Paul’s *fellow-prisoner*. Doubtless, Epaphras whose love for the dear apostle caused him to be deeply attached to Paul, himself became a prisoner in Rome. The wicked, licentious and no doubt, insane Caesar of that time was, perhaps the very worst Rome ever had—Nero. He hated Christians and likely would imprison any who outwardly lived a Christian life and associated with such a well known and hated believer as the Apostle Paul must have been.

How good to ask ourselves if our lives today would qualify as being a *fellow-prisoner* of the Apostle Paul. He is with the Lord but His divinely inspired writings are still with us today. Yet, Paul’s doctrine is being held *prisoner* in professed Christianity today—spurned, hated even—just as he was physically held prisoner almost 2,000 years ago. Christians who seek to follow the beloved apostle’s doctrine (which is specially written to instruct and edify the church, the body of Christ), if really attached to those divine foundational teachings in true heart love, will find themselves mocked, misunderstood, shunned, and ‘imprisoned spiritually’ along with the beloved apostle.

Yet, the truth and vital doctrine given in Paul’s epistles (sometimes referred to as ‘Pauline Doctrine’) cannot be forsaken, changed or disregarded without terrible damage done to the spiritual well being of the individual as well as the assembly, the church of God. May the Lord give grace and courage to stand for the truth He entrusted to the Apostle Paul, and do so in love without wavering! *“But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort”* (1Cor.14:3). *“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another”* (Rom.14:19).

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