

Prayers

To God

I praise You, Holy Spirit of God. You are not the fantasy some suggest, an angel of the past who once visited the earth to help the early church get started; a special gift for special times. You are the truth about God's presence now. You give us God's gifts, You are with us in baptism and communion, You do miracles through us, You change our lives for the better, You convict us of sin, and You draw the lonely soul into the loving arms of the Father. I praise You Holy Spirit, and I ask You to do God's work in me now! **AMEN**

For myself

Weekly theme: Discipline

Pray today for the courage to change. You may not see any need for change and you may not feel there is any change by which you will come closer to your God. Nevertheless, pray for the courage to change.

For others

Pray today for the people who clean your streets. Pray that they will be as valued in your society as those who manage great companies and run public services. It sounds like a ridiculous suggestion, but think about it, and think about the Jesus we follow and what He might have said and done about the value of each person made by God.

Meditation

Protect us, Lord God, in the paths we take;
May we be wise in all our decisions.

Protect us, Lord God, in the company we keep;
May we be careful to keep close to You.

Protect us, Lord God, during all our conversations;
May we be wise in what we choose to say.

Protect us, Lord God, while we do our work;
May we build Your glorious Kingdom.

Protect us, Lord God, when our passions overflow;
May we be committed, sincere and faithful.

Protect us, Lord God, guard our hopes and dreams;

Bible Passage

Colossians 4:7-18

⁷ Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a much loved friend, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I am sending him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know all about us and that he may encourage your hearts; ⁹ he is coming with Onesimus, our much loved friend who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

¹⁰ My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you greetings, as does Mark, Barnabas' cousin (you have had instructions about him, so that if he comes you are to welcome him), ¹¹ and Jesus (also called Justus) greets you. These are the only people of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

¹² Epaphras sends you greetings; he is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus. He is always fighting for you in prayer, so that you may stand complete and confident in everything which is the will of God. ¹³ I can vouch for the hard work he has done for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

¹⁴ Luke, our much loved doctor sends greetings, as does Demas. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the friends in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶ And after this letter has been read by you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea: ¹⁷ and tell Archippus, 'See that you fulfil the ministry you have received in the Lord.'

¹⁸ I, PAUL, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Review

This very last part of Paul's letter to the Colossians may seem uninteresting to us, because we have little real knowledge of the people and personal relationships that are mentioned by Paul. As we read these words, we can feel as if we are intruding upon a personal conversation without really knowing what is going on, and what, we might ask, has all this to do with the spiritual truth of God's Word? Surely this is just an aside, an addendum with little significance.

Indeed, some of the information in this part of the letter may be trivial, such as the greetings sent and the repetition of phrases such as 'fellow-worker' or 'much loved friend'. However, in almost every sentence, there are fascinating clues to the lives of individual people, who were integrally involved in the growth of the early church. With the exception of Nympha and Jesus (Justus), everyone mentioned appears elsewhere in Scripture, and there is a story to tell of their inclusion which tells us something interesting about their life and that of the early church. One could argue that these personal glimpses are essential to our reading of these parts of Scripture as factual documents, rooted in the lives of real people. No-one could make up such connections and references as these, and the more we look at them the more fascinating they become

It is clear from this text that the letter to the Colossians was to be delivered to that church by Tychicus (4:7f.), who had been with Paul since he went to Jerusalem before he was arrested (Acts 20:4). It is possible that Tychicus was a regular bearer of letters for Paul, as he was involved in circulating the letter to the Ephesians (Eph 6:21). It is fascinating for us to discover that coming together with him was Onesimus (4:9), the converted slave, whose master was Philemon, and a member of the church at Colossae, and it is highly likely that he also took with him the letter we now know as Philemon. The need to deal with this complex social issue was important to Paul and may have accounted for at least one significant part of the letter to the Colossians which we would otherwise misunderstand (the section about slaves and masters; Col 3:22 - 4:1).

But there is much more than this. Paul mentions three Jewish Christians ('people of the circumcision' – 3:11) and amongst them were Aristarchus, another of Paul's travelling companions (mentioned together with Tychicus in Acts 20:4), and also Mark (4:10). This is very interesting because what is said here shines just a little light on the famous incident in Acts 15, where Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement about the inclusion of Mark on their missionary 'team' (Acts 15:35f.) It appears that Mark was Barnabas' cousin, and he is mentioned here with warmth. This is important, for it tells us that whatever happened between the three of them, Paul was able to live what he preached, which was the power of love and forgiveness for each individual.

And there is much more, including Paul's personal commendation of Epaphras, the man whose work had founded the Colossian church, and probably that in Laodicea as well (1:7). What Paul says (4:16) indicates that the letter written to Colossae was to be read in Laodicea as well, and appears to confirm a strong connection between the churches in these two adjacent towns/cities (though some think that a different letter was written to the Laodicean church, which was to be delivered at the same time). Finally, the very last verse of Colossians is famous because it appears that the person who wrote the letter for Paul by dictation, passed it over to him for his personal signing, and Paul wrote his own name to conclude the letter, thus giving it his authority and asking his hearers very personally, to 'remember my chains' (4:18). This is the remarkable conclusion of a letter designed to encourage and build up the church of God.

Going Deeper

There is no doubt that we will find other fascinating truths as we look at the other people mentioned in this letter. It gives a vibrant picture of the mission and church growth of the first century, and sheds light on a number of intriguing personal issues about those we know of from elsewhere in Scripture.

Tychicus and Onesimus and news about Paul (7-9)

Tychicus was an important companion to Paul and was someone he trusted to handle awkward situations, particularly those where people were not keeping faith with the Gospel. Although it is quite uncertain in what order these events occurred, Paul considered sending him to Crete to help or even replace Titus when false teaching became an issue for that church (Titus 3:12). It is more certain that Tychicus was sent to Ephesus (2 Tim 4:12) and was almost certainly the bearer of the letter to the Ephesians (6:12). Some scholars doubt whether these references were real (as with those who do not believe that Ephesians was written by Paul), but it is difficult to see how anyone would have thought they could get away with false truths about people whose lives were known and who may have been living when the texts appeared!

Tychicus was in a unique place to encourage the Colossian church and also that in Laodicea (see 4:16), for he had great experience and was able to tell people the truth about Paul, the man he clearly served. Through these references to Tychicus, we begin to see that Paul saw his missionary calling as something that was unsustainable without the practical support and encouragement of companions who travelled with him and served him with complete obedience, 'in the Lord' (4:7). To accompany Paul throughout all he did would have taken personal resources of courage and money. Tychicus clearly possessed the first, and we have to presume that wherever Paul and his entourage of friends went, they were provided for either at Paul's own expense or through the support of the local churches (for example, see Acts 21:4f. and 28:30).

We have already looked at the extraordinary case of Onesimus (see notes on Col 1:1-8 and 3:18-4:1), the slave who became a Christian after coming across the teaching of Paul at Rome while he was in prison (Philem 10f.) and eventually becoming a trusted helper. This fact would have been widely known, and it would have been very difficult even for the great Paul to have had a letter received back in Colossae, the place from which Onesimus had fled after stealing from his master (Philem 18), without returning Onesimus to his master, Philemon. Paul had to 'sacrifice' the personal help of a profitable servant (the name 'Onesimus' meant 'profitable'!) for the higher cause of making sure that the Gospel was upheld free from heresy,

The Jewish Christian contingent (vv10-11)

Next are mentioned the Jewish contingent of those who worked with Paul, and the greetings they sent to Colossae (4:10-11). Jesus, called Justus, is not known of anywhere else in Scripture except here, and it is assumed he was a Jew living in Rome who helped Paul. Aristarchus was another travelling companion of Paul, who was a 'Macedonian from Thessalonica' (Acts 19:29, 27:2). For reasons we cannot clearly know, Aristarchus was imprisoned with Paul (4:10), though this may have been because he had stayed close to Paul throughout the last years of his ministry in Jerusalem and may have been incarcerated with him and for the same reasons, though it is strange that we do not know of this from elsewhere. It could also be that the notoriously fickle Roman guards had imprisoned him because he did not offer the right bribes for access to Paul; such a scenario was not unknown in those days. He certainly suffered to serve his master.

The most interesting mention is of Mark, who was clearly in the group of people who tended to Paul's needs (4:10). John Mark was a companion of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25) in the earliest of missionary endeavours, but because Paul had accused him of deserting the missionary cause in Pamphylia there was a serious split between Barnabas and Paul, which led the two of them to part company (see Acts 15:36 f.). There is no doubt that the record in Acts indicates a great deal of pain over this, but it is incredibly important that we now find out, much later on, that there was reconciliation between Paul and Mark. It does explain things more to discover that Mark was related to Barnabas, who clearly felt a sense of family loyalty to Mark when the earlier dispute arose. Mark is traditionally regarded as a companion of Peter and the writer of the second Gospel, so some have reckoned that this mention in Colossians must have meant that Peter was in Rome at the time, but there is no other Scriptural text or historical means to verify the possibility, so this has to remain speculation!

Epaphras, Luke and Demas, and the reading of letters

Paul devoted a couple of verses to emphasising in the strongest terms his support of Epaphras, the man who had first preached at Colossae and who taken Paul's missionary effort to both there and Laodicea. Epaphras had been sent by the church at Colossae (1:7) to speak to Paul about the problems they were having, yet it seems that he ended up imprisoned at Rome because he was described as a 'fellow-prisoner' of Paul in Philemon (Philem 23). He could have fallen foul of the Roman guards in the way I suggested for

Aristarchus (above) or it has been suggested that as time went by, the Roman authorities began to round up more and more Christians. This was just before the time when Nero blamed the fire of Rome on Christians, and had them 'thrown to the lions' around AD64. It is indicated in this passage that Epaphras preached not only in Colossae, but also in other towns of the Lycus valley, in Laodicea and Hierapolis. He was certainly a gifted evangelist!

Fascinatingly for this relatively small letter of Paul, it mentions not only Mark in its final greetings, but also Luke (4:14). Luke, the Gospel writer, has been identified as a doctor for most of the Church's two thousand years, and he appears to have been associated strongly with Paul in the latter years of his ministry in Rome (see also Philemon 24 and 2 Tim 4:11). Demas, however, seems to have been a co-worker with Paul for some time, but one who fell out of favour, having fallen 'in love with the present world' (2 Tim 4:10).

The general instructions to read the letter are also interesting because they tell the bearer, Tychicus, to pass the letter on to Laodicea, and also to make sure that another letter written to Laodicea was also made available to the Colossians. No letter to Laodicea survives, and some have noticed that the famous account of the church there in the Revelation of John (Rev 3:14f.) indicates a 'lukewarm' attitude to the Gospel which may have resulted in the loss of an important letter of Paul; something that would certainly have led to the chastisement they received in John's vision!

The last remark about Archippus (4:17) is clearly a direct challenge. In the letter to Philemon, however, he is mentioned as one of the household of Philemon, and it is possible that he was an elder at Colossae. Some believe this was a reminder from Paul to Archippus to get on and deal with the pastoral matter of the rehabilitation of Onesimus, and not forget Paul's instructions so to do!

Paul's signature

The final dramatic sign by Paul in writing his name at the end of his letter was not the only time he did this; it was also a feature of Romans (16:22). But we should not see this purely as drama. Paul used his 'chains' as a sign of his authority. By visibly suffering for the Gospel, as he said earlier, he considered himself as undergoing the sufferings of Christ so that the infant church of Colossae could be established (1:24). Through suffering, he felt bound to Colossae.

Discipleship

Application

The church is connected ...

Within this passage are hints at the remarkably strong connections between the early churches. Two Gospel writers occur in Paul's list of names, and the life experience of those involved includes substantial mission and evangelism work throughout the known world of the Roman Empire. It was genuinely important that the young churches had specific connections with each other through these people, and through them with the person of Christ and also the early doctrines of the church. Coherence and obedience to the risen Lord was paramount.

The importance of the body of Christ

One might be forgiven for thinking today that every leader who has a gripe against another, or every leader who has an angle on the Gospel today, forms their own church. Having then gathered a congregation that is self sufficient in money and teaching, they may sometimes then elect to join this or that wider group of churches for the convenience of pastoral

oversight or mission work. There is something within the Gospel and the Scriptures as a whole which shouts out 'this is not good enough'. Before the Lord comes again in Glory, He will reunite His Bride the Church; His people. I also believe we will see churches in stubborn resistance to God's will float away from the Body of Christ on a sea of selfishness and religiosity. That is not just my opinion, it is at least the same as the preliminary report of the Revelation of John (Rev 1-5) on the Church of God before the Bride is presented (Rev 19:7) to Christ, the Bridegroom.

The testimony of these letters of Paul is to a singular truth of the Gospel which all God's people recognise. This does not change, and is at the heart of God's Church, even today.

Ideas for what to do

- What issues in your own life would you like to resolve and feel that they have been 'completed before God to His satisfaction? Pray about this and ask the Lord to help you identify what, if anything needs your attention at this moment in time.
- Pray for those in the life of the church whose lives have been blighted by unresolved problems. Pray for God's grace for them and all involved.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. If you have a Bible Dictionary, please use it to look up some of the names mentioned in this passage.
2. It is possible that while Paul wrote this letter, Christians were rounded up in Rome and thrown to the lions. How might anyone hold faith in such circumstances?
3. How do we 'commend the work of God's servants' in the way Paul does here? Are there any people we can or should commend today?

Final Prayer

Lord God, let me hear Your voice tonight. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord God; **AMEN**