

# Epaphras

Colossians 4:12-13

## *“Pray Laborer”*

I don't know how many times I've heard someone described using the term, “prayer warrior.” It conjures up fantastic thoughts of doing battle with satanic forces, throwing down their strongholds, and crushing their skinny demon-necks with the heel of your Gospel boots.

You know that the term “prayer warrior” isn't used in the Bible. Here's a more biblical term to describe someone we ought to emulate in prayer: “Prayer laborer.” Not very glamorous, is it? It conjures up visions of workers digging ditches.

One guy in the New Testament is described as laboring in prayer.

Colossians 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

Colossians 4:13 For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

Epaphras is sometimes credited with being the founder of the church at Colosse because in chapter one he is said to have brought the Gospel to them. He certainly was active ministering to the saints at Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Evidently Epaphras had been sent by the believers at Colosse to Paul, who was in prison at Rome, to discuss matters pertaining to the church. Or he

may have gone on his own to consult Paul about how to deal with the heresies creeping in to the churches.

In Philemon 1:23 Paul refers to him as a “fellow prisoner.” It probably means that he was willing to identify himself as a believer and visit Paul even though doing so made him a marked man.

I want to look at Epaphras because the Lord sort of whispered to me the phrase “laboring in prayer.” When I searched it out, I found Epaphras. He’s an altogether remarkable character.

Before we look at his laboring in prayer, let’s look at the other descriptors.

Paul said to the Colossians that “Epaphras... is one of you.” Even though Epaphras had brought them the Gospel, and was their teacher and leader, he had the heart of Jesus in counting himself just another servant among fellow servants.

I just can’t stand folks who are always blowing their own spiritual horn, drawing attention to their supposed spiritual disciplines. A lot of people think serving is leading. They are always the head, in charge, in control. You never see them doing anything menial.

If you look at Jesus you see that leading is serving. It’s seeing the need and meeting the need - whatever that might be at the moment.

Epaphras was next called “a bondservant of Christ.” This is the Greek *doulos*, which can have several meanings, all the way from slave to voluntary servant.

I think it’s telling of His love for us that Jesus allows us to choose what type of servant we want to be. If we want to serve occasionally, when it’s convenient, when we’re going that way anyway, He’ll let us.

But when you consider that we are headed for a review of our service, with an eye towards eternal rewards, wouldn’t you rather appear at the Judgment Seat of Jesus as a slave having well-done His every bidding?

Epaphras “greet[ed]” them from Rome. He was thinking about them so much that he asked Paul to send his love in the letter he was writing. He interrupted Paul, as it were, to be sure they knew they were on his heart and mind.

*It was like a tweet!* You know, it’s popular among Christians to do social networking, like Twitter and Facebook. I listened to a message a while back in which the teacher talked about how much of a spiritual waste of time Facebook is, how real Christians don’t have time for it.

*I guess his wife isn’t a ‘real’ Christian, then, because she’s relatively active on Facebook!*

Is sending someone a card in the mail a spiritual waste of time? I’ll bet most of the cards we send have fewer than 140 characters! Listen, if you use those things for the Lord, they can encourage fellowship.

Epaphras “[had] a great zeal” for the Colossians, and for the Laodiceans, and for the Hier-apolians. (I’m guess that’s what they were called!). What does that mean, to have zeal for someone in Christ?

Bear in mind there were a group of people called ‘zealots.’ The dictionary defines them saying they were,

... member[s] of a radical, warlike, ardently patriotic group of Jews in Judea, particularly prominent from AD69 to 81, advocating the violent overthrow of Roman rule and vigorously resisting the efforts of the Romans and their supporters to heathenize the Jews.

Epaphras wasn’t a *zealot*, but he was just as *zealous* (if that makes sense). He was passionate about furthering the kingdom of Heaven, not by the sword but by the Word of God. He was all about the Gospel and that means he had to be all about others, serving them, meeting their needs, desiring their good over his own.

Which brings us to Epaphras’ “always laboring fervently... in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.” “Laboring fervently” is one word in Greek, *agonizomai*. We get our word *agonize*

from it. But, having said that, let's realize that the Greek word has a more positive connotation.

It was used, for example, of someone contending for a victory in the public games. It was used a lot to describe wrestlers contending to win the prize. It indicates a straining of every muscle, every nerve, towards the goal of victory.

The connotation, therefore, is extremely positive. Epaphras labored fervently in prayer the way an athlete labors fervently in his sporting contest. He was the Pete Rose of prayer!

How do I think of prayer? Is it a joyful labor, or is it just laborious?

Consider these comments about the corporate prayer meetings of a church.

As prayer meetings fail in a congregation, so will the ministrations of the pastor become unfruitful, the preaching of the word fail to convert sinners and promote holiness in the professors of religion (J.B. Johnston).

This much is sure in all churches, forgetting party labels; the smallest meeting numerically is the prayer meeting. If weak in prayer we are weak everywhere (Ravenhill).

Do our churches that have a prayer meeting have a weekly prayer meeting or a weakly prayer meeting (Forsyth).

A congregation without a prayer meeting is essentially defective in its organization, and so must be limited in its efficiency (J.B. Johnston).

Many may be happy to come and join in regular worship services but in regard to meeting for prayer the thought may be, 'It's only a prayer meeting.' In many churches the prayer meeting is left to the 'faithful few.' Bill Hughes, one time pastor in Glasgow had a rule that if a member did not attend the prayer meeting they were not permitted to come to the business meeting of the church. If they were not prepared to pray with the church why should they have the privilege of participating in its decisions? (Chewter). The prayer meeting ought to be the most important meeting in the church (R.A. Torrey).

How are we doing, not so much individually, but corporately?

- We offer prayer before each Sunday morning service in the Prayer Room. It is very lightly attended.
- Our *First Watch* prayer meeting on Saturday's draws less than ten people, sometimes only two.
- While our e-mail prayer list is active, we get just one or two requests a day.
- We've annually scaled back our major prayer event due to waning interest. For example: We used to pray for 24 hours straight but in about the third year we had a hard time filling all the slots.

**I think all of us see that there is a need for improvement in our participation in corporate praying!**

Notice next what Epaphras prayed for. He prayed for the believers to “stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.” He undoubtedly prayed for their help and healing, but it was all with an eye toward understanding God had sovereignly placed them in their circumstances with the goal of maturing them, of perfecting them. He prayed that they would understand and submit to the will of God for their lives.

It's like the famous illustration pastors use of the man (or woman) who asked for prayer for patience. The pastor prayed, “Lord, bring tribulation into this dear believer's life.” Startled, the person said, “I asked for patience, not tribulation,” to which the pastor replied, “Tribulation works patience” (Romans 5:3).

Epaphras saw God at work in every believer's life to perfect them and make them more like Jesus. Thus he had no time for puny prayers about temporal comforts. God was at work building for eternity.

Epaphras labored in prayer for the saints. How effective were his prayers?

Three churches are mentioned: Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. There is solid reason to think that two out of the three churches were vibrant and victorious. Can you guess which two?

Well, of course you can, because late in the first century Jesus wrote to the church at Laodicea and strongly rebuked them. It was to the Laodiceans that the Lord said,

Revelation 3:15 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.

Revelation 3:16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

I came across well-documented archaeological information about the water in Hierapolis and in Colossae.

- Hierapolis was a prosperous trade center built around natural hot springs that were considered a source of healing power in the Roman period.
- Colossae was blessed with a constant supply of cold refreshing water of that came from snow-and-rain-fed streams that rushed down from the peak of nearby Mount Cadmus.

There is even evidence that the city of Laodicea piped both hot water from Hierapolis and cold water from Colossae.

So when Jesus said to them, "You are neither cold nor hot," the Laodicean's would have understood it to mean that they were unlike the vibrant, victorious believers in Hierapolis and Colossae.

Everyone wants to have an effective prayer life. Epaphras' prayer life was certainly effective regardless the results in Laodicea.

Epaphras wasn't a numbers guy. He didn't labor in prayer to bring up his average although two out of three isn't so bad! He did it as unto the Lord.

We need more prayer laborers. Doesn't mean we change the way we pray. It means we need to be more excited about it, do more of it.

Charles Spurgeon said,

The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge of the amount of divine

working among a people. If God be near a church, it must pray. And if He be not there, one of the first tokens of His absence will be a slothfulness in prayer!

This story is also told about Spurgeon:

Five young college students were spending a Sunday in London, so they went to hear the famed C.H. Spurgeon preach. While waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who asked, "Gentlemen, let me show you around. Would you like to see the heating plant of this church?" They were not particularly interested, for it was a hot day in July. But they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway, a door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman then introduced himself. It was none other than Charles Spurgeon.



