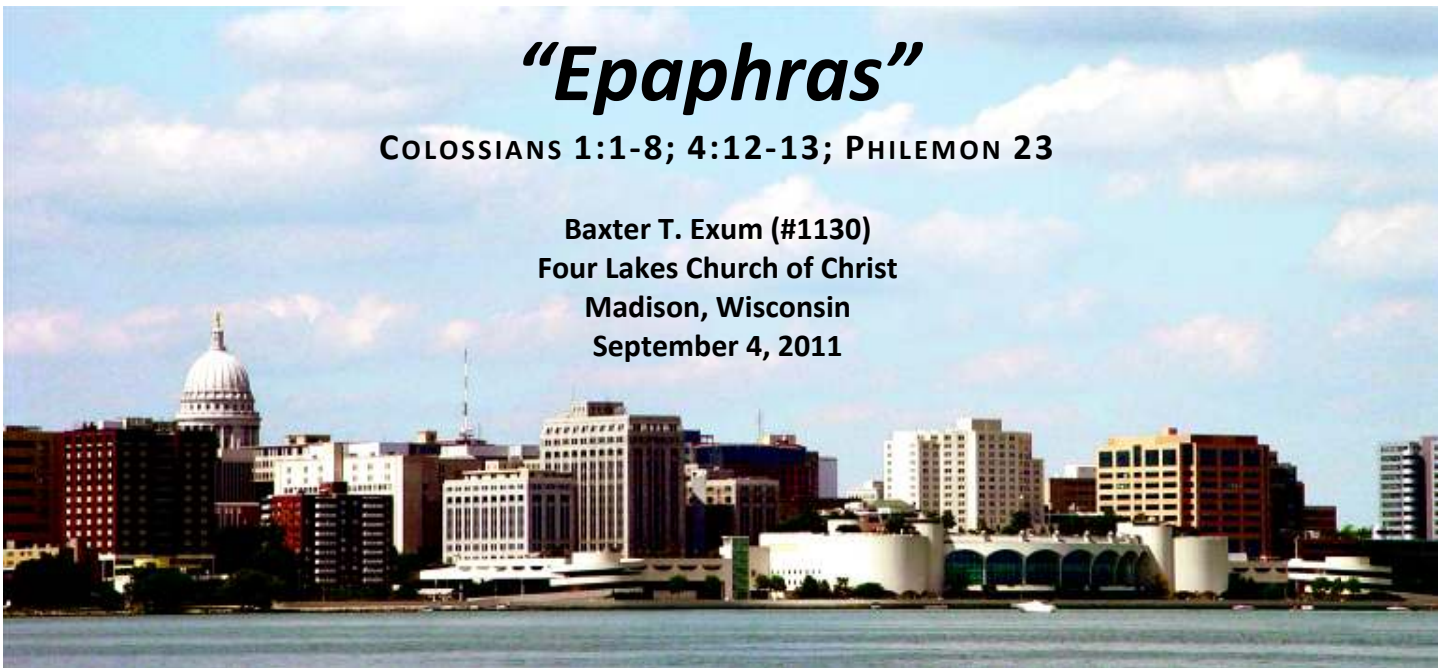


# *“Epaphras”*

**COLOSSIANS 1:1-8; 4:12-13; PHILEMON 23**

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Over the past several weeks, we have studied the ministry of John the Baptist, and as a part of those studies, we considered the fact that Jesus referred to John as being the greatest man to ever live up to that point in history. This morning, though, I would like for us to turn our attention to a much more obscure character in the New Testament. I have told you before that brother Dowell Flatt, one of my professors at Freed-Hardeman, one time just started wondering out loud concerning who was the greatest preacher in the Lord’s church these days, and brother Flatt’s conclusion was that the greatest preacher in the Lord’s church today is probably preaching for a church of eight people somewhere in the state of Wyoming. And by saying that, he was trying to emphasize that greatness is not determined by fame or numbers, and he encouraged us as his preaching students not to always be moving up and climbing to larger and larger congregations—that was not to be our focus—but instead, he encouraged us to do the best we could to stay put, to build relationships, and to patiently and faithfully preach the word of God no matter what.

With that in mind, this morning, then, we will not be studying Paul, or Peter, or John, or Stephen, or any of those others who may be considered great or famous, but by way of encouragement, I would like for us to consider a man who is only mentioned three times in the entire New Testament. I am referring to a man by the name of Epaphras. He is mentioned at the beginning and at the end of the book of Colossians, and he is also mentioned in one verse at the end of the book of Philemon.

To say that Epaphras is a minor character in the New Testament would be an understatement. He is barely mentioned at all. And I know that sometimes as we study some of Paul’s letters, we might be tempted to just kind of quickly read through (or maybe even skip over) some of those rather obscure names. We look at names like Tychicus, and Aristarchus, and Onesimus, and Nympha, and Archippus, and maybe we think to ourselves that there is nothing we can really learn from those names, there is nothing we can really apply to our lives. However, there is a tremendous value to studying some of those “minor” characters! After all, God included these names in the Bible for a reason. And one of the very basic overall lessons is that Paul did not work alone. In fact, in Paul’s letters, he mentions more than 100 individuals who worked alongside him in some way or another at some point during his life. Paul, therefore, might have been one of the more famous preachers in the First Century, but Paul did not work alone; but rather, his teaching and preaching was a group effort. And I don’t know about all of you, but that is encouraging to me. I may never be a preacher like Paul, but maybe I can be like one of those “minor” characters, maybe I can play a support role. I am reminded of an

old saying, “Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something, and if everybody does something, everything will get done.” In other words, each member of the congregation is critically important to the successful completion of our mission as a congregation. Our mission is to seek and save the lost.

This morning, then, let us study those three very brief passages that mention Epaphras, and let us consider several lessons from his life that will hopefully encourage us in the work that we are doing together as a congregation right here in Madison.

The first passage is found in Colossians 1 (p. 1841)—Colossians 1:1-8,

*<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, <sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. <sup>3</sup> We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, <sup>4</sup> since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; <sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup> which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; <sup>7</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup> and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.*

I. **As we look back over these verses, one of the first lessons we learn is that Epaphras was SOMEONE WHO TAUGHT THE GOSPEL TO OTHERS.**

We notice in verse 5 that Paul refers to the **“word of truth, the gospel.”** He was thrilled that the people in Colossae had understood it and accepted it, and then Paul points out in verse 7 that they **“learned it from Epaphras.”** In other words, Paul was not the one who first established the church in Colossae; but rather, the people who were reading the book of Colossians for the very first time had first learned the gospel through Epaphras. Toward the end of this book, we will find in Chapter 4 that Epaphras was a part of the church in Colossae. Paul describes him as **“one of your number.”** So, we may not know very much about this man’s personal life, but we know that he was someone who taught the **“word of truth”** to the people he knew. Epaphras was a Colossian. He lived there. He was from that city. Epaphras took the good news to his hometown. Epaphras was a teacher.

And when we think about it, we realize that this is something that all Christians should be able and willing to do. In fact, I would say that only two minutes after being baptized, every Christian knows enough to teach at least something to someone. Wouldn’t that be an accurate statement? If you know enough to repent of your sins, and if you know enough to be baptized, then you know enough to teach that to another person. “Hey, guess what I just did?” And with that, you can teach someone. You may not know enough to answer every question someone might have about predestination, you may not know enough to answer every question someone might have about the second coming of Christ, but you know enough to teach another person how to go to heaven, and that is huge!

And as we grow in the faith, God expects us to grow to the point of teaching others. We remember how the author of Hebrews was trying to talk about Melchizedek, but he couldn’t do it, because they couldn’t handle it, they didn’t know enough to hear a lesson based on the life of Melchizedek. And so the author says in

Hebrews 5:11-12, ***“Concerning him [Melchizedek] we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”*** You see, the author wanted to talk about Melchizedek, but due to their own neglect of God’s word, they could not handle that lesson, so the author had to stick with the basics. Just a little thought question here: Do all of us here this morning know who Melchizedek is? If I were to hand out a blank piece of paper and ask each person here this morning to write an essay on Melchizedek, how do you think that would go over? Do all of us know who gave Melchizedek a tithe? Other than Hebrews, do all of us know where we can even read about Melchizedek in the Bible? If not, then the author of Hebrews might be upset at us as well. But the point is, the author of Hebrews said, ***“...by this time you ought to be teachers.”*** In other words, all of us should be teachers! All of us, like Epaphras, should be actively involved in teaching the Bible to someone. One more thought question: To whom have we taught the word of God this week?

**II. As we continue looking at this little paragraph in Colossians 1, we also discover that Epaphras is described by Paul not only as a teacher but also as a BELOVED FELLOW BOND-SERVANT.**

And with this, we get the picture that Paul and Epaphras were close, that they were good friends. And the fact that they were bond-servants together tells us that they served side-by-side in some way. They might not have been literally working together in the same physical location, but they were working toward a common goal. Again, we get back to the idea that teaching the gospel is too much of a responsibility for one person to handle alone. Paul was good, but even Paul did not work alone.

There is something else I should point out here, and that is, Epaphras is described as ***“beloved.”*** Some translations may refer to him as being ***“dear”*** to Paul. Think about the kind of person who is considered ***“dear”*** to others. I think we will admit that some people are easier to love than others. Some people we know are a little bit standoffish. Some people are hard to get along with. Let’s just say: Epaphras was not like that! Epaphras was a ***“beloved”*** bond-servant. He was dear to Paul and dear to church in Colossae.

**III. This next concept is very close to this one (really, just a slight clarification), and that is, Epaphras was a FAITHFUL SERVANT OF CHRIST.**

And the emphasis here is on ***“Christ.”*** Yes, Epaphras was a servant, but specifically, he was a servant ***“of Christ.”*** As Christians, we are not employees of the Lord, we are not hired to work in the Lord’s church, but we are servants of Christ...and Epaphras understood this. Epaphras did not work for praise or compliments, he did not work to be noticed by others, but he considered himself to be a servant of God, a slave. We remember what the Lord said in Matthew 20:26-28, ***“...whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*** Like Jesus, then, Epaphras was a faithful servant. He was content to serve behind the scenes, and even if nobody ever noticed what he did, Epaphras was okay with that, because he was serving the Lord.

And I should also at least briefly point out here that Epaphras was a ***“faithful”*** servant. We remember what the master said to the servant in Matthew 25:21, ***“Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”*** And then we also remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, ***“Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found***

**trustworthy.**” Epaphras, then, was a faithful servant of Christ, and we can certainly be encouraged by his example. We don’t worry about what other people may say about us, but we focus on faithfully serving God.

At this time, let’s move on to the second reference to Epaphras (just a few pages over), in Colossians 4:12-13,

***Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.***

IV. **As we continue looking at various traits, we find that Epaphras was a man who SENT HIS GREETINGS TO THE CHRISTIANS IN COLOSSAE.**

And this is where we learn that Epaphras is described as **“one of your number.”** In other words, Epaphras considered Colossae to be his home congregation, and as he is with Paul in Rome, he sends his personal greetings back to spiritual family. He knew these people. He loved these people. And again, it may not sound like much, but to send a greeting to someone can really lift that person up. Maybe we get a call, or a text, or a note, or a message from a member of the congregation during the week, and it can really help us make it through the week. It can make us feel remembered. Epaphras, then, was a man who sent his greetings to his Christian family, something that we can also remember to do even today.

V. **As we look very carefully at this passage, there is something else even more significant here, and that is, EPAPHRAS LABORED EARNESTLY IN HIS PRAYERS FOR THESE PEOPLE.**

We learn here, first of all, that Epaphras was **“always”** praying. We remember how Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that we are to **“pray without ceasing.”** Epaphras did this. He was constantly praying.

Secondly, we also learn here that it takes effort to pray for other people. It is so easy to get caught up with our own troubles and concerns, but Epaphras **“labored earnestly”** in his prayers for the Christians in Colossae. The word Paul uses is an athletic term that refers to an athlete competing to win the prize. I have read that in ancient Greek athletic events, there was no second or third place as we have in our modern Olympics, but there was simply a winner. Athletes, therefore, would **“earnestly strive”** to win, knowing that there was not going to be a silver or bronze medal. This, by the way, is the word from which we get our English word “agonize.” Remember, several weeks ago, we studied the passage where Jesus said that we must **“strive to enter through the narrow door.”** The same word is used. Epaphras, then, was agonizing in his prayers. He was praying with great intensity.

And then thirdly, not only did Epaphras pray always and earnestly, but notice what he prayed for. So often, we pray for someone’s physical health, and that is certainly important. But we notice here in verse 12 that he was praying **“..that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.”** In other words, he was praying for their spiritual health. These were not generic prayers, “Dear God, please help Bob,” but these prayers were specific. He wanted these people to **“stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.”** He wanted each member of the congregation to be spiritually mature. He wanted to see people grow. He wanted them to **“stand perfect,”** that is, he wanted them to be complete, he wanted to see them grow up, he wanted them to be strong, he prayed for them to mature in the faith.

And so with all of this in mind, we ask ourselves: How do our prayers compare to the prayers of Epaphras? Are we praying specifically for various members of this congregation, and are we praying not only for physical needs to be met, but are we praying for spiritual health? Are we praying that each of us may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God? And then, let us imagine what the church would look like if these prayers were answered! Imagine what the congregation could accomplish if each member were standing perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.

Epaphras might not have been an eloquent preacher, Epaphras might not have been an elder or an apostle, but Epaphras could pray. Epaphras was a Christian like all of us here this morning. He constantly and earnestly prayed for the spiritual health of each member of the congregation.

**VI. There is something else we can learn from this passage, and that is, Epaphras had a DEEP CONCERN FOR THE SAINTS.**

As Paul said in verse 13, ***“For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.”*** Of course, being a native of that area, Epaphras would have known some of these people very well. He would have been very familiar with certain members who had not grown as they should have, and he was ***“deeply concerned”*** about those situations. This concern would have been demonstrated not only through prayer (as we learned the previous verse), but it also would have been shown by doing what the Bible tells us to do in those situations. For example, we remember what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, ***“We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.”*** The ***“deep concern”*** Epaphras had would have caused him to obey the words of Hebrews 3:13, where we are commanded to, ***“...encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”*** Again, Epaphras might not have been an eloquent speaker, but he was ***“deeply concerned”*** about his fellow Christians. And obviously, the question for us today is: Are we also ***“deeply concerned”*** about each other, even to the point of doing something? Are we ***“deeply concerned”*** for those who are struggling spiritually? Are we ***“deeply concerned”*** for those who weak, and for those who are in the process of falling away? Epaphras would encourage us to be concerned, and then he would encourage us to express that concern.

At this time we get to one final passage that mentions Epaphras, one small verse in the tiny book of Philemon. As we learned this past Wednesday evening, Philemon is one of the “Prison Epistles,” one of those books that was written as Paul was under house arrest in Rome, a situation described for us in Acts 28. Philemon was written to encourage a Christian slave-owner to receive a runaway slave back not as a slave, but as a Christian brother, and near the end of that book, we read in Philemon 23, ***“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you.”***

**VII. And obviously, as we look at this verse, we discover that Epaphras is described as A FELLOW PRISONER OF THE APOSTLE PAUL.**

And here again we have an example: Not that we should try to get thrown in prison, but rather, Epaphras was able to do all of these things while in prison. So, what’s my excuse? Some of you know that when I first started preaching, my dad told me to keep a list of excuses that people give me for not coming to worship. He said that after a few decades it would be interesting to look back over that list. Well, as some of you know, I have faithfully kept that list in my middle desk drawer over the past 20 years or so. My dad’s all-time favorite was when one of their families called in and said, “We can’t make it to worship this morning, because none of us have any clean underwear.” Well, that’s a good one! One of my favorites is when one of our members called

in to say that there were too many drunk people passed out in his apartment parking lot. This was on New Year's morning, and there was literally gridlock in the parking lot because of all of the people passed out in their cars. I heard another good one this week, "I cannot come to the Wednesday evening Bible class, because I might lose the parking space out in front of my downtown apartment." Okay, well, very interesting, at least! But then we look at Epaphras—faithfully teaching the gospel, laboring earnestly in prayer, deeply concerned for the saints, a faithful servant of Christ—and as he does these things he is with Paul in prison!

I am reminded of John Bunyan, who was arrested in England in the mid 1600's for preaching without a license. I have read that as he was imprisoned, he continued to preach, but being in prison, he could not see who was standing outside the prison walls. Well, the people came up with a system. Outside the prison walls, someone would put a cap on top of a large stick, and when Mr. Bunyan saw the cap, he would start preaching out the window. I have read that for several years he did not actually see the members of his congregation, but during that time, thousands were baptized as a result of his preaching. It was also during this time that Mr. Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the most well-known and widely-read pieces of religious writing of all time. Again, perhaps in a similar way, being in prison did not stop Epaphras from doing what he knew was right. But then I'm going to forsake the assembling of the saints together because I need to go shopping, or because I need to get my hair done, or because I might lose my parking spot, or because I had to do some homework, or because I had to go to a hockey game, or because our family doesn't have any clean underwear? I don't think so! Epaphras, then, is described as being Paul's fellow-prisoner.

### **Conclusion:**

This morning we have looked at a rather obscure character in the New Testament. He is never described in the Scriptures as being a preacher, or an apostle, or an elder, and yet he played a critical role in the growth of the First Century church. As we noted at the beginning of this morning's lesson, Paul did not work alone, but Paul encouraged others to get involved, even if the work was not showy or glamorous. "Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something, and if everybody does something, everything will get done."

As we close, I would like to share a brief story about something that happened during WWII. Apparently, an Allied bombing raid had just returned to its base, and they reported that they had been hit several times by German anti-aircraft fire, but that none of the shells had exploded. Specialists very carefully removed the shells from the plane and took them away to a safe place to examine them. What they discovered was that the fuses were missing, and in place of the fuses there was a small note, written in Czech. The note was apparently put there by one of the prisoners of war working in a German munitions factory, "This is all we can do for now, wish we could do more."

Sometime over the next seven days, are we willing to pray fervently that each member of this congregation will be complete and mature spiritually? Are we willing to say something about God to someone who is not yet a Christian? Are we willing to send greetings or some other word of encouragement to a member of this congregation? Are we willing and able to perform some act of service on behalf of the congregation? Are we willing to be concerned for each other spiritually? If so, then we have learned something from the life of Epaphras.

The Bible teaches that Jesus died in our place. We sinned, but Jesus took the punishment. In response to His sacrifice, the Bible teaches that we must turn away from sin and that we must allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, please pull us aside after the service this

morning. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)