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The Sermon

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Colossians 4:12-18

"Greetings from Prison"

September 3, 2023

TRANSCRIPT

Take your Bible, turn to Colossians chapter 4, and today we're going to be looking at verses 12-18. The title of this message is "Greetings from Prison." Colossians chapter 4, and I want to begin reading in verse 12.

The word of God reads, "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. Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas. Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house. When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part, read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. Say to Archippus, 'Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.' I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you." This is the reading of God's word. Let us go to Him in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are consciously aware that we have just read Your word. It is divinely inspired. It has come forth from Your mouth, been recorded by Paul; but what is written here is an accurate account of what You would have us to know. And so I pray that You will open our eyes that we would see and understand what is being said here, and that You would

show us how to apply this to our own personal lives. Would You bless everyone who is under the sound of my voice here today, would You bless everyone in this house of worship, and would You strengthen those who are weak, and would You save those who are lost? We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. [End]

In these verses the apostle Paul brings the book of Colossians to a climactic conclusion; and as we look at these verses that I have just read there's one word that stands out that is like a thread that is woven through this text, and it is the word "greeting." You find it four times in these few verses. Paul writes in verse 12, "Epaphras sends his greetings." In verse 14, he writes, "Luke sends his greetings." In verse 15, Paul writes, "Greet the brethren in Laodicea." In verse 18, Paul states, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand." So obviously, as we come to the end of this letter, it is marked by greetings.

Now this tells us something about the apostle Paul, that the apostle Paul was a very warm-hearted servant of the Lord. When we think of Paul, and rightly so, we think of Paul as the towering, brilliant theologian. We think of Paul who sat at the feet of Gamaliel and was personally taught by him. We think of Paul who is the master teacher of sound doctrine. We think of Paul who was the author of 13 epistles in the New Testament. I mean, the brilliance of the apostle Paul is beyond our comprehension. But at the same time, the apostle Paul was also very warm-hearted towards people.

Usually a preacher ends up favoring one side or the other something like this: he's strong in the pulpit, but he's weak with people; or he's strong with people, but he's weak in the pulpit. It's hard to find someone who is strong on both sides of the aisle. The apostle Paul stands out really as Exhibit A of someone who was strong in the pulpit, strong in the word, strong in theology, but also in tune to individual people and their needs. And the second part of that comes out loud and clear, because beginning in verse 7 and extending to the end of chapter 4 here is a long list of the names of people who are with him, names of people who are in the church at Colossae and Laodicea. So Paul is in touch and in tune with people as well. So both project and people-oriented.

This is an example for you and for me, because no matter what your gifting is, what your ability is, we have to stay connected to people. That's the part of the beauty of the church. We are the body of Christ, and we are all members one of another. And even after this service is over and we are standing and talking with one another, it is a critically important time that we stay connected to one another and we encourage one another. And that's actually what Paul is doing here. He's an example to me; he should be an example to you.

So what we want to do this morning now, starting in verse 12, is we want to walk through the rest of this list of names that began in verse 7. We want to think through who these people are, why they're important, and what we should learn from their lives.

So beginning in verse 12, we see Epaphras. And I've come up with two words to describe Epaphras, and it is "sacrificial pastor," because that's what he was: he was a sacrificial pastor. So verse 12 begins, "Epaphras," we've got to stop right there. Epaphras. Who in the world is Epaphras? Well, at this time, Epaphras is with Paul in his imprisonment in Rome, and who Epaphras is is he was the founding pastor of the church in Colossae. And there has been trouble brewing in the church of false teachers with false doctrine coming into the church in Colossae. It's known as the Colossian heresy, and it was outlined for us in chapter 2.

And Epaphras needs help; he needs to talk to Paul: "How do I attack this false doctrine? How do I defend the faith?" And so Epaphras makes the long journey from Colossae to Rome. We talked about that the last time we were together. He crosses three land masses, and he crosses two seas, over a thousand miles. And in this day and time, travel was arduous and very difficult. And so Epaphras has now come to Paul and told him what's going on in the church in Colossae: "Give me help, give me counsel. Help me to know how to attack this heresy and how to defend the faith." This is Epaphras; and it's not the first time that we've seen his name in this epistle.

Earlier in chapter 1 and in verses 6 and 7 we were told that he is the one, Epaphras, who first brought the gospel to Colossae. Paul has never been to Colossae. Paul has not met the Colossians personally. Probably what happened is when Paul was in Ephesus, Epaphras came to Ephesus and was probably converted to Christ under the preaching of the apostle Paul. Paul was in Ephesus for three years. Epaphras then leaves Ephesus and comes to Colossae and brings the gospel, preaches the gospel, wins people to Christ, and plants a church and functions as the pastor of the church at Colossae. So he has traveled over a thousand miles to come to Rome now to seek the counsel of the apostle Paul, and also, surely, to encourage him, because Paul was the one who had led him to Christ earlier in Ephesus.

Now he's still the pastor of the church, though he is removed by a thousand miles, and he says in verse 12, "Epaphras," Paul writes, "who is one of your number." What that means is he's still in the church there, and so most likely he's still the pastor there, he's just away for this period of time, and he identifies him as a bonds slave.

Now what should be interesting to us is Paul never identifies someone as a Christian. That term started in Acts chapter 11 at Antioch; that's where the disciples were first called Christians, which was a term of scorn, and a term of mockery really. It's the diminutive form of the word "Christ," which means a little Christ. And so people would look down their long nose and say, "Oh, you're a little Christ, that one who was crucified as a public threat." Jesus never referred to anyone as a Christian, that term hadn't even been invented. All true believers under the ministry of Jesus were called disciples; and a disciple, that word literally means a learner, but it is one who is under the authority of a teacher and receives that teaching and follows that teacher around with loyalty and allegiance.

Well, Paul's favorite designation is either a "saint" or a "bonds slave." And I love this term "bonds slave." A bonds slave is someone who is a slave and has a master, and the master has bought him with a price in a slave market, and then brings him home, "and you live in my house, and you do everything I tell you to do. You don't have a life of your own anymore; I now own you, and you are to do what I tell you to do."

And for Paul, he understood that he was a bonds slave, and all Christians are a bonds slave, because we have been bought at the cross with the price of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are no longer our own, we have been bought with a price; therefore we glorify God. And for the rest of our lives we are a slave under the lordship of Jesus Christ; and we go where He sends us, we say what He teaches us, we do what He requires of us. We no longer have any rights. We no longer have a life of our own. We spend the rest of our lives serving our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. And as I told you two times ago, no slave ever had a more benevolent, loving and wise master as you and I have. He takes care of us wonderfully well.

And so he says, "Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave, sends his greetings." Now when he says, "sends his greetings," this means far more than, "Hi, how are you doing?" The last thing I looked up in preparing this message was the meaning of this word "greetings," my curiosity just got to me, and this is what I found. The word "greetings" means to draw someone to yourself and embrace them. It's a word of very warm, personal greeting, as if I'm drawing you into myself so that I may embrace you.

And so, "Epaphras sends his greetings," Paul writes, and the reason he sends his greetings is, one, he loves the believers in Colossae. It's killing him to be separated from his own church. And he also wants them to know that while he is away, he hasn't forgotten them, "and I still love you." And so he sends his greetings, and he expresses his deep care in these next words, "always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers."

Now I teach and preach out of a New American Standard translation, and these three words, "always laboring earnestly," I don't know how it reads in your translation, but I want you to know it's just one word in the original Greek when Paul dictated this, and I'm going to pronounce the word, because it comes into the English language as a word you'll immediately recognize. It's the Greek word *agōnizomai*, and you can hear "agonizing" in it.

Prayer is hard work. Prayer is difficult. You have to stay focused. You have to be on your knees, or at least in your heart you're on your knees. And you have to give up time and effort. And real prayer wrestles with God. And real prayer calls out to the Lord, and keeps knocking and seeking and asking. And that's exactly what Epaphras has been doing for them; he's been pushing himself to the limit, no doubt, giving up sleep; no doubt, giving up time he could have been talking with other people in this imprisonment house. But he continues to lift them up and hold them up before the throne of grace.

And you know how Paul knows? Because Epaphras has been right next to him in this house - it's a tiny little house - and he has been hearing Epaphras pray and agonize and with passion and fervency calling upon the Lord to "bless my little flock back in Colossae." And probably, Paul has been praying with Epaphras for the church in Colossae, as well as for the church in Ephesus, and the church in Philippi, and other churches. It's kind of an ongoing, spontaneous season of prayer that's going on; and Epaphras is laboring earnestly for them and making great sacrifice in prayer. He can't be with them, all he can do is pray for them. But isn't that the greatest thing you can do for someone is to represent them before the throne of grace and ask for God to open the windows of heaven and pour out His blessing upon someone else? And that is what Epaphras is doing. You'll also notice "prayers" is in the plural, "always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers," plural. It speaks of the multiplicity of prayers again and again and again that Epaphras is lifting up.

And so, what is he praying? Well, he tells us what he is praying for here. And let me just set it up by saying this. Put yourself in Epaphras' place. Paul is in prison here for two years. I don't know the length of time that Epaphras is there, but it would be a very extended period of time. And he is under the influence of Paul; and when you're under the influence of someone who is ahead of you spiritually, you're actually being disciplined by them whether you realize it or not. You're being influenced by them, and you begin to take on even their manners of expression.

I know, for example, I have been greatly influenced by great preachers: John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, James Montgomery Boice, other men like that; and other men in print: Charles Haddon Spurgeon, George Whitefield other men like that, such that when I open my mouth, sometimes I don't know if it's me or Spurgeon, you know. I don't know, because it's just inside of me, and it's part of my vocabulary and part of my manners of expression. And you need people like that in your life as well who are influencing you.

Well, as I read these next words, I just hear the apostle Paul; but he's describing Epaphras' prayers. And just think about what an influence Paul is being on Epaphras just by being in the same room with him for many, many, many months, and absorbing Paul's theology, and Christian worldview, and Old Testament quotations, and manners of expression, and figures of speech, and vocabulary, et cetera. So this is what he's praying, and it sounds so much like Paul.

But this is what Epaphras is praying, "that you may stand perfect and fully assured in the will of God." In fact, it almost sounds like the book of Philippians to me. And so, what does this mean, "that you may stand perfect"? Well, the word "stand" here means that you're anchored, that you have your feet nailed to the floor in the will of God, and you're not like a reed being blown in the wind and you're back and forth like the wave of the ocean. You're standing firm.

But the word that he uses to follow "stand" here is the word "perfect." And I think that's an unfortunate translation, I would say that personally, because what this word "perfect" – it doesn't mean that you become sinlessly perfect; that's impossible in this world. The word "perfect" here means mature and complete. And I'm just taking it straight out of a Greek dictionary, I'm not coming up with this, I am just telling you what the Greek dictionary says: to be mature and complete. In other words, to be more fully developed in the Lord. In other words, to become more like Jesus Christ. And that is what Epaphras is praying for the church in Colossae, that they will get to the next level of spiritual development in the Lord.

And that would be true for everyone in the church, no matter where they are spiritually. You always want to get to the next level, don't you? Whether you have been a Christian for only five weeks or for five decades, you want to grow and reach the next level of spiritual maturity. And so this prayer that Epaphras is making really applies to everyone in the church just like it does to everyone here today. In fact, if you want to know how to pray for your loved ones, if you want to know how to pray for your closest friends, pray this. This is spot on on how to pray. There are many other things for which you could pray, but you should pray that people will stand perfect and be fully assured in the will of God.

Now we also learn from this, in order to be growing spiritually you must be in the will of God, that there is no spiritual growth when you're out of the will of God, you've got to be in the will of God; and to be in the will of God necessitates that you are living in obedience to the revealed word of God. And so this is what Epaphras is praying for them, and Paul wants them to know, "Listen, your pastor loves you so much, and he is praying for you, and he's praying lofty, high prayer requests for you to grow spiritually."

So, verse 13, "For I testify for him. I, Paul, testify for him, Epaphras." And the word "testify" means to bear witness as in a courtroom. So Paul is being very emphatic here when he says, "I testify for him. I'm telling you the truth what's going on. He is laboring in prayer for you people."

And then he says, verse 13, "that he has a deep concern for you." The word "concern" here means distress, toil. And again, it's a reflection of the agonizing of his heart for them. He's toiling to the point of distress within his soul, as he's separated from them and wanting their spiritual good. His heart is in the Lord's work. He's not just going through the empty motions of religious activity, "he has a deep," which means, "great concern and distress for you."

And then he goes, "and for those who are in Laodicea." Now Laodicea is a neighboring town, it's only nine miles away from Colossae. And it's the

nearest city to Colossae, and it would be in Colossae that the gospel would spread there; and probably Epaphras is the one who took the gospel there as well. And a church is planted there in Laodicea, and he has deep relations, relationships with people in that church. He's concerned for them too, and he's praying for them.

And you may recognize this city Laodicea is one of the seven cities to which Jesus sent one of His seven letters to. It's the lukewarm church. Remember He said, "I would rather you be hot or cold; but you're lukewarm, therefore I spew you out of My mouth." I mean, this church would be on a downhill slide.

But anyway, he says he has a deep concern for the church at Laodicea, and then he says, "and Hierapolis." Hierapolis was another neighboring town nearby; and what's important for you to know about Hierapolis is that it was a city that was unusually overrun with Greek mythology and idolatry. And there was the worship of Apollos, the worship of Pluto and other mythological gods. And so idolatry, it established a real beachhead in Hierapolis.

But what's amazing is there are believers now in Hierapolis. And wherever there's believers, there's going to be a church. And so there's a church there as well. And I think what we need to learn from this, from the church at Hierapolis, is God never has to have the circumstances just right to start a church. God can start a church wherever God wants to start a church. And there are today what are called church growth experts; and you can pay a lot of money, and they'll come into a church and they'll tell, "You need to be in this zip code, and you need to be at this intersection, and you need to brand yourself this way, and you need to have this cool name, and your pastor needs to be of this age, and his wife needs to look like this," and on and on and on, "and this is how you start a church." It's a bunch of rubbish is what it is.

And I think of this church. You know what our strategy was? Open this Book and let it out; and that's all we did. And when I look around, it's

every age, it's every ethnic background, it's just a cross-section of Dallas, and beyond Dallas, and it's just something that God has done, because it's the word of God that's being held up. And so God never has to have the circumstances just right. In fact, we started in the coffee shop across the street. Some church growth expert would say that's the worst thing you could possibly do. That was our launching pad.

I once started a church, the last church that I pastored. Our first Sunday we met in a warehouse in an industrial area that was so bad we had to hire policemen to be in the parking lot just to get the older ladies into the building without some kind of a robbery attempt, and we had a little synthesizer that probably cost about a hundred dollars from some store; and I tell you, our church was just thriving. And then it was bought by a Mardi Gras company, okay, and the owner put a 30-foot tall Buddha statue into where we were meeting for church. We told the kids they couldn't look at it, and they immediately all ran to it.

So we had to move out of there, and we moved into a bingo parlor, we really did. And we doubled down and invested our tithing, and - no, we didn't - and people were saved by the droves in this bingo parlor. Then we bought a church in a horrible part of town, and that church couldn't function because it just wasn't matched up right with the congregation. And so we went in there and bought it, and we had to meet in the gym behind until we fixed up out front, and just on and on and on. God doesn't have to have the circumstances just right in order for a church to be built and to thrive, okay. That's the point.

And that there is no explanation for there being a church in Hierapolis, except God did it. And Jesus said, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." And God loves to set up a church next to the gates to hell just in the most difficult of places. The light shines the brightest where it is the darkest.

And so, this man Epaphras - back to him - he's an example to you, and to me. We need to be like Epaphras. This man was willing to go anywhere, do

anything, pay any price, travel any distance. He traveled over a thousand miles, a lot of it either on foot or on the back of a wagon drawn by an ox, and getting on a tiny little ship and sailing through stormy seas in order to get to Rome.

So here's the question I have for you: Are you willing? If the Lord should tap you on the shoulder and to indicate to you that His will for your life is to do something other than what you're doing, go someplace other than where you are, are you willing to say, "Yes, Lord, I will go. Here am I, send me"? Every one of us in this building today needs to be sitting on ready. You need to have already made up your mind that, "If God makes His will known to me, that I will do it whatever it is." Let me put it this way: your life needs to be like a check that you have signed over to God for God to fill in the amount that, "I will pay whatever price, and I will go wherever You will send me." You need to be sitting in that kind of a place in your Christian life.

So, are you there today? Epaphras was. And do not say – and I hear this sometimes, people have a little chuckle when they say it: "Oh, I told the Lord I would never," and then that's what they end up doing. Well, the bad part of that is the word "never." Do not ever say, "Lord, I would never." That's an indictment of you being unwilling and being unsubmitive to the will of God as if you know more about the will of God than God knows about His will for your life.

Romans 12:2 says, "The will of God is good and acceptable and perfect." The will of God is something you get in on. The will of God is the best thing that could ever happen to your life. Being out of the will of God is the worst thing that could ever happen to your life. Epaphras was willing to go anywhere, do anything, pay any price. Are you?

And we come, second, to Luke in verse 14. I want to call Luke "skilled physician," because that's what he was, a skilled physician. So we read in verse 14, "Luke, the beloved physician." He is beloved, which means he is a

close friend of Paul's, a close supporter, an encourager, someone who's in the trenches with Paul.

He joined Paul on Paul's second missionary journey. You know he had three missionary journeys; he joins Paul. That missionary journey began at the end of Acts 15, and really starts in Acts 16, and Luke becomes a part along the way, and he never leaves Paul's side. He's with Paul in his first imprisonment, he's with Paul in the second imprisonment, and it's reasonable that he is in between with Paul. I mean, he is die hard, he believes in Paul's message and his ministry, and he is there to support him, and he's a physician, we read it right here, probably because of Paul's reoccurring illnesses, and he needs someone to help take care of him, so he can keep preaching, and keep him hydrated.

And so Luke, he was an educated man - let me put it that way - he was a smart man. And he wrote two books in the Bible. He wrote Acts, and he wrote the gospel of Luke. You may not be aware, that's one-fourth of the New Testament. Luke wrote one-fourth of the New Testament, and he wrote it with superior Greek language and grammar and syntax. He is a very smart man. And he's really like a medical missionary.

I'm reading David Livingstone's biography at night as I go to sleep, and the first White man to go into the interior of Africa and bring the gospel there, and really what opened the doors for him was Livingstone was a medical missionary. And I was reading last night how there were certain tribes that really were thinking about doing harm to Livingstone; and Livingstone shows up and delivers babies, and saves lives medically, which opens the door for him to be able to preach the gospel to them. And so that's something of what Luke is like.

Now think about this. Luke is at Paul's side, and Paul is pouring his life and influence into Luke, and that's well-invested, because Luke will write one out of every four verses in the New Testament. And think about this. In verse 10 we read about Mark. Well, Paul poured his life into Mark, and Mark wrote the gospel of Mark.

And so even in prison, Paul's ministry is prolific; and Paul is training men, and discipling men, and writing books in the Bible. He writes four letters that are in the Bible while in this first Roman imprisonment. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are all being written at this time, and probably the gospel of Luke. Let me take out the word "probably." The gospel of Luke starts with the birth of John the Baptist. It goes all the way through the resurrection of Christ and His ascension to heaven. He then writes the book of Acts, which goes from Jerusalem all the way to Rome, and it ends with Paul's first Roman imprisonment. And so what Luke writes is really the longest redemptive history of what we have in the first century. He's a very accurate historian, with dates and cities and places. And when you put all of this together, Paul's input into Luke is so well-invested, it's yielding an exponential rate of return in Luke's life.

And so here's the question I have for you. You are like Luke in this sense. You have received training in this world to do something, whether it's in the world of medicine, the world of business, the world of finances, the world of industrial products, the world of education, just like Luke had received training in medicine; and he took this skill and he uses it in ministry, and he uses it for the spread of the gospel. What do you have to invest in God's work? How can God use you in this church? How can God use you outside of this church to invest this training, this ability in spreading the word of God?

You have something that you didn't learn in this church, that you learned out in the world, but can be used for the spread of the gospel. Paul didn't teach Luke medicine, he learned that someplace else; but he brings it into God's work, and now is being used mightily. So I just think you need to really think very carefully about, "What do you have to offer the work of God?" and, "Would you be willing to use that as needs are made known?"

We come to the third name and it is the name Demas; that's at the end of verse 14. And I will describe him this way: "spiritual deserter." And we now move from the most faithful to the most unfaithful. We come to Demas.

And this is a sad story. Though Demas was with Paul bodily, he was not with Paul spiritually; he was of a different spirit.

He's mentioned in Philemon 24, which was written at the same time as "my fellow worker"; and that's what Paul assumes he is, but he's not. And he's mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:10; that's some six years later during Paul's second Roman imprisonment, and Paul would never recover, and Paul would have his head cut off, tradition tells us, just weeks after he writes 2 Timothy.

So 2 Timothy is the last of the 13 letters that Paul wrote, and it's in the last chapter, it's at the end of the last chapter after he has said, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season," et cetera, after Paul says, "I'm being poured out as a drink offering. I've fought the good fight, I've kept the faith, I've run the course; there's light up for me the crown of righteousness." It's even after that.

Basically, all but the last thing Paul ever writes: "Demas," - 2 Timothy 4 10 - "Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. He's bailed on me, he's gone AWOL." This word "deserted" means to utterly abandon and to completely forsake. And he left Paul in his hour of greatest need, because "he loved this world, he loved the comforts of this world. He doesn't like being in a prison. He's not willing to pay the price. He wants the applause of this world. And we're being persecuted, and we're being met with opposition."

This is dangerous to be a bondsman, and so he just abandons Paul and bails out from him after Paul has poured much of his life into him, and he's been right next to him. And Paul must have had some inkling of this, because as we read this, this is the only name that there's nothing positive said about him. Everybody else, "Oh, he's a beloved physician, he's a bondsman, he's much help to me," et cetera, et cetera. He just says, "Yeah, and there's also Demas." And he must have realized that Demas was sliding: "He's not excited for the things that excite Paul. He's not fervent in prayer, he's got

his mind someplace else. He's not with us, and so he proves to be a casualty in ministry."

And I want you to know that ministry is all about people, taking the truth to people. And these people are either the greatest blessing that will ever be in the life of a preacher, or they will be the biggest heartache in the life of a preacher, and there's not much in between. And while Luke and Epaphras are the greatest blessings in the life of Paul, even the apostle Paul with all of his discernment and with all of his wisdom, he can't see the heart. And Demas breaks his heart. This is a sad reality in ministry, that you pour your life into someone, and they go south on you.

I've had associate pastors like Demas go south on me and do me much harm. I've had elders go south on me and do me much harm. I've had to exercise church discipline and put out of the church the chairman of the elders, and rightly so, because he went south. I've had secretaries go south and abandon me. I've had charter members go south. I've had deacons go south. And this is the reality of how vulnerable you become in the Lord's work, that you open yourself up to either great blessing, or really great disaster; and it hurts deep, because they were so close to you, but they could not remain loyal to Christ, to you, or to the work. May God never allow that in this church.

We come next to Nympha, she's in verse 15. We'll call her "selfless believer." And Paul circles back now to the church in Laodicea, and there's one particular lady there that he mentions by name. She must have been making a very significant contribution to the work of the Lord.

And so, we read in verse 15, "Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha" - This means that Nympha is in the church that is in Laodicea. And remember, Laodicea, nine miles away from Colossae, neighboring church, sister church; and there's this woman - "and" - it says - "the church that is in her house." This precious lady will never stand behind a pulpit; God forbids that, for a woman to preach. But the strategic role she plays in the spiritual health and dynamic of the church at

Laodicea, you couldn't even begin to calculate it. She's such an invaluable member of this church; and Paul even mentions her by name. And she's always recorded in the word of God; wherever there's a Bible, there's her name as an example of how God uses a precious woman to further the ministry of a local church.

We don't know exactly what this looks like, the church that is in her house. It's not that the whole church is in her house – though it could be – it's probably a portion of the church. It may be there for a prayer meeting. It may be there for Bible study. It may be there for fellowship. It may be there for a meal and singing and worship. But whatever it is, she has opened up her home to the church. It's what God gave her.

Her husband's name is not mentioned here; and knowing the short lifespan of men in the first century, and wives usually outlived their husbands, she is probably a widow; and what she can do, she has her house. I mean, her husband left her this house, "and I want to use it for the glory of God. I want the word of God to be taught here," and so she does this. She opens up her home. Praise the Lord for women like this.

And truth be known, the church has always been upheld and sustained by godly women like this. They don't stand in a pulpit, they don't serve as an elder, but what they are, they're like pillars in a building, they're like gas in the tank. I mean, they're just make it happen ladies who allow ministry to function and to flow.

That's the way it was in Philippi. Paul goes to Philippi and preaches the gospel, and there's some women there, one of whom is named Lydia. God opens her heart and she is born again, and the church in Philippi starts in her home: Philippi. It's this woman that God uses. Glory to God for her.

And across the street for our men's study we're going through 2 John now; and in 2 John, John writes it to quote, "the chosen lady." We don't know her name, but there is a woman in Asia Minor who has a home, and she opens

up her home for traveling preachers and itinerant evangelists to give them a place to stay, no doubt, to feed them, probably clean their clothes, give them encouragement, pray for them, maybe even give them some financial resources and send them on their way. How are they able to function, these preachers and evangelists? Because there are women like this in the body of Christ who are just make it happen women, who know how to serve the Lord and help facilitate ministry. Praise God for these women .

And I think about this church. I wouldn't even want to be here if you women were not here. It would just be men's Bible study too, okay. And I had enough of the men, okay, on Thursday morning. We need some sweet-smelling perfume in church and all that you offer. And I think you get the point that I'm making. It's the brilliant design of God that women play such a significant part in the vitality of a local church, so much so that Paul writes her name into the inspired word of God that she would forever stand out as an example to all ladies.

Well, verse 16, I need to comment on verse 16. It says, "When this letter is read," that refers to this letter, the book of Colossians. "When it is read among you," so it'll come to Colossae. Tychicus will be the one to bring it to Colossae and hand it to whoever is the point person in spiritual leadership. He'll take this letter, and he is to read it out loud to the whole church; and he probably will make comment of explanation as he reads it, and probably even make points of application with exhortation as the book of Colossians is being read.

And then he says, "and have it read in the church of the Laodiceans. After you've read it here in Colossae, somebody take it nine miles down the road to the church in Laodicea and have it read there." And by the way, that's why I read the word of God when I stand up here to begin the sermon. There is something powerful about just the reading of the word of God.

And then he says at the end of verse 16, "and you, for your part" - referring to the Colossian believers - "read my letter that is coming from Laodicea." So what letter is that? It's an exchange of letters going on here.

Some have suggested that it is a lost letter that Paul wrote to the church at Laodicea. I don't think so. I think it's actually the book of Ephesians that was a circular letter that was intended to be circulated and read among the different churches in that region.

But what it underscores, again, is the importance of the public reading of the word of God. It's not just a filler in the worship service, it's very important. It's what Jesus did when He went into the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4. He took the scroll of Isaiah the prophet and unrolled it to what is for us Isaiah 61:1 and read it: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to preach, proclaim liberty to captives." Just the reading of the word of God had power; and handed it back to the head rabbi and said, "Today this reading has been fulfilled in your ears." The Scripture is to be read 1 Timothy 4:13, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and to teaching."

Well, in verse 17 there's Archippus, and we'll just call him "steadfast servant." Verse 17, "Say to Archippus," now stop right there. Who is Archippus? Well, he's only mentioned in one other passage in the New Testament in the book of Philemon which was written at exactly the same time during this first Roman imprisonment; it's in Philemon verse 2. And most probably he is the son of Philemon. He's a member of the church in Colossae. His mother is probably named Apphia, and he's a young man, obviously serving the Lord in the church in Colossae.

And he says, "Say to Archippus, 'Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.'" So God has obviously given Archippus a very important ministry in the church. He's a young man, and Paul is saying to him, "You need to take heed to this ministry that the Lord has given to you. It is very, very important, and you need to fulfill it, what this ministry is." And I think probably what's going on, when Epaphras is taken out as pastor of the church to travel to Rome, there is now this vacuum, this void of pastoral leadership in the church at Colossae, and it may well be that Archippus steps in to shoulder some of the load, some of the responsibility.

With the pastor gone, there's all kinds of pastoral situations that need to be addressed in ministry of the word of God. Archippus is so important, he's so strategic to the church at Colossae at this point, that Paul will actually give instruction, "Say to this young man, 'Take heed' - and the word "take heed" means to take watch, or to keep watch over; it's an imperative command - 'to the ministry' - that means to the duty of serving the church and serving others - 'take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord,' - this has come from the head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ - 'and He has given to you this assignment. It is a stewardship that has come from Jesus Christ to you,' - and what he says is - 'that you may fulfill it.'" The verb "fulfill," it means literally fill to the full. It means to leave nothing undone.

Now I want to make a very important point here. It's easy to start something, it's hard to finish it. It doesn't matter how you start the race, it's, "Do you finish the race?" and, "How do you finish the race?" And it's easy to start ministry. It's easy to sign up for whatever it is - serving the nursery, sing, play an instrument, work in the sound booth, whatever it is. It's easy to sign up for something and to do it for a couple months. And then something else comes into your life and you just neglect finishing what you signed up for, and you're just drawn away like a little child, drawn to another pretty play toy over here, and you want to go do that.

We don't know exactly what the ministry was that was assigned to Archippus, but it was so important that Paul calls him out; and whatever that ministry was was so strategic to the life of the church that Paul has to tell him, "Son, you've got to fulfill it. You've got to finish it. You've got to do what we would say, 'You've got to give us a turnkey job.' Don't stop short of completing what you said that you would do, because the rest of us are counting on you."

Now Archippus is a young man. And I know that young men can be very excited about God's work, and it's easy to like, "Yeah, I want to be a part." But how difficult it can be for a young man once he realizes "what I just signed on for" to actually finish it. And this underscores the virtue of faithfulness and perseverance.

Yeah, Demas started out great. He went up like a rocket, and came down like a rock. He was unfaithful, and he lacked perseverance. And so there's something for us to learn here, that whatever you start in ministry, finish it, fulfill it, if you have received it from the Lord. And part of what we will answer for on the last day as we stand at the judgment seat of Christ is, "Did we finish what we started?"

Well, finally we come to the last verse, verse 18, Paul, and we'll call him "submissive prisoner." That's what he is. In verse 18, Paul writes, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand." So what this means is that Paul's customary practice was to dictate his epistles, and when he would come to the end of a letter, one of the inspired letters, his recording secretary would take the parchment and hand it to Paul who's been dictating, and Paul with his own handwriting will write the final greeting at the end. And there's a twofold reason for this. Number one, it verifies the authenticity that this letter has actually come from Paul. "We've seen this handwriting before with other epistles as they circulate. Yes, this is Paul's handwriting. It has come from Paul."

The second thing that it is, it makes it very personal. And again, this is how personal Paul is, that he takes the time to actually handwrite the greeting at the end. Yes, real men can write notes. I have notes, handwritten notes from men that I cherish. And email's nothing, I delete them all the time, you delete them all the time. But a handwritten note, I hang onto that. And then the name, I hang onto that. That's a prized possession to me. And it was a prized possession to the church at Colossae to come to the end of this letter that he has dictated and now see in Paul's own handwriting, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand." That makes this letter extremely personal, and they cannot easily discount what is being said.

He then says, "Remember my imprisonment in," verse 18. And what this is is an appeal for prayer: "Don't forget to pray for me. I'm here in prison." And please note, he does not say, "Pray that I will be released from prison, that I can get out of here," because Paul understands there is so much productive ministry that is taking place during this Roman imprisonment.

He is having an exponential affect upon the church and the Roman Empire while he is confined in this house under arrest. So he just says, "Remember my imprisonment. Pray for me."

And another thing we learn from this, even Paul needed people to pray for him. I mean, he's arguably the strongest Christian who's ever lived; and if there's anyone who could get by without others praying for him, it would be Paul. It would almost seem like he's in automatic pilot. But no, Paul is of flesh and blood like you and me. Even Paul needs someone to pray for him when he's in hard places at hard times, just like you need people to pray for you, right?

And so we come to the last four words of the book of Colossians, and they're four very important words. He just says, "Grace be with you." There's so much in that. This sums up the entire book of Colossians. The whole book is the all-sufficient grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that has been poured out to them. This sums up the message of the whole Bible. It was Charles Spurgeon who said, "The subject of the Bible is grace. The whole Bible is about grace."

This sums up the whole Christian life: "Grace be with you." The Christian Life can only be lived by the strength of the grace of God. The Bible speaks of grace as "grace upon grace," John 1:16; of "abounding grace," Romans 5:20; "abundance of grace," Romans 5:17; "grace multiplied," 2 Peter 1:2.

You know what you need more than anything in your life? You need grace. You need grace upon grace. You need grace multiplied in your life. You cannot take one step forward in the will of God apart from His grace. You can't go to work without His grace. You can't go to school without His grace. You can't be a mom without His grace. You can't be a dad without His grace.

What is grace here? Grace is simply divine enablement. It's divine empowering to do the will of God in your life. You can't do it, you can only

do it by the grace of God. That's why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, "I am what I am by the grace of God." Even your spiritual growth is by grace. And you'll need it all the way to your deathbed with dying grace. You either are walking in the flesh, or you are walking in the grace of God.

And grace here is synonymous with the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. It's synonymous with the filling and the empowering of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. So, what do you need today? You need grace. You need more grace to be poured out in your life.

Now I want to finish by saying this: if you are not a Christian, if you're not a bondsman, if you're not a disciple, you need grace; but you need saving grace. Salvation can never be worked for, it can never be earned; it is a free gift that God gives to the guilty, that you can only receive with an empty hand; and if you try to work for it, it will be withdrawn, and you'll never have it. The only way you can receive this grace is to believe in God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and it will be given to you as a free, prepaid gift, that at the cross Jesus Christ purchased your salvation with His shed blood. There is nothing you can do to contribute to it, there's nothing you can do to add to the finished work of Christ, you can only receive it as a free gift, okay.

So if you've never believed in Jesus Christ, you need to do so right now where you're seated. This very moment, you need to call upon the name of the Lord to save you. And there will come a day and a time, sooner than you realize, when that offer will no longer be extended to you. So today is a day of grace. Today is an opportunity for you to believe in Christ, and so you need His saving grace. "For by grace we have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, lest any man should boast." My final words are, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Let us pray.

[Prayer] Father in heaven, how we rise up and bless Your name. Thank You for Your grace. Thank You for Your mercy. Thank You for these examples to show us how to serve You. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. [End]

This has been a great day today. I love you in the Lord. I'm so thankful that I have been able to go most of the way through the book of Colossians. I will be back for one of these Psalms, and I will be back to start the book of Luke, and I will do 10 out of the 11 in Luke to finish the year, and I'll be back at the beginning of the year. So we have so much for which to look forward to.

Pray for me as I go to London to preach. It is a very rare opportunity that I have; and then I go to Ireland and Northern Ireland, and I will see you when I return.

Until then, I, in many ways, feel like Epaphras. "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace." God bless you.