

“Thank God For People”

The letter to the Colossians was one of the letters Paul wrote while he was in prison in Rome. Prison hadn't been part of his plans. Paul was an activist, who was driven by the Spirit of God to preach the gospel in towns and cities in what is now Israel, Turkey and Greece. He had hopes of going to Rome, and even on to Spain to tell people about Jesus. He never made it to Spain, but he did get to Rome, and did get to tell people about Jesus, but not in the way he expected.

While he was in prison he prayed that God would give him an open door. Not a prison door, but a door of opportunity to speak about Christ. That opportunity came in a way he never expected. The soldiers that were assigned to guard him, were actually chained to his wrist for several hours at a time. He had a captive audience. Every few hours he would get a new soldier. These were no ordinary soldiers. These were elite members of the diplomatic protection squad. The Praetorian guard. Their job was to guard all the important people of Rome. The Senators, the Nobles, even Caesar himself. They had to listen to him speak about Christ, because they couldn't get away! From his prison cell Paul had an indirect ministry to the most powerful people in the most powerful nation on the earth. When we pray, God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we think he will. Sometimes, his plans are much bigger than we could imagine.

Paul's passion was to advance the gospel. I'm sure he thought that he could advance the gospel more effectively if he were out of prison. Yet he couldn't possibly know that 2000 years after writing these letters to churches from his prison, they would be read by followers of Jesus in New Zealand, a country on the other side of the world that hadn't even been discovered yet. He couldn't have imagined that God would take these letters written from prison, and through the centuries, use them to help tens of millions of people around the world find faith in Jesus Christ. God's ways are bigger, much bigger than we can imagine.

Whatever prison you feel you are in, be it a prison of sickness, or a relationship that feels like a prison, or a job that feels like a prison, if you pray as Paul did, God will open a door of opportunity for the gospel that is going to be bigger than anything you can imagine.

Another thing Paul did while in prison was to reflect on the people who had worked with him in advancing the gospel. There is a story behind the names of every person that he mentions. I want to introduce you to the friends of Paul that are mentioned here. I want to mention some of their qualities. As we go through the list, I invite you to write down on the piece of paper on your seat, the name or names of people in your life who have been like them for you. Hold on to that list, because later in the service I'm going to give you the opportunity to tell someone else about one or two of them.

The first two, are the two that carried the letter from Rome to Colossae. They are Tychicus and Onesimus. When I get to heaven, I'm going to meet these two, and they are probably going to tell me I pronounced their names wrong! [Here is the scripture.](#)

“Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.” (Colossians 4:7-9 NIV)

Tychicus

It's worth noting that these two men had a journey of over 2000 kilometres on foot to take this letter from Rome to Colossae. No wonder Paul gives Tychicus such a beautiful commendation. He calls him a beloved brother, a faithful minister, a fellow servant and an encourager. Paul says he would encourage their hearts. When one person shares their experience of God's faithfulness, people are changed. Encouragers breathe life into their circle of friends. They keep us going when we would otherwise give up. Communities of people need encouragement like a fire needs oxygen. If you have that gift of encouragement use it as much as you can. Who are the people who have encouraged you? Jot their names down on your paper.

Onesimus

Onesimus was a runaway slave who was sent back by Paul to his master. Paul wrote to the owner of Onesimus, asking him in love to take Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ. That was an amazing request, because runaway slaves sometimes got killed. Paul says if he owes you anything, charge it to my account. Paul couldn't stand the thought that there might be two Christians that he both knew, who were not reconciled to one another. Matthew 18 tells us that our responsibility is to go to a brother or sister who has offended us, or against whom we hold some offence. But if that doesn't happen, then those of us who are aware of this situation need to be the peace makers who reconcile brothers and sisters in Christ.

There is a postscript to this story. Several decades later a Christian writer named Ignatius refers to a Christian Bishop in Ephesus. His name is Onesimus. We don't know for sure, but there is a fairly good chance that this may be the slave who became the bishop of the city of Ephesus. Onesimus was a person who had a whole new life because someone threatened him with grace. Is there someone in your life who treated you in a way that you didn't deserve? Your life is now different because someone stepped in on your behalf. Make a note of their name on your paper.

Here's the next two.

"My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)" (Colossians 4:10 NIV)

Aristarchus

Aristarchus was one of the ones who was with Paul in times of trouble. Scholars think that Aristarchus attached himself to Paul as his slave so that he would be allowed to stay close to him. He was with Paul during the riot in Ephesus. It's likely he became a voluntary prisoner so that he could support Paul in prison. Who have been the loyal friends for you when you have been through trials and difficulties? Jot those names down on your paper.

Mark

Mark set out on a missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas. But Mark quit. He deserted them. That led to a big dispute between Barnabas and Paul. Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them, but Paul wouldn't allow it. Barnabas took Mark with him and he and Paul parted company. With Barnabas, Mark persevered and proved himself to be faithful to the work of ministry. When Paul later wrote to Timothy, he specifically asked that they bring Mark with them because he was useful to Paul. Mark had been a failure in ministry but he came back and became useful. We serve the God of the second chance. Mark later became the writer of one of the gospels that is named after him. How much poorer we would be without Mark. Is there anyone in your life who has given you a second chance when you have failed? Make a note of their name on your paper.

Here are two more.

"Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis." (Colossians 4:11-13 NIV)

Justus

Justus was one of the very few Jews who worked alongside Paul ministering to the Gentiles. They were often thrown out of the synagogues. Justus was one who was prepared to step across cultural boundaries to take the gospel to people who were not like him. Has anyone done that for you? If they have, make a note of their name on your paper.

Epaphras

Epaphras was an intercessor. He was a person who was always wrestling in prayer for others that they may stand firm in the word of God, mature and fully assured. I suspect there are lots of us here today because we have had, or still have, an Epaphras in our lives. It may be a mother or grandmother. It may be a friend who prayed you into the kingdom of God. It may be a parent who

you know is still praying for you. You are still trusting God because of their prayers. Write down their name.

The next two are interesting. One of them we know lots about, and the other we know very little. ***“Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.” (Colossians 4:14 NIV)***

Luke

This is the only time in the New Testament that Luke is described as a doctor. Luke gave up a medical career to travel with Paul. He made a career sacrifice. Luke went on to write the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Who are they people that are close to you that have been willing to make career choices on the basis of what will advance the Kingdom of God? If you know of anyone, write their name down.

Demas.

Demas is the one name in this whole passage that has no description surrounding it. There was a time when Demas was counted by Paul as his fellow worker. The last mention of Demas is in 2 Timothy 4:10. Paul comments that Demas has fallen in love with the present world and has deserted him. He used to be part of the circle of Paul's friends, but he drifted away. Most of us know of people like Demas. People who once followed Jesus with us, but have now drifted away. If you want to remind yourself to pray for those people, make a note of their names too.

This letter to the Colossian Christians was also to be taken to Laodicea to be read there as well. ***“Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. Tell Archippus: “See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord.” I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.” (Colossians 4:15-18 NIV)***

Here are the last two names.

Nympha

Nympha was a woman who was probably unmarried or a widow who hosted the church in her house. Up until the middle of the 3rd century, the church didn't meet in buildings such as we have, but met in houses. In this new community of believers called the church, women not only counted, but took a prominent part. It's possible Nympha was even the leader of the church in that place. In the new community called the church there was a new role for women. Spiritual gifts were given to both men and women without distinction. There are examples in the New Testament of women leading churches, and even a woman Apostle. Thank God for all the quality women leaders who have exercised their gifts and blessed the church immensely. Who are the women who have caused you blessed your life and kept you following Jesus? There are probably many, but put down at least one name if you can.

Archippus.

When Paul says to Archippus “See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord.”, we don't know if he is warning him, or encouraging him. Because it's a similar thing to what Paul said to Timothy, it's more likely to be an encouragement. I'm grateful to the people in my life who have encouraged me to carry on doing what the Lord has called me to do. Do you have people like that in your life? If one comes to mind, write down their name.

Paul finishes his letter to the Colossians by encouraging some of the people who have helped him advance the gospel. People who have loved him, supported him, prayed for him, and been through trials with him. God has done that for you and me. If you track back through your spiritual journey, you will discover that you are where you are in Christ because you have been surrounded by people who have cared for you. I asked you to write down those names so that you wouldn't forget these people. Some of them are here today.

In a few moments Matt is going to lead us in communion. It's going to be our final act of worship together for the morning. During communion, I'm going to ask that if there are people here today who have stood by you on your journey with Christ, that you serve them communion. Take the bread and the juice to them. Tell them how they have helped you follow Christ. Pray with them.

Thank God for them. And if you see someone who hasn't been served, or a visitor, or someone you don't know, go and serve them and introduce yourself. It might be a bit messy. It might take a bit longer before you get out to get your coffee. But we are going to have this wonderful opportunity to thank God for people, and thank those around us, for the role they have played in bringing us closer to Christ.