

CROSSING THE BORDER

An Expositional Study of Colossians

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CHAPTER TEN

HIS ENCLOSED GROUP PHOTOGRAPH - 4:7-14

I DARE say you have had the experience of receiving a letter from a friend, in which he has enclosed a group photograph of friends well-known to you both. Paul seems to have done here, in words, something of the same kind. He has grouped together, in thumbnail sketches, a number of people who are roundabout him in Rome, and who are all well-known to the church members in Colossae. How interested they will be in these glimpses, on that Sabbath morning, in the Assembly, of their far-off comrades in the Faith, brought so vividly to sight and memory by these spoken miniatures. I dare say that we, too, may gain interest and inspiration from a study of their features, for each has a characteristic profile of his own. Take a good look at them, there in the group, one by one.

TYCHICUS - *the Man with a Message*

That word "**minister**" seems to denote that he was acting as a sort of personal servant to the apostle, a kind of valet, a reliable person ready at hand to do any job, to run any errand for him. A servant of his master; and, at the same time, a "**fellow-servant**" of the Master - the two Greek words are different. In the language of the New Testament, there are no less than eight different words for the idea of service.

- (1) *Diakonos*, the ministering servant.
- (2) The household servant, *oiketēs*.
- (3) The subordinate servant, *uperetes*.
- (4) The confidential servant, *therapon*.
- (5) The public servant, *leitourgos*.
- (6) The temple servant, *latreuo*.
- (7) The responsible servant, *oikonomos*.

And, most frequent of all,

- (8) The bond servant, *doulos*.

It is the first and last of these words that are used here of Tychicus. He is not the slave of Paul, he is the *diakonos*, the ministering servant; but he is the *sundoulos*, the fellow-slave, with Paul "**in the Lord**," The inspired New Testament is so exact in its use of words.

It is often said that "no man is a hero to his own valet"; but I fancy we have an exception in this man. Paul thought highly of him, and I suspect that he thought much of his master. Paul certainly trusted him implicitly, and now that this important letter has to be delivered to Colossae, he chose Tychicus to be his postman.

I should imagine that he was in no sense a significant-looking man; but you would be wrong if you passed him on the road thinking him as of no importance - he was a man with a message. He carried this Epistle, a part of the very Word of GOD.

We also, if we are Christians, bear in our person the message of CHRIST. Paul goes further when he says, in II Corinthians 3:3, "**Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of CHRIST . . . written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God.**" Here, then, is this insignificant man charged with such a significant errand. But how often GOD works that way.

"**Not many wise men are called, not many mighty, not many noble,**" I Corinthians 1:26 - he doesn't say not any, but not many. "**God hath chosen**" insignificant folk. Not that He could not have the Somebodies; but He quite deliberately often chooses the Nobodies - a boot-maker's errand-boy, D. L. Moody; a mill-girl, Mary Slessor. It looks as if there's hope of a chance for you and me in the Great Employ.

ONESIMUS - *the Man with a Past*

I wonder what the Colossian church folk thought when they found this fellow in the Group. He belonged to that town; had been a slave in the service of a well-to-do member of the community there, Philemon. He had robbed his master, and bolted. Like many another runaway thief, or other criminal, he had found his way to the Imperial City, magnificent in its splendour, but squalid beyond words in the pestiferous purlieu behind the imposing facade. Lightfoot called it "the common sink of all the worst vices of humanity". It was to the slums of this Rome that Onesimus had gravitated. But the sovereign grace of GOD was after this sinner; and someone found him, who brought him to Paul, who brought him to CHRIST.

"**My son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds,**" Philemon 10. And now "**a faithful and beloved brother who is one of us,**" Colossians 4:9.

All that past is now forgiven, as, bless GOD, any man's past may be, however wicked. Paul is a true and faithful pastor; and he knows that if this man is to grow in grace, and have the joy of full salvation, he must, now that he is at peace with GOD, go and put things right with the one he has wronged. Be it borne in mind that restitution is a first principle of the spiritual life. "**If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift,**" Matthew 5:23-4.

Any reparation that is in our power to make must be undertaken. This is going to be a most difficult thing for Onesimus, for his erstwhile employer, under the Law of the time, has powers of severest punishment. It turns out that this Philemon is another of Paul's converts - "**thou owest unto me even thine own self,**" Philemon 19; and so the apostle writes him the personal letter,

beseeking his favour for his returned slave.

It is a beautiful letter, which will surely melt the heart of the recipient, and secure the boon of mercy for the renegade. Onesimus is to take it, and present it personally.

But what if, on nearing his destination, he should get scared, and turn back? Why, Tychicus also is going to Colossae, with the public letter to the church. Good idea, they shall travel together; and if there shall be any sign of panic, Tychicus will deal with the matter, and keep the fearful one up to his duty. Ay, Paul was ever a strategist!

ARISTARCHUS - *the Man with a Heart*

What a "**comfort**" (11) this man was to the apostle. The first mention of him is in Acts 19:29, where we find him alongside of Paul in the fierce riot at Ephesus, stirred up by the devotees of Diana. Paul escaped; but they "**caught**" Aristarchus. We move on to Acts 27:2, and we discover this man still with the apostle amid the hurricane rigours of the "**tempestuous Euroclydon**". Such sharing of stormy experiences must have drawn the two very close together. And now here he is yet, described as "**my fellow-prisoner**" - sharing again; this time, some form of voluntary confinement.

This friend of the evangelist had learned and practised the Christian exhortation, "**Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ,**" Galatians 6:2. Ultimately, of course, "**every man shall bear his own burden**" (verse 5); but, with the shoulder of our sympathy, and practical aid, we can help to take some of the weight of the trouble off our friend's back, even if it is only to remind them to "**cast thy burden upon the Lord,**" Psalm 4:22.

I have known Christian people who have had no distinction in the exercise of public gifts; they could not lead a meeting, or give an address, they were not on the church council, nor had any prominent place in their church; but yet they were the most beloved and most effective of members. They were burden-bearers. Somehow, whenever anyone was in trouble, it was to these folk that they went, and always found comfort and help. It is a great thing to be of the family of Aristarchus.

MARCUS - *the Man with a Future*

But surely he, too, was a man with a past? Yes, indeed. How happily and enthusiastically he started out on that first missionary tour, when he went with Barnabas and Saul, as the junior member of the party, Acts 13:2, 5. They had a great time on the island; but when plans were being made to go on back to the mainland, Mark, for some evidently unjustifiable reason, decided that he would "**depart**" home, and so deserted them.

After some time Paul suggested to Barnabas that they should make a return visit to the places of their previous tour with the Gospel, to exhort the converts to continue steadfast in the faith. Barnabas, dear man, was all for it; but there was strong disagreement as to whether or not they should take Mark again.

Paul said "No," and of course he was right. How could they urge the young Christians to be

loyally steadfast, if they took with them a young man who had deserted. Barnabas said "Yes," and of course he was right in taking Mark with him back to Cyprus, where he had not deserted. So, out of the "dissension" arose two missionary societies, instead of one.

Yes, he had a past; but that is now all over. Largely, I suppose, he had a second chance through the kindly action of his uncle. Do you think that GOD ever judges a man on a first chance? I recollect how Peter, after his dismal failure, was graciously re-instated in his apostleship to "feed" the flock. I recall how Jonah ran away from GOD, rather than go to preach to the despised Gentiles, and how "**the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time,**" Jonah 3:1.

And now, here is young Mark - such a disappointment, but GOD will not leave him there. A past, yes; but as we look at him there in the group, it is his future - of which, at the moment, he is wholly unaware - that strikes us.

Listen: this is the man upon whom GOD has His hand for the writing of the Second Gospel. You and I are not given the honour of writing a Gospel, but we are privileged in being a Gospel -

"You are writing a Gospel, a chapter each day,
By all that you do, and all that you say.
Men read what you write, whether faithless, or true.
Say! What is the Gospel according to you?"

So John Mark gets his second chance; and he is now back again with his old leader, and Paul rejoices to have him in the group of his now faithful friends. That is a wonderful testimony that the apostle gives, when writing from his last, and more rigorous, imprisonment - "**Take Mark, and bring him with thee, for he is profitable to me for the ministry,**" II Timothy 4:11. What a glorious come-back!

If any of us have wandered, let us take heed and heart, in the knowledge that, if there is sincere repentance, there remains for us a future of boon and blessedness. I don't know what, but something, for Him and His glory.

It is a poignant remark that Paul adds here - "**touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him,**" 10. I suppose they heard about his early disloyalty to their friend; and if he dared to come near them, they would show him what they thought of him!

No, no, says Paul, not a cold shoulder, but a warm hand.

That's the way to welcome home a backslider. Look at Galatians 6:1 - "**If a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted**".

We can happily leave the matter there.

JESUS JUSTUS - *the Man with a Name*

We know practically nothing about this man, except that he was a Jew, and was one of those

who were a "**comfort**" to the apostle. We do know his name: but, what a Name! It was a quite common name in Palestine. According to the Early Church historian, Origen, it was even the name of Barabbas. "**Barabbas**" was only his description - "**Bar**," son of: "**Abbas**," the Rabbi. Son of the Manse, as we should say. What a pity that such a son should come to such a pass.

Down the years, alas, there have been not a few tragedies somewhat of the sort. How vivid, then, was Pilate's challenge - which of the two will you have: Jesus Bar-abbas, or JESUS CHRIST? This common name is common no longer since the Saviour bore it, and did so for its significance of meaning, "**for He shall save His people from their sins**," Matthew 1:21. The name actually means "**the Lord the Saviour**". Tell me, reader, is He Your Saviour, and your Lord?

Do you recall that James 2:7 speaks of those who blaspheme "**that worthy Name by the which ye are called**".

It is sometimes suggested that the name "**Christians**" was given to believers by way of ridicule. "**The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch**," Acts 11:26. "**Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian**," Acts 26:28 - me . . . a Christian! "**If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed**," I Peter 4:16.

I am not so sure about this suggestion. Anyhow, it is a truly honourable and worthy name, Christians - CHRIST-ones. It takes some living up to; and only CHRIST Himself can enable us to live, and be, truly Christian. It - was the living Lord who wrote to certain professors of the Name, "**thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead**," Revelation 3:1. What does He say of us who really do bear the Name-are we really living it?

EPAPHRAS - the Man with a Passion

This was apparently the man who, on the human side, founded the church at Colossae; and Paul records that "**he hath a great zeal for you**," 13. It is good to come across a man with real enthusiasm - be it for art, for music, for sport, for bird-watching, or what not; but how rarely we find it amongst us Christians for the Master's cause.

The Lord has Himself told us, in no uncertain terms, what He feels about "**luke-warm**" People, Revelation 3:15-16 - tepid Christianity. What strange bedfellows these two words make! How shall we be anything other than eager, if we have any experience and understanding of the love of GOD toward us, any real grasp of the amazing grace of the crucified and risen Lord; and how shall we be other than earnest, by the transforming power in our own lives, to commend Him to others as the living Saviour, Master, and Friend of all who Trust and Obey.

Ah yes, this Epaphras had zeal enough for the welfare and well-being of his beloved congregation. Doubtless that eagerness was evidenced in the relationship existing between them and him. He would be their comfort in hard experiences, their counsellor in solving their problems, their devoted friend along the road, their trusted leader in all the church life and personal life. But now he is miles away.

He has gone off to Rome to consult Paul about that Gnostic heresy that we have spoken of in an earlier Study.

Removed from them by all that long distance, he can now do nothing for them, nothing to help in nurturing these Colossian "**babes in CHRIST**," I Corinthians 3:1.

But, can he not? I thought it was said that he had a great zeal for them. Surely, such a passion will out! No untoward circumstance will quite damp down an enthusiasm like his! What can he do for them? He can still, even so far removed, do for them the greatest thing that any Christian can do for another: he can pray, and evidently he throws into this strategic ministry all that GOD-directed enthusiasm that characterises all his work for them. Listen:

"always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God," 12.

"**Labouring fervently**," one word in the Greek, a word of which our English "*agonising*" is but a transliteration. There he was, on his knees, wrestling with GOD for these people. His whole heart and soul were in it, his entire surrendered being was caught up in the task. I can imagine him rising from his knees utterly spent, completely exhausted.

We should have counted ourselves as being like him, if it had been said that he grew tired of praying and gave it up; but have we ever, like him, grown tired through praying? Oh, to be thus prayer-warriors: battling for souls, with what, in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan calls "the weapon of all prayer". Such supplication overleaps all distances, all barriers. The friend in China can be reached via the Throne. The unfriendly neighbour can be reached via the Throne. The believers in Colossae can be reached by Epaphras, in distant Rome, via the Throne.

The good man believed that, which is why he spent so much time in it - "**always**" at it; which is why he spent so much energy in it - "**labouring fervently**". Do we believe in this tremendous ministry of intercession? It should be a Christian's natural employ, for listen: "**unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us . . . priests unto God and His Father,**" Revelation 1:5-6. It is the priest's particular prerogative to offer to GOD the incense of intercession. The New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers. So let us take heed to the oft-heard challenge, "**Let us Pray**": let us, indeed, and that in the spirit of this dear man. I say! What attractive people the apostle has snapshotted here.

LUKE - the Man with a Gift

How often an affectionate relationship grows up between a man and his doctor. It seems to have been like that between Paul and his "**beloved physician**". It would appear that the two first met at Troas; and I would hazard the guess that Paul had there an attack of his illness, his "**thorn in the flesh**," II Corinthians 12:7, and that he had to call in a doctor.

So Dr. Luke first came into contact with his out-of-the-ordinary patient - unusual, because, as I fancy, Paul brought his physician to CHRIST. This apostle was a man of such all-round capacity, and full-orbed personality, that he was able to attract not only the lowly, like Tychicus, but the brilliantly educated, like Dr. Luke. All his own personal gifts were laid under contribution for the advancement of the Kingdom. "**I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some,**" I Corinthians 9:22.

What of Luke's gift? Legend has it that he was a considerable painter; but certainly he was an artist in words.

What vivid and what attractive pictures he has given us, both in his Gospel, and in the Acts, in these "Stories from the Diary of a Doctor". His principal gift, of course, was that of medicine; and that gift he laid at the feet of the Divine Physician, and became the first medical missionary.

It is thrilling to notice that Luke did actually join Paul's mission party from Troas onward, as we surmise from his record of the Pauline travels: note the significant change of pronouns. "**They came down to Troas**" - Luke is not with them. "**We endeavoured to go into Macedonia,**" Acts 16:8, 10 - Luke, by his use now of "**we,**" is journeying with them. Think of Matthew's gift, keeping the accounts in his office, who, when he was converted, dedicated his pen to the Master's service, and was used for the penning of the first Gospel. And what of us? Have we some gift to use for Him - music, needlework, games, hobbies, languages, art, personality? GOD can use them each and all - yes, even Tabitha's needlework, Acts 9:39. Most people have some gift, whether brilliant or humble. Will you let Him have your gift along with your self? You might even become known as "the beloved stamp collector"!

DEMAS - *the Man with a Bias*

This is the last man in Paul's group photograph taken in Rome. He is, to mix the metaphor, the fly in the ointment. You notice that he is the only one about whom the apostle has not one word to say. I wonder if there is any reason for that? in the private letter to Philemon he is called "**my fellow-labourer,**" 24 - but here, nothing at all.

Do you think that he was already beginning to show signs of cooling off, which ended in that tragic sentence about him that Paul wrote in his very last letter - "**Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world,**" 2 Timothy 4:10. He had this fatal bias within him, though he was a Christian. We are not told what form his weakness took.

John Bunyan thinks it was money - not in itself wrong, of course, but "**the love of money is the root of all [kinds of, Gk.] evil,**" 1 Timothy 6:10. You will recall the story in *Pilgrim's Progress* of how the two pilgrims, Christian and Hopeful, are accosted by a man who has discovered a silver mine, and who tries to lure them to stray out of their path, to become rich quickly. The incomparable allegorist calls that man Demas. I wonder? I do know that the temptation of riches has caused the downfall of many Christians.

Paul quite often uses the word "**flesh**" - and in two senses.

(1) Sometimes, he means the component of our physical frame - "**the life that I now live in the flesh,**" Galatians 2:20.

(2) Sometimes, however, he uses the word in a kind of technical sense, and the context must guide us as to its immediate connotation. In this latter connection, the "**flesh**" is that lower nature within, which we inherit from Adam - "**the flesh lusteth against the Spirit,**" Galatians 5:17. That evil nature is the bias that we carry within our being, which will cause us to stray from the white of His holiness, and to wander off into sin. But, thank GOD, the Christian is a two-natured

person, he has also within him a Divine counter-action, so that the evil warp can be controlled and conquered - "**the Spirit** [lusteth] **against the flesh . . . so that ye cannot do the things that ye would** [if left to yourself]". Such a life of control by the indwelling HOLY SPIRIT is one bright aspect of Full Salvation.

Thus we close our look at the Group. The names that follow, in the close of the Epistle, are of people, not with him in Rome, as these eight are, but residing at Colossae and neighbourhood, members of the church, to whom the apostle sends his affectionate greetings. As we conclude our contemplation of our eight, shall we not seek grace of GOD to follow their good example, and "**flee . . . and follow . . . and fight,**" I Timothy 6:11-12?

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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