

Unsung Heroes



by John Guzzetta

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Spiritual equipment for the contest of life

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Introduction

WE KNOW A LOT ABOUT the major characters of the New Testament: Paul, Peter, James, John, etc., and of course the Lord Jesus Himself. I've attended uplifting and fruitful quarter-long studies of Paul and his journeys, and of the Twelve Apostles.

Also sprinkled among the pages of the New Testament are names mentioned almost in passing, quick references to people whose duties and deeds are not given much attention, people like Onesimus, Tertius, Phoebe. We tend to overlook them, but the Holy Spirit includes them for a reason. With a little study and thought, we discover they were involved in vital areas of spiritual work.

This book is an effort to present thoughts on the "minor" characters of Acts and the Epistles. If the Holy Spirit includes these names for our benefit, what lessons can we tease out of them (without going too far) that inform our faith and inspire us to good works?

I have a reason that goes beyond curiosity. Many times, I've heard Christians say, "I can't be an elder, or a preacher, or *that* preacher, so I guess I'll just be happy to sit on this pew." That's the wrong idea!

Sometimes a congregation does not do a very good job encouraging people to explore their talents, nor motivating people to employ those talents. Sometimes a congregation wishes to protect new converts or weak members from being taxed with work. We worry that walking up to a new convert and saying, "Hey, I'm going to sign you up to bring food to the funeral Friday night, OK?" or "I've added your name to the duty list to help pass the trays next month, OK?" might drive them away.

There may be an exception here or there, but for most people, being asked to contribute makes that person or family feel like a valuable part of the

church. No one likes to sit on the bench for a whole season. The more quickly leaders of a congregation approach new converts to get involved, the more opportunities a congregation provides for them to spread their new wings, the stronger their faith becomes, and the closer they feel to the family of God. In the same verse Lydia was baptized, she began practicing hospitality and contributing to the work of evangelism (Acts 16:15, NASB). In the same town Paul was baptized, he began proclaiming Jesus as the Christ (Acts 9:19–20). People aren't as fragile as we think they are.

There's an old story about a father and young son whose fishing boat flipped over in the waters off New England in January. They managed to get into the small open lifeboat, but were soaked through. They could see the lights of shore several miles away. It would take many hours, but they were confident they could reach shore. The father knocked the ice off the oarlocks, inserted the two oars, and began rowing. After a while, the son said, "Dad, you're beginning to get tired. Let me take a turn at the oars." Dad was feeling guilty for letting the fishing boat capsize, and also wished to spare his son from the backbreaking and repetitive work. So, he instructed his son to curl up in the bow, while he continued to row. Several times over the next few hours, the son offered to take a turn at the oars, and each time the father refused, telling him to relax and be patient, for they would be home soon. The boy grew silent, while the father doggedly rowed on. Several hours later, as dawn was approaching, the father nearly incoherent with fatigue felt the bow of the rowboat touch the shore. With new vigor and excitement he leapt out onto the beach, crying, "We are saved!" But when he attempted to share his joy with his sleeping son, he discovered that he was stiff. He had quietly frozen to death during the night, unnoticed by the father. The father had protected him from the very activity that would have kept him warm and alive.

Everyone needs a turn at the oars.

These character studies convince us that the work of the church—from helping widows to leading worship all the way up to evangelizing of cities—was shared by many, many more people than just Paul and the Apostles. Sometimes the inadequacy is in our own hearts. We look at our place in the

church and despair. We see song leaders and preachers with a prominent place on stage. We see elders and deacons with official titles. Is there a spot for anyone else to make a difference? The answer is yes! Every oar is vital.

Even if we can't be Peter or Paul, the alternative is not to sit in a pew, mouth a few songs, drop in a few dollars, and be content until Judgment Day. There is an enormous amount of work to be done. Each and every Christian is placed in the kingdom for a reason. Each and every Christian has an important part to play.

Paul compares the church to a human body:

Even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ ... God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or against the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary ... Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

You may not happen to be the hands or the tongue—at least not today—but if you are in the body, you are vital to it, whether as an ear or even a foot. My senior year of high school I broke my big toe in the first soccer game; whereas I had never much paid attention to that member of my body before, its inability to support weight and strike a ball now dominated my thoughts for the rest of the season. Every part, no matter how humble it seems, has a part to contribute to the glory of the body of Christ.

Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) reminds us that serving the Lord is not about what abilities and blessings we do not possess (2 Corinthians 8:12), but what we do with the talents we do possess. The five-talent man and two-talent man were judged "according to their ability."

The one-talent man was not judged for his apparent lack of ability, but because he didn't use the talent the master gave him. He didn't lose the talent of money, he didn't allow it to be stolen, he didn't squander it, and he didn't gamble it away. He held onto it. But he didn't use what he had to make an increase for his master.

Every Christian has a talent, a “special gift,” to use in Christ's service.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness (Romans 12:6–8).

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:10–11).

And every part is vital.

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love (Ephesians 4:15–16).

This study is an effort to learn what “every joint supplies,” to recognize, and celebrate, and emulate the contributions of Christians recorded in Acts and the Epistles that may have escaped our notice before.

Without you, the body of Christ will never become all it could be. Thanks be to God for all those already using their talents in the kingdom. And may we all be encouraged to find ways to do more, and bring others along with us.

Questions for Thought

1. How does a Christian benefit when he works for the Lord?
2. What happens to a Christian who does not work?
3. What are some key applications of Paul's comparison of the members of the church to the parts of the human body?
4. Does every Christian have a talent, a contribution to make? What do Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11 demand?
5. What is one talent that you could better use to the Lord's glory?

Epaphras: *Striving in Prayer*

FROM THE EVIDENCE LUKE PRESENTS in the book of Acts, it seems likely that Paul had never actually visited Colossae, or the two nearby towns of Hierapolis and Laodicea. Paul didn't make it that far west on his first journey, he purposely skirted the area on his second journey (Acts 16:6), and though he was in the vicinity on his third journey (Acts 18:23; 19:1), Luke describes only his work in Ephesus. When Paul writes the letter to Colossae from Roman imprisonment, he mentions "all those who have not personally seen my face" (Colossians 2:1).

If Paul didn't plant the gospel seed in Colossae, who did? Paul's introduction suggests that a Christian named Epaphras had something to do with it.

We give thanks to God ... since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus ... which has come to you ... from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit (Colossians 1:3–8).

Perhaps Paul sent Epaphras as a missionary, since he was "a faithful servant on our behalf." Later, Paul identifies Epaphras as "one of your number" (4:12). So, I tend to think Epaphras was a resident of the Colossae area who heard the gospel from Paul and then brought it back to his hometown. In any case, Epaphras recently had brought news from Colossae to Paul in Roman custody. Now, he found himself unable to return to the people of Colossae, since he was busy ministering to Paul in his imprisonment. Perhaps, since Paul refers to Epaphras as a "fellow prisoner" (Philemon 23), he shared actual captivity with Paul, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Paul chose Tychicus and Onesimus instead to bear his letter to Colossae (4:7–9).

Paul wanted the Colossians to know that even though Epaphras was separated from his beloved brethren by distance, he was not separated from them in his heart, nor from his ability to make an impact there. Paul, in his closing comments, reported:

Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave 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 of him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:12–13).

Whatever the exact nature of Epaphras' relationship to the Christians in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, he didn't let distance prevent him from working. His "deep concern" motivated him to be "always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers."

From time to time, we will receive a request for help from a far-off place. Perhaps a foreign evangelist reports persecutions and threats from the government in his country. Perhaps family members complain of a serious sickness. Perhaps brethren we used to worship with call to talk about troubles in their congregation. Does it seem silly to say, "I can't be there ... but I'll be praying for you"?

I hope not! If we understand the purpose and power of prayer, we will understand that prayers are not half-measures. Prayer is the way we communicate with God and the way we get things done; or to say it more accurately, the way we request that God get things done on our behalf. Philippians 4:6 says, "be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Now, it is important to recognize and submit to the will of God when praying (Matthew 26:39; 2 Corinthians 12:8–9; 1 John 5:14; 2 Samuel 12:22). But too often, "you do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Prayer can move God to move mountains for us (Matthew 7:11; 21:21–22; Romans 8:32). Prayer opened Hannah's womb (1 Samuel 1:3–20) and called down fire

from heaven (1 Kings 18:36–38). In fact, prayer can even change God’s mind (2 Kings 20:1–6; Jeremiah 26:19; Exodus 32:14; Amos 7:1–3)!

Knowing the power of prayer, Epaphras was “laboring earnestly” in prayer. The phrase “laboring earnestly” translates the Greek verb *agonizomai*. Various Greek dictionaries define it “to contend, to strive, straining every nerve to obtain the object” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words: Fight*, B1), “to put forth great effort to obtain a result” (Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Strive*), “to contend for a prize” (Earle, *Word Meanings in The New Testament: Col. 4:12*). Obviously, our English word “agony” derives from it; and while it’s certainly true that some exercise feels like agony, that would be taking the word picture down an unintended direction. The word is used of striving to win athletic contests, such as in 1 Corinthians 9:25, where it is translated “compete.” Metaphorically, *agonizomai* suggests putting all the self-discipline and energetic effort of an athlete into a spiritual pursuit, exerting every muscle toward the finish line or final bell. It’s the word Paul uses to describe his own efforts to teach the gospel (Colossians 1:29). It’s the word Paul uses to spur on Timothy to “fight the good fight” (1 Timothy 6:12).

We often take a lackadaisical approach to prayer. Epaphras was not just off-handedly mentioning the Colossians at mealtimes. He didn’t just say, “Lord, be with the Colossians.” Instead, we might imagine Epaphras diligently and frequently praying for the Colossians, daily without fail, not for a minute but for a solid hour, with specific concerns in his mind and specific names on his lips. Not just for the usual healing of the sick, but for maturity and assurance, as Paul says, “that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.” That’s a big goal and includes praying for things like greater faith through teaching, for greater love through service, for greater numbers through evangelism, for steadfastness in persecution, for peace and harmony in the family of God. We might imagine Epaphras following a written prayer plan, with all the fortitude of a dieter keeping track of his meals, or an athlete logging miles in preparation for a race.

Brothers and sisters who are looking for something to do: strive in prayer! You can be hundreds of miles away, but Jesus proved that one doesn't need to be standing at the bedside of a sick person to pray for him (Luke 7:2–10). You can be a new Christian and pray effectively, for Paul requested prayers from those he recently ministered to (Romans 15:30). You can be handicapped, without access to a car, too poor to contribute money, but you can still labor earnestly in prayer. “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16). Our hands are never tied when we can lift them up in prayer.

Prayer should be an essential part of any spiritual endeavor. If the church plans to have a gospel meeting, by all means, hand out flyers, invite your friends, schedule your attendance, but also pray! If the church decides to support a new evangelist, read his reports, contribute money toward his expenses, but also pray! If a sister is in surgery, visit her in the hospital, take a meal to her family, but also pray! If the church is thinking about appointing elders, ask questions and go through the process, but also pray and fast (Acts 14:23)! You may not be the speaker or the missionary or the surgeon or the elder-candidate, but your prayer is vital to secure the blessings of God. “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (Psalm 127:1). Laboring in prayer is not sitting on the sidelines; it is playing on the field in a key position. Tangible work is pointless without behind-the-scenes diligence in prayer.

I know that I need to change my attitude about the worth of prayer. A normal day for me might be to go into the office and spend five minutes praying and five hours writing. What if I flipped those numbers? What if I spent five hours praying and sixty minutes writing? I probably would feel like I had not spent my time wisely. Yet, when Peter excused himself from serving tables, he said, “we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Maybe if I spent more time praying, things would improve that I have failed to improve through studying, preaching, visiting, and cajoling. Paul planted, Apollos watered, “but God was causing the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Prayer is not an empty promise. When you say, “I’ll be praying for you,” follow up! Those prayers provide real results! Perhaps whole assemblies should be devoted to prayer, certainly at important moments, or when a member is facing major treatment, but even as a regular part of worship. Epaphras may seem like a minor character in the New Testament, but he made major contributions to the saints in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, even from a long distance away. May God give us more who labor earnestly in prayer like Epaphras!

Questions for Thought

1. Why doesn’t prayer get the emphasis it deserves?
2. What are some characteristics of “laboring earnestly” in prayer?
3. What is your favorite example in Scripture of the effect of prayer?
4. What is your favorite example in your own life of the effect of prayer?
5. What are some ways to make your own private prayer time more effective? The congregation’s prayer time?