Colossians - Commentaries by Charles Henry Mackintosh

The Mackintosh Treasury: Vol. 5, Epaphras

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(Col. 4:12.)

There is a very striking difference between the inspired records of the people of God, and all human biographies. The former may, truly, be said to be, "much in little;" while many of the latter may, as truly, be said to be, "little in much" The history of one of the Old Testament saints- a history stretching over a period of 365 years, is summed up in two short clauses. " Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." (Gen. 5:24.) How brief! But yet how full! how comprehensive! How many volumes would man have filled with the records of such a life? And, yet, what more could he have said? To walk with God, comprehends all that could possibly be said of any one. A man may travel round the globe; he may preach the gospel in every clime; he may suffer in the cause of Christ; he may feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick; he may read, write, print and publish; in short, he may do all that man ever could or did do; and, yet, it may all be summed up in that brief clause, " he walked with God." And right well will it be for him, if it can be so summed up. One may do nearly all that has been enumerated, and yet never walk with God, one hour, yea, he may not even know the meaning of a walk with God. The thought of this is deeply solemnizing and practical. It should lead us to the earnest cultivation of the hidden life, without which the most showy services will prove to be but mere flash and smoke.

There is something peculiarly touching in the mode in which the name of Epaphras is introduced to our notice, in the New Testament. The allusions to him are very brief, but very pithy. He seems to have been the very stamp of man which is so much needed, at the present moment. His labors, so far as the inspired penman has recorded them, do not seem to have been very showy or attractive. They were not calculated to meet the human eye or elicit human praise. But oh! they were most precious labors-peerless-priceless labors. They were the labors of the closet, labors within the closed door, labors in the sanctuary, labors without which all beside must prove barren and worthless. He is not placed before us, by the sacred biographer, as a powerful preacher, a laborious writer, a great traveler, which he may have been, and which are all truly valuable, in their place. The Holy Ghost, however, has not told us that Epaphras was any one of the three; but, then, my reader, He has placed this singularly interesting character before us, in a manner calculated to stir the very depths of our moral and spiritual being. He has presented him to us as a man of prayer- earnest, fervent, agonizing prayer-prayer, not for himself, but for others. Let us hearken to the inspired testimony.

" Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always laboring fervently, (agonizing) for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis." (Col. 4:12, 13.) Such was Epaphras! Would there were hundreds like him, in this our day! We are thankful for preachers, thankful for writers, thankful for travelers in the cause of Christ; but we want men of prayer, men of the closet, men like Epaphras. We are happy to see men on their feet, preaching Christ; happy to see them able to ply the pen of a ready writer, in the noble cause; happy to see them making their way, in the true evangelistic spirit, into " the regions beyond;" happy to see them, in the true pastoral spirit, going, again and again, to visit their brethren in every city. God forbid we should undervalue, or speak disparagingly of such honorable services; yea, we prize them more highly than words could convey. But, then, at the back of all, we want a spirit of prayer- fervent, agonizing, persevering prayer. Without this, nothing can prosper. A prayerless man is a sapless man.

A prayerless preacher is a profitless preacher. A prayerless writer will send forth barren pages. A prayerless evangelist will do but little good. A prayerless pastor will have but little food for the flock. We want men of prayer -men like Epaphras-men whose closet walls witness their agonizing labors. These are, unquestionably, the men for the present moment.

There are immense advantages attending upon the labors of the closet-advantages quite peculiar-advantages for those who engage in them, and advantages for those who are the subjects of them. They are quiet, unobtrusive la-hours. They are carried on in retirement, in the hallowed, soul-subduing solitude of the divine presence, outside the range of mortal vision. How little would the Colossians have known of the loving earnest labors of Epaphras, had the Holy Ghost not mentioned them. It is possible that some of them might have deemed him deficient in zealous care on their behalf. It is probable that there were persons, then, as there are those, now, who would measure a man's care or sympathy by his visits or letters. This would be a false standard. They should see him on his knees, to know the amount of his care and sympathy. A love of travel might take me from London to Edinburgh to visit the brethren. A love of scribbling might lead me to write letters by every mail. Naught save a love for souls, a love for Christ, could ever lead me to agonize as Epaphras did, on behalf of the people of God, " that they may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."

Again, the precious labors of the closet demand no special gift, no peculiar talents, no preeminent mental endowments. Every Christian can engage in them. A man may not have the ability to preach, teach, write or travel; but every man can pray. One, sometimes, hears of a gift of prayer. It is not a pleasant expression. It falls gratingly on the ear. It often means a mere fluent utterance of certain known truths which the memory retains, and the lips give forth. This is poor work to be at. This was not the way with Epaphras. This is not what we want and long for, just now. We want a real spirit of prayer. We want a spirit that enters into the present need of the church, and bears that need, in persevering, fervent, believing intercession, before the throne of grace. This spirit may be exercised, at all times, and under all circumstances. Morning, noon, eventide, or midnight, will answer for the closet laborer. The heart can spring upward to the throne, in prayer and supplication, at any time. Our Father's ear is ever open; His presence chamber is ever accessible. Come when or with what we may, He is always ready to hear, ready to answer. He is the Hearer, the Answerer, and the Lover of importunate prayer. There are no accents He likes better than, " I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." He himself has said, "ask-seek-knock"-"men ought always to pray, and not to faint"-" all things, whatsoever ye shall ask, in prayer, believing, ye shall receive"- "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God." These words are of universal application They are intended for all God's children. The feeblest child of God can pray, can watch, can get an answer, and return thanks.

Furthermore, nothing is so calculated to give one a deep interest in people as the habit of praying constantly for them. Epaphras would be intensely interested in the Christians at Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. His interest made him pray, and his prayers made him interested. The more we are interested for any one, the more we shall pray for him, and the more we pray, the more interested we become. Whenever we are drawn out in prayer for people, we are sure to rejoice in their growth and prosperity. So also, in reference to the unconverted. When we are led to wait on God about them, their conversion is looked for with the deepest anxiety, and hailed, when it comes, with unfeigned thankfulness. The thought of this should stir us up to imitate Epaphras, on whom the Holy Ghost has bestowed the honorable epithet of " a servant of Christ," in connection with his fervent prayers for the people of God.

Finally, the highest inducement that can he presented to cultivate the spirit of Epaphras is the fact of its being so directly in unison with the spirit of Christ. This is the most elevated motive. Christ is engaged in behalf of His people. He desires that they should "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God;" and those who are led forth in prayer, in reference to this object, are privileged to enjoy high communion with the great Intercessor. How marvelous that poor feeble creatures, down here, should be permitted to pray about that which engages the thoughts and interests of the Lord of glory! What a powerful link there was between the heart of Epaphras, and the heart of Christ, when the former was laboring fervently for his brethren at Colosse!

Christian reader, let us ponder the example of Epaphras. Let us imitate it. Let us fix our eye upon some Colosse or other, and labor fervently in prayer for the Christians therein. The present is a deeply solemn moment. A correspondent in Scotland makes the following most impressive statement: « Matters are coming to a crisis; and men are taking sides: and it is all well. We are no longer left in doubt as to who will serve the Lord, and who will not. May the Lord break up His own way into the hearts of many, and prepare His people for suffering and doing His holy will." These are true sayings, and they tend to make us feel our urgent need of men like Epaphras. Men who are willing to labor, on their knees, for the cause of Christ, or to wear, if it should be so, the noble bonds of the gospel. Such was Epaphras. The first notice we have of him is as a man of prayer (Col. 4:12); and the last notice of him is as a companion in bonds with the devoted apostle of the Gentiles. (Phil. 1:23)

May the Lord stir up amongst us a spirit of earnest prayer and intercession. May He raise up many of those who shall be cast in the same spiritual mold as Epaphras. These are the men for the crisis.

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