



Colossians 4:12–15

12 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. 13 I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. 14 Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha

and the church in her house.

Reflection

There's much fascination with the modern sport of Mixed Martial Arts, or MMA, which seems to have come out of nowhere in recent years. MMA is a full contact sport that draws free form from a variety of other combat sports with the goal of bringing an opponent to submission. MMA is fast-paced, violent, and has relatively few rules transporting viewers in many ways back into eras of history like the gladiatorial combats in the arenas of ancient Rome which were so loved by the populace. Or from an Eastern perspective, to ancient China and the training of Han Chinese military generals that would later give birth to modern jujitsu. In this respect, while MMA

is relatively new, its roots can be traced to ancient times.

Even within the discipline itself, MMA is new and very old. Most would agree that at its base, once your opponent is on the ground, the foundation of an MMA fighter's skill is the ancient art of wrestling. And whatever you believe about violence in sport, or violence in general, the origins of wrestling can be traced back as far as 15,000 years. In New Testament times, because of its Greek heritage, wrestling was one of the most popular sports of the day. And so the terminology, determination, physical skill and exertion required of participants would have been well known. Techniques such as clinch fighting, throws and takedowns, joint locks, pins and other grappling holds would have been un-

derstood and easily visualised, calling to mind two competitors grappling with each other using every ounce of their beings to gain and maintain a superior position over their opponent through both skill and sheer perspiration. It's through this image that Paul would also have us appreciate Epaphras. Listen to Paul describe him in today's passage, from Colossians 4:12–15,

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my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

At the end of Paul's letter he's reminding the Colossians that his ministry, and all ministry, is a team effort. He so far has mentioned six names, three Jews and three Gentiles, unremarkable men from diverse backgrounds who've been transformed by Jesus. They've been hand-selected in their weakness to do remarkable things for the kingdom of God, together, as an unlikely team, so that no-one might mistake the origin of their ministry. God's power is made perfect in their weakness. God's treasure lives in their jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from them (2 Cor 4:7).

Epaphras was a Colossian. And it's likely that Epaphras had travelled all the way from Colosse to Rome because of his profound concern for this brothers and sisters back home. He loved them so much that he'd travelled over land and sea, a distance of more than 1300 kilometres, in order to beg Paul to speak out against the misleading and deceptive philosophies that were being peddled amongst the young Colossian church. And all the while, 'always' as our passage says, Epaphras wrestled for them in prayer. Verse 12,

He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

Images from the Colosseum, the Olympics, the sporting arenas would have filled their minds.

He is always wrestling in prayer for you

From the Greek word used here we get the English word 'agonize'. Paul watched Epaphras pray for his brothers and sisters in Colosse and this is the one word that best described his prayer life. Epaphras wrestles in prayer, he agonizes in prayer for them, earnestly and desperately imploring God to deliver them from the clutches of false teaching and enable them to stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

God answers Epaphras' prayer more won-

derfully thank he could ever know in the letter to the Colossians. The result of Epaphras' struggle for his brothers and sisters, this letter that Paul wrote because of him, has blessed the entire world and will continue to do so for the remainder of human history until Jesus returns.

Our passage mentions more names and more stories.

14 Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Luke, the doctor, Paul's personal physician who patched him up throughout most of the book of Acts and then went on to be

the largest contributor to the New Testament through the gospel that bears his name and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. Stop and consider for a moment that Paul healed so many, people were even healed by handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched his body (Acts 19:11–12) – and yet his own wounds, of which there were many, were attended to by Luke or left unhealed (2 Cor 12:7–9). So Luke travelled with him, took care of him, and the words he would later write about his journeys would change the world.

Demas however, is destined to fall away or at best, backslide in the most discouraging way. In God's sovereignty his kingdom can move forward, and people can come to Christ, through the ministry of those who were never truly of the faith.

Paul will later write about Demas,

10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.

And finally Nympha, one of the many women in the early church who deserve a much higher profile in relation to the ministry of Jesus, the explosive growth of early Christianity, and indeed Christianity right throughout history. Jesus' every need was cared for by a band of women who also supported him financially, and stood by him at the foot of the cross, when there were no men to be seen (except John). Women were last at the cross and first at the tomb. And it was the huge influx of women to the Christian faith, from the slave classes right through to some

of the most influential women in Roman society, that drove the explosive demographical growth of the Christian faith. In a society that put to death female babies, never accorded females a status beyond that of children, and in which divorce, incest, marital infidelity and polygamy were the accepted norms Christianity was so attractive to women that in AD 370 the Roman emperor Valentinian issued a written order to Pope Damasus I requiring that Christian missionaries cease calling at the homes of pagan women! And so our society which is so quick to denounce Christianity as patriarchal and sexist is baseless in its accusation. The historical reality is that the origin of the modern trend towards equality between men and women has its roots in first century Christianity which has been God's good design from the begin-

ning.

Think & Pray

Please think and pray over these verses. What would it look like for you to always be wrestling in prayer? And what work might God perform through your prayer life should you pray in this manner? Consider again how bountifully he answered Epaphras' prayer. God has blessed the billions of readers of Colossians, leading millions to Christ, which only came about through Epaphras' prayers. What could God do through your fervent prayer?

Or perhaps you're a doctor or medical professional. Do you use your professional skills for the kingdom of God like Luke? Or perhaps you're independently wealthy.

Nympha was the patron of a major church in Laodicea. Have you considered becoming a patron or benefactor to a Christian cause and blessing them through your wealth and business expertise as well as your Christian maturity and example?

Wrestle in prayer today with our God, bringing before his eyes the people he has placed on your heart through the working of his Spirit. Contend for them in his presence. Really pray for them today in the way that Paul describes Epaphras doing.