

THE EARLY-DAY SAINTS

by Ray C. Stedman

In our final study in the letter to the Colossians we come to a list of names of associates and friends of the apostle Paul. We could call these people "the early-day saints." Down the street from this church there is another church building, called "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." Mormons believe that the Scripture has been so garbled in translation through the centuries that it has lost all authenticity, so that God had to begin again with a new revelation which they call the Book of Mormon. Thus, they think of themselves as the Latter-Day Saints. But the glory of the Bible is that in it we have an unbroken and trustworthy record of the early-day saints! In this section we will recognize these saints to be the same kind of people as we are today. They have the same Lord, and believe the same dramatic, dynamic truths that we believe. This, then, is a very relevant passage for us.

The letter closes much in the same way as we end letters today, with greetings to and from friends and associates. But there are also certain themes which shine through these references to individuals. A close look will reveal characteristics of life in the early church and what they thought to be important. The first theme is that of the importance of discipleship. In verses 7-9, mention is made of two of the disciples whom Paul took along with him in a training experience.

"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."

We should be grateful for these two men mentioned because they brought this letter from Paul in Rome to the church in Colossae. They may not have realized what a treasure they were carrying, or how momentous this letter would prove to be but how grateful we are for their faithful obedience.

Tychicus was one of a band of young men and women who accompanied Paul on much of his ministry. There were no seminaries in those days, so training was done in the most effective way of all---through continual, on-the-job, personal relationships. This involved taking people along on journeys and teaching them what was important and how to respond to situations. Four years in a seminary today could not possibly equal one or two years of this intense, personalized training with the apostle Paul himself. Tychicus, who was from Thessalonica, traveled widely with Paul. He was part of the delegation chosen by the churches of Macedonia to accompany the apostle when he took to Jerusalem the special offering that had been collected for the poor and needy saints there. Later, Paul sent him to Ephesus to take Timothy's place in that city, and possibly also, as the letter to Titus suggests, Tychicus was sent to Crete.

Notice the three descriptions used by Paul which give insight into how he related to these young men and women who accompanied him on his ministries. He calls Tychicus "a dear brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant." In the first description, "a dear brother," we see something of the ties of love that bound the apostle to these young men, and bound them to him as well. You cannot read the New Testament without seeing in these affectionate greetings that Paul was a very warmhearted man. He loved those who worked with him and showered them with praise and encouragement.

He also calls Tychicus a "faithful minister." Here Paul assesses the quality of his work. The chief virtue of a Christian at work is faithfulness. In the letter to the Corinthians, the apostle writes that God has called us to be stewards of the mysteries of Christ. He goes on to say, "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful." That is what God values more than anything else. He does not ask us to be popular, or brilliant, or widely accepted, but he does ask us to be faithful in whatever ministry, task, or assignment he has given us. Faithfulness is what will win high praise at the throne of grace. Tychicus had amply demonstrated that quality

of faithfulness.

The third phrase, which describes Tychicus as a fellow servant, speaks not of the quality of his work but of the equality of the workers. The departure of the church from the first century relationship of believers one with another has always puzzled me. There is no hierarchy in the early church. That has been imposed upon the church and borrowed directly from the world. Paul never refers to himself as a pope, or even as a bishop. He always speaks of himself as a fellow worker, a fellow servant. He is an apostle (authorized spokesman), an older brother, and sometimes calls himself a spiritual father, yet his authority was one of love and of knowledge. To paraphrase a modern television advertisement, he "gained his authority the old-fashioned way: he earned it." He gained it by loving these younger men and women and by treating them with courtesy and respect as equals. He shared with them the vast knowledge of truth he had, yet always on a basis of personal equality. As a result he gained their respect and their voluntary submission to his desires. Perhaps one of the most striking phrases uttered by Jesus is given in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, where our Lord says to his disciples, "One is your Master; all you are brothers." There never was intended to be a hierarchy in the church. When we impose one upon it we greatly disturb the proper functioning of the body of Christ.

The story of Onesimus is related in the letter to Philemon. Onesimus was a runaway slave. He apparently took some of his master's money with him when he left. Somehow he found his way to Rome and came in contact with Paul. The apostle himself probably led him to Christ. Paul now sends him back to his master, with a beautiful appeal to Philemon, "If he has done anything wrong, charge it to my account!" He asked Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother in Christ and restore him to his household. It is likely that Onesimus is being sent back to Colossae to be a minister among the slaves who probably made up half the congregations of these early day churches. By this means the gospel penetrated all classes of society. Jesus himself said that his task as living Lord was to place people where he wanted them to be. "You have not chosen me," he said to his disciples, "I chose you and I appointed you [the word means, 'I strategically placed you'] so that you may bear fruit in my name."

Along with Onesimus, the forgiven slave, another name; given in verse 10, highlights the Christian virtue of reconciliation.

"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)."

That reference to Mark takes us back to the first missionary journey of Paul, recorded in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Acts, when the apostle, together with Barnabas, was sent out from the church at Antioch. They took with them a young man named John Mark (who is referred to in Acts 13 as John). We know from other references that John Mark was the son of a wealthy widow who lived in Jerusalem. He was probably a little spoiled, so that when things got tough on the journey with Paul and Barnabas Mark wanted to go home to mama. And that was what he did, abandoning the work. Later, when Barnabas wanted to take him on the second missionary journey, Paul resisted and refused to allow a quitter to go along. Barnabas instead took Mark to Cyprus, where they ministered there.

What a wonderful thing it is to find that now, years later, Mark is with Paul in Rome. Somehow he has won his way back into the apostle's good graces. It may well be that by this time he had finished the Gospel according to Mark, which he wrote under the tutelage of the apostle Peter, with whom he had ministered for many years. Now Paul sends him to Colossae with this affectionate word of appreciation, and instructions that he should be welcomed there. What a reminder this is that we are dealing with the God of the Second Chance! Some may have muffed things badly in a ministry, or failed in some area of life. Oftentimes in the world, no second chance is offered, but the God of grace offers a second and even a third and fourth chance. How beautiful to see Mark receive another chance. and to meet now with the apostle's approval!

Aristarchus and Mark are linked in verse 11 with another name.

"Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me."

Here are three Hebrew Christians---Mark, Aristarchus, and Jesus, who is called Justus---whom Paul says were a comfort to him. Reading between the lines here we see a reminder of Paul's consciousness that he too was raised a Jew. This takes us back to Romans 9 and 10, where the apostle writes of his love for Israel, saying he has "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart because of his fellow Israelites, that they may be saved. What a comfort it must have been to him, bound as he was by a chain and unable to go about the city, to have three young Hebrew Christians to carry the ministry to the Jews on his behalf.

Aristarchus, who came from Thessalonica, probably became a Christian under Paul's ministry in that city and later joined the apostle's party when he was sent as a prisoner from Caesarea to Rome. Here Paul refers to him as a "fellow prisoner," which suggests that he had been charged by the Jews with some crime and was actually awaiting trial along with the apostle. With them is Jesus, called Justus, another evangelist among the Jews. He took the Roman name Justus because he wanted to gain acceptance in the Roman Empire. Many young Jewish converts did this. Paul himself changed his name from Saul when he was converted. These men, therefore, would have been the first "Jews for Jesus" contingent who went abroad to minister on behalf of the Savior!

A section on the theme of faithful prayer and intercession brings before us the names of Epaphras, Dr. Luke, and Demas.

"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. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings."

We have already met Epaphras in the opening verses of this church. He was the evangelist who first began the church at Colossae. He had probably carried the gospel to these three cities, Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, when Paul was living in Ephesus, teaching the word of God five hours each day, six days a week, for three years. What a tremendous outpouring of Christian truth that must have been! Epaphras also had a pastor's heart. He labored in teaching and in prayer to bring these Colossian Christians to maturity. We do not know how he got to Rome. He may have gone there to get apostolic instruction on how to deal with this terribly subtle and powerful false teaching that had surfaced in Colossae (of which we see a counterpart in the New Age movement today).

It is interesting to remember that in the letter to Philemon, Epaphras is called a "fellow prisoner" of the apostle. That may indicate that he too was arrested by the Romans when he came to visit Paul and was chained as well as the apostle. This would explain why he was unable to return to Colossae. In his absence he "agonized" (that is the word Paul uses) in prayer for the Colossian saints, praying that they "may stand firm in the will of God, be mature and fully assured." What a lesson that is concerning prayer! How many times do we pray with agony like this? Oftentimes we are more interested in what we can get from God. I am reminded of a Reader's Digest article I read the other day about a military commander who was giving instructions to a group of raw recruits. "I am your commanding officer," he told them, "and when I give you an order I expect you to obey it instantly. But aside from that, I want you to think of me as a father and come and talk to me about your problems." Immediately a hand went up and a voice said, "Hey pop, how about borrowing the jeep tonight?" God is our Father, and many of us think of prayer as a way we can get things from him. Oftentimes our prayers reflect that shallow concept. But Epaphras interceded with agony and perseverance on behalf of others.

You too may be separated from loved ones who need spiritual help. What can you do? You can pray for them. Prayer is a marvelous provision to release spiritual power into an individual's life, to remove obstacles, and open doors. It may take a long time, so prayer must be persevering. My wife and I recently have had the joy of seeing God open doors for someone close to us for whom we have been praying for many years. Finally, this man is beginning to melt and respond as God answers prayer for him.

With Epaphras is linked the most faithful of all of Paul's associates, Doctor Luke. In Second Timothy, the apostle's last letter, Paul writes, "Only Luke is with me." All the others had left, but Luke remained faithful to the end. To this beloved, faithful brother we owe both the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Only eternity will reveal the enormous debt the church owes to Luke for his faithful labors to the end.

By contrast, the name Demas is mentioned here without comment in a kind of eloquent silence. He too was from Thessalonica and probably was part of that original band of Asian interns who traveled with Paul. Evidently he labored well for awhile for Paul seems to have taken him to several places. But now, when Paul is in prison and all his associates are in danger of being arrested themselves, it is apparent that Demas is beginning to drift. Paul says nothing good or bad about him at this point, but later, in his letter to Timothy, he writes, "Demas has forsaken me having loved this present age, and has gone back to Thessalonica." This young man has become famous (or infamous) in Christian history as the one close associate of Paul who would not hang in with him. He left because he loved the attractions of the world and abandoned his faith as a result.

The theme of home churches is introduced in verses 15 and 16.

"Give my greetings to the brothers 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."

Some versions say, "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nymphas and the church in his house." It is difficult to know whether this refers to a woman or a man for some versions have the masculine ending, while others have the feminine. It is likely, however, that this person was a woman who owned her own home. Perhaps she was a businesswoman, or a wealthy widow. In Philippi, Paul and Silas stayed in the home of Lydia, a "seller of purple." Many of you old timers here remember our "purple lady," Alma Davis, a wealthy widow who bought the pews on which you are sitting. This church has been greatly blessed by her generosity. The early church was similarly blessed with businesswomen and wealthy widows.

We do not find any church buildings described until the third century, so that for at least 250 years Christians met in homes, and when they met they read the Scriptures. That is what Paul exhorts them to do here. His letters were already widely shared, as we see from this note. He himself makes the claim in I Thessalonians (one of his earliest letters) that what he preached was not his own ideas but it was "the word of God" which came to them. Thus they read and studied these letters; analyzed and applied them. This reading formed a great part of their worship service, just as it does in our churches today. You can imagine how this letter to the Colossians was discussed in the church at Colossae, amidst the heresy and false teaching that was going on among them. It must have occasioned many long hours of discussion!

We do not, of course, have a letter "to the church at Laodicea" in our New Testament. Many scholars feel that the letter to the Ephesians is this letter to Laodicea, as the Ephesian letter was, in a sense, a round-robin letter. The first and last of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation are Ephesus and Laodicea respectively, so that the letter to the Ephesians, as we call it, was sent first to Ephesus, then to the other churches on that circuit, and finally ended up at Laodicea. If that is the case then we have not lost anything in that regard.

Paul now sends a message to an individual in the church.

Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work [or, the ministry] you have received in the Lord."

In the letter to Philemon we learn that Archippus was most likely the son of Philemon. He had a certain ministry given to him which he was neglecting, so Paul reminds him to "complete the work." No one knows what that ministry was, but the important thing was that he had a ministry, as do all Christians! Here again is a greatly neglected aspect of the church today. We have been taught for so long, unfortunately, that when we come to church the "ministers" are those who stand up in front and lead the meeting. But that was not the case in the early churches. The ministers are the coaches; the players are those in the pews. They are the ones who have "the work of the ministry." Paul says in the letter to the Laodiceans (or Ephesians) that leaders are to "equip the saints to do the work of the ministry." I hope by now that many of you have caught this truth. The impact of this church on our community is not going to be made by what we say here so much as it is by what you do when you leave here. You are the ministers. You are the ones responsible to carry on "the work." The church does not meet to worship and to learn, period. We meet to worship and to learn in order that we may prepare each believer for his or her ministry. That is what Paul is doing here. He is stirring up this young man

to take on the work that God had given him to do. This is a very important truth, one which the devil resists strongly because it is so powerful. When individual Christians begin to recognize that God can and will work through them, they begin to sense new excitement and challenge. Christian life is no longer boring and routine. It becomes demanding and exciting.

There are great models in this congregation of those who have taken on personal ministries. Some of these ministries have grown into institutions that have carried on the work. Last week we saw a very effective ministry undertaken by Marge Kuder, a woman in our congregation who works at Stanford University. She learned that Student Health Services at Stanford planned on handing out condoms to the students in response to the AIDS crisis. The media gathered on White Plaza to report what was happening. Marge seized the opportunity and distributed some broadsides prepared by Jews for Jesus which described the three kinds of love. This opened up opportunities for personal and sensitive interaction with individuals. The media saw her and took note of what she was doing. She was interviewed on two television stations and one radio station and was invited to serve on a panel to represent the Christian view of sexuality. God can use even the media for his work if somebody is faithful to the ministry which he has given! Marge had a great opportunity to speak, not with condemnation or with strident charges, but with caring concern, and point out that though distributing condoms may be well intentioned, it conveys a false sense of sexuality. She was able to contrast that with the intention of the Almighty in designing this marvelous force we call sex, and describing what it can do in bringing someone to a sense of fulfillment and enjoyment within the framework of marriage.

How do we discover these ministries which God has given? We find them by responding to a need that is right at our doorstep. You do not have to look for a ministry, it is usually right in front of you---on the bus, in your carpool, with your neighbor next door. Respond to a need. Speak to some lonely person. Open up your home to someone who is homeless. Do a kind deed to some widow on your block who needs help. Have a cup of coffee with somebody. That is how you find the ministry which is given by the Lord himself. If you follow it up you will soon discover that you have an exciting door of opportunity opened to you. Perhaps others can join in with you, and life becomes for all a tremendous adventure of faith. That is what the apostle is talking about here in this letter. That is how the church spread through these three cities and began to affect that whole section of the Roman Empire.

Paul closes with this word in verse 18, when he takes the pen in his own hand:

"I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. [How much would you give for that autograph today?] Remember my chains. Grace be with you."

That word, "Remember my chains," was written two thousand years ago to people who have long since gone.

Paul himself has been in glory all these centuries, and yet these words still have meaning for us. It is well for us too to remember his chains, to think of this mighty apostle who was hounded, persecuted and oppressed everywhere he went. He was resisted and thrown into jail in many places. He spent a night and a day in the deep. He was beaten with rods and stoned on occasion. Even as he writes these letters he does not find it easy to do so. He does not sit down in a comfortable room with his word processor. He must dictate them to an educated slave, and then painfully, because he suffered from poor eyesight, write with large letters his name at the close, lest the letter be treated as a forgery. Down through the centuries this letter, along with others, has transformed the history of the world. It is a tremendously important document. Yet it is well for us to remember the cost of having these scriptures in our own hands. "Remember my chains." Let us give thanks for this apostle who kept the Lord always at the center of his thoughts. Heedless of obstacles, he fulfilled his own ministry faithfully before the Lord. What a model he is to us!

Thank You, Father, for Your magnificence in nature.
Thank You, Father, for the inner promptings of Your Spirit.
Thank You, Father, for fresh truth to live by.
Thank You, Father, for people whose lives illustrate Your word.
Thank You, Father, for this church to which I belong,
for those who help me,
intercede for me,

support me,
love me,
inspire me.

Lord, I cannot live as a Christian without them,
for I need that part of Yourself
that You have placed within them.
And they cannot live without me,
because they need the gifts
that You have deposited in me.
Lord, free us of the selfishness,
the self-centeredness, the ego-trips,
the independence of spirit
that keeps us from binding ourselves into one.
Lord, help us to think first of those things
which will benefit others
before we begin listing our own needs.
Give us grace to live in such a way
that we draw attention to You. Amen.

Catalog No. 4030
Colossians 4:7-18
Twelfth Message
February 22, 1987

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