

THE LIFE BEARERS

by Steve Zeisler

People are fascinating, and most of us like to talk about others. There is a growing industry in this culture based on catering to gossip through magazines and talk shows in which people tell embarrassing things about themselves. The fascination we have with human beings seems to be on the rise everywhere. I think the British have retained their royal family just to have something to talk about around the dinner table.

There are good reasons and bad reasons to be fascinated by people. Some bad reasons are being judgmental, we enjoy ridiculing someone else, or we're voyeuristic in our interest in others. A good reason is love for others, which causes us to be genuinely concerned both to know others in order to be a blessing to them, and to make ourselves known to them so that the life of Christ that exists within us can be displayed more fully.

LOVE FOR PEOPLE

The passage of Scripture that we have come to this morning is filled with references to specific people. This is one of the great human sections of the Bible. The book of Colossians to this point has been largely about the glory of Jesus Christ and his supremacy over all that has been and will be created. It has been about prayer to God. There has been a great deal of heavenly discussion. But the final and most practical section, which we began last week, has to do with human beings. God is fascinated with us, just as we are with each other. He is deeply interested in the very ordinary stuff that makes up human life. We'll meet a number of folks in our study of this section, and see a bit of Paul's commendation of them, his words of encouragement, and a brief prayer. I hope we'll be encouraged in relationships among ourselves as well.

Colossians 4:2-6:

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; in order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak. Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.

The first category of people that the apostle is concerned for is those who are not yet part of the Christian community, who are outside the faith. He introduces this subject by calling on all who read these words to be devoted in prayer. He wants them to pray in particular that he would be able to speak effectively to those who have are not yet convinced of the truth of the mystery that has been revealed, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Then ultimately he directs all who read these words to conduct themselves in such a way that their lives are attractive to non-Christians.

Let's look at the directive to pray in verse 2. He first tells us some very important things about prayer in general: "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving." We can see three ideas here. First of all, prayer should be a devotion of ours. That is, it should be something that we are deeply committed to, not a whim that every now and then captures our attention, so that we give ourselves to it briefly but then turn aside to get caught up with something else. You probably know people who have an identifiable devotion: perhaps the 49ers, their job, money, or their family. You can tell what anyone is devoted to by the depth of their commitment or by their insistence that it is important. The apostle Paul is calling on believers to be devoted in prayer, to care deeply about it, and to be committed to it.

Secondly, he says to be alert in prayer. We can at times find our minds wandering, can't we? I don't know anyone who isn't periodically frustrated at their inability to concentrate during prayer. We find ourselves repeating sentences, mouthing phrases, without paying any attention at all to what we're saying. Paul's word here reminds us that we must choose to stay alert. Our devotion should make us active in prayer, and our alertness should keep us engaged in it. We mustn't allow it to become routine, empty phrases.

The last time I was in traffic school, the point made by the instructor was that people drive badly not because they don't know how to drive, but because they don't stay alert. We were reminded that if your mind is occupied with how furious you are at somebody, you're worried about something, you're late for an

appointment, or you've taken a drug and you're unable to concentrate, you're going to be a bad driver because you aren't alert. We had all gotten tickets because we hadn't been alert. The same word applies to prayer here. Don't let other things crowd in and destroy your ability to concentrate during the time you spend in prayer to God.

The last point is that prayer is to be made with thanksgiving. It is not to be a duty that we shoulder reluctantly in order to meet some standard, our devotion grudgingly given and our alertness maintained under duress. We are to be grateful for the possibility of speaking to God, drawing near to him, knowing how much he loves us and longs to communicate with us. It's a privilege.

OPEN DOORS FOR PROCLAMATION

The prayer he puts in particular focus in verse 3 is, "...that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also have been imprisoned; in order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak." Paul was in prison because he was a Christian; his Christianity had proved dangerous to the security of the Jews in Jerusalem and dangerous to the peace-keeping efforts of the Romans in controlling their empire. He was in chains, and what he is asking the Colossians to pray is that a door be opened, but not so he could be released from prison to enjoy himself. He does at the very end of the book ask them to remember his chains, and I think Paul's humanity is clear in this. He didn't like being in prison. But his request is for an open door for the gospel. He had been made a steward of a mystery, truth that the whole world needed to hear, secrets that had been hidden from humanity and that believers needed to be instructed in so that we could be everything God intends us to be. So he is asking for an open door of opportunity to speak this mystery. In fact, he is asking for a chance to do the very thing that got him thrown into prison, "Pray for an open door that I may go out and stir up more controversy, win more people to Christ, and shake up the world that's committed to sin and self-preservation!"

The book of Philippians was written during this same imprisonment. Paul makes a wonderful, subtle statement at the end of Philippians: "The saints of Caesar's household greet you." He is referring to the guards who had been chained to him every day. He was under house arrest, so there was always a guard there to oversee him. But meanwhile Paul had friends visit, and he was writing letters, talking to people about Christ, and over time winning these Roman guards to the Lord, to the point that there was now a community of believers among the praetorians (Caesar's handpicked close associates and soldiers). The open door in this case was for him to speak to his captors. Paul wanted an opportunity to care to speak the truth courageously even though he knew that time and again it would get him in trouble. He wanted to bless the very people who insisted on denying him his freedom.

SEASONED WITH SALT

Finally, Paul wanted to say the things he needed to say in a way that would be helpful to those who were still enemies. Look at verse 4: "...in order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak." He is asking not only for an open door for ministry, but thoughtfulness and sensitivity in being able to speak the mystery of the source of real life to people who didn't have it yet. He wanted to understand those he spoke to, to be able to put it in terms that would make sense to them. It's amazing and encouraging to me that this man, who had for many years had public ministry in every place, was not confident that he knew everything and that he didn't need prayer for wisdom about how to speak the truth. It was not a canned, routine speech that he would run through in every setting. Every time he met somebody, perhaps especially those who hated him for his faith, he wanted to be able to understand their world and speak clearly, aptly, and helpfully.

While some outsiders or non-Christians oppose the gospel, however, those we meet beginning in verse 5 are apt to be attracted to it. It says, "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace." Paul was imagining speech to be something like a tasty stew; you put the right amount of salt into it to make it especially flavorful. We're to put grace into our speech the same way you put salt into a stew so that people are all the more attracted to what we have to say, interested in it, and apt to follow up on it. He's picturing people who are going to come to us and say, "What was that you were saying? You act as if God were alive and you could know him! You're talking about prayer as if you take it seriously. And when you speak of your Christian friends, you're not just talking about people trying to use each other for their own ends, but something entirely different. I'm very interested in this! Help me understand it."

These people are so attracted to the Jesus they see in us that they're coming to us and asking us about what they see. We're answering their inquiries; not forcing ourselves into their lives, battering them down, grabbing their lapels and making them listen to us about things in which they have no interest. They're interested! They would love to be as sure that God loves them as we are sure that God loves us. We must learn how to season everything we say with little references to the love of Christ so that the stew is so tasty that people want more of it. We need to ask God to help us see open doors, follow-up tentative inquiries and bring those attracted to Christ to a life of faith.

John Fischer gave a concert here last Sunday. One of the songs he sang had the refrain, "Jesus is the only way, but there's more than one way to Jesus." He was exactly right to remind us that Jesus is the only way to God, of course. Not all religions are good religions, and not everything people declare about God is true. We must not say to each person we encounter what we think they want to hear. "There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). But there is more than one way to Jesus; that is, we are called when we enter the world of outsiders to know what to say and how to say it; what not to say; how to listen; and how to be gracious, wise, clear, and courageous as we share the words of eternal life, the "mystery of Christ."

WORDS OF GREETING

Now the rest of the chapter is taken up not with outsiders but with another category of people: those who are already Christians. Paul has a great deal to say about folks who are already of the faith just in these words of greeting and encouragement. Let's read verses 7-9 to begin with:

As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bondservant in the Lord, will bring you information. I have sent him **to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances** and that he may encourage your hearts; and with him Onesimus, our faithful and **beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the** whole situation here.

In this first section Paul basically wants his own life, circumstances, feelings, needs---in short, his world---to be explained to them.

Verses 10-14:

Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas' cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, **welcome him**); **and also Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow** workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision [i.e., Jews]; and **they have proved to be an encouragement to me. Epaphras, who is one of your** number, a bondservant 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 bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you **and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved** physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas.

The apostle includes greetings from a whole group of people who were with him in Rome, some of whom the Colossians knew, such as Epaphras, who was from Colossae. He talks about himself and his comrades in Rome because people are fascinating and God cares about them. As we saw earlier, there is a godly, loving way for us to be caught up and concerned with each other.

Now in the last section Paul is going to greet those who are in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, these three close cities that were parts of a single Christian community. Verses 15-17:

Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house. And when this letter is read among you, have it also read in the **church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming** from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you **have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.**"

Finally he picked up the quill and wrote the very last sentence in his own hand. Most of the time he dictated his letters (some think he had glaucoma or other eye problems that made it difficult for him to write legibly), and at the very end he would sign them with his own name, writing the last greeting to authenticate them as his. He says in verse 18:

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment [chains]. Grace be with you.

A GRAND MIXTURE

Now, there is a wonderful cross-section of people from verse 7 all the way through the end of the chapter: Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, Asians, slaves, free, women, men, those who were older and experienced in the faith, and those who were young and timid in the faith. There are all kinds of differences among them, and yet there is community, respect, and love among them. Paul gives us a beautiful example in the greetings at the end of this letter as to what it's like to be inside the Christian community.

Let's go back to verses 7-9 where Paul mentions the two men, Tychicus and Onesimus, who will bear this letter to the Colossians. He says that when they get there they will talk about things that are not in the letter; they will tell the Colossians about Paul. Paul was not a gossip, someone who loves to talk about other people but remains hidden behind a veil himself. He was very comfortable that his needs, wants, foibles, struggles, and joys in life should be discussed in his absence. In fact, he's asking that these two men do that.

The references to personalities and people here are all positive, for the purpose of building them up. Onesimus in particular is an interesting man. His story is told in the little book of Philemon. Philemon lived in Colossae and was probably a fairly wealthy individual. He owned a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus was lazy when he was there; he didn't get any work done. His name means useful, and Paul makes a pun in the letter to Philemon, saying, "Well, his name is finally equal to what he is. He has been useless to everybody, but now he is useful to me and to the Lord." He not only was a useless slave when he was there, but he ran away, which was, of course, illegal. He found his way to Rome, became a Christian, and was transformed. He became Paul's close associate, someone who served the apostle from the heart and loved Jesus Christ.

Now Paul is sending him back to his master Philemon in Colossae. He sends him back because it's the responsible thing to do, but he sends him back as a brother in Christ. And he says (in the letter to Philemon), "Philemon, everything has changed. Whether you own this slave or not is not so important anymore. The issue now is that he is your brother in Christ. You need to treat him that way, and he needs to treat you that way." The references we saw last week to masters and slaves are written in the very context of a slave returning to his master carrying this letter. So it's a wonderful story of redemption, renewal, and relationships being restored.

In verse 10 we meet a man named Aristarchus. He shows up a few different times in the New Testament, but there is never any reference to his saying anything. In my mind's eye he is a big, tough guy with a square jaw who doesn't talk much. He was first sent from Thessalonica with money collected to care for the poor in Jerusalem. He was given responsibility for the money, so he was evidently trustworthy. He was also capable; he could travel across the Roman Empire and take care of business as necessary, and he accompanied Paul on that journey. He showed up in Ephesus later in one of Paul's interesting adventures. Paul preached the gospel in Ephesus, infuriating the idolators there, who started a riot in which people were storming the streets, screaming bloody murder, and attempting to kill the Christians. Aristarchus was one of the ones who stood by Paul in the middle of the riot. He was the kind of guy you wanted to have around when you had problems. Later he accompanied Paul on the prison ship from Caesarea to Rome, where Paul was imprisoned at this writing. And Paul calls him "my fellow prisoner." There was no reason to believe that Aristarchus was really under arrest. It's just that because of the kind of man he was, he shared Paul's imprisonment with him. He was a brother you could count on; he hung with the apostle, lived under the same circumstances, and served his good friend because he cared about him.

DIFFERENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Now in a bit of contrast to him, farther on in the paragraph Epaphras is mentioned. In my mind's eye, if Aristarchus was the strong, tough, silent type, Epaphras was a talker. Epaphras was the one who founded the church in Colossae after he went to Ephesus, heard the gospel, and met Christ. Paul says here that Epaphras was a native of Colossae, "one of your number." He talked to Paul about his people, to people about the Lord, and to the Lord about everything ("laboring earnestly in prayer"). Again, in contrast to one another, Epaphras was someone who spent hours bringing heaven and earth together in his prayers, and Aristarchus was someone who stood by saying little; but dealing very effectively with danger and deprivation. They had different personalities, strengths, and gifts, but they were both of great value.

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e was different again from either of those two. His description in this paragraph is "beloved physician." It's all

well and good to have the warrior types who can be serious, determined, and effective; and it's also very good to have someone who knows how to pray and express his faith. But every now and then you've got a broken bone and you need someone to set it, or you're sick with a fever and you need someone to bring the fever down. Paul rejoiced to have somebody with him who could care for people's physical needs. Luke was the team physician. And all the time he was performing those duties he was watching and listening to everybody, putting himself in the background but taking notes. He ended up giving us perhaps the greatest history ever penned by anyone, the two-volume set of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Mark (also known as John Mark) and Demas stand as another interesting pair in contrast with one another. Mark started out badly as a young man. He was the cousin of Barnabas, who was one of the great heroes of the early church. Barnabas wanted to help him out, so on their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas took Mark along with them. Eventually they got into trouble, and John Mark chickened out and ran for home.

Later, Paul and Barnabas were going to go out on another adventure, and Barnabas again wanted to bring Mark along. Paul said, "No way! The gospel is too important, and the responsibility too awesome. We shouldn't bring along young guys who can't pull their weight." (Paul and Barnabas had an argument over it. Barnabas said, "This kid failed once, but he's not going to fail forever. I believe in him." Paul said, "But I believe in the message;" and they actually split up. The Lord ended up using the convictions of both Paul and Barnabas redemptively. Paul publicly reprimanded Mark for his failure then, but now he is publicly commending him. In 2 Timothy, the last book he wrote just before his death, he commends Mark even more fully. It's great testimony to the redemptive work of Christ. Failing once doesn't mean failing forever. Mark's fear turned to courage, and he became someone they could count on. He too became one of the great chroniclers of the life of Christ. The book of Mark is this man's document.

Demas went the other direction. He began as an able member of the band which traveled together in ministry. But there's a subtle point that comes across in Paul's statement, "Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas." Everybody in this paragraph has something positive said about him except Demas. Demas is just Demas. He's not beloved, courageous, fellow, or brother. It strikes me that Paul even at this point may have begun to wonder about Demas and whether he was wholehearted in his devotion to the cause of Christ. He wanted to mention him because he was there, but he couldn't think of any honest commendation to add.

By the time Paul wrote 2 Timothy at the end of his life, he said of Demas that he "loved this present world" and abandoned his faith. He loved what this world had to offer. We might think of him as sort of the patron saint of modern failed televangelists: people who had an effective ministry once but increasingly favor this world's goodies in place of the stewardship of Christian service. By the end Demas had become an outsider to the believing community. So Mark is the story of someone who started out badly and ended up faithful. Demas is the story of someone who was in the midst of sliding downhill even as this letter was written.

THE LYCHUS VALLEY CHURCH

Let's examine the last paragraph, beginning in verse 15, in which Paul sends greeting to the believers who are receiving the letter. I've already mentioned that there were three cities that were in close connection to each other. Nobody knows for sure the identity of the letter coming from the Laodeceans mentioned here. It may have been the book we know of as Ephesians, because that was circulated and may have come to Laodicea, later to be passed on to the Colossians. Or it may be a letter that has been lost to us.

There are two more people who are also interesting. First, Nympha was a woman who owned a home where a church community or fellowship met. There are a number of ancient manuscripts for this book that list that name as Nymphas, a man's name. Most scholars agree that the original document said Nympha, that this she was a woman who owned a home and was giving leadership and hospitality to this church. But scribes transcribing the Bible changed it from a feminine name to a masculine name, because of their discomfort with women in prominent positions in the church. Christians struggling with the roles of men and women, which we discussed last week, is not new.

The other person mentioned here is Archippus. Paul wrote this word to him in verse 17: "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it." Archippus is also greeted at beginning

of the book of Philemon. Philemon, as I've said, was a wealthy man and a leading figure in the church of the Lycus Valley, and Archippus was almost certainly Philemon's son, probably a young man. Paul had a particular affinity and concern for young men who struggled with timidity. He had rebuked Mark because Mark had failed the test once, but in this letter he speaks well of him. Timothy, whom Paul called his son in the faith, was a young man who struggled with timidity or fearfulness. He often needed a word of encouragement and "bucking up" in order to get on with what he had been called to do. I think Archippus is the same kind of person. Paul meant, "Say to Archippus, 'Even though your father is a big deal, and even though it's hard for you to believe in yourself compared to other people, there is a ministry you have received from the Lord that you are to fulfill. Don't be afraid, wringing your hands and in self-doubt. If the Lord Jesus has called you to some service for him, get on with it, because you can do what God has given you to do.'"

The conclusion in the last verse is perhaps the most human thing about this whole document. Paul says, "Remember my chains." He was counting on the Colossians' caring and praying for him. We, too, must remember the chains, figuratively speaking, of one another. Some may have physical disabilities that bind and frustrate them. Others have emotional chains---perhaps relationships that have the effect of weighing them down, or memories of past failure. Let's not forget to be involved with one another in those things. We ought to be concerned to be helpful to one another in the tough business of being human. Our glorious Savior, described so powerfully in this letter, continues to use the lives of ordinary people to honor himself and make the truth known.

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Eighth Message
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