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**Title:** Footnotes\* Epaphras

**Preaching:** Ryan Hazen, lead pastor, Mud Creek Campus

**Text:** [Colossians 4:12](#)

**Email:** [Ryan Hazen](#)

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Last week, we started a four-week sermon series based on a book that I read a couple of months ago. It is a four-session Bible study by Julie Lyles Carr called *Footnotes: Major Lessons from Minor Bible Characters*. The book centers on four important characters of scripture who really changed the course of our faith but whose names very few people know or remember. I thought it might be worth our time to consider these four people. Last week we got acquainted with Tychicus. This week is Epaphras. Next week, Mother's Day, will be Joanna followed by Quirinius. For today, let's consider Epaphras.

Epaphras is mentioned only three times in the Bible. In three sentences across two books of the Bible, we catch a tiny glimpse of one man with a significant legacy of faith. In the book of Philemon, Paul refers to him as a fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus and sends greetings to Philemon on his behalf. Epaphras was probably with Paul under his house arrest, making him a fellow prisoner in his companionship with Paul. This brief mention tells us little—only that Epaphras shares Paul's spiritual conviction and is present and working with him. It also shows us that he shares a personal relationship with Philemon of Colossae, a fellow believer. So far, it's not a significant story, but we still have two more sentences to explore. If it doesn't get better, this will be a short sermon.

In the first chapter of Colossians, Paul writes in the salutation to the letter to the church in Colossae about the hope in Jesus Christ that they have heard. It has been shared with Paul that this hope is bearing fruit. "This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit" (Colossians 1:7-8).

The name Epaphras surfaces again at the conclusion of the book of Colossians. In our one verse of scripture that was read today it said, "Epaphras, who is one of you...." That tells us that he is from Colossae and may have even been the leader of the church that Paul started there. In addition to Colossae, there are two other churches mentioned as Paul brings Colossians to a close. It's likely that Epaphras was instrumental in ministry to all three. "For I testify for him that he was worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis" (Colossians 4:13). Epaphras may have been an itinerant minister, moving from one church to the next—essentially one of the first multi-site churches—one church in three locations.

On one side of the Lycus River, he likely established the church at Hierapolis. Six miles below on the other side of the Lycus River is the church at Laodicea. And twelve miles up the Lycus River is the church

at Colossae. The Lycus Valley was about a hundred miles inward in Asia Minor—what we call Turkey today. Epaphras went for some reason to Ephesus and became acquainted with Paul, and there he was converted to Christianity. Afterward, he went back home to the Lycus River valley, and there his testimony for Christ took hold in these three churches.

That’s about all we know about the man named Epaphras. However, there is one other thing that struck me when Paul was talking about him. Paul, talking to the Colossian church—and the churches at Laodicea and Hierapolis—says that Epaphras “is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills” (Colossians 4:12b). Epaphras is not just praying for them but **WRESTLING IN HIS PRAYERS**. It made me stop and think about what exactly that means.

First, it’s probably good to be on the same page about wrestling. My grandmother used to watch wrestling on TV—back in the days of Ric Flair, Andre the Giant, Hulk Hogan, and The Undertaker.<sup>1</sup> I don’t think Paul is imagining the entertainment and theatrics kind of —dare I say it, fake—wrestling that those names conjure up. Paul was more likely thinking about the kind of wrestling that would have started as an Olympic sport in 708 B.C.<sup>2</sup> It is more like what we would now know as high school, college, and Olympic wrestling—real wrestling.

The dictionary says that wrestling is a combat sport involving grappling-type techniques, such as clinch fighting, throws and takedowns, joint locks, pins and other grappling holds.<sup>3</sup> One of our own Geist Christian Church youth, Jackson Goodyear, is a wrestler for Hamilton Southeastern High School. This is him on the right in this picture. A former wrestling coach once corrected me when I called wrestling a “fight.” He said, “It is not a fight; it is an exchange of moves and strategy.” Epaphras wrestling in prayer using this definition and seeing Jackson in one of his moves might start to make some sense in how we might wrestle in prayer.

When I think of wrestling in the Bible, I first think of Jacob in the Old Testament. In Genesis 32, Jacob is on his way back home to Canaan after a twenty-year sojourn. He is scared to death because his estranged brother, Esau, is coming to meet him—with four hundred men. This is no welcome party. It’s an army. Jacob intends to spend the night alone and no doubt in desperate prayer.

In the middle of the night, a strange man shows up and wrestles Jacob. At some point during this wrestling match, Jacob realizes that he is wrestling God. And when God decides that it is time to end the match, he dislocates Jacob’s hip and demands to be released. And Jacob, in significant pain, replies, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:26). There and then, God changes Jacob’s name from JACOB, which means “one who deceives,” to ISRAEL, which means “one who strives with God.” Jacob/Israel then limps toward his tense reunion with Esau with a weakened body and a strengthened faith. Having wrestled with God, he knows his prayers regarding Esau will be answered.

The other person who immediately comes to mind when I think of someone wrestling in prayer is Jesus. Jesus wrestles in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane right before he is arrested. He wrestles to the point of sweating blood, asking that the events that were looming before him might not have to take

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<sup>1</sup> Information from my memory confirmed here - <https://groovyhistory.com/wwf-wrestlers-70s>

<sup>2</sup> Information about ancient Olympic games found at International Olympic Committee website - <https://olympics.com/ioc/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrestling>

place. But, in the end, Jesus prays what we all have to ultimately pray: “Yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

There’s more than one kind of prayer. I was taught to pray using the ACTS method—**A**DORATION, **C**ONFESSION, **T**HANKSGIVING, **S**UPPLICATION—asking for our needs. Those we do in worship, before meals, in our prayer groups, and whenever we just pause to thank God for being God. But there’s also a deeper, more powerful level of prayer. There is wrestling in prayer. That deeper level of prayer is what Paul is talking about when he says Epaphras is wrestling in prayer for the churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Epaphras cares about them so deeply and wants the best for them—so deeply that he agonizes over them, stays up at nights for them.

Julie Lyles Carr, the author of the Bible study on Footnotes, tells of wrestling with God in prayer over her own daughters. She speaks of her daughter, Maesyn, with hearing loss and her daughter, Merci, who experienced a stroke at birth. She says, “We’ve wrestled in prayer for those girls—for healing and for their roads to be easier. But for whatever reason, God has allowed the hearing loss and the aftereffects of the stroke to remain.” She goes on to say that when we talk about wrestling in prayer, we want to be cautious not to confuse dedication in prayer and the outcome.<sup>4</sup> Wrestling in prayer has value, whether things turn out the way we would like or not. Let me say that again because that was important for Jacob, it was important for Jesus, it was important for Epaphras, and it is important for us. Wrestling in prayer has value, whether things turn out the way we would like or not.

Wrestling in prayer means to stay in prayer for longer than might feel comfortable. Stay in the discipline. Don’t give up when the heavens seem silent and the future seems distant and God doesn’t appear to be listening. Wrestling in prayer is a full-contact sport where there will be clinch fighting, throws and takedowns, joint locks, pins, and grappling holds. It can take place in the solitude of a quiet morning or the chaos of a traffic jam. It can happen while you are serving others.

Christian evangelist D.L. Moody always talked about being passionate and practical in your faith. In the late 1800s, while he was traveling by ship across the Atlantic, a fire broke out in the hold of the ship. A friend is reported to have said to the evangelist, “Mr. Moody, let us go to the other end of the ship and engage in prayer.” The prayerful but practical Moody replied, “Not so, sir, we stand right here and pass the buckets and pray hard all the time.” It is our reminder that we can wrestle in prayer while we’re passing the buckets. Just as going to the other end of the ship would not make prayer any more effective, neither would it be of help to call passing the buckets prayer.<sup>5</sup>

There is a woman in the church who comes into my office on a pretty regular basis with the question: “How can I be praying for you?” I know she means it. I know she is a wrestler. One of my mentors and member of Geist Christian Church, Hal Watkins, used to carry a 3” x 5” index card in his shirt pocket. On it were the names of people who were in his prayers. It was his prayer wrestling card. Did each one of those prayers have a happy ending? Of course not. But here’s what happens when you become a prayer wrestler.

You will be changed. Wrestling with God changed Jacob’s identity. He was no longer to be known as one who received his blessing by deception. This time he received God’s blessing by prevailing with God by

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<sup>4</sup> Carr, Julie Lyles, Footnotes: Major Lessons from Minor Bible Characters, copyright 2019. Abingdon Women, The United Methodist Publishing House, page 68.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 79.

faith. This struggle—even with a dislocated hip in the process—turned out to be a profoundly gracious gift of restoration that God gave Jacob. When God calls us to wrestle, there’s always more going on than we first understand, and God always uses it to transform us.

Last week, I gave you four “S” words that described Tychicus. This week, I have three “P” words—three mentions in scripture, three words that describe Epaphras. First, Epaphras was a man of PRIORITY. Epaphras was a man who had his priorities dialed in. He was a “servant of Christ Jesus,” so Christ came first in his life. For Paul to label Epaphras as a servant is a high compliment. It is a title that describes the most devoted of believers. Only Timothy and Epaphras were ever called “servants of Christ” by Paul. The priority for Epaphras was to please Christ.

Next, Epaphras was a man of PASSION. Epaphras was a man of passion and zeal. He had worked hard for the Colossians, Laodiceans, and Hierapolisians—people from Hierapolis. He had a fervor about him, especially for that particular region of the Lycus River valley. In the book of Revelation, we hear about the “lukewarmness” in Laodicea, but it didn’t start with Epaphras. He was strong and a man of passion that radiated in the churches.

Third, Epaphras was a man of PRAYER. It’s what we’ve been talking about. For all his other attributes, this was his most notable quality. He contended prayerfully for those dear to him. His request was for them to stand mature in Christ. He would kneel so they could stand.<sup>6</sup>

These scant three lines of scripture that mention Epaphras can be a model for us. They can remind us that God is looking for people who will let God be their priority. They can remind us that God is looking for people who will bring passion into their service of Christ. God is looking for people who will struggle for others in prayer—looking for people to stay engaged and won’t let go until they come out transformed. God is looking for those like Epaphras and like us. This minor character had a major impact. May it be so with us as well.

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<sup>6</sup> Three “P”s from Nate Holdridge, Character Study: Epaphras - Colossians 4:12-13, January 30, 2018 found at <https://www.nateholdridge.com/blog/character-study-epaphras-colossians-4-12-13b>