A Study in Colossians 4:13–14

Epaphras, Luke, and Demas — March 12, 2008

We are reading Colossians chapter 4, beginning at verse 13.

> *"For I bear him record that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis."*
>
> *"Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you."*

Eating the Sin Offering — Paul and John Mark

Before taking up Epaphras directly, a remark had been made in a previous reading about Paul's treatment of John Mark in connection with his restoration. A commentary had noted, almost in passing, that Paul had eaten the sin offering with respect to that matter. It is worth pausing on what that means.

The first seven chapters of Leviticus describe the five offerings Israel brought to God. The burnt offering comes first, because it was wholly consumed for God and has the preeminence — its focus is the excellence of the offering itself, not the sin of the offerer. The sin offering in chapter 4 is different: here sin itself is before the mind. God is the one against whom the sin was committed, and the whole weight of the offering rests on that.

Chapter 6 adds a further detail. In a holy place shall it be eaten, in the court of the tent of meeting — the priest who dealt with the sin offering had to eat of it. And verse 30 qualifies: if the blood was brought into the tent of meeting to make atonement in the sanctuary, that sin offering was not to be eaten. It was too holy an offering; it was to be burned outside the camp. Hebrews 13 picks up this detail: the bodies of those beasts whose blood was brought within were burned outside the camp — and so Christ suffered without the gates of Jerusalem for us.

What then is the eating of the sin offering? It is the priest appropriating to himself the value of the sacrifice that was offered for sin. When a sinner came and told of his sin, the priest who dealt with that matter had in his own heart the same fallen nature, the same response to sin that every man has. He could minimize it, or he could exaggerate it with vengeance. Neither would be just. God is perfect; man is not. The priest had to eat the sin offering so that, when the matter was over and the blood was shed and the animal was dead, instead of closing the file and walking away, he identified himself with that offering. He appropriated it to himself — he made it his own.

For Paul with John Mark: the restoration of Mark to Paul's company, after a failure that had been real and not merely technical, involved taking up the subject of that sin. And the commentator's remark was that Paul had eaten the sin offering with respect to it — that is, instead of merely accepting Mark's repentance and walking on together in easy fellowship, Paul brought the whole matter to the value of Christ's sacrifice. That did Paul good. That did Mark good. If we forget to eat the sin offering when we deal with the sins of others, we go away either embittered or morally careless about sin. If we remember it, we go away with a deeper appreciation of what Christ suffered on the cross, and of the excellency of that offering.

Epaphras — Great Zeal, Fervent Labor, and Laodicea

The case of Epaphras is altogether different from that of Mark. In verse 12, Paul describes him: always combating earnestly for you in his prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. Verse 13 adds: for I bear him record that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis. Geographically, Colossae and Laodicea were very close to each other. It is difficult to think that Epaphras's connection to Laodicea is coincidental.

Epaphras — in everything his name calls to mind — was the precise opposite of Laodiceanism. He had great zeal. He labored fervently. He prayed earnestly with a high aim: not merely that the Laodiceans would be kept or maintained, but that they would stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. That requires an exercised conscience. To stand perfect and complete in all the will of God means that every circumstance of life has been brought before the question: what is the will of God in this? That is a high standard.

Now notice the connection between what Epaphras prayed and what the risen Lord later said to the Laodiceans in Revelation 3. Epaphras prayed that they might stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. The Lord counseled them in Revelation 3:18: buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. There is not a one-to-one correspondence, but the substance is much the same. The gold tried in the fire answers to standing complete in God's will — an exercised conscience. The eyesalve answers to standing in the intelligence of God's will — seeing things as God sees them. And the very word zeal appears in both: Epaphras had a great zeal for them in verse 13, and in Revelation 3:19, the Lord says to the Laodiceans: be zealous. The same word.

Epaphras was in a real sense the antidote for Laodiceanism, and he was sent to them before the condition described in Revelation 3 had fully developed. About thirty years separate Colossians from the writing of Revelation — a generation. The Laodiceans of our chapter were not yet the Laodiceans

of Revelation 3; they were their forerunners, and they bore a responsibility for what those successors would become. The epistle to the Colossians itself was to be read to the Laodiceans — verse 16 instructs exactly that. Colossians is the antidote for Laodiceanism. It is the epistle of Christ as head, as all in all, as the fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily — the epistle that corrects the tendency to trade in truth without being changed by it.

As for Epaphras being a prisoner — Philemon 23 seems to say so: Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus. What a testimony: a man in chains who was still combating earnestly in prayer. The Roman sentence may have called for hard labor, but it could not reach the labor on his knees. He labored much for them from inside a prison.

Luke — The Beloved Physician Who Wrote of the Perfect Man

Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you. Luke is the second of the four Gospel writers to appear in this chapter — Mark having already been mentioned. That is remarkable: two of the four Evangelists are named in these closing verses of Colossians 4.

The story of Mark is that he failed in service, was restored, and thereafter was useful — so useful that he wrote the Gospel of Mark, whose subject is the perfect servant. Every sentence of Mark's Gospel came from the pen of a man who had failed in service. That must have been bittersweet to write: every sentence describing a perfect servant, knowing he himself had not been one — yet knowing also that that perfect servant had loved him enough to restore him.

Luke's situation is different but equally remarkable. He was a physician. Every working hour of his life he saw the effects of the fall — broken, sick, dying human beings, brought to him because they were not well. He was an expert on fallen, imperfect, flawed humanity. He had never seen a perfect human being in his entire professional life. And yet Luke wrote a Gospel whose whole subject is the perfect man, the humanity of the Lord Jesus. He traces His human genealogy all the way back to Adam — because one cannot be a perfect human being without Adam for an ancestor. Luke, as an expert on what fallen men look like, was in some sense the most qualified of all writers to notice and document what perfect humanity looked like. Every sentence he wrote, he was writing as one who had to say: I am an authority on human beings, and I have never seen one like this. This one is perfect — perfect in this way, perfect in that way, perfect in every way.

This makes Luke's Gospel a very searching book. The brother who once stood in the snow outside a prison dormitory rather than remain inside and hear a preacher suggest that the Lord Jesus had sympathy for us because He knew what it was to be sick — as though the effects of the fall were seen in His person — that brother understood something of what Luke's Gospel is about. The subject of Luke's Gospel is holy humanity: not innocent humanity, not sinful humanity, but holy. The Holy Spirit

overshadowed the virgin, and that holy thing was born. The Lord Jesus was holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners. Luke, an expert on all that holy humanity is not, bore witness that in this one Person it was everything it was meant to be.

Demas — Nothing Said

And Demas greet you. That is all. Nothing more is said of him here. No commendation, no description, no zeal, no prayer, no occupation. Three names in a group — Epaphras, Luke, Demas — and the third has nothing attached to his name.

The silence is not accidental. About three years after Colossians was written, Paul would write in 2 Timothy 4:10: Demas hath forsaken me, having loved the present world. It is worth noting what it was that drew him away — not gross wickedness, not open scandal, not some violent sin. It was the present age. The present order of things. The legitimate, the attractive, the going concerns of the world around him — things that are not in themselves evil, but which were part of this present course of things.

That is a lesson that cuts close. We can be drawn away from Paul — from his rejection, his imprisonment, his heavenly standpoint — not by anything outwardly vicious, but simply by the pull of a wider sphere of fellowship, a broader life, a fuller engagement with the present age. The present age has attractive things in it. There is nothing wrong with agriculture; livelihoods depend on honest work; the name of the Lord is honored by diligent, faithful labor in one's calling. Yet these very things, without discernment, can make our share in the ministry and truth of the gospel much less than it should be. Demas had nothing to say about the things that truly mattered. And in the end, he forsook the man who had them.

May we be found with great zeal, fervent labor in prayer, and eyes fixed on the perfect Man who is above.