

A Study in Colossians 4:17–18

Archippus — Remember My Bonds — Grace Be With You — March 26, 2008

We are reading Colossians chapter 4, beginning at verse 17.

"And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it."

"The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you. Amen."

Nymphas Before Archippus — Worship Before Service

Of the last two named individuals in the chapter, Nymphas comes before Archippus. Nymphas is associated with the assembly of God — worship, the gathering of believers around the person of the Lord Jesus. Archippus is associated with ministry — service in the Lord. The order is not accidental. Worship comes before service. The assembly, gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus, is the center from which service flows. A man who has his affections fixed on the Lord Jesus in the assembly will serve differently from one who serves without that center. Nymphas before Archippus is the order of things as God has appointed them.

Archippus — The Only One to Receive a Directive

Among all the names at the close of Colossians 4, Archippus alone receives a directive. He is not sending a greeting; a word is coming to him. And say to Archippus: take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it. The very manner in which this is addressed — the assembled believers at Colossae are instructed to say this to him — shows that the matter of obedience is woven into the verse itself. He is to hear it from the body; they are to say it to him. And then he is to take heed.

Archippus is mentioned once elsewhere in the New Testament, in Philemon 1–2, where he is called our fellow soldier. That is instructive. A soldier knows how to receive a directive. The Lord, speaking with the centurion in the Gospels, found in him an immediate grasp of what it meant to be under authority — a man who gave orders and received them, who said to his servant, do this, and he did it. Archippus was that kind of man — a fellow soldier. And what the verse presents to him is a directive, not a suggestion: take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.

Ministry Received — A Threefold Gift

The central weight of verse 17 falls on the word received. He had received this ministry in the Lord. That word carries more than one implication. When we speak of ministry by gift in the New Testament, we should think several things at once. First, the person who does the work is himself a gift that the Lord Jesus has given to His assembly — an evangelist, a teacher, a prophet. Second, the abilities and capacities for that service are a gift placed inside that person by the Lord. Third, the service itself — the particular work assigned to him — is a gift. So the man is a gift, his abilities are a gift, and the service is a gift. It makes a threefold gift. And if it is truly a ministry that has been received in the Lord, the proper response is not pride but thankfulness. One gets down on one's knees and gives thanks for it, as one would for any other gift from God.

This leaves no room for ambition. You cannot go further in a thing than what was given to you to fulfil — if you do something more, it is something other, and it is no longer the fulfilment of what was received. Nor can you purchase the ministry, or manipulate your way into it, or flatter someone into confirming you in it. A ministry obtained by political means or by self-promotion is not a ministry received in the Lord. And the expression in the Lord implies submission to the one who gave it — not merely acknowledgement that the Lord gave it once, but a continuing alignment of one's will with His in the exercise of it.

The parallel with 1 Corinthians 7:39 is worth pondering. There, the widow is free to be married to whom she will, only in the Lord. That expression — in the Lord — can mean as little or as much as one allows it to mean. At the very least it means she should marry a Christian. But if she truly seeks His mind, it will mean far more than that. It will mean that her will and His will in that matter are brought into alignment. So here: the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord ought to mean, at the very least, that it was given by a Christian to a Christian for Christian service. But truly entered into, it means one's will and the Lord's will in the exercise of that ministry are aligned in the same direction. That is the recipe for service that truly fulfils what it was given to fulfil.

Possible Failings — and the Word Fulfil

Without knowing what the particular difficulty with Archippus was, several failures are possible and the verse covers them all. He might have been distracted by some other line of work more attractive to him, and splitting his time accordingly. He might have been drawn toward some broader or more impressive sphere of ministry than the one actually given to him, grasping after something not yet his to take. He might have been puffed up — working in the line given to him but for the wrong motive. Or — and this is perhaps the most common failing among younger believers — he might have been shy or shrinking, like Moses at the burning bush. I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue. Sometimes the

exhortation is needed not because a brother is overstepping, but because he is holding back from what has genuinely been laid upon him by God.

The word fulfil — or fill full, as the Greek properly means (plēroō) — is also significant. Harvey notes that it means to fill full rather than simply to complete, suggesting the fullness of what the service can be rather than merely its termination. It is not simply a matter of getting to the end of a task. It is a matter of filling out the service with all that it was given to contain. And in one real sense, there is no such thing as an unfinished Christian life: the Lord does not take His people home before the right time, before what He gave them to do has been done. The ministry of that Bolivian brother who died in the Andes after six months, with not one visible convert, was not unfinished — it was complete. The man who came to believe just after his death went on to become an evangelist through whom many souls were saved over many years. The first man's ministry had been fulfilled at the moment of his death, though no one there could see it.

Paul's Signature — and the Coming of the Lord

The salutation by the hand of me Paul. He signs with his own hand. This is not merely a personal touch: it had doctrinal significance. In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul warns the believers not to be troubled by any letter as if it were from him, teaching that the day of the Lord had already come. There had been a counterfeit letter circulating — or at least the danger of one — with error in it concerning the coming of the Lord. And at the end of 2 Thessalonians, he says: the salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle — so I write. It is the signature that authenticates the letter against counterfeits.

The epistle whose counterfeiting he guards against was one concerning the coming of the Lord. So every time Paul signs his letter with his own hand, the attentive reader can trace a line back to 2 Thessalonians 2, where the issue was a false letter about the Lord's coming. Paul's signature, in every epistle, is a quiet reminder of the coming of the Lord. The whole book of 2 Thessalonians was called forth by error on that subject. And the authentication at the end — this is my hand — was given in that context. Remember that, and every Pauline signature becomes a small token of expectancy: the Lord is coming.

Remember My Bonds — The Whole Epistle in Three Words

Remember my bonds. Three words. They are among the most profound in the book of Colossians.

Did Paul mean only the chains of Rome? Yes — and much more than that. He is the man who wrote that the love of Christ constrains us. He wrote to the Colossians, who were in danger of being spoiled

through philosophy and vain deceit, through the tradition of men and the elements of the world — not after Christ. He wrote to them to seek those things which are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God, to set their affection on things above and not on things on the earth. He desired for the Colossians a spiritual bondage — the kind that truly sets men free. The yoke that the Lord Jesus spoke of: take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

And then, having written the whole epistle — the fullness of Christ, His headship, His being all in all, the hidden life with God, the putting off of the old man and putting on the new, the ordering of households and of masters and servants, the names and greetings of beloved brothers — he puts the whole of it into three words, and gives it to them one last time before he lets them go. Remember my bonds. It is as though he said: everything I have written you is summed up here. Don't forget what this book is about.

At the end of Galatians he writes: from henceforth let no man trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. These are the marks of the cross — the stigmata of having belonged wholly to Christ, of having been bound to Him. My bonds in Colossians and the marks of the Lord Jesus in Galatians are the same thing seen from two sides. One says: I am bound to Him and His cause. The other says: the marks are on my body to prove it. Both are summaries of the whole epistle in which they appear. And both call us to the same question: are we bound in this way? Are there such marks on our lives? If Paul were here, would we be forsaking him — like Demas — for the present age? Or would we remember his bonds, and be found bound with him, constrained by the love of Christ?

Grace Be With You

Grace be with you. The last word of the epistle. All of those named in the chapter needed it: Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Marcus, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Nymphas, Archippus — and you, and I. That is what we need. The chapter ends where the Christian life begins and where it is sustained throughout — in grace.

It is fitting that Colossians ends this way. The epistle about Christ as head, as the fullness of the Godhead bodily, as the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, as the one in whom all things consist — that epistle ends not with an exhortation to be something or do something, but with a bestowal of grace. He has been all in all through these chapters. At the end, grace is all we have to offer, and all that is needed.

Remember my bonds. Grace be with you.