

Colossians 4:12

Form and structure

- In Colossians 4:7-18 we find the greetings, plans and last instructions of the letter. In verse 10-14 we find greetings from people to the Colossians, and from verse 15-17 Paul mentions people to whom they must send greetings.
- Verse 10-11 gives the greetings from three Jews who are Paul's co-workers, and verse 12-14 gives the greetings of three Christians out of the Gentiles.

Exposition

Verse 12

12a: 'Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings.'

- Epaphras was already mentioned in Col 1:7. He was the one who first brought the gospel to the Colossians. He is part of their community, and a trustworthy leader in the church. However, it did not look like he would return to them soon, because somebody else brought the letter to the Colossians. In Philemon 1:23 Epaphras is called a fellow prisoner, which suggests that he was working with Paul for the time being (or actually was in prison with Paul). He is apart from the Colossians, but still fully there in heart.
- The word 'servant' can better be translated with the word 'slave' (Greek: doulos) here. With this word the author wants to describe the Christian's total dependence and his total dedication to his Lord, Jesus Christⁱ.
- Paul uses this word 'servant' (=slave) sparingly when referring to people specifically. He only uses it to refer to himself, Timothy and Epaphras. Cf. Col. 1:7; 4:12; Rom. 1:1,2; Phil. 1:1. By naming Epaphras a slave here, he gives him an honorary name, a high status. His description of Epaphras emphasizes why he calls him a slave: he is always in prayer (just like Paul, the slave). In prayer he shows his dependence and dedication as a slave of Christ the Lord.
- The word 'slave' here must not make us think of humiliation and misuse of a slave, but of his total commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and unconditional obedience to his master. Being a "slave" (doulos) means that you belong exclusively to your master: They "work by His commission, represent His cause and must give account only to Him"ⁱⁱ. In the Septuagint this word can refer to high positions such as kings and prophetsⁱⁱⁱ.
- For a broader understanding of the meaning of "slave" (or: bond slave) we must also look at Exodus 21:5-6. The relationship between slave and master can be a very good relationship. "...if the servant says I don't serve because I have to, I don't serve because I'm forced to, I don't serve because I'm paid to, I don't serve because I'm afraid not to, I serve because I love my master, therefore I'll never go free. He became known as a bond slave."^{iv}

12b: 'He is always wrestling in prayer for you...'

- Epaphras here shows the same desire for the Colossians as Paul. Paul is also always in prayer for them (cf. 1:3), he also wrestles for them (cf. 1:29), he also seeks their maturity (cf. 1:28) and he also wants them to be confirmed in all the will of God (cf. 1:9). With the words from our text, Paul asserts Epaphras' authority and desire for the Colossians^v. Epaphras clearly has a deep burden for the Colossians.
- The word 'wrestling' shows strenuous work. It often has an athletic or wrestling connotation: somebody working tremendously hard to achieve a goal. The word creates the picture of an intense battle that must lead to victory. It brings up the idea of the battle in the arena^{vi}. It is also sometimes translated as battling, contending, struggling, labouring fervently, toiling strenuously. The slave gives everything he has (in prayer!) to fulfil his task – every ounce of energy, every last bit of his mental capacities. Both words, "bond slave" and "wrestling", emphasize total commitment.
- The word 'wrestling' expresses the idea that the goal can only be reached with the full expenditure of all our energies, through rigid self-denial, a passionate struggle, and a constantly renewed concentration of forces on the goal^{vii}.
- Paul uses the same word 'wrestle' (ἀγωνίζομαι) to refer to his missionary work in general (Col. 1:29-2:1; 1 Cor. 9:25; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7), and since he was not in the presence of (all of) his mission work a lot of the times, the struggling was mostly done in prayer. Epaphras also could not preach and teach the congregation, but he was still wrestling for them.
- "...the verb translated 'struggling' at this point is the same Greek word that gives us the English 'agonize' and the tense he uses makes it clear that this is no mere momentary spasm of anguish, but which has endured for at least as long as this man has known of the trouble in the church he planted. What is so striking in Paul's choice of word at this point is the fact that it is the same word that is used to describe Jesus' agonizing in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). The same kind of intensity that had poured out of Christ in his anticipation of the cross was mirrored in the praying of this man whose deepest longing was to see the blessings secured by Jesus' death brought to full fruition in the lives of his people"^{viii}.
- The Greek actually has 'the prayers' (ταῖς προσευχαίς) here, and not 'his prayers' like some translations. 'The prayers' probably refers to the public prayers that were done by Paul and those surrounding him (cf. 1:3, 9)^{ix}. This would explain why Paul knew about this, and what Epaphras was praying for. The wrestling of Epaphras in his prayers (in general) probably became visible in the public prayers.
- Even though Epaphras could not preach to the church he started at the time, he could pray for them. From Acts 6:4 we can see that this is a central part of the task for those who have a special calling to bring the Word of God to people. Prayer is even mentioned first in Acts 6:4! (Acts 6:4 probably also refers specifically to public prayers).

12c: 'that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.'

- 'That' (ὅτι) can refer to the purpose of the prayer or the content of the prayer.
- It is probably better to follow the word order of the Greek in translating this part of the text (like the ESV does): "that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God". The content of the prayer of Epaphras, however, does not really change in the different translations.
- The "will of God" here does not only refer to what God wants them to do, but to God's whole plan and way of salvation. We read in 1:27: "God has chosen (Greek = willed) to make known

among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory". The Colossians have to understand what God has done in Christ, so that they will not become easy targets for false teaching^x.

- The Colossians are a young church, under the influence of false teachers, and Epaphras is praying that the Lord will confirm them in a mature spiritual stance that would honor all that the Lord has taught them^{xi}. The false teacher added extra rules and spiritual experiences to faith in Christ to have "the fullness" and to understand "the will of God"^{xii}. The bond-slave of Christ (Epaphras), only and fully committed to Christ, here prays that the church may become mature and fully assured in all the will of God. And this will of God is that we will see Christ as the fullness of all our spiritual experiences and growth (Col. 1 and 2). He is the all-sufficient Saviour Jesus Christ.
- "Thorough, rich gratifying insight into all spiritual matters is meant; understanding which not only penetrates the mind but also fills the heart with satisfying conviction"^{xiii}.
- Epaphras prays that the Colossians will learn to stand for what is right, that they will follow the will of God and be willing to go against all the teaching of the false teachers (cf. 3:1-4:6). He prays that they will learn to stand on their own two feet like mature Christians. From the gospel that Epaphras brought them, they learned the will of God (cf. 1:7-9); now they also had to learn to live accordingly. The church of Colossae may know that their pastor is praying for the fruit of the gospel he brought them!
- "The qualities of firmness, maturity, conviction, and obedience will enable the Colossians to deal effectively with the heresy that is threatening their faith"^{xiv}.
- Epaphras is wrestling in prayer, and he cannot rest until the Colossians are maturely following the will of God, fully grown in Christ.

Application

Slave of Christ and prayer

- Paul describes greatness in God's service in direct opposition to a status-conscious world. Greatness in God's service is living out your humble position as slave.
- Epaphras the slave: total dependence and total dedication to Christ. That is the reason why he is in prayer for the church the whole time. He knows who he is, and he knows who Christ is! Because he is so dependent on Christ for the fulfillment of his work and ministry, he is in prayer the whole time. Because he is fully dedicated to Christ the Lord, the One who has to open hearts and work growth, he is in prayer that Christ will be active. Our dependence and our dedication to Christ is first of all seen in prayer. Do we really know Who has to do the work? Do we really know Who is the beginning of all good things? Do we really know what our place is in all this work of the Lord?
- Why does Paul tell the church of Colossae about Epaphras' prayer for them? Because in this way they know what really lives in his heart, what his true desire is. Paul heard Epaphras pray in the public prayers, but probably also saw him wrestle in private for them. And this shows you who somebody truly is: what you pray for and how you pray, – especially that which happens between you and the living God when no one is listening. From the calluses on his knees, from how low the slave bows before the glorious Master, from how empty his hands are, from how he wrestles and pleads with God for the fullness of Christ in the church – that is how we know the true desire a person has for the spreading and progress of the gospel.

- In all the important work that we do in the church or in the kingdom of God, it can still be a lot about ourselves (our glory, our pride, our advantage); but to wrestle in private prayer with God for others and the progress of the gospel – that is total selflessness and total commitment to the Master.
- “To be ‘slave of Christ’ means that all one’s possessions, aspiration, and time belong completely to him. Christ owns him, and therefore Epaphras does not offer service to him only as time or inclination permit”^{xv}.
- Being a slave of Christ in this passage shows us that in all the work we are doing for Christ, the most important is to look at Christ in prayer. We are never more at our highest and our greatest than when we are on our knees before our God.
- Prayer is not an “extra”, with and after we do our “real” work as Christians. Prayer IS our work – our first, our best work, especially because it is now in the hands of the glorious and Almighty Master and not dependent on a lowly and small slave.

Wrestling with God in prayer

- Our prayer is not just mentioning something to God (who already knows it anyway); our prayer is a wrestling with God on behalf of others for their spiritual growth and safety. The Lord wants to truly hear the desire of our hearts for others. He wants to hear how much it really means to us, how important it really is to us, how much we are really willing to sacrifice for it. The sovereign God has made it part of his will to be wrestled with before giving. No, we never wrestle *against* God. His will is always good. But we do wrestle *with* God, because he wants to see and grow the fire in our hearts for Him and his work.
- There is a war raging in this world – a war in which Satan is constantly attacking the children of God, trying to pull them away from the fullness of Christ, trying to get them to settle on a gospel of Jesus Christ PLUS...(something or someone else). Our biggest battle in this war is a battle of prayer – a wrestling in prayer that God will protect his children and make them grow in Christ alone.
- The reality of the danger, the reality of what can be lost, the glory of the fullness of God – these are all things that bring us to struggling with God in prayer.
- We just have to look at the Psalms to see how we must wrestle with God. They do not simply mention things to God, they elaborate on what it means to them, demonstrating their intense feelings about it. Our petitions often lack all signs of urgency. God wants to be “persuaded” by us, even though He is the sovereign God. He wants to hear our reasons; he wants to hear how we build a case (see, for instance, Abraham in Genesis 18 and Moses in Ex 32-34). We come with humility (we know our place as servants!), but we come with determination and supporting our desire as well as we can. For this you can even use pen and paper to prepare before wrestling with God. This is also how you can pray for a long time on one request without falling into mindless repetition^{xvi}.
- Martin Luther writes about his struggle with God over the healing of his friend Philipp Melancthon: “This time I besought the Almighty with great vigor. I attacked him with his own weapons, quoting from Scripture all the promises that I could remember, that prayers should be granted^{xvii}.”
- When we wrestle with God, we do it by making holy arguments, grounded upon principles drawn from His nature, name, word or works^{xviii}. In other words, we try to persuade God by who He himself is! “Lord, answer our prayers, because of Who you are!” In this way, we may have full liberty and boldness to wrestle as small servants with the holy and almighty and sovereign God.

- Because God is righteous, we do not accept injustice in this world, but wrestle with God to bring justice. Because God is love, we do not ignore coldness and hate in the church, but we constantly remind God of whom He is. Because God is faithful, we do not accept a marriage where two people are drifting apart, but struggle with God for his work in people. Because God is merciful, we do not rest when sin between two people is not confessed and forgiven, but we keep on wrestling with God. Etc.
- “Wrestling” is the same word as used in John 18:36. The kingdom of Christ is not enhanced by physical wars and fighting, but by battling in prayer. Also in the church we do not dominate and force, but we pray!
- Wrestling with God is hard work. It requires good preparation; it requires our best times of concentration. It cannot just be left as an “extra”, somewhere in the day (or before we go to bed) when we are tired. Good prayer is sweaty work.
- Aren’t we as Christians accepting the existing state of affairs too quickly? Can we truly say that we have wrestled with God about it constantly, and that we have reached a point where we know it is God’s will for things to remain as they are? We wrestle with God because we see the existing state of affairs and it is not consistent with who God is and what He has promised. There are a lot of things that we cannot change, but it doesn’t mean that we must then simply accept it. It means we must now wrestle with Him who can change things, and who is also not happy with the existing state of affairs! First and foremost, the wrongful situation goes against Him and his honor!
- We want to emphasize that wrestling in prayer with God does not mean that we become arrogant, inordinate, impatient, selfish or distempered in our prayers. We don’t “name it and claim it”, but plead with God, always acknowledging and resting in: Let your will, which alone is good for us, be done!
- It is true that God is the sovereign God and does not need our prayer to do good. But God does want to hear our wrestling with him, and uses that to make us part of his work. The one who does not really pray does not really become part of God’s work in this world. When we show in our prayers how our desire is the same as His desire, we truly become bond-slaves: willingly and totally connected to the one Master in everything.
- We wrestle *with* God; we do not wrestle *against* God. It is the Father’s desire that all of his children will find and live in the fullness of Christ. And therefore, our wrestling with God is asking God that he will urgently and completely act according to the desire of his own heart. “Lord, please go do much more of what you desire!”
- “Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance; it is laying hold of his highest willingness” (Archbishop Trench).
- Through Epaphras’ kneeling, he wants to make the Colossians perfect in their standing.
- The bond slave of Christ is giving everything he has in prayer in order that (and: until!) the church may stand firmly in the fullness of God.

Prayer and missions

- The mission work of Paul and the situation of Epaphras here in 4:12 can be characterized as constantly wrestling in prayer for the congregation, on and off preaching to the congregation (due to distance from a congregation or imprisonment). Prayer must carry all the work done – also the preaching of others. It definitely does not have less priority than the mission preaching and outreach. This is how the mission door is open to all of us – even if we are tied to our beds due to illness or age, even if we are a pastor who cannot preach at the moment. Being a slave (doulos) will not first of all become visible in our preaching, but in our prayer life! The struggling

and wrestling is not first of all done with the people out there (in the preaching and teaching), but in prayer with God. This places all of us on the front lines of mission work! This is where all of us become co-workers of the pastor and the missionary.

- Our mission field can be very broad – not because of where we can reach with “our” preaching, but where we can reach with our prayers and where the Lord can reach with his Word and Spirit! The slave is fully committed to his Master – it is all about what his Master can do and where He can reach.
- An enlarged heart for the work of the Lord and the people of the Lord makes you vulnerable to the burdens of others^{xix}. It puts us on the path of prayer!
- In prayer we find the climax of the battle for the progress of the gospel^{xx}. Therefore, there is no greater gift to the church than prayer warriors. Is the church and the worship service an arena where we wrestle for the progress of the gospel?

Christ and Col. 4:12

- For a Christ-centered understanding of this text, it is good to see Christ as the One who prays for us in heaven, the One whose requests the Father will never leave unanswered. We wrestle with God, but we wrestle in peace, because Christ Himself is the guarantee that all his children will reach the fullness of the life in Him. He is the real Shepherd of his sheep.

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ⁱ Cf. Rengstorf, 1974:261

ⁱⁱ Rengstorf, 1974:277.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kruse, 1993:870.

^{iv} MacArthur on Romans 1:1.

^v Moo, 2008:343-344. Also see Pokorný, 1991:193.

^{vi} Stauffer, 1964:135.

^{vii} Stauffer, 1964:135, 137.

^{viii} Johnston, 2013:129.

^{ix} Van Eck, 2007:224.

^x Garland, 1998:279.

^{xi} Moo, 2008:345.

^{xii} Cf. Van Leeuwen, 1923:72.

^{xiii} Hendriksen, 1981:191.

^{xiv} Patzia, 2010:101.

^{xv} Garland, 1998:278.

^{xvi} For this note we made use of Pratt, 1987:136-145.

^{xvii} Quoted from Yancey, 2006:84.

^{xviii} Cobbet, 1993:348

^{xix} Cf. Hughes, 2013:365.

^{xx} Ridderbos, 1960:239.