

A BAND OF BROTHERS

Colossians 4v7-18

On Tuesday more than two hundred men and women of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers will march through Ashington and Morpeth marking their return from six months in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Look out for their famous plume or *hackle*; as a fusilier regiment they wear the plume of the former Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, red over white. During this tour of duty seven of their numbers were killed and more than a dozen seriously wounded.

This past week some newspapers featured poignant portraits of soldiers on the front line in Afghanistan by Arabella Dorman. She spent a month this autumn as an official war artist embedded with the 2 Rifles battle group in north Helmand. Twenty three members had been killed and about a hundred injured by the time they returned home after the bloodiest six months suffered by any British unit in Afghanistan.

Whatever you think of our involvement in Afghanistan there is something deeply moving about young soldiers facing danger, pain and death together. Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks' 2001 TV mini-series depicted a company of soldiers during the second war, E ('Easy') company of the 2nd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Based on actual events, it followed their exploits from training in Georgia to parachuting behind enemy lines in 1944 and then battling on until the capture of Hitler's mountain retreat. The series was called '*Band of Brothers*'. I can hardly listen to the theme music without tears.

Well, in our text we have pen portraits of Paul's own *Band of Brothers*. And there is a sister too. Paul sometimes used the idea of soldiers fighting a war to describe the mission of the church and he referred to his colleagues as fellow soldiers. The apostle loved to work with a team and he enjoyed deep friendships. Here, under house arrest in Rome, some of his closest friends are alongside him during his two year wait for trial before the emperor. William Barclay reminds us that it could be dangerous to be a prisoner's friend; you could easily "*become involved in the same fate as the prisoner himself. It took courage to declare oneself a friend of Paul and to visit him in his imprisonment.*"

In any company there are characters with different temperaments, strengths, weaknesses and personal stories. It's the same with Paul's Band. Let's see if you recognise anything of yourself in these pen portraits. The first of his companions is not mentioned here, we have to go back to the beginning of the letter to find him.

Timothy

Timothy is with Paul as he writes.(1v1). It is likely that Paul had led him to faith and so he is like a son to the apostle. There are two New Testament letters to Timothy in his own right. We can build up an identikit picture of Timothy from different references to him in Paul's letters and Acts. He was very young when Paul first met him, not especially strong physically so that he often suffered from illnesses; he was also somewhat lacking in confidence. Perhaps because of this Paul encouraged him to be a good soldier. 1 Tim.6v12: "*fight the good fight of faith*". 2 Tim. 2v3,4: "*Endure*

hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” Timothy rose to the challenge. He travelled with Paul, was sent on special missions and then he was trusted to lead the key church at Ephesus. He stood alongside Paul through good times and bad. Perhaps you identify with Timothy’s temperament or physical weakness. Take courage then and be a soldier.

Tychicus and Onesimus

⁷Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. Tychicus seems to have joined the Band late in Paul’s mission but this description shows you how highly valued he was. Notice the qualities that really matter to Paul. He says Tychicus is like his own brother, absolutely reliable and he is there to serve. These are the very qualities you need when you are on the front line together facing a dangerous enemy. Are you the kind of man or woman others would want with them in a tight corner? **⁸I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts.** Tychicus has been entrusted with carrying this letter but he was much more than postman. He was being sent to encourage the Colossians and to bring first hand news of Paul; there would be so much more to tell than the apostle could put in a letter.

⁹He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. What do we know of Onesimus? He had been a runaway slave but at some point had put his faith in Jesus. This must have been a big moment for Onesimus because he was also carrying a letter addressed to his former master, Philemon, who was also a believer. There was no escaping him on this trip because the church at Colosse actually met in his home. (Philemon v1,2) Paul has obviously instructed Onesimus to go back and meet his former master but in the letter he is urging Philemon to receive him back, no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. The finest soldiers obey orders even when it involves considerable personal risk. Onesimus obeyed the one over him in the Lord. (Hebrews 13v17) The attitude, *“I’ll follow if I agree with you, otherwise, I’m off!”* is not a New Testament one.

Aristarchus, Mark and Justus.

¹⁰My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, Aristarchus was a Jew from Thessalonica. The phrase *“fellow prisoner”* here is, literally *“one caught with a spear”* i.e. he is a *“fellow prisoner of war.”* So, here we have another battle-hardened soldier. We see him on the front line in Acts 19v29 being dragged away by a mob in Ephesus; he was with Paul on his journey in chains to Rome and then shipwrecked with him off the coast of Malta. It has been suggested that in order to be permitted to travel with Paul Aristarchus would have had to become his personal slave; he may even have been in chains with Paul as this letter was written. That’s some expression of friendship! *“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”* (John 15v13) He was laying down his own plans and ambitions to serve Paul.

“Aristarchus sends you his greetings, **as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)** There is a special reason for Paul’s words about giving Mark a warm welcome. Years earlier he had been a big disappointment to Paul. After a visit to Cyprus, and while preparing to move on to southern Galatia, young Mark had gone back home to his mum. Not exactly the stuff of which heroes are made! This caused a serious disagreement between the apostle and his colleague Barnabas who happened to be a relative of Mark. But Mark has since proved himself and is with Paul once more. (2 Tim. 4v11) Don’t write yourself off, or write someone else off because you or they have “*bottled it*” at some point. In Mark’s case, his older cousin Barnabas was the one who got alongside him and helped him move on. Most of us need an encourager like Barnabas at some point in our life, someone who still believes in us. Mark came good again and here he is, back among Paul’s Band of Brothers. He even went on to write a Gospel which is included in our New Testament.

¹¹**Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings.** Not much is known about this man but there something interesting is highlighted here. “*Jesus*” was a common name – Joshua / Yeshua in Hebrew. It looks like he is now known as Justus because the name “*Jesus* had come to be revered and reserved for Messiah Jesus alone. Did his fellow believers choose his new name – one that summed him up? You know how it is with close friends (especially male), they give each other nicknames – sometimes amusing and not always flattering. If this was a name given to Justus then they paid him quite a compliment: Justus means “the just” or “the righteous”. What name would you like to be given in such circumstances – and what might others choose for you?

These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Jews in the synagogues of many cities had rejected Paul’s message and given him a hard time; but not all. Some of his closest colleagues were fellow Jews who acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah.

Epaphras:

¹²**Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings.** This man was well known to the Colossians. It seems he was another convert of Paul’s ministry when based in the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus; then he pioneered the church in Colosse before moving on to establish churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis. He was a genuine church planting apostle. But Epaphras was also a fighter! He was forever battling in prayer. Elsewhere Paul talks about having spiritual weapons which can demolish enemy strongholds. (2 Cor. 10v3-4) Prayer is one such mighty weapon. **He is always wrestling in prayer for you,** (NEB “*he never stops battling for you*”) **that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.** Prayer is part of a church leader’s work. And it is hard work. ¹³**I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.** Someone might ask me, “*What have you done today?*” If I reply “*I spent the morning praying*”, most people (even many Christians) would look at me as if I were crazy. But it’s part of a church leader’s work; and it can be very hard work.

Luke and Demas

¹⁴Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Luke, *“the beloved physician”*. Luke is a Greek name. He was the author of the third Gospel and Acts; but he was also the medic in the Paul’s Band of Brothers. Every company needs one. When there were wounds and illnesses to tend this had to be done on the move. He travelled with Paul on three sea voyages: Troas to Philippi, Philippi to Jerusalem, and Caesarea to Rome. When Paul was under arrest in Caesarea and Rome (two years in each place) Luke was with him, one of Paul’s most loyal friends. He brought his intellect and expertise to the service of Christ alongside Paul. His New Testament writings are more than histories – they are scripture with the power of God’s breath in them that have helped millions to become followers of Jesus too.

Luke and Demas are named together in other letters but they are a study in contrasts. Here Demas is mentioned without any positive description and in one of Paul’s final letters we read this: *“Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica... Luke alone is with me.”* (2 Timothy 4v9-12) Demas was a deserter! He had left his Brothers and Arms. There is some appreciation now of the effects of battle fatigue and shell shock which has made us more sympathetic towards soldiers who go *a.w.o.l.* But Demas was not shell shocked – another passion had lured him away.

Paul has finished sending greetings from his colleagues. The roll of papyrus is almost full but he can just squeeze in a few extra comments.

¹⁵Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea: Laodicea was just 10 miles from Colosse and the ministry of Epaphras meant they were very closely linked.

¹⁵Give my greetings to Nympha and the church in her house. A sister in arms! Nympha was one of a number of wealthy women in the first century who followed Jesus and could be numbered in with the Band. Some of them, like Nympha, Lydia in Philippi and Priscilla in Corinth and Rome had the church meeting in their home. This reminds us that during the first two centuries churches didn’t have religious buildings. This gives us some idea of the numerical strength of these churches in their early stages. James Dunn writes: *“Judging by archaeological evidence from cities like Ostia and Pompeii in Italy, a typical well-to-do house could host only about thirty to fifty people for a meeting held in any comfort.”* To open your home can be strategic. We talk about homes as *“bridgeheads”* for the gospel here in Northumberland. This is a military term. A bridgehead is *“a fortified position held on the enemy’s side of a river or other obstacle”*. I first began to use the term in south London when we were starting to plant cell groups in the A20 corridor. A friend brought a prophetic picture as we prayed together; it was of an army pressing through to a new location in enemy held territory using land base transporters. Soldiers were surging in to secure a base which, once secured, became a bridgehead through which others poured in. A whole new area could now be taken. Can you think of your home like this?

¹⁶After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. (a letter we know nothing else about)

The final person to get a mention is **Archippus**. He was probably a leader in the church at Colosse. He is referred to in Philemon's letter as another "*fellow soldier*" (v2) suggesting he had shared in some tough campaigns alongside Paul. ¹⁷**Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord."** This is meant to galvanize Archippus but it's not clear what he should be completing. Paul is a bit vague at this point. Had Archippus been given some sensitive task that only he and Paul knew about? Remember, letters like this were read out publicly to the assembled church so Archippus would hear his name and so would everyone else. For this reason I think this must have been an affirming word, one which Paul intended everyone to hear. Maybe Archippus had hit some tough obstacle or opposition or he faced a long term task which required perseverance. Whatever it was, I'm sure Archippus knew what Paul meant. If someone said these words to you, you would probably know too. Maybe it would be worded differently: "*God created you for a purpose – are you fulfilling that purpose?*"

¹⁸**I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.** He brings the letter to a close with a characteristic personal touch. A scribe, maybe Timothy, would have written for him much of the time, but now Paul takes the pen to personalise and authenticate the letter. His wrists are chained and the chains move over the surface as he writes. **Remember my chains.** He is not looking for sympathy but to stir them to action. What Paul has written is not a theological dissertation crafted from the comfort of a fireside armchair. Paul is imprisoned and likely to be executed. This is a martyr's letter. Paul is a soldier who would prefer to die in battle rather than in retirement. In his book 'Desiring God', John Piper pulls no punches on the subject of Christians and retirement. He quotes Ralph Winter, the founder of the U.S. Centre for World Missions. "*Most men don't die of old age, they die of retirement.*" He calls Christians to quit throwing their lives away on the golf course when they could be giving themselves to the global cause of Christ. He asks. "*Where in the Bible do we see retirement? Did Moses retire? Did Paul retire? Do military officers retire in the middle of a war?*"

The short ending, much shorter than many of his letters, suggests that he is restricted and in some pain as he writes. **Grace be with you.** Paul started his letter with grace and now he ends it with grace. This final phrase is a blessing. Paul is imparting grace from Christ to those who read the letter. So that includes you and me! So, receive grace for Jesus as we close this series: Grace for every situation. Grace for every individual. Grace for every marriage. Grace for every job. Grace for every crisis. Grace for every anxiety. Grace for every physical weakness. Grace for every temptation. Grace for every need. Grace for the unknown future. Grace for every challenge we face as a church. Grace for every mission. Grace for every band of brothers.

John Wilthew. December '09

Message Summary

A BAND OF BROTHERS

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In our text we have pen portraits of Paul's *Band of Brothers*. He sometimes used the idea of soldiers fighting a war to describe the mission of the church and he referred to his colleagues as fellow soldiers. In any company there are characters with different temperaments, strengths, weaknesses and personal stories. It's the same with Paul's Band. Let's see if you recognise anything of yourself in these pen portraits.

Timothy is with Paul as he writes.(ch.1v1). He was very young when Paul first met him and not physically strong; he was also somewhat lacking in confidence. Perhaps because of this Paul encouraged him to be a good soldier. 1 Tim.6v12: *"fight the good fight of faith"*. See also 2 Tim. 2v3. Timothy rose to the challenge. He travelled with Paul, was sent on special missions and then he was trusted to lead the key church at Ephesus.

Tychicus and Onesimus (v7-9) Tychicus is the kind of person you need alongside when you are on the front line facing a dangerous enemy. Onesimus had been a runaway slave but at some point had put his faith in Jesus. Paul has instructed him to go back and meet his former master in whose home the church in Colosse meet. The finest soldiers obey orders even when it involves considerable personal risk.

Aristarchus, Mark and Justus. (v10,11) Aristarchus is a *"fellow prisoner of war."* So, here we have another battle-hardened soldier. It has been suggested that in order to be permitted to travel with Paul Aristarchus would have had to become his personal slave. That's some expression of friendship! Mark had been a big disappointment to Paul some years earlier but has come good again and here he is, back among Paul's Band of Brothers. His cousin Barnabas was the one who got alongside him and helped him recover. Justus means "the just" or "the righteous". *"Jesus"* was a common name – Joshua / Yeshua in Hebrew. It looks like this man is now known as Justus because the name *"Jesus"* had come to be revered and reserved for Messiah Jesus alone.

Epaphras (v12,13) pioneered the church in Colosse before moving on to establish churches in Laodicea and Hieropolis. He was a genuine church planting apostle. But Epaphras was also a fighter! He was forever battling in prayer. This is one of the spiritual weapons able to demolish enemy strongholds. (2 Cor. 10v3-4)

Luke and Demas. (v14) Luke was the medic in Paul's Band of Brothers. He travelled with Paul on three sea voyages: When Paul was under arrest in Caesarea and Rome Luke was with him. Many times he must have tended Paul's wounds and ailments. Luke and Demas are named together but they are a study in contrasts because Demas ended up deserting the Band of Brothers. (2 Timothy 4v9-12)

Paul has finished sending greetings from his Band of Brothers but he ends by adding personal words to two fellow soldiers, one in Laodicea and the other in Colosse.

Nympha (v15) was one of a number of wealthy women in the first century who followed Jesus and could be numbered with the Band. The church in Laodicea met in her home. We talk about homes as strategic bridgeheads for the gospel. This is a military term. A bridgehead is *"a fortified position held on the enemy's side of a river or other obstacle"*.

Archippus (v16) was probably a leader in the church at Colosse. He is referred to elsewhere as a “*fellow soldier*” (Philemon v2) suggesting he had shared in some tough campaigns alongside Paul. Paul’s sends a brief message urging Archippus on.

Paul draws to a close with a characteristic touch to personalise and authenticate the letter. This is no theological dissertation crafted from the comfort of a fireside armchair. Paul is imprisoned and likely to be executed. Paul is a soldier who would prefer to die in battle rather than retirement. The letter end as it began with Paul imparting the “grace” of Christ to those who read the letter. That includes us!

Questions

There are too many here to use every one, so choose the most appropriate or print them out so that the group members can choose.

1. Do you identify particularly with any of the characters mentioned here?
2. What’s the toughest situation you have had to face as a Christian?
3. What qualities do you most value in the people alongside you when you are in a tough spot?
4. What has been your biggest soldier-like act of obedience as a believer?
5. Have you, like Mark, ever had someone who helped you recover after failure?
6. What nicknames have you had? In circumstances like that of Justus what name would you like to be given, or what name might you give to one another in the group?
7. Do you identify with the description of Epaphras “battling in prayer”? In what way?
8. What learning, training and experience (like Luke) do you feel you bring to the service of Christ?
9. How can we help restore those who seem to have been lured away by love of the world?
10. How can our homes become strategic bases for gospel advance?
11. If someone said to you, like Archippus: “*See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord*”, what would you immediately think of?