

Roll Call at Rome! (vv. 23, 24)

“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers” (vv. 23, 24).

When Socrates was building a house for himself in Athens, he was asked why a man so eminent as he would not build a house larger and more suitable to his dignity. Socrates replied that he thought the house was quite large enough and would be thrilled if he could see it filled with real friends.

Real friends! They are a genuine treasure, priceless in value (Proverbs 27:9). In the closing verses of the book of Philemon, we are able to see Paul surrounded by a small cadre of “real friends.” Five names are listed, and each one has a marvelous history. These same men are listed in Colossians 4:7-17, which further indicates that the two books were written at the same time.

Take a few minutes and study this “roll call” at Rome. As consideration is made regarding these five brethren, a lesson will emerge stressing the blessings of genuine friendship.

THE LIST BRIEFLY NOTED

Epaphras (v. 23; Colossians 1:7, 8; 4:12, 13)

Epaphras was an outstanding saint! He was the one responsible for establishing the Colossian congregation. He is described by inspiration as a faithful minister, a servant of Christ, a hard laborer, and a fellow prisoner with Paul. He prayed hard for his brethren and was dearly loved by Paul.

Mark (v. 24; Colossians 4:10)

This was the same John Mark who authored the Gospel record. The mention of Mark reminds the Bible student of another situation where fellowship had been broken and reconciliation was necessary. Mark had failed Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary tour. Early in this man’s career he had been marked as a “deserter” and was written off as “useless.” I am sure that John Mark felt a close empathy with Onesimus. The two shared a similar situation in the past. It is probable that Philemon knew of Mark’s earlier disappointment to Paul and was aware of how Mark’s life had changed. If so, Mark’s past history would add further emphasis to the situation of Onesimus. Surely Philemon would receive Onesimus again just as Paul had received John Mark (v. 11).

Aristarchus (v. 24; Colossians 4:10; Acts 19:25)

This brother traveled with Paul on the voyage to Rome and kept him company while Paul was in prison. Aristarchus was a devoted friend, to Paul and to the gospel. He shared the sufferings of Paul and willingly served the apostle’s needs.

Demas (v. 24; Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:10, 11)

Each time Demas is mentioned in Scripture, it is in the company of Luke. Demas is forever remembered as “the disappointment” because he deserted Paul in prison and went back to the world.

Luke (v. 24; Colossians 4:14)

The “beloved physician” was Paul’s most loyal friend. Luke is one of the greatest men in the New Testament. He was cultured and educated. His Gospel record and Acts reveal that his temperament was cheerful. At the last, when all were either unwilling or unable to be with Paul, Dr. Luke remained true and at his side.

THE LESSONS LEARNED

As contemplation of these friends is made, the following lessons come in to our focused thoughts.

Friends are a great blessing! (Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10). An old truism states, “Joys shared are doubled; sorrows shared are halved.” Such is exactly what happens with friendship. One of the greatest blessings a friend can give to another is to lighten the burdens of sorrows and multiply the bliss of joys! Paul found this blessing in prison as these faithful five blessed his life!

Friends “stick with you” through all times (Proverbs 18:24). Genuine friendship accepts its object unconditionally. A friend cares little about status, looks, or possessions. The true friend cares only about the inner man. Paul found this to be so with the five friends in Rome. They each were described as a “fellow prisoner,” which literally refers to “a prisoner of war taken at spearpoint.” Aristarchus was referred to as such in the Colossian letter (Colossians 4:10), and now it was Epaphras who was called by the same phrase. Some suggest that each of these five took turns keeping Paul company. In order to be with him, they were required to submit to the same restrictions as Paul—military guard, etc. If this is correct, it only reveals the deep devotion between these five and Paul.

Friendship is enhanced by mutual labors and shared devotion (v. 24b). The title “fellow workers,” one of Paul’s favorite, stresses the mutual status of all Christians. Regardless of one’s training, education, or economic status, all who are in Christ share a mutual work! Paul loved the thought of partnership in furthering the gospel. Friends delight in working together, and friendship is deepened when there is cooperation and concern for a mutual job.

Friendship can be sabotaged! Demas was the disappointment, the deserter! His defection must have shocked Paul (cf. Philippians 3:18, 19). If Paul’s greatest delight was in the company of “fellow

workers,” his greatest sorrow was in reflecting on those former comrades who had deserted the Lord’s army! How could Demas have turned back to the world after working with Paul? This question only Demas and God can answer. We do know that the disloyalty of Demas to God broke the wonderful ties of friendship he shared with the others in

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Rome! Such a tragedy is often seen in the Lord’s church today. Many sacrifice friendship with God and saints for friendship with the world. No matter how hard one tries to keep both areas of friendship, it just cannot be done! (James 4:4).

THE LINGERING DIRECTIVE

As these lessons are contemplated, observe the directive from God’s Book to all of God’s children—the practical gospel directs all believers to develop genuine friendship with one another! The genuine friendship you share with another saint enables you to strive steadfastly toward the victor’s crown (Revelation 2:10). Genuine friends are scarce! (Proverbs 27:6, 17). Real friends will stand the tests of time and storm; they are priceless treasures. If we develop the kind of fellowship that should exist in the church, we must develop genuine friendships within that body!

CONCLUSION

This “roll call” at Rome lists only five friends of Paul. To this list we can certainly add others—men and women who served with Paul and provided blessings to his life because of the friendship they shared.

Paul’s friends enabled him to endure. He acknowledged their thoughtfulness; he loved and trusted them. In Christ, Paul found “every spiritual blessing” (Ephesians 1:3), and among these blessings were real friends!

Let us develop and maintain friendships like Paul possessed.

—John Kachelman