

The Man Who Fought On His Knees

COLOSSIANS 4:12-13 (WEB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

Somewhere right now somebody is sweating in prayer for people they can't reach with their hands, and that same kind of praying is the realest work of love you can do for a person this week when there's nothing else you can do for them.

Opening Lines

Paul is closing his letter with a name most people skim right past. But watch the verb he attaches to it. Epaphras isn't sending warm wishes from a distance. He's on the wrestling floor, straining, sweating, and the whole fight is over people he can't get to.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Get the room to see prayer the way Paul saw Epaphras: not a polite murmur before sleep but a wrestler straining for people miles away. They should leave with one specific believer they're going to labor over.
- If you're short on time, cut: Cut the extended word-study on the three towns if time runs short. The geography is flavor; the striving is the meal.
- Where the moment lives: It lives in the moment someone names an actual person out loud and admits they've only ever prayed a rushed 'bless them' for that person. The move from a vague crowd to one real face is where this passage bites.
- Your prep: Before class, do the exercise yourself: pick one believer, pray them 'perfect and complete' by name, and plan to tell them tomorrow. Walk in having already done what you'll ask the room to do.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Use the classroom opening (5 min) — read verse 12, stop on 'striving,' hit them with *agōnizomenos*. Teach the word deeply with the wrestling posture (8 min). Questions 1-2 in the full room, then break into pairs for question 3 so the tender naming isn't performed for twenty people (12 min). Come back for question 4 as the friction and question 5 as the gospel landing (12 min). Everyone writes their one name on the handout, then a few say it out loud (5 min). Close in prayer over the actual names. Transformation lives in the pair moment on question 3 and the writing of the name. Cut first: the Laodicea/Hierapolis geography.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Use the small-group opening — everyone names one person they've physically strained for (8 min). Teach the word with the posture and Colossians 2:1 (10 min). Walk all five questions slowly, letting question 3 breathe the longest (28 min). Everyone writes their one name and says it out loud with when they'll tell that person (8 min). Close by praying the names back to God (6 min). Transformation lives in the out-loud naming and commitment. Cut first: trim the geography and one of your own story prompts.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Use the coffee opening — ask about someone they love and can't reach (4 min). Read verses 12-13 and explain 'striving' in one sentence (4 min). Skip to questions 1, 3, and 4 (14 min). Both of you name one specific person and say when you'll pray and tell them (5 min). Pray a short, real prayer over each other's named person (3 min). Transformation lives in the mutual naming — you're not teaching, you're doing the exercise together. Cut first: question 2, and don't let the geography come up at all.

One Thing Deeply

This is a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately. Remember week 3 and week 13, when you took a single thing and refused to hurry past it. Level 5 asks for a harder rep: don't just linger on one idea, build the ENTIRE session to funnel toward one physical moment where each person writes one real name on the line. Everything you say — the word study, the questions, the openings — is a river narrowing to that single act. Kill anything that widens the room's attention back out. If a comment or a tangent pulls people away from the one name they need to write, gently steer back. By the end, the test is simple: did every person leave holding one specific human being, or did they leave holding a nice general truth about prayer?

Why This Passage Matters

This is the easiest kind of passage to skim and the hardest kind to feel. It's a greeting. A name in a closing list. And most rooms will nod at 'always striving for you in his prayers' and move on before the word does any damage. Your job is to slow them down until they feel the sweat in it. The word Paul uses is the language of the wrestling floor — a competitor straining every muscle to exhaustion. Epaphras founded this church, and now he's stuck in prison with Paul, unable to teach them or defend them while false teaching creeps in. So he does the one thing distance can't take: he fights for them on his knees. That's what love does when it can't do anything else. Here's why this matters for your people: every one of them has someone they love and can't reach — a kid who moved away, a friend who won't return calls, a parent in decline. This passage hands them a weapon for exactly that helplessness. And it tells them, quietly, that someone once did this for THEM, and Someone better still does. You get to hand a room the most useful thing a Christian can hold when their hands are tied. That's a privilege.

Catch the Fire First

Before you teach a word of this, do the exercise yourself and don't fake it. Pick one specific believer you can't easily reach — an old friend from a former church, a relative in another city, a missionary you support. Take a real minute, not a rushed breath, and pray them 'perfect and complete in all the will of God.' Name them. Ask God to make them mature and steady. Then text them or call them tomorrow and tell them you did it. When you stand in front of the room, you're not describing a good idea — you're reporting on something you already felt. The room can always tell the difference between a teacher who read about the medicine and a teacher who took it.

Bring Your Own Story

- PROMPT: The person who first told you about Jesus, or first prayed you into the faith — someone whose knees you're standing on right now.
- PROMPT: A time you were helpless to DO anything for someone you loved and prayer was the only thing left in your hands.
- PROMPT: A moment you found out, after the fact, that someone had been quietly praying for you the whole time.
- SAMPLE (polished vs. real) — Polished: 'My grandmother's faithful intercession shaped the whole trajectory of my spiritual life.' Real: 'After she died we found a notebook. My name was in it. Dated. She'd been praying for me on days I don't even remember, and I never knew.'
- GUARDRAIL: Keep it unfinished and true — a raw moment beats a tidy testimony, and the full storytelling coaching lives back in week 1.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Read verse 12 and stop on the word 'striving.' Tell the room the Greek is agōnizomenos — the word for a wrestler straining to exhaustion, the root of our word 'agony.' Then ask: does that sound like how any of us prayed this morning?"

Start with the verb, not the name — let a familiar-looking word land as a shock.

SMALL GROUP: "Ask everyone to name, out loud, one person they've physically strained for — carried, held up, worked to exhaustion for. Then read the verse and say: Epaphras did that on his knees, for people miles away he couldn't touch."

Anchor an abstract idea in a physical, shared memory before you explain it.

COFFEE: "Ask: is there someone you love that you just can't reach right now? A kid, a friend, somebody who moved? Let them answer, then say: there's a guy in this letter who was in exactly that spot, and watch what he did about it."

Open with the helplessness your friend already feels, then hand them the passage as the answer.

Teaching the Word

The word is agōnizomai — 'striving.' It's the language of the arena. A wrestler on the floor, a runner spending the last of himself down the final stretch. It's where we get 'agony.' Do this physically: stand up and lean forward like you're pushing against a door that won't give, muscles tight, breath short — then say, 'That's the posture. That's Epaphras praying.' Not hands folded gently on a lap. Hands white-knuckled. Paul uses this exact word about his own prayers in Colossians 2:1, so Epaphras learned it from the pattern of costly love. And here's the thing to say slow, then stop: he was fighting for people he could not reach with his hands, only with his knees. That is what love does when it cannot do anything else. [Let the silence sit. Don't rescue it.]

Discussion Questions

1. When you prayed for someone this week, was it closer to Epaphras straining on the wrestling floor, or closer to a quick 'bless them' as you rushed out the door? Be honest.

Coaching note: Most people will admit it was the rushed version. Don't scold. Let the honesty create the appetite — they can't want the striving until they've owned the murmur.

If it stalls: Simple yes or no: does 'always striving in prayer' describe your prayer life right now? Just yes or no to start.

2. Notice what Epaphras is praying FOR — not their comfort, not their circumstances, but that they'd 'stand perfect and complete.' When you pray for people you love, what do you usually ask God for?

Coaching note: They'll usually admit they pray for safety, health, and easier circumstances. That's not wrong, but name the gap: Epaphras aimed higher — at their maturity. Don't shame the health prayers, just widen the target.

If it stalls: Think of the last person you prayed for. Did you ask God to make their day easier, or to make them more like Christ? Which one?

3. Who's the Epaphras in your life — the person whose praying you're standing on right now, whether you can name them or not?

Coaching note: This is the tender one. Some will name a grandparent, a Sunday school teacher, a friend. Give it room. If someone says 'I don't know that anyone did,' that's a real answer too — sit with it, don't fix it.

If it stalls: Who first told you about Jesus, or first prayed for you that you know of? Just say the name if one comes to mind.

4. Here's the hard side: this passage is warm and easy to admire. But what does it actually ask of you that you don't want to give?

Coaching note: If the room has gone soft and agreeable, this is your friction. Push for the real cost: minutes you don't have, praying for people who never thank you, laboring with no visible result. Name it: this is slow, hidden, unglamorous work. Don't let them off the hook with 'that's so true.'

If it stalls: Praying for someone's growth for years and never seeing it change — could you actually do that? Would you keep going?

5. The passage says Christ Himself 'always lives to make intercession' for you and never grows tired. If that's true, how does it change the way you'd pray for someone this week?

Coaching note: Land the gospel here. Their striving is a small echo of a greater Intercessor who prays without failing. This should feel like fuel, not pressure — they don't pray to make it happen, they pray because Someone stronger already is. Let it settle before you move to commitments.

If it stalls: Does it help or scare you to know Someone with better lips than yours is praying for you right now? Say which.

Questions You May Hear

"Who was Epaphras?"

He's the man who first carried the gospel to Colossae — Paul never visited the city himself. Epaphras likely planted or nurtured all three churches in the Lycus Valley, and now he's with Paul, probably sharing his imprisonment.

"Where are Laodicea and Hierapolis, and why does Paul mention them?"

They're two towns clustered close to Colossae in what's now western Turkey, just miles apart. Epaphras had likely worked in all three, so his heart stretched across the whole valley.

"What does 'stand perfect and complete' actually mean — does anyone reach that?"

'Perfect' here means mature and finished, not flawless. Epaphras is praying for their spiritual growth and steadiness — the same destination Paul names in Ephesians 4:13, growth into the full measure of Christ.

"Is prayer really described as combat here, or is that reading too much in?"

It's right in the word. Paul uses *agōnizomai*, the language of a wrestler or a runner spending the last of himself — the root of 'agony.' Paul uses the identical word about his own prayers in Colossians 2:1.

For Experienced Leaders

- When you demonstrate the wrestling posture, actually stand and lean — teachers who stay seated while describing physical strain break the spell. Let your body preach.
- Guard the tender question about their Epaphras from turning into a warm mush of nodding. If everyone's just glowing, drop the hard-side question: 'What does this cost you that you don't want to pay?' Real depth has edges.
- Watch the clock on the three towns. It's fascinating, but it's the easiest place to lose fifteen minutes and starve the real exercise — the naming of one specific person.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Go around and have each person say out loud the one name they wrote down — the specific believer they're going to pray 'perfect and complete' for this week, and when they'll tell that person they prayed it. Saying the name out loud makes it real.

Close by praying out loud over the actual names people just spoke — the Epaphras

they named, the person they can't reach, the one they're going to text tomorrow. Don't reach for a written prayer; naming their real words back to God is the whole point.

If you run out of time: If the room only gets to question 3 and the naming of an Epaphras, stop there. That tender moment is worth more than finishing the list — don't rush past it to check a box.

Midweek follow-up: Next week, before anything else, ask: did you tell the person you prayed for them? What did they say? Let the room hear that the hidden work actually reached someone.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/colossians/4-12-13/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- The word 'striving' in verse 12 is agōnizomai — the language of a wrestler straining to exhaustion. In one honest word, how would you describe your prayers this week? _____
- Who is the 'Epaphras' in your life — someone whose praying you may be standing on right now? Write their name if one comes to mind:
- Epaphras prayed people would 'stand perfect and complete.' When you pray for those you love, what do you usually ask God for instead?
- Name ONE specific believer you'll pray for this week the way Epaphras prayed — and when you'll tell them you did it:
- What does this passage ask of you that you honestly don't want to give?

Take-home actions:

- Tonight, pick one believer and take a real minute — not a rushed 'bless them' — to pray them 'perfect and complete in all the will of God' by name. Tomorrow, tell them you prayed it.
- Do the same for someone far off you can't reach in person. Text a missionary, an old friend from a former church, or a relative in another city today and let them know you're asking God to strengthen them.
- Set a reminder to pray for that same person again next week, and the week after. Praying for someone's growth is slow, hidden work — keep going even when you never see the result.

Someone across the miles would be steadied just by knowing you carry them before God.