

# Firstfruits and Labourers

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[ 0 : 00 ] Welcome back with me to Romans chapter 16, page 950 of your church Bibles. And I want to read again the middle of verse 5 and verse 6.

Romans 16 verses 5 and 6, middle of verse 5. Greet my beloved Eponitis, who was the first convert or firstfruits to Christ in Asia.

Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. I don't know about you, but I'm always fascinated with names that appear, for a moment, names that appear briefly in scripture, maybe in single instances. We have examples in the Old Testament, we have examples in the New Testament. These names that God has given to us for a purpose, different purposes perhaps, some honourable action that these individuals have performed, maybe some lesson to learn from the very anonymity of, relative anonymity of these individuals.

And then that's it. We don't hear of these individuals again, apart from the one instance when these people, when these individuals have been mentioned in scripture.

[ 1 : 30 ] And as we've been doing for the past few, I think this is, as I say, the third Sunday evening that we've been looking at this section, when we come to this last section, last chapter in Romans, Paul's letters to the Romans, we've seen how many names there are.

There are a significant number of names that Paul writes to give greetings to. And included in this list of names are those who we read of once and are seen no more.

We don't know anything about their life story. We don't know anything about what happens next, as we're thinking this morning. Nothing to tell us about how they developed as Christians, their experience as Christians.

Nothing said how they fared under persecution. Just their names. But as we'll see, this evening, names with significance attached to them.

These two individuals that we're going to look at this evening, Epinetus and Mary. Now, I'm not sure of the last time you ever heard the name Epinetus.

[ 2 : 35 ] I'm not sure if it evokes the reaction from anyone, perhaps. But, you know, we live in a modern age, 21st century, with the strangest names that are given to babies. I don't think I've ever heard of an Epinetus other than here in Scripture.

We might even say it's lost in the consciousness of today's society, even in today's church. And yet the name is written, this name is given to us, this person's name is given to us in the infallible Word of God.

It's given by God for a great purpose under his providence that, God willing, we'll examine in a moment. And then there's the name Mary, and certainly that does evoke a certain element of recognition, even in today's post-Christian society.

Certainly the name Mary has resonance as, as we say, the mother of Jesus. But this individual, this particular Mary, we know very little about other than this one mention of her name here.

So these two named individuals, Epinetus, Mary, two individuals briefly mentioned. I mean, you know, when you think of the vastness of the pages of Scripture, two names mentioned out of the vastness of the content, the Word of God, two names that, in fact, give us much to tell us, much to consider about, well, to consider about God's ways and the spread of the gospel of the Lord Jesus, the names that will tell us something of that.

[ 4 : 09 ] The names themselves will, and what's associated with them, tell us much about the spread of the, and the power of the gospel of the Lord Jesus. And I pray then, as we look at what's said of these two individuals, that they'll encourage you.

That what we see of these individuals will encourage you in your labour for the Lord, and in your hope in the Lord, our Saviour. Three things to take from these names.

Two, really, from the first name, Epinetus, and the second from Mary. The first thing to look at, beloved. Beloved in Christ. The Epinetus.

Beloved in Christ. Greet my beloved Epinetus. Epinetus. Now, Paul the Apostle, Paul the Pastor, Paul's obviously formed relationships with those to whom he's preached, those whom he's proclaimed the Word of God to.

He, you know, in these relationships, he's not reluctant, he's not averse to speak of those whom he's formed his relationships with.

[ 5 : 16 ] He's not averse to calling them as beloved. I mean, that's why we read down in that list that Paul mentions. You go down the names.

There are others who also are described as beloved. Verse 8, for example. Greet Ampliatus. My beloved in the Lord. Verse 9.

Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ. My beloved. Stachis. Or you go to other parts of Scripture, other letters that Paul wrote. Again, he speaks of those whom he's writing as beloved, as beloved.

Timothy, for example, Paul wrote to Timothy. Timothy's described as his beloved and faithful child in the Lord. When Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth, Paul speaks of them as his beloved children.

So, you know, Paul's pastor's heart is reaching out to fellow believers, fellow Christians in the Lord. And whether it's to individuals or collectively to church, he's speaking of them as my beloved.

[ 6 : 31 ] Now, I suppose we often use that particular expression, beloved. You know, in ordinary speech, maybe as much as we ought to. But nevertheless, the intimacy of true, sinless, pure love one for another, well, it's captured in Scripture throughout God's Word.

You know, when one speaks of another in that particular term of fellowship, of closeness, of, you might say, true endearment in the Lord. So, let's just look at Paul's instance in using this particular term.

I mean, there's no doubt that with Paul writing this letter, he's full of emotion as he's writing of this individual, this eponetis, his beloved, my beloved. But there's more, of course, than just affection, much more than just, you know, human affection.

This is the communion of saints. This is the fellowship of believers that's expressed and love one for another. And so we have to say this, that no believer should ever not love one another in the Lord. That there should never be instances when a fellow Christian is not beloved of another. I mean, if a believer, someone who's united to Christ, of that Christian's beloved of God in Christ, why should any of us withhold that, you know, giving of love and recognising love one to another when we share in the love of God in Christ?

[ 8 : 06 ] I mean, if we're to love one another, we do it, you do it in response to the love of God towards you in Christ. If you're beloved in the Lord, then show it.

Show it, yes, even in the, you might say, in the intensity of love for God and love one for another.

Because, you know, when we consider the love of God towards sinners, we can scarce take in that great love, that love of a holy God towards sinners.

We don't deserve His love, we deserve His wrath. But as God's Word instructs us and shows us, we love because He first loved us.

I mean, the same God who declared of the Son, the same God the Father who declared of God the Son, and this is my beloved Son. It's the same God who says to you in Christ that you are beloved of Him.

And that surely has to impact the love that you show towards your Heavenly Father, the love that you show towards the Lord Jesus, your Saviour, the same love that you show towards the Holy Spirit, the same love you show towards God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[ 9 : 21 ] And that surely has to impact the way that you love one another. And have no hesitation in speaking of fellow believers as beloved.

Paul loved because of the love that God had given him in Christ. And Paul's expression of love towards others, others such as this individual Eponetis, it wasn't an insincere statement.

This was true, whole, pure love in Christ. And I pray that that's in your heart and my heart, that sincerity of love, when you call and refer to one another as beloved in the Lord.

That expression that tells of the unity that we have in Christ, when we think of the one who gave himself for you in love. That we respond, yes, loving our God, our Father, loving God, loving one

another in Christ.

Beloved. But then, what's this second heading? First fruits, first fruits to Christ. Great, my beloved Eponetus. Well, one translation was the first convert to Christ.

[10:38] If you've got older Bibles in front of you, or even the footnote in our own church Bibles, the literal language, the original language, the Greek language, tells of the word first fruits.

Great, my beloved Eponetus, who was the first fruits to Christ, or for Christ even, in Asia. But the sense is clear. I mean, here's this man, Eponetus.

Yes, in the way that Paul writes of him, he is, or was, the first convert under Paul's ministry in the province of Asia. You know, sort of western Turkey, modern day, western Turkey.

You know, the area for the seven churches that Paul wrote to. But I think we really do have to get the significance of what Paul's writing here. And it's not directly concerning, it's not primarily concerning this individual.

But it's this whole aspect of conversion that Paul's delighting in, that he focuses in on this man Eponetus. So that's why we need to get right to the text. If anyone says you don't need the modern, the ancient languages forget that.

[11:50] You do need the original language to really explore deeply into God's word. And here's one example. This man, Eponetus, the firstfruits, the firstfruits to Christ, the firstfruits for Christ.

Because that's important. It's not just, you know, great Eponetus who was the first person to come to Christ. No, it's specific. It was the firstfruits of Christ. Now, why do we say that?

It's so important because, well, as you know, we've got to go back to the Old Testament. That's where we do our comparing Scripture with Scripture. As I'm sure most of you know, in the time of Moses, remember during the Exodus, the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites, remember, were commanded by God to offer to him the first and best produce of the land in sacrifice.

Exodus 23, verse 19, the best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God. Now, of course, everything that the Israelites had was from God.

And it was for him. But the gift of the first produce of the land was designated to be special, special for God. Of course, not unless we use their ordinary use, but special, special for God.

[13:15] And that relevance of being set apart, set apart as holy to God. And the very fact that the offerings there of these firstfruits was the first of the produce, the best of the produce, this was to be offered annually, year after year.

It was to remind the Israelites that, well, that God keeps his promises. God had promised to deliver his people from Egypt. God had promised to be with them.

God had promised to provide for them and all their needs. The harvest was that, the evidence, if you like, of the promise of God that was sure.

And so, three things in the firstfruits signifying special to the Lord, sent apart for the Lord, and a reminder that the Lord keeps his promises.

Now, bring that all into this context here of the conversion of someone like Eponetus, the believer. Special, special, or specially for the Lord.

[14:24] The Christian, the one who's in Christ, is specially for the Lord. Lord. He's in the Lord. She's in the Lord. You're the Lord's precious jewel.

You're special to him. You're specially for him. You're his precious possession. You who are in Christ, in him, by faith, you're specially for him.

You're special to him. Yes, of course, you have ties, you have relationships, you have commitments, family, friends, church, community, work.

Above all, you who are in Christ, you're special. Special to the Lord. You're specially his. You're for him. You're to him. Because he's claimed you as his own.

You're not your own. You're not your own just to do us. You wish to us. You want to us. You please. You're Christ. You're special to him and specially for him. And as Christ, you're set apart.

[15:22] Set apart from, just as the first fruit, set apart for the Lord. Set apart, and of course, as a Christian, set apart from the world. Set apart from the standards and values of the world.

Set apart as holy, holy to the Lord. You belong to the Lord. You're his completely. You have to be devoted to God. You're set apart for him.

Your chief purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Seeking his glory. Seeking what you do for his glory and not for self-glory.

Service for him, not for self. Honoring him in all that you are. Loving him who first loved you. And then, that reminder that you are his, that tells you of the promises of God, that the promise that all who come to him in faith are his, are saved, eternally.

God keeps his promises. His eternal promises, the eternal covenant. The covenant promises that are sure and confirmed in Christ Jesus.

[16:34] So, you see then what Paul's saying now. You see how this mention of firstfruits really brings all this to show the wonder of God's love for sinners and the wonder of your relationship to God through Christ.

Christ. And you're seeing then what Paul's saying here of his beloved Eponetus as the firstfruits. It can be either to Christ or for Christ there in Asia, in Asia Minor.

What are we seeing then? We're seeing surely this. Through the saving grace of God. This person, Eponetus, was the first person in that province where Paul preached, the first person to be converted, the first person to be set apart for Christ.

The first person in that province to be united to Christ. The first person to be that living testimony of the truth that God keeps his promises.

Special to the Lord. Especially his. Now, anyone or anything that has a special claim to greatness or achievement, well, it happens.

[17:43] I mean, think of records. Guinness Book of Records. Think of records of firsts. You know, just thinking this the other day. Louis Blerio, the first man to make an airplane flight across the English Channel in 1909.

60 years later, Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, 1969. And we can go on and on and on about all these firsts. But, you know, we marvel at their achievements, what they've achieved, what they've done by their courage, what they've done by their skill.

The very fact that they're the first human of all humans to achieve something remarkable by their own effort. But when Paul commends Eponetus as the first fruit, the first convert to Christ, he's not commending Eponetus.

He's not saying, isn't it wonderful what you've done to make yourself this first convert to Christ. No, Paul's giving glory to God. That God should have chosen this individual to be the first person to receive the Lord as a saviour from that particular part of the world.

So Paul's giving glory to God. That God's promised to save all peoples, Jew, Gentile. That's seen in the conversion of this non-Jew, this man Eponetus, this first convert.

[19:02] And so we're seeing the progression of the one true faith in that particular region. And, you know, we give glory to God that, you know, there's nothing here in Scripture, there's nothing to indicate that there was any pride in Eponetus' heart, you know, for being this first convert to Christ in Asia.

I do think that the very fact that this man's name is mentioned only once tells us, certainly a strong indication that he's not seeking any glory for himself in being this first fruit, this first convert to Christ. Because it was all of God. The first fruits for the gospel was proclaimed there in that particular part of the world. Because it's to God and not to man that be the glory.

And, you know, in the providence of God, there are those who are first in the kingdom of God. Think of Scripture, some certainly are recorded in Scripture, there's others that are hidden under a cloud of anonymity.

You know, from Scripture we can certainly see instances of those who were first, if you like, in being converted to Christ. Or certainly some of the first. Think of Jesus' ministry, calling disciples such as Peter and James and John and Matthew among some of the first people to be called by Jesus to follow Him.

[20:32] Or think of the Samaritan woman of whom we read of in John chapter 4, that Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well. The woman who later say of Jesus, come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.

Could this be the Christ? I mean, this unnamed woman, and I think I'm right in saying who along with a healed leper from Samaria, remember the one man in ten who returned thanks to Jesus for His healing.

The only two recorded conversions from Samaria, from that northern territory under Jesus' ministry. Think of Peter's ministry, Cornelius, the Roman centurion in the north of Galilee in Caesarea, reckoned to be the first Gentile convert.

As one commentator has written of Cornelius, the first fruits of the harvest that followed. And you know, the very mention of first fruits then, whether it's the case of Eponetus or whether it's Cornelius or whoever else mentioned as first fruits, even think of Lydia as well, tells us that yes, they were the first and therefore there was a harvest that followed.

The first fruits, I guarantee that God would keep His promise in saving many others, even many, in this case, many Gentiles, many non-Jews. So when we see first fruits being mentioned, when we tell of, see of conversion, then that tells us, that gives us that encouragement to know that the harvest was to come, was to follow.

[ 22 : 12 ] first fruits, so first fruits, as we said, people like Eponetus, Cornelius, promises of the progression of the gospel, where? Well, in Europe and beyond.

God hasn't finished bringing the harvest. There are harvest sheaves of souls to be brought in. The work of gospel ministry continues.

I think the very mention of first fruits in Paul's writing tells us this. And that, surely again, encourages you to not to lose hope.

There are sinners in Livingston who will be saved by the power of God's saving grace. There will be sinners in Scotland and Europe and the world who are part of that harvest to be gathered in.

And we thank God and praise God for that truth. And yes, there will be rejoicing in the bringing in of the sheaves, souls saved by the amazing grace of God.

[ 23 : 12 ] But we might also say this, if there's a first fruit that indicates first, first convert, there will be a last.

Because in the providence of God when history is wound up but Christ's return, the very last soul will have been saved, will have been brought into the kingdom of God.

When will that be? Who knows who that will be? We don't know. No one knows except God. And so, we strive to make known the Saviour.

We seek to evangelise, seek to tell others the good news of Jesus and expect God to do great things in the saving of lives, the saving of souls.

So, first fruit, this motif, this first fruit motif surely assures you of that harvest and it confirms that yes, at some point there will be a last convert.

[ 24 : 12 ] That indication that Christ will have returned and so as much rejoicing over the last convert as the first convert. No one knows that day.

No one knows when Christ returns. We don't know, you don't know, I don't know. But we pray fervently for sinners to be converted and labour diligently to tell others the good news of Jesus. To tell your neighbour, to tell your friends, to tell your work colleagues, to tell, for the most difficult of all, to tell those in your family that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus saves, that Jesus is the only Saviour of mankind.

Well, we mentioned labouring, labouring diligently in the work of the Gospel and look at verse 6 of this section. Greet Mary who's worked hard for you.

Greet Mary, you might even say, I think again more precisely, greet Mary who's laboured for you. It's a strong verb, a strong word here. I mean, in this list of names that Paul asked the church in Rome to greet, it's very interesting.

[ 25 : 24 ] Four women are actually highlighted as being workers for the Lord. But it's more than just workers, it's actually labourers, we might even say those who toil for the Lord.

I mean, there's Mary here in verse 6, and then there's the three women we read in verse 12, Triphina, Triphosa, and the beloved Persis. Now, we're not told in any of these cases what particular kind of toil, what particular kind of hard work that these women were engaged in. But the very fact that each of them is described as, you know, in relation to hard work, to toil, really indicates exertion, exertion that they were expending in the Lord's work.

As we said, we don't know very much about this Mary apart from this reference to her, and I don't know anything about her apart from this reference in verse 6, or these other women of verse 16. But there they are included by Paul in relation to the work for the church, which of course is the work for the Lord. And amongst many other things, surely it tells us of the importance of women's work in the Lord's work.

[ 26 : 38 ] I mean, again, you know, the first five names that Paul mentions in this list, three are women, the majority are actually women. In the spheres of service that they were engaged in in their second mile living, they were energized for the Lord and their service for their Lord and

Saviour and, of course, therefore for the Lord's people.

Now, let's of course be precise here in Scripture, there's no warrant for women in leadership in church office, but that certainly doesn't demean the role of women in the church.

Women's ministries are vital to the well-being of any congregation. And thank God for the prayer warriors in our church who are women, or the mothers in Israel, as it were, encouragement that that gives to the Lord's people, the work that so many women do with children, support for other women coming alongside the weak, the needy, just a word of encouragement, those who give and give of themselves for the cause of Christ, who are labourers, toilers for the Lord, that's really an expression of their faith and action.

That's what we see here of Mary and these other women who worked hard, who laboured for the church, and I pray that's an encouragement to you, in your work, it's as women, in your work for the Lord, to be proactive in the work of the kingdom.

But, again, there's something almost hidden in this commendation that Paul gives to this particular Mary.

[ 28 : 23 ] And the question is simply this, how did he know? How did Paul know about this Mary and her hard work? The answer surely is this, he must have been told about her.

Others must have told Paul about this individual. Now, maybe it was Priscilla and Aquila, these two, mentioned just before, it was them who told about this Mary, the supposition is strong in relation to their lives.

But we're not told directly. But the point is surely this, the sharing of good news among Christians. That's important, we build one another up.

Rejoice with those who rejoice. Yes, of course, we will weep with those who weep. But even telling fellow believers of a particular brother or sister in Christ, maybe despite particular pressures in his or her life, maybe living in a particular hostile environment and a secular culture and a secular opposition, we commend those who are courageous for the Lord.

Those who truly, despite the opposition, are seeking to strengthen the church by the work that God gives them to do. And, you know, we live in a day and age when there's various ways, various means to share good news about others so that we are encouraging one another in the Lord, particularly those who toil and labour for the Lord.

[ 29 : 54 ] Now, of course, the danger is that self seeks to promote self through the various media that we have. But that's not the spirit of meekness that Christians are to show in the Lord.

But nevertheless, we should surely rejoice in the work of others. And yes, even when opportunity permits, tell others of the work that a particular believer is doing.

Because we want to rejoice in the work of the kingdom. We want to raise others up. Far too often in a church context even, we run others down for what they fail to do rather than build up others in what they do do for the Lord.

But we're not out, no Christian surely is out for praise. We don't seek praise from others. Let us Proverbs tell us, Proverbs 27 verse 2, let another praise you, and not your own mouth, a stranger, and not your own lips.

Well, this Mary of Romans 16 verse 6, Mary was praised by others, praised for her hard work in the Lord, that work that indicated her saving faith in her Saviour.

[ 31 : 09 ] And it's for the Lord's people to, if you like, emulate that attitude to be hard at work, to be those who labour for the Lord and the work and the place where God sends them.

Because there is work to do in the church, there's work to do in the kingdom. it's not for any of the Lord's people to be passive or inactive in that work.

And ask the Lord, pray to him, direct me Lord, direct me in the work that you have for me. Help me Lord to do that work in your strength and not my own strength. And help me Lord to do that work for your glory and not for my glory.

Because when we think of work, when we think of labour, when we think of toil, remember above all, remember the Lord Jesus who toiled for you, who laboured for the sake of his church, the Lord Jesus.

You may even say whose work was accomplished on the cross in the toil, in the labour of his giving of himself for the sake of his own. Well, as we come towards our end of our thoughts on this short passage this evening, what have we considered?

[ 32 : 26 ] We've considered someone who was beloved in the Lord, the same one who was the first fruits of Christ or to Christ in Asia. Consider us another one who was a labourer, who laboured for the Lord.

Notice the pattern. It's all in relation to Christ Jesus. Because in Christ we're beloved of each other through the one who's made it possible for you to love one another in him.

Through Christ lives are saved. Through Christ in him people are converted. And yes, even the first fruits in different parts of the world where the gospel is proclaimed, we give praise and thanks that there are these first fruits that give that encouragement of the harvest to come.

God's love. Be strengthened in him in the work that he's given you to do and will give you to do. Be strengthened in him and give to him your heart as you serve him and that you'll know the Lord Jesus yes, as your saviour and be empowered in him.

Be empowered to love one another. Be empowered to serve the church. Be empowered as you serve the church because above all you serve the Lord Jesus. You know that blessing of salvation in him.

[ 33 : 50 ] You're a convert to Christ. You are, someone once said, the property of Jesus. So live for the one who gave himself for you in love.

And with all these thoughts before this evening, may God bless to us and bless you with his word. Amen. Let us pray. Lord, we're very mindful of our weakness in our service for you.

We're very mindful, Lord, of the many times when we keep our mouths shut, when we ought to be open to tell of the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus. And we're so often, Lord, prepared to sit back rather than do the work of the kingdom.

And so, Lord, strengthen your people this evening to do that work for you, to labor for you, to delight, delight, yes, Lord, delight in your will for them.

So, Lord, hear us, bless us, continue with us, go before us in all things. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

[ 35 : 00 ] Well, let's close in Psalm 19 on page 23 of our Psalm books. We're going to sing from verse 7 to the end.

Verse 14, the perfect law of God revives the soul of man. His statutes which are sure make wise the simple one. The precepts of the Lord are right and fill the heart with great delight.

7 to 14, Psalm 19, to God's praise. God's shout out to God's nothing of God's name's Example in them.

Hey. Thanks for to God's name's name. Hi. Bye. Bye. We're going to what say. Why?