

## Colossians 4:7-18

### A Little Help From My Friends

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# Introduction

As Paul closes Colossians, he encloses with his letter a verbal group photograph. He includes in it a number of those who helped him in his ministry while he was imprisoned at Rome. He gives recognition to some of the unsung heroes of the New Testament, and by so doing uses them as an encouragement to those who read this letter. This section adds a warm, personal touch to what has been largely a doctrinal letter. It is similar to the personals he adds in chapter 16 of Romans. That many of those mentioned had stuck with Paul for years indicates the tremendous loyalty he inspired.

2

## Colossians 4:7-15

Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. <sup>8</sup> I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, <sup>9</sup> with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is *one* of you. They will make known to you all things which *are happening* here. <sup>10</sup> Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), <sup>11</sup> and Jesus who is called Justus. These *are my* only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision; they have proved to be a comfort to me. <sup>12</sup> Epaphras, who is *one* of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. <sup>13</sup> For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis. <sup>14</sup> Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. <sup>15</sup> Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that *is* in his house.

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## Friends

To Paul, these people were indispensable assets to his ministry. He knew that he could not do it alone; no one can. God's leaders have always depended on others to support them in their work. Exodus 17:8–13 illustrates that truth:

Now Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. <sup>9</sup> And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." <sup>10</sup> So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. <sup>11</sup> And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. <sup>12</sup> But Moses' hands *became* heavy; so they took a stone and put *it* under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. <sup>13</sup> So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

With help from Aaron and Hur, Moses was able to lead Israel to a great victory. With their support, Moses was enabled by God to accomplish things he could never have accomplished alone.

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## Friends

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 adds, “Two *are* better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. <sup>10</sup> For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him *who is* alone when he falls, For *he has* no one to help him up. <sup>11</sup> Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm *alone*? <sup>12</sup> Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

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## Friends

Paul never ministered alone. He shared his first leadership opportunity in the church at Antioch with four other men, and throughout the following years of his missionary travels, he always had companions. The only time we find him alone in Acts is for a brief period in Athens (Acts 17). Although he is a prisoner as he writes Colossians, he still is not alone. The eight men he names are not all well-known figures. Each was, however, a special person to Paul. And each was willing to pay the price of associating with a prisoner. In this passage we meet the man with a servant’s heart, the man with a sinful past, the man with a sympathetic heart, the man with a surprising future, the man with a strong commitment, the man with a single passion, the man with a specialized talent, and the man with a sad future.

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## A Man With a Servant's Heart

Colossians 4:7-8

Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. <sup>8</sup>I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts.

**Tychicus** means “fortuitous,” or “fortunate.” Indeed, he was fortunate to have ministered with Paul for so many years. He is mentioned five times in the New Testament. Although the references are brief, they give us a rich profile of the man.

We first meet Tychicus in Acts 20:4. Paul was in Ephesus near the end of his third missionary journey. He planned to return to Jerusalem via Macedonia, where he intended to collect an offering. With the offerings from Galatia and Achaia, he would present it to the needy believers at Jerusalem (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1–9). By so doing, he hoped to cement the bond between the predominantly Gentile churches outside of Israel, and the predominantly Jewish church at Jerusalem. He also planned to take some Gentile believers from Greece and Asia Minor as representatives of their churches to the Jerusalem church. Among them was Tychicus.

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Tychicus’s willingness to travel with Paul to Jerusalem shows his **servant’s heart**. Such a journey was not to be undertaken lightly. Travel in the ancient world was far more difficult and dangerous than in our day. The trip to Jerusalem would be very arduous, and it would take Tychicus away from his family, friends, and church for a long time. Along the way, Paul was repeatedly warned that trouble awaited him in Jerusalem. Although Tychicus must certainly have heard those warnings, he remained with Paul.

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As Paul wrote Colossians, it had been more than two years since his arrest at Jerusalem. Since then he had survived a plot by the Jewish leaders to murder him, trials before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, and a harrowing voyage to Rome. Tychicus may have been with Paul through that entire time. He definitely was with him during his imprisonment at Rome. After Paul's release, Tychicus remained with him. When Paul needed a temporary replacement for Titus as pastor of the church on Crete, Tychicus was one of the ones considered (Titus 3:12). Tychicus, who had begun as a messenger, was now a candidate to fill in for as great a man as Titus.

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At the very end of Paul's life, during his second Roman imprisonment, Tychicus was still with him. Facing imminent execution, Paul desired to see Timothy one last time. Because Timothy could not leave his congregation at Ephesus without a replacement, Paul sent Tychicus (2 Tim. 4:12). Once again, Tychicus's name comes up as a replacement for one of Paul's prominent associates. That speaks highly of his character.

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The writing of Colossians finds Tychicus in Rome with Paul during his first imprisonment. By this time about four years have passed since Tychicus joined Paul in Ephesus. Because he is a man of proven loyalty, Paul has an important task for him: He is to deliver the letter to the Colossians. Not only does he carry Colossians, but Ephesians (cf. Eph. 6:21) and probably Philemon as well (cf. 4:9). The trip from Rome to Colossae was a difficult one. Tychicus would first have to cross much of Italy on foot, then sail across the Adriatic Sea. After traversing Greece on foot, he would sail across the Aegean Sea to the coast of Asia Minor. After all that, he still faced a journey of nearly one hundred miles on foot to reach Colossae. That he was entrusted with delivering three inspired books of Scripture once again indicates Paul's trust in him.

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Not only will Tychicus deliver the letter of Colossians, he will also bring the Colossians information about Paul's affairs and update them on his circumstances. That would include bringing them information on Paul's health, his hopes, and his future prospects. He would also encourage their hearts by adding a personal word of encouragement to what was written in the letter and answering their queries about Paul's condition.

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Paul next lists three credentials Tychicus possessed that qualified him to act as Paul's personal envoy. First, he was a **beloved brother** in the Lord. That Paul calls him a **brother** shows he was one of the family of believers. His personal character had earned him the designation **beloved** from no less than the apostle Paul himself. Second, Paul describes him as a **faithful minister**. Tychicus served as Paul's liaison to the churches. He was a **faithful** steward of his ministry—the highest commendation Paul could give (cf. 1 Cor. 4:2). Finally, Paul calls him a **fellow bond-servant in the Lord**. He was a *diakonos* (**servant**) in relationship to Paul, but a *sundoulos* (**fellow bond-servant**) with Paul in relationship to **the Lord**.

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## A Man With a Sinful Past

Colossians 4:7-9

with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is *one* of you. They will make known to you all things which *are happening* here.

**Onesimus**, the man with the **sinful past**, is the runaway slave whose return to his master was the occasion for the book of Philemon.

Philemon was one of the leaders of the Colossian church, and it is likely that the church met in his home. Onesimus had been a slave in Philemon's household until he ran away and made his way to Rome.

There he met the apostle Paul, who led him to Christ. Now he was returning to Colossae and his master. Paul wrote to urge Philemon to forgive Onesimus for running away and defrauding him and to welcome Onesimus as a brother in Christ.

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Although Onesimus was a runaway slave, Paul describes him as **a faithful and beloved brother**. When a person comes to faith in Christ, the past is no longer an issue. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). Onesimus was a testimony to the power of God to transform a life. Paul tells the Colossians that the man who left Colossae as a runaway slave now returns as **one of you**. He was to be treated as a member of the church, because in Christ there was neither slave nor free (Gal. 3:28). Paul shows his regard for him by having him, along with Tychicus, inform the Colossians about Paul’s whole situation.

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Let me digress here. Philemon may have been a kind and gracious master, but for whatever reason, Onesimus wanted to be free. As a slave, he ran from his master but came face to face with the living God. Onesimus’s story is the classic picture of one who tries to run from God, a good and gracious Master, but instead runs right into His arms. Through salvation, the fugitive sinner finds grace, forgiveness, and the freedom that is found only in Jesus Christ.

The story of Onesimus and Philemon is a beautiful picture of the distinction between law and grace. Both Roman law and the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament gave Philemon the right to punish a runaway slave. But the covenant of grace through the Lord Jesus allowed both master and slave to fellowship in love on an equal basis in the body of Christ. Paul’s payment of all of Onesimus’s debts parallels Christ’s payment for our sins. Philemon’s acceptance of Onesimus as a brother in Christ helped lay the foundation for the abolitionist movement centuries later—master and slave are equals in Christ.

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So, after reading Paul's words to Philemon, do you think Philemon did it? Did he accept Onesimus back and not kill him for running off? For the answer we look to ancient Church history and letters written 50 years later by an early Christian leader (St. Ignatius of Antioch) to the Church at Ephesus. In St. Ignatius' letter he praises their "their wonderful bishop" (pastor) Onesimus. Think it's a coincidence? Ignatius uses the identical phrase that Paul uses in verse 11 – "who formerly was useless, but now is useful."

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## So What ...

It is easy to look at our friends and see that they are there to support us. However, we must look at the needs and be willing to support and encourage. This is especially important in ministry (and we all have one). Somedays you will be the one helped and encouraged, but later you will be the one there for others.

Let's remember the example of Onesimus. It does not matter what our past is. As believers, our past is under the blood and our debt forgiven. What matters is choices we make with regard to our future. Let's make sure we are choosing Jesus.

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