

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Paul's Companions: Tychicus and Onesimus

"A friend in need is a friend indeed" – so runs the familiar proverb. The apostle Paul certainly valued those friends who stood by him during his imprisonment and house arrest in Rome. Eight of them are given a special mention in his letter to the Colossians. In the previous two talks in this series, we have already looked at four of them – Aristarchus and Mark, Jesus-Justus and Epaphras. The two men who are the subject of today's talk are actually mentioned first in Paul's list. We can read about them in Colossians 4:7-9: "Tychicus, who is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here".

We will look first at Tychicus. We first meet this special friend of Paul as one of a group of men who travelled with Paul from Ephesus (which was probably the home town of Tychicus) up to Jerusalem (see Acts 20:4 and 5). Paul was the bearer of a monetary gift from some of the Gentile churches to their poor fellow-believers in Jerusalem (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). Travelling with money in those days was no light matter. You were likely to end up being robbed! These men would provide Paul not only with companionship on the long journey but also protection for the valuable gift he was carrying. In the nature of things, they would themselves have been honest and reliable men.

From other of Paul's letters, we know that Tychicus was chosen by Paul to be the bearer of Paul's letters to the churches in Ephesus and Colossae (see Ephesians 6:21 and 22). It is clear that, at some time, Paul considered him as a possible relief for Titus in Titus's difficult job in caring for the church in Crete (see Titus 3:12). Later on, Paul sent Tychicus once again to Ephesus (see 2 Timothy 4:12).

Tychicus, then, was no light-weight in the things of God. Rather, he was a much trusted, much travelled and much tested servant of God. With this background, it is time now to look at what Paul has to say to the Colossians about this special friend. Three things are mentioned – a beloved brother, a faithful minister, a fellow servant in the Lord. Interestingly, Tychicus is described by the first two of these terms again in Ephesians 6:21. It is worth looking at each of these in turn.

A beloved brother

Paul had not always been a follower of Christ. Indeed, at one time in his life, he went to Damascus intent on having the Christians there thrown into prison. But on that Damascus road, the Lord Jesus wonderfully met him and Saul, as he was then known, was converted. Stricken blind by the brightness of the light from heaven which he had seen, Paul had to be led by the hand into Damascus. There he waited for three days, neither eating nor drinking (see Acts 9). At that time, the Lord appeared to one of His disciples, Ananias, and told him to go to where Paul was staying. Despite his fears, for Ananias would probably have been on Saul's hit list, Ananias went. Can you imagine what went on in Saul's mind when he was told that Ananias was there to see him? Had Ananias come to get him? To shout at him? To get his revenge?

The first words of Ananias must have fallen strangely but wonderfully on Saul's ears: "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17). Those first words, 'Brother Saul', would have remained with Paul for the rest of his life. They indicated a new relationship, a special closeness which existed first of all between the Lord Jesus and those who belonged to Him, and consequently between all followers of the Lord Jesus. That relationship had been hinted at by the Lord Himself as He spoke to Paul on that Damascus road, "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?" The Lord did not say 'My followers', but 'Me', because His followers were so closely united to Himself. That special relationship had been first announced by the risen Lord on that first Easter Day to Mary Magdalene, "Go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (John 20:17).

For the rest of his life, Paul had revelled in that special relationship which he had with his brothers and sisters in Christ. So we can almost sense the delight with which he describes Tychicus, 'a beloved brother'. Today, we need to recapture that delight in each other, recognising that all who truly love our Lord Jesus Christ are indeed our brothers and sisters in Him. Instead of falling out with each other, we need to learn to love one another. This, after all, is the

commandment Jesus left with His disciples. He said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another...By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34 and 35).

A faithful minister

Several words are used for 'servant' in the New Testament. The Greek word used here has the idea of 'ministering servant'. It is the word from which our word 'deacon' is derived. Under house arrest in Rome, Paul would have greatly valued the help of those, like Tychicus, who would be able to help care for him, running errands and helping in the many other things which Paul would not be free to do for himself. Jesus used that same word when He said of Himself, "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). How like his Master Tychicus was! And what about us? Are we following our Master's example or do we wait to be helped, rather than being ready to help?

But Tychicus was also a faithful minister! He was absolutely trustworthy, totally dependable. Paul could give him a job to do and could rest assured that it would be done. It has been aptly remarked that the greatest ability in the world is dependability! More than ever today, this quality of faithfulness is needed: in family life, faithfulness between husband and wife and between parents and children; in business life, faithfulness between employer and employee – a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. But especially in the church today is this quality of faithfulness needed! Am I being faithful to my Lord in doing what He wants me to do? Or do I only give Him what's left of my time and energy? Am I faithful to His people, always ready to meet together with them to worship Him, to read His word, to pray together, and to help those who are in need? Will my Lord be able to say to me in a coming day, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21)?

A fellow servant in the Lord

Here, Paul uses the Greek word 'doulos' for 'servant', literally a bond slave. A bond slave in those days had no rights of his own. He was his master's possession, absolutely under his master's control. This is the word which Paul chose often to describe himself (see Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1). On that Damascus road, Paul had asked the Lord Jesus, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (Acts 9:6). From that moment onwards, Paul handed himself over unreservedly to be at the disposal of the Lord Jesus. Now here he was, a prisoner in Rome, as part of that service. Tychicus was just such another servant. How Paul and he would have rejoiced together in their service for the Master! Have you ever asked the Lord that question, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" If not, make that your prayer now!

Paul was sending Tychicus to Colossae so that he might acquaint the Colossian believers with Paul's circumstances. They would then be able to pray more intelligently for Paul. A better translation of verse 8 is, "...that you may know our circumstances". We, too, would do well to keep ourselves informed of the activities of our fellow believers, through missionary magazines or Christian newsletters, for example, so that we might the better pray for them.

We turn now to Onesimus. Paul's brief, but important comment about him in Colossians is "a faithful and beloved brother" (4:9). We can, however, learn quite a lot about him from Paul's short but lovely letter to Philemon. Take time after this broadcast to read it. It will only take you a few minutes. It appears that Onesimus literally was the bondsman of Philemon in Colossae. He had run away from his master, possibly robbing him at the same time, and escaped to Rome – that common sink of all the worst vices of humanity, as Rome of that day has been described. There in that teeming population, Onesimus hoped to hide himself. No one would know that he was there.

But God knew! And somehow or other, perhaps because one of Paul's trusted companions met him in the streets of Rome, Onesimus was brought to Paul and, through Paul, was brought to know the Lord Jesus as his Saviour. The Good Shepherd, through Paul, had found His lost sheep! So Paul writes to Philemon, "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me" (Philemon 10-11). Being under house arrest was no barrier to Paul's fruitful service for his Master. Perhaps some of you are shut in and unable to get out much – through illness or other responsibilities. As the hymn puts it, there's still "a work for Jesus none but you can do".

It's interesting that the name 'Onesimus' means 'profitable'. Philemon would not have thought so when Onesimus fled his service, perhaps robbing him too. Little wonder that Paul describes Onesimus as "once was unprofitable to [Philemon]". But Onesimus had joined that faithful band of friends who helped Paul in the day to day restrictions of house arrest – now he was indeed true to his name! So Paul can go on to say of him, "...but now is profitable to you (Philemon) and to me".

But Paul realised that Onesimus still belonged to Philemon. Much as Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus with him, he realised that the only proper course was to send him back to Philemon. That course of action, however, was not without its risks. The penalty for a run-away slave who was caught was death! So Paul writes this beautiful letter to Philemon, pleading for Onesimus. It's worth reading some more of it:

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow labourer, to the beloved Apphia (probably Philemon's wife), Archippus our fellow soldier (was he Philemon's son?), and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints...For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother. Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you – being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ – I appeal to you for my son Onesimus...I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand, I will repay – not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides” (verses 1-19).

Paul's letter breathes the atmosphere of Christian love and consideration. Would to God that it characterised relationships between believers everywhere! Philemon was obviously a wealthy Christian who, with his wife, had opened their home as a meeting place for the church in Colossae. He was very much involved in the work of the church at Colossae. Like his slave, Onesimus, Philemon too had been brought to Christ through Paul. Now Paul was giving Onesimus this letter to take back to Philemon, pleading with Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, not only as a slave but, more importantly, as a beloved brother in Christ. Paul can only have known Onesimus for a relatively short time, yet such is the love that he bears for this son in the faith, he promises to repay Philemon for anything Onesimus may have stolen from him.

Martin Luther pointed out that those words of Paul, ‘if he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account’, might well have been words that the Lord Jesus could have used of us to His Father as He hung on the cross, bearing the punishment for our sins. Except of course, that there was no doubt about our guilt. We had all wronged God, as Paul writes to the Romans, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). But on the cross, the Lord Jesus, in His wonderful love, died to pay the debt of our sins: “...who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24).

So we can readily picture Tychicus and Onesimus as they set out from Rome, Tychicus bearing the letter for the church at Colossae and Onesimus with Paul's letter to Philemon. How glad Onesimus would be to have Tychicus by his side! What kind of reception would he receive from his master, Philemon? Could he expect a prodigal's welcome or would it be a prisoner's gallows? But then Onesimus would have this special pleading from Paul, and surely Tychicus would put in a good word for him too.

Thank you, Tychicus, and thank you, Onesimus, for faithfully bearing and delivering your letters so that, in the providence of God, we today might also enjoy the blessing of reading them!

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