

Colossians 4:7–9 — Tychicus and Onesimus

Two Faithful Brothers and the Oneness of the Body of Christ

Scripture Reading: Colossians 4:7–9

“Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow bondman in the Lord, will make known to you all that concerns me, whom I have sent to you for this very purpose, that he might know your state, that he might encourage your hearts.

With Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother who is one of you, he shall make known to you everything here.”

Ten Names, Not Seven

A commentator reviewing Colossians 4 confidently asserted that seven persons are named here for the benefit of the reader. He could not count. At least ten names appear in verses 7 through 17, besides the apostle Paul himself: Tychicus and Onesimus; Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus called Justus; Epaphras; Luke and Demas; Nymphas; and Archippus. Each one has something to teach us, and none ought to be passed over.

The Little Word ‘With’

Tychicus is named first, and it might seem at first reading that Onesimus is merely attached to him — “with Onesimus” — as though he could not stand on his own. But consider what that word with actually means. It means fellowship. It is the opposite of independency. Those two brothers were joined, the one to the other, by that small word.

This recalls the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:20: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” The word together is easy to drop from that verse, but it is the word that counts. It puts them with one another. They have fellowship. They are joined. The little word with in our verse does the same work.

Both Called Faithful

Of all ten names in this passage, only two are described with the word faithful: Tychicus, “the beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow bondman in the Lord,” and Onesimus, “the faithful and beloved brother.” Luke in verse 14 receives the word beloved, but not faithful. These two men are different from each other in many respects, but the apostle places the same word beside both their names.

The book of Colossians takes the believers in the Lord Jesus to a high and exacting place — past the Jordan, as it were, to Gilgal, the place of the cutting off of the flesh. An inheritance remains to be claimed. What the Colossians needed, therefore, was good examples. And the first examples set before them are these two, both of whom were called faithful. That one word, placed twice in these three verses, is not there by accident.

Tychicus: Fellow Bondman

Why is Tychicus called a fellow bondman in the Lord, but not Onesimus? The answer lies in a careful distinction. Tychicus was bound to the Lord Jesus in service, just as the apostle Paul himself was. That is what bondman means — he was a slave of Christ, and Paul calls him his fellow slave. But Onesimus, as readers of the epistle to Philemon will know, was Philemon’s runaway slave. That was what the world saw when it looked at him.

The apostle Paul wrote these things with great care. The man the world called a slave — Onesimus — is not described as anyone’s bondman here. The man the

world would have said was free — Tychicus — Paul describes as his fellow bondman. It is a quiet but deliberate reversal.

Their Shared Purpose: The Oneness of the Body

These two faithful brothers were sent together with a purpose. Verse 8 states it: “that he might know your state, and that he might encourage your hearts.” Verse 9 adds: “they shall make known to you everything here.” The here is Rome, where Paul was a prisoner. The they who will report is both of them.

Yet there is a distinction even within the shared mission. It appears from the text that Tychicus bore the particular charge of knowing the state of the Colossians and encouraging their hearts — a pastoral burden. Onesimus was his fellow communicant of the news from Rome. Two brothers, sent on the same journey, walking together, and yet each bearing a distinct burden from the Lord. This is consistent with ministry by gift: two can labor side by side in the same place at the same time, and the Lord will lay upon each a different commission for the good of the saints.

An anecdote from an earlier generation illustrates this. J.N. Darby and J.G. Bellett were to speak publicly before saints in a certain place, one after the other. As they parted to take their places, one said to the other: “John, remember the saints have hearts.” And the other replied: “John, remember the saints have consciences.” They were together in the work, encouraged one another, and yet their ministries were very different. The Lord had laid upon each that which was for the good of the saints.

Underlying all of this is the oneness of the body of Christ. The apostle Paul, writing from a Roman prison, supposed that the Christians at Colossae would care about what was happening in Rome. By verse 8, he makes plain that he cared about their state at Colossae — because they were members of one body. These are not theoretical constructs. The sending of these two brothers was a practical expression of that oneness.

Faithfulness first. Sent together. Bearing different burdens for the one body.