

Colossians 4:7-18

A Commentary on Paul’s Closing Words to the Colossians

Preaching through this series, “*Christ in You the Hope of Glory*,” has been a joy in helping to more fully appreciate this beautiful jewel of a letter. Over these past few months we have seen that this tiny letter packs a radiant truth of the reality of Christ living inside of His people, bringing forth His glory, and conforming us to His image (1:27-29), from the inside out.

In the final words of this letter Paul gives his concluding remarks and greetings, but he does so in the context of life, ministry, and struggle. In remembering individuals, expressing concern, and giving personal instructions to his co-laborers, Paul sets an example for mature interpersonal relations.¹ The following is a personal commentary on these closing paragraphs of Paul’s letter.

4:7 - “*As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information.*”

Tychicus, who is mentioned five times in the New Testament, was part of the team delivering this letter from Paul in Rome, along with a group of letters (Ephesians, Philemon, Colossians), to some of the churches in Asia minor or modern Turkey. Paul was confined in Rome and awaited the outcome of his appeal to Caesar. But his confinement had already lasted for many months, and would ultimately extend to two full years (Acts 28:30). Time had come for Tychicus to leave Rome and travel eastward to his home area back in the Roman province of Asia (Acts 20:4).² Years before, at the end of the 3rd missionary campaign, he had joined the evangelistic, church-planting missionary team of the apostle Paul and continued as a close associate throughout Paul’s ministry (Titus 3:12; 2 Tim 4:12).³ Tychicus would update the Colossians, (and other churches, Eph 6:21), informing them or making known the things regarding the latest details of Paul’s ministry and situation. Though Paul dispenses Tychicus back to his home area, no doubt there would have been a blessing and personal advantage to keep Tychicus with him in Rome. In this act we see Paul’s zeal for the advancement of the gospel and his care for all the churches, even beyond his own personal comforts.⁴

Paul’s use of a definite article and pronoun with Tychicus’s name infers that he is well known to the people.⁵ In describing him as a *faithful servant* (*diakonos*) he is communicating that he has been reliable, one upon whom he and the church could depend. By further describing him as a *fellow bond-servant* (literally ‘a fellow-slave’

¹ Norman L. Geisler, “Colossians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zook, New Testament ed. (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983), 684.

² Homer A. Kent, *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians and Philemon* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1978), 15.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Colossians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, rep. ed. 2003), 226-227.

⁵ *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown: One Volume Commentary*, New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers, n.d.), 382.

sundoulos), Paul acknowledged Tychicus as one who had joined him in totally subjecting himself to the will of Christ. Tychicus's willingness to travel with Paul to Jerusalem carrying the relief offering (1 Cor 16:1-9) shows his sacrificial, servant's heart.⁶ "Travel in the ancient world was far more difficult and dangerous than in our day. . . would be very arduous, and it would take Tychicus away from his family, friends, and church for a long time."⁷

Application: Both in Paul and in Tychicus we see individuals who through their examples model a selfless, sacrificial ministry.

4:8 - *"For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts;"*

While Paul did not write many personal details in the letter to the Colossians, it will be part of the ministry of Tychicus to fill in the details regarding Paul and his present situation.⁸ "At the same time, as Paul's colleague and co-worker, he will impress the apostle's teaching on the congregation and so strengthen their hearts . . . not simply through the passing on of information about Paul in prison that will be the instrument of strengthening but also by means of admonishing the congregation with Paul's teaching . . ."⁹

Application: Even as Paul labored and faced personal challenges and needs, he was concerned about those to whom He ministered and desired that they be encouraged and grow into the likeness of Christ.

4:9 - *"and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here."*

While Onesimus was a common name among slaves at the time and frequently found in inscriptions,¹⁰ the usually accepted, reasonable position is that this is the same Onesimus addressed in the epistle to Philemon.¹¹ A full explanation concerning Onesimus can be found in the Epistle to Philemon which depicts him as a slave in Philemon's household. The details connected with his fleeing and how Paul persuaded him to return are not given. However, the Colossians to this point had known him as an unfaithful, runaway slave. Now he is introduced upon his return as *"the faithful and beloved brother."* By describing him in this manner, giving him the same titles as

⁶ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Colossians & Philemon* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 192.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Baker, gen. eds., *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), vol. 44, *Colossians, Philemon*, by Peter O'Brien, 248.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s. v. Ονησιμος , 570, 2nd ed. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker.

¹¹ O'Brien, 248.

Tychicus and Epaphras, it is suggesting that Onesimus the slave is to receive the same warm greeting from the Colossian church as is extended to the others.¹² Paul had apparently come to love Onesimus dearly as a fellow brother, having seen what God had done in transforming his life, bringing him to Christ, and making him into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Certainly this was a delicate situation and Paul was carefully crafting his words. Because he was a runaway slave, he was in constant danger of being arrested, unless and until reconciliation could be made. By using a plural form of the verb *“they will inform,”* Paul includes Onesimus in the reporting process which is intended to strengthen and encourage the hearts of the Colossians. Thus Paul is carefully helping to close the gap between Onesimus and the Colossian church. It seems reasonable to assume that part of the report in which Onesimus would be involved would be in sharing his conversion story, life transformation, and his return for reconciliation. When the letter of Colossians is seen within this historical backdrop, the mystery of *Christ in you* (Col 1:27) and the admonitions to slaves and masters (Col 3:22-25), suddenly takes on a fuller and deeper reality of Christ coming to have first place in everything (Col 1:18).

Application: Putting Christ first applies in every area and to every situation of our lives. Onesimus models the reality of a slave in whom Christ lives, displaying the glory of God.

4:10 - *“Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas’s cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him);”*

Six of Paul’s associates sent their greetings to the Colossians. Aristarchus was a Jewish believer (cf. 4:11). Though like many Jews dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world, he had a Greek name. He was a native of Thessalonica (Acts 27:2), and first appears in the biblical record in Ephesus as a traveling companion of Paul (Acts 19:29). It was in Ephesus that he was assaulted and drug by the rioting crowd. He accompanied Paul on his relief trip to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4) and on his voyage to Rome (Acts 27:4), probably enduring the ship wreck with Paul. No doubt the trials and hardships had bound these two men close together. As Paul writes Colossians from his Roman confinement, Aristarchus is by his side. Paul describes him as his *“fellow prisoner,”* a term that has a military connotation and is understood by O’Brien to have a sense of “a prisoner of war.”¹³ While not using the term literally, Paul is probably metaphorically intending to create a mental image. Even from these few words, much can be learned regarding how Paul viewed those who labored with and stood beside him.

Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, is elsewhere called John Mark (Acts 12:25). He was a member of Paul’s first missionary endeavor, but abandoned Paul and Barnabas during the journey (Acts 13:5, 13). Apparently when the going got tough, Mark deserted his companions. Barnabas attempted to include him on the 2nd missionary campaign

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 250. Paul is fond of using military metaphors in his letters: Eph. 6:11; Phil. 2:25; 2 Tim. 2:3; Philem 2.

which caused a serious division between Paul and Barnabas, causing a rupture in their relationship (Acts 15:37-39). Thankfully the story does not end there and Mark’s ministry was preserved, possibly through the ministry of Peter, (1 Pet 5:13), who himself was no stranger to failure.¹⁴ Paul was eventually reconciled to both Mark and Barnabas (1 Cor 9:6; 2 Tim 4:11). In Philemon 24, Paul names Mark among his fellow workers. The man whom Paul once rejected became one of his greatest helpers. At this time Mark was in Rome. Later Paul tells Timothy to pick up Mark and bring him back to Rome because he is useful for service (2 Tim 4:11). This same former “drop out” went on to write the gospel account that bears his name.

There seems to be some question or doubt whether Mark would actually come to Colossae, but if he did, they are to welcome him. Paul notes that they have received prior communication about Mark. Certainly Paul is trying to make Mark’s possible arrival warm and inviting, particularly in light of his past failures. But also, does his instructions regarding Mark and how Paul views him and how the Colossian church is to treat him create a further and fuller backdrop for the tension and situation of Onesimus and Philemon?

Application: Reconciliation is desirable and possible. Through Paul’s words regarding Mark we see that reconciliation is a viable reality when Christ lives within His people.

4:11 - *“and also Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me.”*

Paul continues his list of those giving greetings, particularly a group of those who are from a Jewish background (*“who are from the circumcision”*). Jesus Justus is mentioned only here in the biblical record. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua, meaning “savior.” His Latin surname, Justus, meaning “righteous” indicates in some measure his background and direction oriented toward salvation and righteousness. In spite of nothing else being said about him we see that Paul values him and mentions his greeting. This is a reminder that God values and uses faithful individuals who seek him, whether or not they achieve “star status.”¹⁵

Paul statement here that *“these are the only few . . . from the circumcision”* means that there were few Jews at Rome who showed themselves to be helpers to the gospel.¹⁶ “The sad tone of this phrase and Paul’s notation of the lack of response from his fellow Jews is a possible and likely indication that this must have grieved Paul’s heart.”¹⁷ However, Paul acknowledges that these three particular individuals: Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus have been an encouragement to him. Paul’s uses a unique word here for *“encouragement”* which is only found here in the New Testament. It carries more of the idea of “comfort, consolation, soothing, or to assuage.” Like an

¹⁴ MacArthur, 195.

¹⁵ Kent, 143.

¹⁶ Calvin, 229.

¹⁷ MacArthur, 196.

ointment used to help heal a wound, their ministry had been a healing, comfort, and encouragement to him.¹⁸

Application: It is not simply individuals of "star-status" that God uses to minister and bring healing in the body of Christ, but people who are often nameless and unnoticed to us. Many people who we know little or anything about here on earth, are greatly know and noticed in Heaven..

4:12 - *Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God*

Epaphras was considered as "one of their own" and the one responsible for originally sharing the gospel with the Colossians (Col 1:7). He is considered to be the one who founded the church at Colossae.¹⁹ It was probably Epaphras who had "journeyed to Rome bringing Paul news of the dangerous heresy threatening the church of the Lycus Valley."²⁰ Epaphras was a passionate prayer-warrior for the Christians there, his prayers being many and frequent. He strove with God for the people of Colossae even to the point of agony, as the word signifies; he wrestled with the Lord as Jacob did, and would not let go without God blessing this tiny church. He was incessant, importunate, and fervent in prayer for them. *Laboring earnestly* comes from the Greek term "agonizomai" from which we derive our English term "agonize."

Application: Being able to present individuals mature in Christ comes through hard work and agonizing effort. Discipling ministry is not for the lazy or faint of heart.

4:13 - *For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.*

Paul was an eye and ear witness of the fervent prayers of Epaphras. He saw his labor of love, and zealous affection for these saints and others, and bore testimony for him.

4:14 - *Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas.*

Luke was Paul's close friend. He is mentioned by name here and in two other passages (2 Tim 4:11; Philem 24). Luke had endeared himself to Paul and is here described as *beloved*. He frequently traveled with Paul, accompany on parts of his 2nd & 3rd missionary journeys as well as his trip to Rome. It is here revealed that he is a

¹⁸ *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. παρηγορεῖα Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott.

¹⁹ MacArthur, 6.

²⁰ MacArthur, 196.

physician. Some speculate that following Paul's reoccurring illnesses Luke was brought along to help minister to Paul's physical needs.²¹ In separating his name from "the circumcision," Paul signifies that Luke was a Gentile believer. Luke sends his greetings to the Colossians.

The Demas mentioned here is considered to be the same man that later abandoned Paul (2 Tim 4:10), having loved the things of this age more. Though he had made a substantial commitment to the ministry, and in Philemon 24 is acknowledge as a "fellow worker," the pull of the world system eventually sucked Demas in. However, no problems are indicated at this time.

Application: One must be careful that no matter how long and how hard one has labored that one finishes strong.

4:15 - *Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house.*

Paul gives a request to the Colossians that they greet the brethren in the church at Laodicea. This implies that there was frequent contact between the churches. There is some ancient manuscript differences of Nympha and the pronoun, both appearing in both the feminine and masculine forms. Assuming the feminine form, the church at Laodicea gathered in her home. Prior to the 3rd or 4th centuries A.D., the church regularly met in homes. This is a reminder that the physical building is not the essential factor, and its meeting place is a matter of convenience.²²

4:16 - *When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.*

The reading here refers to the public reading aloud of the letter. It was the common practice of the public reading of Scripture in Jewish synagogues as well as the early church. After the letter was read in Colossae, it or a copy was to be sent to Laodicea where it was to be read out loud as well. This brief note gives us an indication of how the early churches obtained copies of the various New Testament writings. As well, there would be a letter come from Laodicea that is in turn to be read at Colossae.

There has been much debate over the identity of the Laodicean letter. It has been variously identified as a letter from the Laodiceans to Paul, a letter written by Paul from Laodicea, the apocryphal Epistle to the Laodiceans, and a genuine letter of Paul to the Laodiceans that is now lost. In all likelihood, however, Paul here refers to the book of Ephesians. The oldest manuscripts of Ephesians do not contain the words "in Ephesus" in Ephesians 1:1, indicating that it was a circular letter intended for several churches.²³

²¹ Ibid, 197.

²² Kent, 147.

²³ MacArthur, 199.

4:17 - *Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."*

Archippus appears here and in Philemon 2. Kent believes that given the nature and positioning of both references that Archippus was a member of Philemon's household, a son of Philemon and Apphia. Paul doesn't seem to be rebuking Archippus, rather there is a sense in which he is encouraging him by reminding him that the ministry he has received is actually from the Lord. Perhaps he has been appointed as a lead teaching-pastor after Apaphras' departure to Rome. Either way, he is to continue with renewed and focused vigor.

4:18 - *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.*

Paul customarily used an amanuensis (recording secretary; cf. Rom 16:22), but would frequently add a greeting with his own hand writing (cf. 1 Cor 16:21; 2 Thess 3:17; Philem 19). He closes with a request to remember him in his imprisonment.

With the brief benediction, "Grace be with you," Paul commended the Colossians to the care and protection of God's matchless grace. A proper realization of what God's grace has provided in Christ would prevent the readers from falling victim to the legalistic teachings which were the occasion for this epistle. The very survival of the letter suggests that the Colossian church heeded Paul's counsel and emerged victorious from its conflict.²⁴

²⁴ Kent, 150.