

Nov. 8, 2020

Portrait of Paul's Ministry Team

Colossians 4:7-18

Part 1

*Jesus is Building his church through the fallible dependent labor
of ordinary people like us.*

LTS: Col. 13-23

Back in 1987 when Chris and I were finishing up college in Tennessee some dear friends decided that the Lord would be pleased to send them out as missionaries to the country of Japan. To say the least, this was exciting news! Up to that time we had never had a close relationship with someone who was willing to turn their backs on the comforts of American culture to follow the Lord to a faraway land as missionaries. We were so excited we promised to pray for them regularly and to give financially to their long-term needs.

Chris and I were just newly married at the time, and we couldn't offer much by way of financial support, but we did commit to giving and praying. Eventually, these dear friends packed up their belongings and took their two young children to the other side of the world. Like most cross-cultural missionaries, they began studying the language and culture and eventually found a place from which they could launch their strategic plan for gospel ministry in the neighborhood where they lived.

Like the apostle Paul, they were committed to planting churches – not an easy feat in east Asia. But over the years as they labored and suffered, and built their ministry team, they began to see fruit - the rare fruit of faith in Jesus and repentance from idolatry.

It took 27 years of or hard work but in the end, by the mercy of God, they were able to turn their little church plant over to a Japanese pastor and move on to the next city to start from scratch building relationships, proclaiming the mystery of Christ, and praying that God would use them to establish another church.

Over the years as we continued to support them, we have been delighted to receive (every month or so) a letter detailing their ambitions, successes, disappointments, their joys, their heart-breaks, and their needs for prayer. And every so often, they would

include with the newsletter a photograph of those whom the Lord had sent to join their ministry team.

Along with the photographs they would explain that role each person played in the ministry: their faithfulness, their achievements, their proven character, their struggles, and their various contributions to the work.

Sending out missionary letters is NOT a modern or novel idea. The apostle Paul himself was the author of the original missionary letter. I'm not saying that all 13 of his epistles could be classified as "Missionary letters," but there is no doubt that several of them included dedicated sections for Paul to update his friends and supporters on what the Lord was doing, how churches were multiplying, enemies were attacking, the message of Christ was advancing. And along the way, he would periodically send something of a portrait of his ministry team. And this is what we find in the last paragraph of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Last week, we talked about how living "On Mission" for the advancement of the gospel requires that we serve NOT so much as individual Christians, but as a ministry team that works and prays together for the furtherance of the gospel. And this is what we see in Col. 4:7-18. In these few verses Paul offers us a portrait of his ministry team along with a few comments about their various contributions to the work.

Well, you can probably tell that this sermon is going to be a little different than usual. Paul has finished his teaching points and exhortations. He has gone out of his way to magnify the supremacy of Christ. But now, having taught us that our Ministry-Mindset must be Prayerful, Plural and Personal, he reveals how that works out in his own ministry. And he does so by including with the letter a portrait – kind of a verbal photograph – of the entire ministry team serving with him in Rome and tells us a little bit about each one.

To be specific, Paul introduces us to

I. Two Faithful Messengers:

II. Two Fearless Ministers:

III. Four Tireless Coworkers:

IV. One Distant Supporter:

V. One Fellow Soldier:

But before we dive into the details, let's take a minute to read the text together. Will you stand with me in honor of God's word?

Read Col. 4:7-18

Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹ and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. ¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), ¹¹ and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. ¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. ¹³ For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴ Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶ And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. ¹⁷ And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.” ¹⁸ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

May the Lord add his blessing to the reading...

1. Now before we begin learning about the individual members of Paul's team, I want to make a couple comments about Paul relationship with his teammates. First, it is evident that Paul loved these men! Consider how he speaks of them here:

- A. Tychicus, (7) “he is a beloved brother.”
- B. Onesimus: (9) “our beloved brother.”
- C. Mark, (10) Barnabas and Jesus called Justice, “They have been a comfort to me.”

- D. (13) Luke is “the beloved physician.
- E. If pastors/elders in a local church believe Paul’s life is worthy of emulation, then we should cultivate the same kind of affection for one another that Paul had with his men. And by the way, I’m happy to report that this is true among the elders of Calvary Bible Church.

2. And notice how Paul speaks about their character:

- A. Tychicus is a Faithful Minister
- B. Onesimus, Paul also describes as faithful.
- C. Epaphras, Paul Characterizes as a Servant of Christ.

3. And you know, when we think of a ministry team - like a board of elders – or a team of evangelists, etc. it’s easy to focus on whether or not each man has a firm grasp of sound theology, whether they are gifted to fulfill their calling. But often what is missing among Christian leaders is a genuine love and affection for one another. For Paul, however, he not only worked with these men, he loved them. He had a deep affection for them.

4. Let’s take a few minutes to acquaint ourselves with these dear saints. First, Paul introduces us to

I. Two Faithful Messengers:

- 1. (v.7) Paul identifies them as Tychicus and Onesimus.
- 2. I think it’s safe to say that Tychicus came to know Christ either directly or indirectly under the ministry of Paul in Asia Minor (Present-day Turkey). He was a close associate of Paul who must have spent a significant amount of time under Paul’s teaching, serving Paul in practical ways and earning his trust. Usually, when the text mentions Tychicus, however, is nowhere near his mentor. That’s because Paul entrusted Tychicus with the weighty responsibility of being the chief communications officer for the growing network of churches Paul planted.

3. In fact, right here (7) Paul's letter tells the Colossian believers that he has sent Tychicus, to "tell you all about my activities." Again (8) "I have sent him for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may comfort your hearts.

A. Do you sense Paul's concern? He's in jail and he knows these dear saints in Colossae are worried about him as were the churches in Philippi, and Ephesus, and the other churches. Tychicus was sent to deliver Paul's letter and to comfort them about his situation and encourage their hearts.

B. As chief communication officer, he was the one primarily responsible for delivering Paul's letters wherever they needed to go. Rome did have a reliable postal service, but Paul insisted that his letters be delivered by hand so that a real man would be there to personally relay news, answer questions, can render comfort.

4. The other messenger Paul mentions here is a young man by the name of Onesimus. Now this is an interesting character. Try to follow this narrative with me.

Onesimus had been a servant/slave in Colossae. We don't know how he became a slave, but we do know that he served the household of a highly respected man of some influence in Colossae. At some point, it seems, Onesimus stole something from his master and ran away. I suspect he thought that if he could make it to Rome without being caught, he would simply blend in with the teeming crowds and disappear.

In the mystery of God's providence, however, he found himself face to face with the apostle Paul who was still in chains. Paul, of course, shared with Onesimus the Mystery of Christ, and the Lord opened his heart. Onesimus repented and believed in the Lord.

Paul, then, disciplines Onesimus for an undetermined length of time, but then decides to send him home to make things right with his master who lived in Colossae. Who was his master? Well, it was a man you have all heard of. His name is Philemon, who, as it turns out, was a personal friend of Paul! Apparently, Paul had been instrumental in leading Philemon to Christ years earlier, and in that sense was in Paul's debt. Furthermore, it seems that the church of Colossae gathered in Philemon's house! "Oh, what tangled webs we weave."

So, from his place of incarceration, Paul writes his letter to the Colossians. Then writes another letter to Philemon with instructions about how he should

respond to young Onesimus when he arrives at Philemon's door. Can you imagine how that scene played out? Onesimus, the thieving run-away slave having caused significant harm to his Master's house, having been on the run for weeks or months, now unexpectedly (much like the prodigal son) shows up at Philemon's door and says something like this, "Master, before you say anything, would you please read this letter? Its from your friend – the Apostle Paul.

5. Now, obviously, there is more to tell about this narrative, which is one reason why I intend (starting in a couple weeks) to offer a two-sermon series on Paul's brief letter called Philemon.

6. Getting back to our text, then, now, remember that from Jail, Paul writes his letter to the Colossians and entrusts it to Tychicus to deliver. Along with that letter, Paul also gives him the letter to Philemon and instructs Onesimus (the run-away slave) to team u with Tychicus and go home.

7. Additionally, with those two letters, Paul also entrusts Tychicus with a letter to the Ephesians, and his famous letter to the Philippians as well. The mission of Tychicus was to deliver all four letters and make sure Onesimus safely arrives back at the home of Philemon. No wonder Paul refers to Tychicus as his beloved brother, fellow minister and fellow servant in the Lord.

8. Now, I don't know about you, but I find these details fascinating and encouraging. Its as if Paul is pulling back the curtain to give us peak behind the scenes where the nitty-gritty of ministry is worked out.

8. Well, more could be said about the two Faithful Messengers, but let's move on to the...

II. Two Fearless Ministers:

(Aristarchus & Mark)

1. Aristarchus is described by Paul as "My fellow prisoner." Acts 19 identifies Aristarchus as a companion of Paul's as he traveled through Macedonia. I call him a Fearless Minister because in Acts 19 we are told that he and man named Gaius were

seized and dragged into the theater of Ephesus because their gospel had caused serious harm to the businesses of the local silver smith's.

2. The Lord delivered them by natural means, but they're experience marks them, at least in my mind, as men of courage. I think that opinion is further justified by the fact that, at the time of this letter, Aristarchus is in jail with Paul. We are not told why he is in jail. Not all of Paul's ministry teammates were in jail, but Aristarchus was. I think it's safe to assume that whatever ministry he was participating in with Paul got him into the same trouble Paul was facing. Just another reason to identify him as a man of courage.³

3. O' how the church needs men like Aristarchus who are willing to take risks and even suffer for the sake of the gospel! They are not super men. They are ordinary people like you and me who minister the gospel even when its uncomfortable to do so.

4. Now, the other "fearless minister" is Mark (also called John). The fear he had to overcome, however, was the fear of humiliating failure. You probably remember his story.

5. As a young man he was invited to join Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. But when the going got tough, he quit and went home. When Paul's second journey rolled around a year or so later, Barnabas wanted to give Mark another chance, but Paul would have none of it. Acts 15:39 tells us there was a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over the issue. So, they each chose another ministry companion and went their separate ways.

6. When I say that Jesus builds his church through the fallible, dependent work of ordinary men, here is a vivid example. On the one hand you have Mark who failed as a missionary. On the other hand, you have two godly men who are at loggerheads over a significant ministry decision. In the end they make the painful decision to separate. That's not good! But somehow God sovereignly rules over every fumble we make to further his kingdom. Isn't that wonderful news?

7. Let me show you the providential conclusion of those human failures. Some time after Mark returned to Jerusalem where his mother lived, he apparently became a disciple of the apostle Peter. We know that Peter knew Mark's family as it was to Mark's mother's house that he retreated after the angel released him from jail.

8. Furthermore, some years after his disgraceful return home, Peter writes his first epistle. And in 1 Peter 5:13 Peter refers to Mark as “my son” – a term that is used in Scripture of a faithful disciple. Clearly, Peter and Mark had developed a very close friendship. And consider this. When Mark arrived home from his missionary failure, the man who befriended him was the disciple who famously denied his Lord – not once, but three times. Turns out, the apostle Peter was a fallible man just like Mark, and just like you and me. And yet, God used them in powerful ways.

9. Most scholars believe that the found in the Gospel of that bears Mark’s name were derived from the Apostle Peter himself as Mark sat under his tutelage. My best guess is that Mark’s faithful production of the Gospel of Mark, along with Peter’s testimony of Mark’s proven character, was what eventually resulted in Mark being restored to Paul while Paul was in prison. In fact, Paul even became Mark’s advocate. (read v. 10). Then again, towards the end of Paul’s life, he famously writes to Timothy asking him to come to his prison before winter. And then he says (2 Tim. 4:11), “And bring Mark with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”

10. You see, Jesus is building his church through the labor of fallible, dependent people like you and me. With all of our mistakes; all of our foolish decisions; all of our inadequacies, and all our sin. Jesus loves to use such people because by doing so, all the glory rests in God.

11. And you know, I have to wonder if that was the message Mark intended to communicate when, in his rendering of the arrest of Jesus in Gathsemane, he records (probably of himself), (Mk. 14:51) “And a young man followed [Jesus], with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.” What a humiliating moment in the life of Mark. But God gives grace to the humble.

Conclusion:

Now, I know I have only made it through two categories of Paul's faithful companions, but in the interest of leaving sufficient time for the Lord's table, we'll park it here for now. But here is the message I want you to leave with...

Jesus is Building his church through the fallible dependent labor of
ordinary people like us.

III. Four Tireless Coworkers: (Epaphras, Luke & Jesus called Justice) and Demas

IV. One Distant Supporter: (The brothers and Nympha)

V. One Fellow Soldier: (Archippus)

Paul's Final Salutation:

a