

Companions of the Apostle Paul

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Christian Character | *The Sword & Trowel*

November 2008

Towards the end of Paul's remarkable letter to the Colossians, written during his first imprisonment in Rome, he names seven men who assisted him at that time, men whose lives continue to challenge and encourage us today.

These were not the only fellow workers of Paul, for such significant pastors as Timothy and Titus are not referred to, but the 'Roman seven' have much to teach us, and in this article we shall assign to each one a different term to capture his distinctive feature.

Tychicus

The first two to be named are travelling as bearers of the letter, Tychicus being the senior of them. Paul writes: 'All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you (*Colossians 4.7*).' What distinguishing term can we give to this native of Ephesus, a long-time travelling companion with the apostle, who engaged in preaching, evangelism and many other duties besides? The most fitting, surely, is – a servant.

Tychicus had accompanied Paul as a representative of the Gentile churches when he took a great offering of relief to Jerusalem, going at least as far as Miletus with him. He was a courier for the letter to the Ephesians, and possibly carried 2 Corinthians (accompanied by Titus). He was sent by Paul to Crete to minister alongside Titus, and also to Ephesus, probably to succeed Timothy.

Tychicus was one of that early band of preachers who had risked their lives with Paul on his third missionary journey, and now he has been sent by him to Colosse carrying out the captive apostle's instructions.

Just look at the way Tychicus is described by Paul. He is (verse 7) 'a beloved brother', or one for whom Paul had very great affection. His character, lifestyle and love for Christ, drew out the strong affection of Paul.

He also manifested a tremendous concern for Paul's work and health, being sensitive to his needs and meeting them as far as he could.

To be someone described as a 'beloved brother' indicated a person of unselfish friendship and kindness, and it would appear from his record that nothing was too much for Tychicus. A servant spirit was the keynote of his life.

The apostle goes on to call him 'a faithful minister', because he cared for people. He was a preacher, certainly, but also a personal encourager and exhorter, exercising a great ministry of comfort and challenge. He had believers on his heart.

Being 'faithful' also means that he was loyal to the Word, the ideal man, therefore, to send to Colosse at a time when heretics were knocking at the door. He taught the Truth accurately and plainly, as one utterly bound to his high commission.

Then, as if these terms of commendation were not enough, Paul calls Tychicus a 'fellow servant in the Lord', a term rich with meaning. First, it describes him as a colleague; a team member. Tychicus, for all his strengths and capacities, was not an individualist running after his own reputation and glory. He was happy to assist the apostle and to work unobtrusively with others.

He gave himself to the ministry as a diligent servant, or slave (in the Greek). A slave was owned by his master, and served his demands and comforts every hour of the day. This was the spirit of Tychicus as a servant of Christ. He would do anything that was required of him.

Paul does not speak of him as a personal servant, but as a 'fellow servant in the Lord'. He would do anything for the sake of the ministry.

Tychicus will visit Colosse, says Paul, to 'know your estate,' or circumstances and to 'comfort your hearts', or rather, to encourage you. He will relate to your trials, share your opportunities, and do all he can to help. He will, of course, preach about Christ, lifting him up, teaching wonderful things, and encouraging you in the mission.

Inevitably, he will speak of eternal glory. If your circumstances are hard, he will point your minds to that great, forthcoming, eternal glory. There was no better person for such a task than Tychicus, transparently at the disposal of the Lord, faithful to the Word, and faithful to believers. But his characteristics should be true of all of us, for this is the objective of God's work in our hearts.

Are we servants, fully at Christ's disposal, or do we run off after earthly interests? Tychicus, one of the close companions of Paul, is a pattern of unselfish love for Christ which should be the great goal of all our lives.

Of course, it must be said that Paul would have unconsciously attracted to his band of close fellow workers people like himself, who were inspired by his life. If those of us who are ministers were more like Paul, then we would naturally gather likeminded believers in our churches.

Onesimus

The next name to be mentioned is that of – 'Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.' Most readers will know about Onesimus, whose distinctive description must be a trophy of grace. A slave of Philemon, a wealthy man of Colosse converted through the preaching of Paul, Onesimus had stolen money and absconded to Rome. In due course he had somehow come in touch with Christians, and Paul, and had found the Lord, and then been totally changed. Now he will be returned to Philemon and to the church at Colosse, no longer a thief and a runaway, but as a servant of God. He is now a 'faithful and beloved brother', a mature believer, who may be entirely trusted.

Are we trophies of grace? Have we really been changed? There are some people who say they have come to the Lord, but you could not emphatically say they are trophies of grace, because they are not much different from how they were before. They do not seem to have a new spirit and a new heart, being entirely for the Lord and his worship and work. They are still feathering their nests in this world and getting their pleasures from earthly things.

Onesimus could be sent back as a totally transformed young man, and that is what we long for in every worshipper. Have we truly repented of sin, sought the Lord, trusted in the work of Christ on Calvary, come to him as Saviour, and sincerely yielded our lives to him? Only if this is so will we be seen to be trophies of grace, with new motives and desires in life. May all readers be of the spiritual lineage of Onesimus – a trophy of grace!

Aristarchus

Paul's third named companion is to remain in Rome, but sends his greetings: 'Aristarchus...saluteth you' (the word in the Greek means 'embraces' you). He sends his fondest greetings.

Aristarchus was a Macedonian from Thessalonica, and we must 'label' him as sacrificial. He seems to be included as the first of three Jewish helpers. Once violently seized along with Paul (and Gaius)

at Ephesus, he travelled with the apostle during the third missionary journey, and joined with him as a prisoner on ‘the perilous voyage’, ending in shipwreck. Aristarchus is a very notable companion of Paul.

Here, he is called ‘my fellowprisoner’, which is both interesting and slightly confusing. He was arrested with Paul at Ephesus but that arrest did not last. Then he would have been treated as a prisoner no doubt (though not personally under arrest) on the perilous voyage. But Paul clearly means that he is a prisoner with him in Rome, and this is the point of confusion.

In the letter to Philemon, Epaphras is called a fellow prisoner, and Aristarchus is not. Here in Colossians, Aristarchus is named as a fellow prisoner and Epaphras is not. As Colossians and Philemon went out at the same time, the mystery deepens.

The most probable solution is that Aristarchus and Epaphras alternated in tours of duty as voluntary fellow prisoners. In turn, they were willing to be bound like Paul in his room and be treated in exactly the same way. To stay with Paul in the hired house of his first Roman imprisonment did not allow complete freedom, because the companion could possibly have overpowered the guarding soldier and released the prisoner. To share the apostle’s ministry of prayer and writing, for the sake of security, you would wear the same shackles and be treated as a prisoner of imperial Rome. Aristarchus, it appears, was one of those who was prepared to share Paul’s sufferings.

The word translated ‘prisoner’ means a prisoner of war. Paul seems to be reminding us that he and Aristarchus were not in prison as criminals, but as captives in the world’s war against Christ and the Gospel. A prisoner of war possesses a special honour in the eyes of his own nation, and Aristarchus, with Paul, may wear this title of distinction as a contender in the great battle for souls. He deserves the epithet – *sacrificial*.

Is there anything of Aristarchus in us? Do we say, ‘My career is for Christ, not for me, and if I cannot rise to the top without forfeiting my service for him, I won’t attempt to do it’? Certainly some believers are enabled by the Lord to get to the top and still serve him, the Lord opening up great opportunities of witness to them. But that is for the Lord to bring about. The rule for us is to be willing to accept a modest station in life, if necessary, to be chiefly for Christ.

Marcus

Another well-known helper of Paul at this time was ‘Marcus, sister’s son to Barnabas’, better known to us as John Mark (verse 10). What descriptive word may be assigned to John Mark? Undoubtedly that of conqueror. Approximately 12 to 14 years previously he had been given the great privilege of serving with Paul and Barnabas to travel, preach, and commence churches. However, in Pamphylia he deserted that missionary journey and went back to his home in Jerusalem.

Why did he go? Many think he was scared in Pamphylia, being somewhat soft and unreliable. He recoiled from the threat of persecution and ill treatment. Although possessing the physical strength and energy of youth, he had not yet developed courage and persistence. His desertion was so serious that Paul would not have him back on his next missionary journey, giving great offence to Barnabas, so that Barnabas took Mark and went his own way.

In time, however, Mark conquered his weaknesses to become a leading servant of Christ, no doubt owing much to Paul’s firm stand. After a dozen or more years we see his remarkable transformation. He applied himself, overcoming his lack of persistence. We see him now as an overcomer; a conqueror. He has obviously long repented of early failure and laid his weaknesses and his vulnerabilities before the Lord, who has given him character and strength to persevere. From that time he has gone forward, being instrumental in the writing of the Gospel that bears his name, which is really

the Gospel of Peter, for whom he acted as scribe.

Surely we must ask: what about us? Does the earlier John Mark describe us? Do we make five-minute commitments to the Lord – undertakings that quickly die out? Do we flit from one activity to another beginning with enthusiasm, but proving unstable and unreliable?

Do we have a record of numerous unkept promises to God? The self-conquering example of Mark tells us we can master our tendencies by the power of Christ.

If you are a young person, moved by God to serve him with zeal, but you find yourself easily distracted and diverted, don't incur a catastrophe like Mark before you see the need to appeal to the Lord to strengthen and settle you. Stretch for greater maturity and steadfastness, and the Spirit will enable you to conquer and master yourself, so that you become consistent and reliable.

It is a great encouragement to us to see Mark in the list of Paul's beloved helpers. We may all become conquerors for the service of Christ.

Jesus Justus

Another of Paul's helpers was 'Jesus [Joshua], which is called Justus', who like Mark and Aristarchus was a Jew. Says Paul – 'These only are my fellowworkers unto the kingdom of God, which have been a comfort unto me.' This does not mean that these three were his only fellow workers, but that they were the only Jews among his fellow evangelists.

We say fellow evangelists, because that is what the phrase 'unto the kingdom of God' indicates. They were fellow builders of the kingdom by the winning of souls. How interesting this is – that in a predominantly Gentile church there were these three conspicuous Jewish evangelists. The description fits all three, but as we know so little about Joshua Justus, not being mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament, we shall give him the epithet of evangelist. He is a fellow labourer unto or for the kingdom of God, bringing in the harvest of souls.

It is moving to hear Paul say that the three Jews had been a comfort, or a great encouragement, to him. We may say: 'Dear Paul, you are detained in chains, suffering great discomfort through painful ailments, and cut off from your widespread ministry, and the matter that cheers you more than anything else is to hear of the work of evangelists.' If only we would all be so spiritually minded, and so in tune with the heart of Christ!

Here is a challenge for all of us. When we were first saved we witnessed a great deal. Do we still? We took every opportunity to pray for those to whom we spoke, and we were eager to join in other outreach activities also. Are we still? Would Paul be able to say of us, 'He is a fellowworker unto the kingdom of God, and has been a comfort [encouragement] to me'?

Eparhras

After Justus the better-known name of Epaphras appears – 'Epaphras, who is one of you [a Colossian], a servant of Christ' (verse 12). What was distinctive about Epaphras? There is something that was probably true of the others also, but it particularly distinguishes this brother – he is an interceder. Paul says he was 'always labouring fervently for you in prayers'.

Epaphras had probably been converted through Paul's ministry in Ephesus, following which he returned to Colosse and evangelised the city. Not only that city, but he apparently founded churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis too. Now he is willing to share Paul's room, being treated as a prisoner like Aristarchus. So he prays alongside Paul.

The apostle provides us with detail about the contents of the prayers of Epaphras, who laboured

fervently for the Colossians, and others, that they would – ‘stand perfect and complete in all the will of God’. ‘Labouring fervently’ is very strong in the original, the English word ‘agonising’ coming directly from the Greek term.

Epaphras feels for the people, clearly praying for individuals and their situations, that they will progress in sanctification, knowledge and service for Christ, for all these are ‘the will of God’. This also includes their preservation in purity (that they will not surrender to the threatening Colossian heresy) and that glory may be brought to Christ through the salvation of souls.

The prayers of Epaphras are not fitful or listless, nor just occasional and half-hearted, they are wrestling pleadings for the people. He asks that they may become mature and complete in the will of God, which means – God’s will as expressed in his Word. In other words, he prays that they will have a clear grasp of doctrine.

He prays for them, no doubt by name, for he knows them, and he asks that they will obey spiritual duties day by day, and never be turned aside. That is the agenda for the prayers of Epaphras. Is it so with us?

Paul makes a kind of oath to attest the quality of the praying of Epaphras, saying – ‘I bear him record...’ He prayed as he did for three churches, constantly. If only we would be interceders of this quality there would possibly be many more churches like those three congregations throughout our land. Epaphras saluted them, and we salute him – the interceder!

Luke

The seventh companion to be named is Luke, and so much could be said of this remarkable man, but we shall use an Old Testament term and call him the apostle Paul’s armour bearer, because that is what he was. So often he was there, treating the apostle’s very serious health problem. We don’t know exactly what Paul’s chief illness was, but we know it was extremely painful, unsightly, and a handicap to him. However, Luke, the beloved physician, was often there. He was also a preacher.

A Gentile from Antioch of Syria, he was almost certainly a bachelor, and some very early references to him in tradition suggest he was also an able artist. There is an interesting theory, but it cannot be proved, that Luke went to university with Saul of Tarsus in that city, and some say that Apollos was also there, but not necessarily at the same time. Paul and Luke were close friends and it is possible that their friendship had roots in a similar place of education.

Rather daringly, some say he was not only a doctor, but had also been a ship’s doctor, or physician to a fleet. Certainly Acts 27 demonstrates a remarkable command of correct nautical terms and maritime information.

Tradition says that Luke lived a very long life, but he still lives today through the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, and the record shows that he was always ready to preach, serve, look after the apostle and, of course, to be an inspired penman of holy Scripture.

Nothing can be said too highly of Luke. Although obviously a clever man and well-educated (as we see in his use of Greek), he was pledged to serve the apostolic mission in every necessary way. As ‘armour bearer’ to Paul he was pre-eminently a team person, and this is the challenge his life presents to us.

We are all in a team as members of a church. Ideally, every capacity and ability is pledged to the Lord’s service, with no one trying to stand head and shoulders above anyone else for self-notice. You can see how this was true of all the companions of Paul, but you see it particularly well in the

long service of Luke.

Demas

A sadder note is struck in the case of the next named companion (verse 14), because we have to sorrow later at the defection of Demas. What about Demas, Paul? Can't you say something special about him? But Paul attaches no sure commendation to this man. In fairness, he is called a fellow soldier elsewhere, but from this passage you begin to wonder whether Paul senses that Demas is not fully stable, and could suffer a fall, for this is what happened.

Between five and seven years later Paul writes to Timothy – 'Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica' (*2 Timothy 4.10*).

We have not counted Demas among the seven who serve as examples to us, and the distinctive term we ascribe to him is – Demas the unstable.

Why did Demas forsake his calling? Was he a false convert? There is no mention of this, and the discernment of Paul would surely have discovered this long before. Earlier he had been a worthy companion of Paul, carrying out good work. He undoubtedly loved Christ, but there was something deficient in his spiritual walk, and the world clawed him back into its attractions.

He was probably a very able man who realised he could earn much money and possess a beautiful house in wonderful surroundings by taking up once again the goals and opportunities of Thessalonian commerce.

It could happen to any of us if we underestimate the power and the hostility of Satan, who watches continuously to see opportunities to turn us back to the world. If we begin to indulge covetous desires, personal conceits, or dubious entertainments, Satan will stir our minds to desire these things increasingly, and eventually turn us away from our first love.

Demas was snatched out of service by the enemy of souls when he came to desire worldly luxury and acclaim more than he desired Christ. If he was a true believer he would surely have been restored in time by merciful divine discipline, but he forfeited his privileged work.

If we find ourselves thinking too much about worldly things, overloving earthly possessions or activities, or aspiring to self-satisfaction, we must be cautioned by Demas, the companion of Paul. Even the godly may swiftly fall. Let us cast ourselves upon the Lord asking for protection, and recommit ourselves entirely to him. May the case of Demas, the unstable, warn our hearts.

Archippus

Having named seven worthy companions, plus Demas, Paul has a greeting and a word for two people in the churches of Colosse and Laodicea. One is Nymphas, about whom we know nothing, apart from the fact that a congregation somewhere met in his house.

The other is Archippus (called a fellow soldier in *Philemon*). The message for him borders on the blunt: 'And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.'

What has he done, or what is he not doing that he should be doing? It is likely that Archippus served as pastor in the church meeting in the house of Philemon (*Philemon 2*). Some say he was Philemon's son, set aside for the ministry of the Word.

What is the matter with him? Is he lacklustre? I believe it is something like this. He is an earnest young man who loves the Lord, and truly wants to serve him, but Paul seems to say, 'Why don't you

get on with it?' Perhaps he is not preaching the Gospel as he should be, tirelessly bringing in the lost and teaching the people. Something is distracting him, so we will call him Archippus, the distracted.

You see it today, even in the ministry. I know of a most able pastor who wrote a number of edifying books, and very long ones, while his church fell to pieces. He became distracted, and stopped evangelising. His writing totally engaged his emotional energies. His chosen field may have been good, but it took his time and attention from his primary ministry.

I can think of one or two ministers who have been chairmen of numerous missionary societies and other boards, but as they travelled here and there to chair this and that important meeting, their churches lay at death's door, with no increase.

These brethren have been sound, but sound asleep. Perhaps they needed the apostle to say to them, 'Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.'

Our motto should be – First things first. There is much to do; there are souls to win; there are people to build up, and we should be doing those things. I am not speaking about pastors who are distracted by sinful things, and worldly things, but some who have been distracted by secondary activities. Something else, however worthwhile, has interested them and taken their attention from their most important calling.

Only recently a missionary was telling me that there is a tendency in some lands for new missionaries to be planting Bible colleges before they have developed a single credible church, before they have opened a Sunday School. Paul says to Archippus – First things first, and get on with it.

It is not only ministers who may be distracted. Years ago I knew a young man who was conspicuously poor at being involved in any Christian service, but he was busy writing a 500-page book telling other Christians how they should live. The apostle's word to him would certainly have been – 'Take heed to your share of the labour commitment to your local church.'

Are we distracted by other things? We hear that some professing Christians spend weeks and weeks planning their holiday travel, rather than serving the Lord, while others devote all their spare time to home or hobby or sport. Perhaps some reader who sincerely loves the Lord errs in the wavering of his direction, and needs this same word – 'Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.'

We think that this word transformed Archippus the distracted, and galvanised him for years to come.

Most of the companions of Paul were marvellously committed people and we can learn so much from them. Think of Tychicus with his true servant spirit. O, to be like him – all for Christ and entirely at his disposal. Then think of Onesimus, a trophy of grace; a completely changed young man. May our own transformation at conversion last, and our graces grow and flourish.

Think of Aristarchus – so sacrificial. Today we are not called upon to become voluntary prisoners. All our sacrifices are so much easier to make, and we should make them gladly. Think of Mark, the conqueror, who overcame his weaknesses by the power of the Lord. There is hope for us, for we can all make progress for Christ.

Think of Justus the evangelist who so encouraged Paul. What do we do, by way of individual or corporate witness, for Christ? Think of Epaphras the interceder. Would British churches be declining if we were more like him?

And what of Luke, Paul's armour bearer, who, for all his outstanding education and abilities, willingly took a supportive role, and received the privilege of human authorship of Luke and Acts? How we need his humility and vision for teamwork!

Only Demas the unstable disappoints, his experience calling us to self-examination. And lastly Archippus the distracted, who needed firm direction to order his priorities aright.

Paul's epistles are all so pastoral that even the greetings are a blessing to us, if we heed them.