

The Well-Known Unknown: Onesimus Colossians 4:9

INTRODUCTION

This is part two in a series under the title “Well-Known Unknown”. We are looking at individuals who would otherwise be unknown in history, but they are known because they are specifically identified in the Bible.

Why look at such individuals, listed at the end of a letter, such as here in **Colossians 4**?

2 Timothy 3:16-17 – “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

Therefore, what God has to say in **Colossians 4:9** is also inspired and profitable for us. With a little work, by looking at other passages, we can unlock greater understanding from the Bible about what God did in the lives of individuals He identifies.

So...you might be wondering when you missed the first part in this series! Well, in October 2015, we looked at the person listed in **Colossians 4:8** – Tychicus.

- Our focus then was on the companion passage of **Ephesians 6**
- We also looked at passages in Acts, Colossians, 2 Timothy and Titus

Today, we are going to look at Tychicus’s traveling companion, Onesimus.

READ Colossians 4:8-9

Maybe I like these two guys because they are the announcement guys (like me).

By looking at the first part of the **v.9** we see our outline for this morning:

- I. Onesimus’ **Faith**
- II. Onesimus is **Faithful**
- III. Onesimus being in **Fellowship**

I. Faith – “beloved brother”

Not a familial or cultural relationship, could not be any more different.

Paul:

Philippians 3:5 – Paul is a top-level Jew, a Pharisee, he had zeal like nobody else as a Jew
Acts 21:39 – a Roman citizen; citizenship by birthright; played citizenship card in Acts 22

Onesimus:

Read **Philemon 10-16** – Onesimus is a Gentile and a runaway slave – no similarity to Paul yet Paul calls him a “brother”

Philemon 16 - “brother” - be being “**in the Lord**” and “in Christ” with God as Father as stated in **Colossian 1:2**. Onesimus is in the family of God.

Context: Brotherhood is a basic concept, but read in the context of Onesimus:

Col 3:11 - “a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all”

Warning: could be understood as universalism or unlimited atonement.

Test question: brothers/sisters just because of Jesus’ work on the cross? NO

Yes, only because of Jesus’ work on the cross are we brothers and sisters in Christ but there is something that must be present:

Col 1:4 – “**faith in Christ**” is what binds us together

Col 1:5 – faith is grounded in the Word of Truth, the Gospel

Col 1:6-7 – Truth is heard, understood, taught, learned

- That is why we have sermons, Bible Hour, Bible study, home groups
- Need truth about the right Jesus, **vv.15-17, 2:8-16**
- Many claim brotherhood by faith in Jesus Christ - just read the sign on the building - but it is the wrong Jesus (**Gal 1:6-9**)

There are many other passages that describe who Jesus is.

Recall Pastor Miller’s sermon last week on Luke 9: Peter responds: “Jesus the Christ.”

Fun Fact: Rarely does Paul use the name Jesus Christ. Paul mostly uses “Lord Jesus Christ” or “Christ Jesus”.

Remember that Christ is not Jesus’ last name.

How did Onesimus get faith?

Col 1:13-14 – rescued and redeemed (**2:14** debt), personal for a slave

Summary: Brother Onesimus – Exhibit A of faith in Christ explained in Colossians

Application: How about you? Is Onesimus your brother in Christ? Yes, if we have the same faith in the same Jesus.

II. Faithful

Onesimus is not just a new convert.

Greek word: trusted, dependable

- This is the same original Greek word used in **Matt 25:21**; “Good and faithful servant”

Context: **Col 2:6-8** - Onesimus is established in his faith, so now he must walk in Christ doing as instructed.

Christianity is not just an emotional experience. Is there an emotional aspect? Absolutely.

But like faith, there is both a mental and an emotional aspect. There must be thinking and engaging.

- Mental aspect: knowing what to do – what is instructed, not just what you feel like
- Emotional aspect: with gratitude to God for what He has done

What are the specific instruction in **Col 3:22-24** - slaves obey masters

Note that this passage is not an endorsement of the abomination of slavery, particularly the horrific slavery of American history and ongoing slavery in the world.

We can talk more about this on Wednesday night's home group!

Instruction is more than obey externally; sincerity of heart is internal
Motivation for faithfulness; fear the Lord.

Application: none of us are slaves, but have our own instructions in **Col 3:18-21**

- Wives, husbands, children, fathers

Side note – command to children, recipients of this letter **1:2**

- Faithfulness is not something to put off until later

Another sidetrack regarding faithfulness:

Paul's example toward a lawbreaker

- He shared the gospel/ministered to a lawbreaker, but directed him to obey the law.

Our context: speeding ticket, steals from work, immigration laws?

- Share the gospel and minister to all, but do not fail to instruct to obey.

Application: Onesimus demonstrated faithfulness by going back to Philemon in Colossae. In order for Onesimus to be faithful, Paul had to be faithful as well.

What are you being directed to do to show faithfulness to God? What have you been putting off or ignoring? Are you studying Scripture to find out what your instructions are? Dig into God's Word!

III. Fellowship

4:9 - "who is one of your number" meaning he is part of the church

- what a beautiful picture of the community we live in

Let this sink in: Onesimus is a new convert, a runaway slave – and he is part of the church
Shame on those churches that lack ethnic, social and economic diversity

We do not focus on diversity. It should be a reality because we are all brothers/sisters in Christ.

Back to **4:9** – literally in the original Greek – "is from your number"

- the idea is that he is part of church before he is physically there
- "is" is a present verb: "action in progress" and "state of persistence"

Being part of the church is not optional , it is action in progress
Onesimus is not returning to Colossae where he might join the church.
He is a Christian, he is faithful, so he will be part of the church.

A state of persistence indicates not temporary, and it takes work.
Can I vent for a moment on the East Valley shuffle? People moving from church to church
checking them out.
If you find a church that is preaches God’s Word and it is in your community, go there.
If you find a church where they are faithful believers proclaiming the real Christ, go there.
Praise God for persistence in the local church.

Another thing to notice in the phrase Paul uses here:

“**who is one of your number**” also used for someone else: Epaphras - Col 4:12

- 4:12 and 1:7 indicates he is the lead pastor of the church

Application: the newest member of the church, a runaway slave is referenced in the same way
as the pastor. Some of us have been here since beginning of STBC. Some of us are in leadership
positions recognized in the Bible. We are part of one number – there is an equality here. No
believer is better than another.

Extra note on fellowship:

In 2012, I preached on the letter to Philemon and we pulled out of this letter 10 characteristics of
the Colossae church from Philemon. This sermon is online if you want to listen to it.

Now, on the 11th San Tan Bible Church Anniversary Sunday, let us remind ourselves of the
10 characteristics of a healthy church from references in the letter to Colossians:

1. Christ-centered (1:4)
2. Love for other believers (1:4)
3. Gospel foundation (1:5)
4. Bearing fruit (1:6)
5. Learning and understanding (1:6-7)
6. Leadership works hard (1:7)
7. Encouraging communication (1:8)
8. Holy Spirit led (1:8)
9. Pray for each other (4:12)
10. Meet together (4:16)

CONCLUSION

Onesimus had **faith**, he was **faithful** and he was in **fellowship**.
Those words describe a runaway slave living 2000 years ago. Do they describe you?