**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Message Of Philemon: Transformed By The Gospel (1):**

**“Philemon, Our Dear Friend and Fellow Worker”**

**Philemon 1-3**

**November 19, 2023**

Philemon is Paul’s shortest letter. In the past some have called it a “postcard;” but today it might be referred to as a “text message.” It reminds us that the gospel transforms our lives and makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. It also reminds us that we should treat one another with brotherly love, no matter how great the differences between us.

But does brotherly love really work, especially when circumstances are extremely difficult? Does it work, for example, in a relationship between a prominent slave owner and one of his runaway slaves? Evidently, Paul has no doubt! That’s why he’s writing this note to Philemon, his dear friend and fellow worker, on behalf of Onesimus, his former slave but now his brother in Christ.

Philemon wasn’t just a Christian. He was a Christian leader, and the church in Colossae was meeting in his home (vv. 1-2; Col. 4:7-9). Paul is writing to him during his “*imprisonment for the gospel*” (v. 13), but he doesn’t tell us where he is. Most commentators say it’s Rome since he was allowed to preach during his two-year house arrest while there. As we read at the end of Acts, “*he welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance*” (Acts 28:30-31).

If so, then that’s where Paul meets Onesimus. Not all the details are clear, but it seems that Onesimus had stolen some money and then had run away (v. 18). He could have sought refuge in Rome, hoping to disappear in the Roman Empire’s largest metropolis. But in God’s good providence, he came into contact with Paul, who led him to Christ (v. 10).

Paul clearly grew to enjoy his company (v. 12) and benefitted from his ministry (vv. 11, 13). He wished that he could keep Onesimus with him, but he knew that he had no right to retain him. This would not only have been illegal (according to Roman law), it also would have been a breach of fellowship between himself and Philemon.

So, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon along with this brief letter. By using very gentle language and carefully chosen words, he requested (not commanded) that Philemon welcome Onesimus back as a “*dear brother* (v. 16), just as he would receive Paul himself (v. 17). He also asked that any demand for financial compensation due to Onesimus’ actions might be charged to his account (v. 18). After all, Philemon owed his very life to Paul, since Paul had also led him to Christ (v. 19).

The decision, of course, was to be Philemon’s entirely. But Paul was confident that his friend would respond in the right way, and also believed that “*he will do even more than I ask*” (v. 21). Those words are intriguing; by reading between the lines we could conclude that the “*more than I ask*” refers to Philemon’s willingness to send Onesimus back to Paul. If so, then this is not just a plea for Philemon to *forgive* Onesimus. It’s a not-so-subtle hint for Philemon to *free* him, so that he might continue to minister with Paul on behalf of the gospel.

That’s Paul’s view on slavery: He sees slaves-in-Christ as equals to everyone else in the body of Christ. He never became a political activist who stirred up an abolitionist movement to abolish slavery throughout the Roman Empire. He dug deeper – much deeper than surface behaviors. He urges Christians to treat one another with brotherly love. Evidently, Paul knew that when Christians start doing this, masters will become servants and slaves will become free, *one soul at a time*.

The outline of the letter is simple: **(a)** the salutation (vv. 1-3); **(b)** Paul’s thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon (vv. 4-7); **(c)** Paul’s appeal on behalf of Onesimus (vv. 8-20); **(d)** his personal remarks, extended greetings from his co-workers in Rome, and concluding benediction (vv. 21-25). Today’s study focuses on the opening three verses – often overlooked, but oh, so important!

**The Salutation (vv. 1-3):** “*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.” Paul begins in the same way as many ancient letter writers did by mentioning (a) the name of the senders, (b) the recipients, and (c) a greeting.

***First****,* Paul is the author. He describes himself as a “*prisoner of Christ Jesus,*” which means “for Christ’s sake.” As already noted, he was under house arrest in Rome (in his own rented quarters) and was able to receive visitors (like Onesimus). During this time, he wrote four letters (Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians).

Paul also mentions that he is writing along with “*Timothy, our brother*” (v. 1a). But in this very personal letter to Philemon, he uses “I” rather than “we.” Paul mentions Timothy, therefore, not as a co-author, but because Timothy had ministered alongside him for much of his ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:1ff). While there, he would have met Philemon and others from the city of Colossae (Acts 19:10). It’s evident, then, that Philemon and Timothy knew each other.

***Second****,* the recipients include Philemon, described as “*our dear friend and fellow worker*”, along with “*Apphia, our sister*” and “*Archippus our fellow soldier*” and “*the church that meets in your home*” (vv. 1b-2). Philemon was evidently a prominent and well-to-do Christian, who probably owned other slaves besides Onesimus. He was wealthy enough to have a large home where the church family could assemble on the Lord’s Day. He was also a treasured friend of Paul, who perhaps had been converted under Paul’s ministry (v. 19).

The likeliest place for Philemon to have heard Paul preach was Ephesus, during Paul’s ministry while he was there on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:9-10). Perhaps he then assisted Paul in his ministry at Ephesus, and then continued to minister to the Christians in Colossae upon returning home (vv. 5, 7). That’s probably the reason why Paul refers to him not only as a “dear friend,” and but also a “fellow worker.”

*Apphia* may have been Philemon’s wife. *Archippus,* as *a fellow soldier*, had apparently played an important role in assisting Paul in his missionary labors. No doubt he had faithfully stood at Paul’s side through his many persecutions and trials – perhaps even his imprisonment. He too was a resident of Colossae, possibly the son of Philemon and Apphia.

*Third,* Paul’s greeting is more than a conventional literary device that’s found in the letters of the ancient world. It’s an expression of his deep concern that his readers experience more of their life in Christ: “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (v. 3).

“Grace” is undeserved favor that reconciles us to God and saves us through Christ (as in Ephesians 2:8-9). But here, the grace Paul has in view is enabling grace; it’s the grace that supplies all our needs (as in 2 Corinthians 12:9) and gives us the strength to minister to others on behalf of Christ (as in Eph. 3:8). Surely Philemon will need the work of grace in his life if he is to comply with Paul’s request. Onesimus *has* wronged him; first by stealing and then by fleeing, which were both crimes in the Roman world. Without grace, there is no forgiveness.

The “peace” Paul has in view is more than an absence of conflict. It’s the blessing of inner tranquility, as in Philippians 4:7; “*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*.” The best way to describe this peace is by realizing what it does for us in the midst of dealing with the *real* problems of life (i.e., an incurable disease; an incorrigible son or daughter; a devastating hurricane or tropical storm). In Philemon’s case, it’s the calm in the aftermath of a runaway slave who had stolen some of his money.

**1Q.** But *where* does this inner peace and enabling grace come from? **A.**  Both flow from the same source: “*from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (v. 3b). Here is yet another affirmation that Jesus is God (the *Lord* Jesus Christ), and that He and the Father are co-equal (from God the Father *and* the Lord Jesus Christ).

**2Q.** How, then, do we experience *more* of God’s inner peace and enabling grace? **A.** The same way Philemon and the Colossian Christians would have! It’s by hearing and heeding the Word of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and by resting in the truth that what God has promised He will fulfill. This is but one example of what theologians have called “the means of grace” (the others include fellowship, worship, and the Lord’s Supper.)

**3Q.** So, did Philemon free Onesimus? **A.** Yes, he probably did. This letter from Paul is part of the inspired Word of God. When Philemon heard this word, and embraced this word through the enabling power of the Spirit of God, he would have been *strengthened by God’s grace* to comply with Paul’s plea. In fact, it’s hard to imagine how this brief note would have been preserved in the New Testament had he not!

But this letter was also written to the entire church. Surely Philemon would have been *encouraged by God’s people* to do the right thing. Epaphras, the man who planted the church (Col. 1:6-7), would have encouraged him. Tychicus, the man who was sent by Paul to bring Onesimus back to Philemon (Col. 4:7-9), would have encouraged him. Archippus, the “fellow soldier” for the cause of Christ (v. 2) would have also encouraged Philemon to do the right thing. There is much to be said about the importance of accountability in the Body of Christ!

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;*

*He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.*

*To added affliction He addeth His mercy; To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.*

*His love has no limit; His grace has no measure.*

*His power has no boundary known unto men.*

*For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!*