**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Message Of Philemon (5): Transformed By The Gospel**

**“Travel Plans, Final Greetings, And A Familiar Benediction”**

**Philemon 21-25**

**December 17, 2023**

Philemon is the smallest book in the New Testament. It’s also a largely neglected book due to its brevity and its strictly personal nature. But this wasn’t always the case. During the American Civil War it was at the center of an intense theological debate. Those who defended slavery and those who opposed it used the book of Philemon to justify their positions.

Philemon was a wealthy Christian who had been converted under Paul’s ministry. Like other wealthy men in the Roman Empire, he owned slaves. Onesimus was one of those slaves. Apparently, he had stolen money from his master and ran away to Rome, where he met Paul and was converted. So, when Paul sent him back to Philemon, along with this letter, why didn’t he come right out and condemn slavery? This letter would have given him the ideal opportunity to do it.

The reason is disarmingly simple. Paul wrote this letter as a Roman prisoner, and a Roman prisoner was in no position to demand the abolition of slavery throughout the Roman Empire (in the first century, more than 20 % of the population were slaves). However, Paul does teach that the gospel so transforms the institution of slavery that it ceases to be slavery by any meaningful definition. He commands Christian masters to pay their slaves for their work (Col. 4:1), and he urges masters to treat Christian slaves as brothers rather than slaves. *Thus, the gospel serves to abolish slavery one soul at a time*.

As we saw in last week’s study, Paul had led Philemon to faith in Christ (v. 19). He used this special relationship to request that Philemon welcome Onesimus as he would have welcomed himself (v. 17). He also offered to pay any debt that Onesimus might have owed, backed by his personal, handwritten guarantee (vv. 18-19). Finally, he expressed his wish that he might receive some “benefit” in the Lord from Philemon (v. 20). By using a play on the meaning of Onesimus’ name (“useful” or “profitable”), the “benefit” or “profit” that Paul wished to receive was none other than Onesimus! But this would mean that Philemon would have to release his slave and send him back to Paul as a “freedman.”

**Q.** Was Paul’s request granted? **A.** Yes; “Otherwise,” writes F. F. Bruce, “the letter to Philemon would not have survived! That it survived at all is a matter calling for comment, but if Philemon had hardened his heart and refused to pardon and welcome Onesimus, let alone send him back to Paul, he would certainly have suppressed the letter.”

In the verses before us today, Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will do even more than he asks (v. 21). He is also confident that he will be released from prison and is hopeful that he can visit Philemon and Apphia in the near future (v. 22). Then he closes the letter with his usual greetings (vv. 23-24) and a familiar benediction (v. 25).

**A. Paul’s Confidence (vv. 21-22):** “*Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. And one thing more: prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers*.”

It’s important to remember that Paul has not *commanded* Philemon to do anything. Nevertheless, he is confident that his beloved friend and fellow worker will not only read what is written but read between the lines and see what he would really like him to do – and then do it! In fact, he adds, “*knowing that you will do even more than I ask*.”

It’s hard to know exactly what Paul had in mind when he added those words. He may have meant; **(a)** “I know that you will send Onesimus back to me, *and right away*;” or **(b)** “*I know that* you will emancipate him, and right now; or **(c)** “I know that you will emancipate him, *along with the rest of your slaves*;” or **(d)** “I know that you will urge other masters in Colossae *to do the same thing*;” or **(e)** “I know that you will find a ‘useful’ ministry for him, *before you send him back*to me.” *Whatever* Paul may have meant, his confidence was in the outworking of God’s grace in the heart of Philemon!

In the very next verse, he adds “*And one thing more*” (NIV), or “*At the same time* (ESV) *prepare a guest room for me . . .*” Paul also expects to be released from prison and to come to Colossae for a visit. If we are reading between the lines, it’s not too hard to see what he may be saying: “Surely you would not want to disappoint me when I get there!” And just where was this guest room? It could have been in any member’s house large enough to have a room to accommodate an apostle – including Philemon’s house.

One final thought: Paul’s confidence that God will release him from prison is grounded in his conviction that God answers the prayers of His people. “*I hope to be released to you in answer to your prayers*.” Here the second person pronoun is plural; “*in answer to all your prayers.*” These are the prayers of Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the rest of the Christians in Colossae. As is evident throughout his letters, Paul expects and *wants* believers to pray for him, and for all those who are engaged in spiritual warfare. Dependance on the prayers of others is never incompatible with trusting in the Lord to meet our every need!

To the Thessalonians, he says,“*Brothers, pray for us*” (1 Thess. 5:25); and to the Colossians he says, “*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains*” (Col. 4:2-3); and to the Romans, he writes, “*Now I urge you brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me*” (Rom. 15:30). If a man of Paul’s spiritual caliber and gifting was so dependent on the prayers of others for his effectiveness in ministry, how much more should we be today!

**B. Greetings from Paul’s Companions (vv. 23-24):** “*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers*.” As we have seen in a previous study, *Epaphras* was the founder of the Colossian church (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13). In those passages, Paul does not identify him as a “fellow prisoner,” but here he does. Perhaps he was arrested just after Paul wrote Colossians. As in Colossians, Paul also sends greetings from the four others.

*John Mark* was with Paul (Col. 4:10); as we know, he was the young man who failed Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:36-41). By now he has been reconciled with Paul, and Paul was grateful for his faithful ministry (Cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). *Aristarchus* was from Thessalonica and accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 19:29; 27:2).

*Demas* is mentioned three times in Paul’s letters; here as Paul’s fellow worker (v. 24) then in Col. 4:14 as simply “Demas;” and finally in 2 Tim. 4:10, as having forsaken Paul “*because of his love for this present world*.” John Mark failed and was restored. Demas started out well but then fell away (what matters is *not* how we start, but how we finish.) *Luke*, of course, was the beloved and faithful physician (Col. 4:14) who traveled with Paul, ministered to him, and eventually wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. As we have seen throughout our studies, Paul was a team player!

**C. Paul’s Familiar Benediction (v. 25):** “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit*.” Here Paul concludes the letter much like he began it – with a prayer that Philemon, his family, and the church might experience the grace of our Savior to the fullest! After all, we have been saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 8:9). When He paid the debt we could not pay, it was He who said, “Charge that to My account.” When we came to saving faith in Him, it was He who also said, “Receive them as You would receive Me.”

In this final verse, “*the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*” is His enabling, energizing grace. It’s the grace that will empower Philemon to comply with Paul’s request, and do even more. If he welcomed and pardoned Onesimus, he did it by “*the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*.” If he chose to be loving and generous, and forgiving and forbearing, he did it by “*the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*.” If he refused to conform to the world’s expectations by freeing Onesimus, without demanding any restitution, he did it by “*the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*.”

The same holds true for us today. Standing firm *against* the ways of the world – and *for* the principles of God’s Word – is never easy. Nor is it ever fashionable. It takes the energizing, sustaining, strengthening, and guiding “*grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*.” Paul knew this, and Philemon knew this, and Onesimus knew this; and so also should we. Some, of course, find it easier to trust in their own insights to do what’s right, or to yield to the pressure to conform to the world’s standards. But Paul and Philemon would have nothing to do with that thinking, and neither should we. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with *your* spirit – and mine – today!

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!

(Annie Johnson Flint)