
Bible Study

The Epistle of Paul to Philemon

December 29, 2018

Reading -- The Epistle to Philemon (Darby Translation)

Philemon 1-25

Paul, prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timotheus the brother, to Philemon the beloved and our fellow workman... Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always making mention of thee at my prayers, hearing of thy love and the faith which thou hast towards the Lord Jesus and towards all the saints... For love's sake I rather exhort, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also prisoner of Jesus Christ. I exhort thee for my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus, once unserviceable to thee, but now serviceable to thee and to me... Not any longer as a bondman, but above a bondman, a beloved brother, specially to me, and how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If therefore thou holdest me to be a partner with thee, receive him as me. But if he have wronged thee anything, or owe anything to thee, put this to my account. I, Paul, have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it... Yea, brother, I would have profit of thee in the Lord. Refresh my bowels in Christ. Being confident of thine obedience, I have written to thee, knowing that thou wilt do even more than I say. But withal, prepare me also a lodging, for I hope that I shall be granted to you through your prayers... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

The Surface Story and the Back Story

Every great passage of Scripture has a surface story and a back story. David and Goliath on the surface is the account of young David killing the giant enemy of Israel with a sling and a stone. But the back story -- David's background as shepherd, the nature of his service, his father's house -- is in many respects even more important for our spiritual instruction than the exploit itself.

The Epistle to Philemon has its own surface story. Onesimus was a slave in the household of Philemon who ran away. He ended up in prison in Rome, where the Apostle Paul was also imprisoned. Paul spoke the gospel to this lost young man, and Onesimus was converted. Now it is time for him to be released, and Paul proposes that he return to the very household he fled from -- with this letter. It is a letter of commendation, bearing witness to the new man that Onesimus has become. But beneath the surface is a whole world of teaching about relationships in the body of Christ.

Not Playing the Apostolic Authority Card

One of the first things to notice is what Paul does not do in verse 1. He does not introduce himself as an apostle. He does not open with a statement of his authority. He says: 'Paul, prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timotheus the brother, to Philemon the beloved and our fellow workman.' That is not a man pulling the apostolic authority card. It is a man presenting himself in the place of a prisoner -- the lowest possible earthly position -- and addressing his correspondent as a beloved fellow workman. An equal. The Lord Jesus said, take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart. Fellow workmen are yoked together. They pull together. There is no one holding the whip hand over the other.

The letter is also not from Paul alone. It is from Paul and Timothy together. Several of Paul's epistles begin this way -- Paul and Sosthenes, Paul and Silas.

These were not formalities. When the text says 'I' in verse 9, the 'I' is Paul and Timothy together. They had one heart and one mind. They were yoked together in writing. What Philippians 2:20 says of Timothy is the key: 'I have no man like-minded, who will with genuine feeling see how you get on.' That is the heart in tune not only with Paul but with the Lord. It was David caring for the sheep.

To Philemon the Beloved

The word for Philemon in verse 1 is 'the beloved.' There was love between Paul and Philemon. That is the relationship. The whole chapter is built on it. One could search through every verse of this short epistle and find it difficult to point to any verse that is least filled with the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. The most controlling principle in this letter is love. There is no place here for the woman riding the beast -- no whip, no threat, no coercion. But love is present in abundance, in circumstances as peculiar and difficult as any that believers encounter.

The Assembly in Thy House

Verse 2 addresses the assembly which is in Philemon's house. The letter is sent to a sister, Apphia, and to Archippus the fellow soldier, as well as to the whole gathering. It is not only for some brother. The sister is there. And Archippus is a fellow soldier -- under the command of the same commander, marching to the same orders.

Two things must be noted about the assembly in Philemon's house. First, this is not a support text for a house-church movement. The verse says nothing about the virtues of meeting in houses as opposed to other buildings. It is simply where the assembly happened to meet. If a hundred people came, and Philemon's house could not hold them, the answer is not to split into ten house-groups of ten. That thought is entirely absent from the text. Second, there is only one assembly, one

body of Christ. What met in Philemon's house was a local expression of that one universal assembly. The assembly at Philemon's house was not a different entity from the assembly at Ephesus or Corinth. It was the same assembly expressed in that location.

Grace and Peace from God Our Father

Verse 3 says: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Take those words away -- cut verse 3 out of the epistle -- and what is left would be flat. The profound beauty and depth of this letter rests on the grace and peace that come from such a source. Peace can be achieved by compromise -- but that is never God's way. Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: that is the only foundation on which the kind of relationship described in this letter can actually exist.

A Letter of Commendation: The Unity of the Body Expressed

When Onesimus arrives at the door of Philemon's house -- the house where the assembly of God meets, the very house from which he had fled as a runaway slave -- he brings this letter. In one sense, the letter is those believers in Rome, where Paul was in prison, bearing witness to the believers in Philemon's location that Onesimus is a brother in the Lord, and asking that he be received as such. It is the unity of the one body expressed in practice. The assembly in Ephesus was the same assembly of God as the assembly in Corinth. When believers traveled from one place to another, they were received on the strength of their commendation from the assembly they came from. They operated as one assembly expressed in multiple geographical locations.

What Onesimus' reception at Philemon's house would also represent is what we all share together: the one loaf at the Lord's table, which speaks of the one body of Christ -- His physical body that entered into death, and that same body

comprised of all believers. Both aspects in one.

Verse 11: Onesimus the Profitable, Now Serviceable to Both

The name Onesimus means profitable or serviceable. Before he ran away, he had perhaps been profitable to Philemon as a slave. But as a runaway, he was unprofitable -- not fulfilling what his name meant. Now Paul says of him in verse 11: 'once unserviceable to thee, but now serviceable to thee and to me.' How could this one man be serviceable both to Philemon in one place and to Paul in another? While he was with Paul in prison, he ministered to Paul there. When he returns to Philemon, he will minister there. But Paul says he is serviceable to both at once.

The answer lies in the oneness of the body. Because there is one body, not divided by geography, what Onesimus did for Paul was a help to Philemon too. And what he does now for Philemon is a help to Paul. There may be plainer Scriptures about the unity of the body of Christ. But there is scarcely one that is more practical -- expressed in the common events of daily life -- than the question of what you do when a runaway slave with a letter in his hand knocks on your door.

Verse 14: Nothing Without Thy Mind

Verse 14 is one of the keys to the whole epistle: 'I have wished to do nothing without thy mind, that thy good might not be as of necessity, but of willingness.' This is not Paul pulling the apostolic authority card. He says: I do not want to do anything without your mind. He wants Philemon's will to go along with his own. It could appear at first reading as a polite nod -- I want you to agree, but really we're going to do it my way. But that misreads the verse entirely.

The reason it is not heavy-handed is that Paul has complete confidence in what the Lord's will is, and complete confidence that Philemon will arrive at the same point once he has understood it. It is not Paul manipulating Philemon to a predetermined conclusion. It is Paul trusting that when the head in heaven is not left out of the calculation -- when Christ is the center of the assembly's thinking -- the slow thinkers and the fast thinkers will reach the same place. Because they are all trying to discern what the head wants, not trying to outthink each other.

Verse 17: Partner -- Verse 18: Put It on My Account

Verse 17 opens with the word 'partner': 'If therefore thou holdest me to be a partner with thee, receive him as me.' That is the language of true yoke-fellows (Philippians 4:3), pulling together in the same direction. Then verse 18 adds: 'if he have wronged thee anything, or owe anything to thee, put this to my account. I, Paul, have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it.' Paul takes upon himself the debt of Onesimus.

That is not just courtesy. It is a picture of what Christ did for us. The Lord Jesus took upon Himself the debt that we owed to God -- a debt incomparably greater than anything Onesimus owed Philemon. And in the light of that, the parable of the unforgiving servant is the background to Philemon's response: a servant forgiven an impossible debt who then throws a fellow servant in prison for a pittance. When we have been forgiven such a debt by God through Christ, it should be our pleasure to forgive whatever any brother or sister may owe us. 'Forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.'

Verse 21: Obedience -- Verse 22: Prepare a Lodging

Verse 21 says: 'Being confident of thine obedience, I have written to thee, knowing that thou wilt do even more than I say.' After all that has been said about love and wanting thy mind, Paul uses the word obedience. But obedience to

whom? Not to Paul as apostle. The obedience is to the Lord, whose will Paul has set out. Paul has complete confidence that Philemon sees the Lord's will as clearly as he does. And when Philemon acts on it, the obedience will be obedience to the Lord -- not compliance under Paul's apostolic pressure. That is the difference.

Verse 22 adds: 'prepare me also a lodging, for I hope that I shall be granted to you through your prayers.' This too is not a heavy hand. It is an invitation to prayer. Paul is still in prison. He is asking Philemon to pray for his release. The preparation of the lodging is faith anticipating the answer to prayer -- like the assembly gathered in Acts 12 praying for Peter's release while being astonished that he actually appeared at the door. Paul wanted Philemon to pray expecting. As we are reminded of the Lord's coming: we ought not to be surprised when He comes. We should be expecting Him.

Verse 25: With Your Spirit

The closing benediction is 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.' Why your spirit specifically? Scripture teaches that man is a three-part being -- body, soul, and spirit. The spirit is that part of man which has to do with God. It is the point of contact between God, who is a Spirit, and man. We pray with our spirit. The spirit is called the candle of the Lord -- it is both man's approach to God and God's means of access to the inner life of man. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with your spirit: that grace reaching the deepest part of the man, where God and man meet. Nothing else would be sufficient.

Faith in the Colossian letter establishes what became of Onesimus: 'Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you' (Colossians 4:9). Paul's confidence in Philemon was not misplaced, and the man who was once unserviceable became a faithful brother. That is the power of grace.

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Lord willing.