

**Philemon:**  
*“From Trash To Treasure”*  
Part 1 of 3

**Intro:**

Let's turn to the book of Philemon - which you will find right in front of the book of Hebrews. So if you find Hebrews, go left and you'll find it. It's a short book; only 25 short verses in fact, so it is very easy to miss.

We're going to look at this fascinating letter from Paul, perhaps one of the most personal letters that Paul wrote. Though the letter is short, there is a tremendous amount here, and I'm not sure we'll be able to get through all of it today. If not, we will continue our study next week.

Philemon is often a neglected letter and that's a real shame, because not only is it a powerful book as we'll see, it holds **profound** application for not only our lives as believers but also a particularly powerful exhortation to those of us as Christians in leadership.

And so, let's read this short letter (25 verses) together.

(Philemon 1-25).

The apostle Paul wrote 13 inspired letters in the New Testament, and this is one of only 3 that he wrote to individual people. Those three being Titus, Timothy, and here, Philemon. And we can immediately see after reading these 25 verses that there's a real story here. And at first glance, you might get the sense that this letter has *something* to do with forgiveness. (And you'd be right).

Paul is pleading for the sake of Onesimus and calling for Philemon to forgive him. So we might ask, who's Philemon? When we examine verse 2 more closely, we see it: "...and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house."

Philemon was a Pastor. In fact, it's widely believed that he was the Pastor of the church in Colossae where the Christians there **met in his home**. Now we don't know how large the church WAS that met in his home but it was at least large enough to house a group of believers. So this would seem to indicate that Philemon was either wealthy, or at the very least above average in wealth. We can further confirm this notion because we know that Philemon owned at least one slave. And who was that slave? None other than: Onesimus.

And so now that we know who Philemon was, and now we have a rough idea of who Onesimus was, we can begin to see that Paul is making a plea for Philemon to forgive Onesimus for a wrong that he committed. In fact, we read that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon and then had run away.

Being a runaway slave in ancient Rome was an offense punishable by death. Slavery in ancient Rome was a part of daily life. By some estimates that I've read, there were some 60 millions slaves in Rome. As surprisingly large that number is, it's even more of a surprise when you consider that the Roman Empire was comprised of about 120 million people! Likely HALF of the population of Rome were slaves.

And so after stealing from Philemon, Onesimus ran away. And he fled to Rome, no doubt to get lost in the crowd, as it were. And because he had stolen from him and because he had run away, Philemon had some hostility towards Onesimus, and we see that Paul is appealing to Philemon to forgive Onesimus.

While it's important to understand that forgiveness is certainly a Christian virtue, it is so much more than that. Let us be reminded that those of us who are in Christ are actually **commanded** to forgive. It has often been said that "you are never more like your Heavenly Father than when you are forgiving". God never forgives sin but He frequently forgives sinners. Christ Himself forgave those who were crucifying Him saying, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do" .

We are after all, commanded to forgive JUST as God through Christ has forgiven us. God's word goes even further, telling us that if we do NOT forgive others, then God will not forgive us. It's not an easy thing to do, forgiveness. In fact, without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, real forgiveness is flat-out impossible.

This letter to Philemon was written by Paul WHILE he was imprisoned in Rome, most likely in the infamous Mamertine Prison; the dungeon where he would be kept prior to his execution under the Roman Emperor Nero. Because he wrote this while in prison, this letter is therefore referred to as a "Prison Letter" or a Prison "Epistle". As a point of reference, the letters Paul wrote to the churches at Ephesus, Phillipi, and Colossae were also written by Paul while imprisoned in Rome. This letter to Philemon shares a couple of connections with Paul's letter to the Colossians which Paul wrote at the same time.

### **Verse 1:**

*"(v. 1) Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker..."*. The word Paul uses here for "prisoner" is the greek word, "desmios" meaning "one physically restrained or bound in chains", as opposed to the Greek word "doulos" or "bondservant" / slave in some translations where Paul might describe himself a doulos or "slave" to Christ. So in this instance, Paul is describing his literal, physical imprisonment for the sake of

Christ while he writes this letter to Philemon. But in effect you COULD say that it WAS his bondservant-hood TO Christ, his faith IN Christ that led to his imprisonment FOR Christ.

His opening in this letter is actually very important: he opens, "*Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus...*". Ok great, but **why** is that important in this context? Because Paul usually opens his letters with "*Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ...*". He normally asserts his authority in Christ in his other letters. But Paul chooses **NOT** to assert his apostolic authority as he usually does and instead, he chooses to highlight his suffering for the sake of Christ. So what's the reason for this tenderness, this humility? It's because this is an appeal not **from authority**, but an appeal from Paul's **heart**.

Though the letter was written by Paul physically, the opening verse seems to ascribe not only Paul but also Timothy as co-signer, apparently indicating that they were both in agreement on the matter. From verse 1, "[From] *Paul [...] AND Timothy our brother, to Philemon OUR beloved friend...*[emphasis added by me]". He's not saying "Timothy sends his love". This is Paul saying it's a letter from the both of us. We'll see that at the end of this letter, Paul includes some names of folks who do send their love and well-wishes but that's not the case here. So why would it have been important for Paul to include Timothy at the top? Well, let's recall that Timothy was Paul's protege, the young man Paul was discipling - he was the one Paul was likely grooming to "take over", to continue the work after Paul went home to the Lord. So Paul is including him as much as possible, mentoring him in the "way".

### **Verse 2:**

The second verse, "*...and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:*". This is a group of folks who have likely suffered great persecution at the hands of the Roman government. With Paul using terms such as "prisoner" and "laborer" (as in verse 1),

and now “fellow soldier”, talking about a church meeting in a house, this paints the picture of people who are punished for Christ, who labor IN Christ, and who fight FOR the sake of souls, all while having to do so covertly. Again we note the wording “...and the church in your house”. We know that Philemon was the Pastor who led this home church. We also know that until at least the 3rd century, all churches met in homes. There were no chapels or church buildings to speak of. So meeting in homes for church was the norm at the time this letter was written.

There is a popular belief that Apphia, described as “beloved”, was Philemon’s wife, though there is nothing specific in this text that gives us any evidence for that, so let us leave that mystery of who she was where it lay. The same goes for Archippus, the fellow soldier mentioned, who is thought to have been either the son or brother of Apphia, but again - let’s not insert something or speculate on something that is not there. The thought was however, that there would otherwise not have been a reason for Paul to name these other two lest it was a serious domestic issue (which we know this letter addresses). But again, that’s pure speculation.

But I think it’s interesting that Paul uses these adjectives to describe his recipients: he’s using terms like “beloved friends”, “soldiers”, “brothers”, “fellow laborers”. He paints this picture of a church knee-deep in the fight for souls, so assured in their walk with Christ, a church willing to undergo persecution for the sake of Christ. Are we that people? Are we that church? Can we only be described as brothers, fellow laborers, soldiers, beloved friends? Because if we aren’t that church, then by the grace of God let us **become** that church!

### **Verse 3:**

Moving now into Verse 3 we read, “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” This greeting is common to Paul’s epistles. And why not? Grace (and peace for

that matter) are so very necessary to this work of ministry. Paul knew this, and therefore always included it at the beginning of his letters. In fact, grace and peace will be a requirement of the reconciliation that will become apparent at the conclusion of this letter.

And after all, what can't be accomplished through the gift of much grace? Many difficulties, much healing, and many reconciliations are accomplished through bestowing grace. Particularly when one has received such a great measure of grace are they most understanding of its power and need. Paul certainly did. Like the question I asked earlier, "What's my excuse?" The just punishment for my sin against a Holy God was laid upon Christ. Christ received the Justice that **I** deserved, **I** received the Grace that **He** deserved. It's not even fair. So how much more should I be willing to give grace freely as I have received?

And by the way, I don't think the progression of "...grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ..." is accidental. Paul uses that greeting in all his letters but I think there's something more to that. When you consider that those he's writing to were recipients of grace, one can't help but to see the truth in it: that when we are granted repentance, and then turn from our sin, and turn TO **Him who forgives**, when we receive His gift of Grace and are then redeemed and become the adopted children of God, then we too have PEACE. We might be able to read it, "Grace is given to you by God our Father, and because of that, Peace is given to you from the Lord Jesus Christ". A great truth to ponder.

#### **Verse 4:**

Now looking at Verse 4, "*I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers...*". Paul makes a very personal statement about God, saying "I thank MY God". Now it's obvious that

God wasn't exclusive to Paul. No, this is less about God and more about how personal God was to PAUL. Thanksgiving is given here BEFORE supplication is made. "I THANK my God..."

Thanksgiving, the verbal demonstration and acknowledgement of gratitude before the Father is necessary because not only is He worthy to receive Thanks and Gratitude, not only are we instructed by our Lord Jesus Christ to pray that way, but His character of Perfection demands it! His ways are so much higher than ours. How can we NOT thank Him even in the midst of trials? Dare I even say, we must thank Him ESPECIALLY in the midst of our trials as a demonstration of our trust in Him and His Sovereign purposes. I'll always remember the quote, "Blessed are the WAVES that wash the shipwrecked Mariner upon the Rock of Salvation" (- Charles Spurgeon).

Blessed are the waves INDEED for bringing us to the place of refuge, the Rock upon which we stand. It sucks to be shipwrecked, caught up in the black of the sea. I think most of us can relate to the shipwreck of our faith or our lives at some point. Yet, how blessed that it was the waves themselves, the TRIAL ITSELF, that brought us upon the Rock, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of our souls.

### **Verse 5:**

Verse 5 here, "*Hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and towards all the saints...*". Philemon seems to be known for his love towards Christ and the saints. Either Paul knew this from being around Philemon or that love must have been spread far and wide for Paul to hear about all the way to him in the prison in Rome.

Should WE not be known for the **love** we show our brothers and sisters in Christ. Oh Lord, Let me never be found so deficient of it that if one were to write about me, those words would be glaringly absent... We'll recall Jesus's words from John 13:35 "*By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*".

**Verse 6:**

That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. Paul is acknowledging what the Lord has done, and is doing in Philemon and how that makes sharing his faith effective.

Sharing faith in Christ is empty by definition if it doesn't include demonstrations of faith in our own lives. Because otherwise it's just sharing words - NOT words of life, NOT faith. Let's open ourselves to others as living examples of what Christ has done and IS DOING. Let us be willing to acknowledge His work in us for effective sharing in works of evangelism.

You've heard it said from this very pulpit: "Don't just share the victory; share the process."

**Verse 7:**

*"For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother".* The love Philemon has thus shown to the saints that has refreshed them, provides Paul & the others with great joy. We cannot even imagine how far our love goes when given in a real, authentic, refreshing, re-energizing way. Our love is like the ripples from a stone thrown into a large pond. Those ripples go far and wide. So make sure to try and make waves to the delight & refreshment of others more distant to where that stone first entered the pond.