

Paul's Letter to Philemon

(Part One -- Salutation)

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1-3).

The letter to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's epistles, and yet, there is so much to learn in just twenty-five verses!

Philemon was an inhabitant of Colossae. We know this because many of the same names are found in the salutations of both letters, including Onesimus (Col. 4:9, "who is one of your number"), Epaphras (4:12-13, "who is one of your number ... always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers"), Mark and Aristarchus (4:10), Demas and Luke (4:14), and Archippus (4:17).

Paul was "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" at the time of writing. Both Colossians and Philemon are prison

epistles, suggesting that Paul composed both letters at the same time and even sent them by the hand of the same courier. In fact, most scholars believe Paul sent the letters by the hand of Onesimus, who, we will soon see, figures prominently in the letter itself.

Thus, while Paul wrote a broader letter to the Colossian brethren, he had another concern he wished to handle separately with Philemon. Still, we shouldn't feel like we are invading on private correspondence. Paul addressed his letter more broadly—"to the church,"—so that many would read it. I am convinced that even includes us today. This letter was inspired by God for our benefit.

Philemon

Philemon hosted a church in his house (though, it is unknown whether this congregation was the same as the Colossian church or a separate local church nearby; the church in Nympha's house in Col. 4:15 suggests the latter). We will discover that Philemon owned slaves. These facts suggest that he was a man of considerable means. In Paul's book, this is neither an asset nor a fault—Philemon was in a position to be a great help to the cause of the gospel, and he did so. As Paul would later tell Timothy, "instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be

conceited or to fix their hope of the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all good things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed." When I think of the sacrifices necessary to host an entire congregation in his house, I conclude that Philemon was a man fulfilling this obligation!

Paul seems to hold Philemon in the highest regard in Christ. Paul calls him "our beloved brother" and "our fellow worker." These were not terms that Paul threw around lightly. They emphasized Philemon's place among the family of God, a joint participant in the blessings of the body of Christ and heaven. And while "our beloved brother" would apply equally to every member on the church roll, Paul also considered Philemon a burden-bearer in the day-to-day work of the church. We might imagine that when a call went forth for a worship leader, for a building-project helper, for transportation to the assembly, for all sorts of good and helpful works, Philemon was one of the first to raise his hand and step forward. Let us thank God for such reliable, talented, busy, and diligent individuals! It takes many people working together, "fitted and held together by what every joint supplies" (Eph. 4:11) to edify a congregation.

Apphia

But Paul doesn't limit his praise to Philemon. He also calls out "Apphia our sister" and "Archippus our fellow-soldier." Perhaps these were members of Philemon's household. Some scholars suggest they were Philemon's wife and son (if "in your house" refers to all three), though this argument is inconclusive.

Regardless of their blood-ties to Philemon, the possessive "our" shows that Paul treasured them as his own family in Christ, too. Apphia, and doubtless many other women, were essential to the work in Colossae. Like Mary, Lydia, Tabitha, Phoebe, and others, Apphia's work does as much to strengthen the body of Christ as Onesimus and Ephaphras. That has been our experience with the dependable, hard-working women of this congregation, too!

Archippus

Archippus was, like Timothy (2 Tim. 2:4), a soldier in the army of God. Probably this is Paul's way of recognizing that he had made a commitment to teaching the gospel to the community, training himself to use the "sword of the Spirit" as an evangelist. In fact, in the Colossian letter, Paul writes, "Say to Archippus, 'Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it'" (4:17). Clearly, Archippus was a man known for his preaching work; and yet, there's never a safe time for a preacher to rest on his laurels.

Three times in this letter (and over 100 times in the New Testament) Paul coins new words that have yet to be found outside of the Bible, by affixing the Greek prefix sym- to the front of a

common noun or verb. Sym- means “together”; think of English words like “sympathy” and “symphony” and “synchronize” and “synonym.” Paul’s new word would be startling to a Greek reader, and would emphasize in a special way their togetherness and fellowship in the work of Christ. The three such words in this letter are synergos, “fellow-worker”; systratiotes, “fellow-soldier”; and synaikmolotos, “fellow-prisoner.”

Paul was an Apostle of Christ, but always mentioned the many people in his life who were jointly involved in that work, no matter the distance that separated them, through their blood, sweat, and tearful prayers.

Paul’s Christian Greeting

Every one of Paul’s letters begins with some version of “grace and peace.” We are told that “peace” was the standard greeting among Jews, and “grace” (charis) was similar to the standard greeting (charein) in most Greek letters.

But Paul does more than say a flippant, “Hope you’re doing okay!” Not a single word inspired by the Holy Spirit is wasted. Paul recognizes that our relationship in the church, and even of the joy of Christian life itself, is based on having a right relationship with God through Christ, who is the Lord of all things. The grace of salvation bestowed upon us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is what allows us to have peace in this world, and the expectation of life everlasting. Who cares what temporary, worldly success we happen to enjoy, if we don’t possess grace and peace from God?

Next week, we will continue with verses 4-7.