

Philemon: Coming Home

Philemon 1:1-7

As one of only three personal letters from Apostle Paul in the New Testament, Philemon stands as a lesson in brotherly love in the Lord and in Christ-like communication. From this short letter, we catch a glimpse of the supernatural bond that God's children can develop with one another, in this case Paul with Philemon and his family. Let's mine this text carefully and see what God has to teach us about living godly and loving well.

Philemon 1:1

(KJV) Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow labourer

(NIV) Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker

Paul does not open this letter with the usual authoritative greeting found in the other Prison Epistles. The reason is he is not addressing a whole congregation, but a few close friends. We tend to be more transparent and vulnerable with those we have developed a close bond, especially in the Body of Christ. Paul here unashamedly regards himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ, as he is not in prison for any crime or wrongdoing but for obeying God. In the eyes of his closest friends who also bear the name of Christ, Paul's identification as a prisoner here would be commendable. Beloved, God commends us when we boldly take a stand for Jesus, when we stand unashamed of His Name:

Luke 9:26

For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels.

While we may not be chained in prison for our preaching of Jesus, we may bear persecution of some degree for shining light and standing firm for our Saviour:

1Peter 2:19-21

For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

Our personal before and after Christ testimony is an authentic and irrefutable witness to the unbeliever of our identity in Christ. Some of those in our sphere of influence will reach out to the light they see in us while others will be repelled by that same light. Either way, the Holy Spirit will prompt us and give us the right words to say in the moment that we need them:

Luke 12:11-12

And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.

Therefore, beloved, we can step out in faith, knowing that God has our back, and His strength will be made perfect in our weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

So, dear Christian, trust God, and shine on!

John 3:19-21

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

An older Timothy stands with Paul as he writes this letter to Philemon. Timothy's life is a testimony to Paul's spiritual investment in him. Discipleship is a sacrificial but essential part of our growing in the Lord - ordained of God - and Paul and Timothy are a continuation of the relationship Paul had with Jesus. Essentially, discipleship is duplicating ourselves in another person. If we are in Christ and His Word, our lives will honour Him, and be worthy to duplicate in another. This was certainly the case with Paul, as he formerly laid hands on Timothy to anoint him as a disciple of Jesus Christ:

2Timothy 1:5-10

When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also. Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands. For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, but is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel:

The tenderness with which Paul addresses his friend and fellow labourer Philemon indicates to us that God has sown deep humility in the hearts of both men. Philemon would have been a wealthy man, as he had a slave, and he also was a minister in the Colossian church. At some time in the past Philemon and Paul may have ministered together, as their friendship was borne of walking some miles together:

Philemon 1:19

I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.

Let's not assume that these words were spoken by Paul in haste. We know from the context in the surrounding verses that there is no bitterness in Paul's tone here. He is simply reminding Philemon of the spiritual reality - and ultimate salvation - that forever unites them. It is worth noting that these anointed friendships are not possible outside of the realm of Christianity. These relationships are familial and supernatural - God anointed and Holy Ghost sealed:

Ephesians 2:19-22

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Philemon 1:2

(KJV) And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:

(NIV) also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

These are family greetings from Paul, and we can assume that Apphia is Philemon's wife, and Archippus is either his son or someone close to him in ministry. Paul's tone here points to close, intimate friendships that have weathered the seasons of life. Eternal bonds, sealed by the Holy Ghost! Paul's greeting to the church that meets in Philemon's house is almost an afterthought here, as this letter is marked by Paul's intended purpose and personally addressed to Philemon.

Philemon 1:3

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

(NIV) Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This familiar greeting from Paul here is written not in the context of a broader church greeting, but rather to close brethren. We should never skip over such common greetings when we see them in the text. Instead, let's meditate on these extravagant words of blessing!

Grace:

χάρις

charis

khar'-ece

graciousness (as *gratifying*), of manner or act (abstract or concrete; literal, figurative or spiritual; especially the divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in the life; including *gratitude*): - acceptable, benefit, favour, gift, grace (-ious), joy liberality, pleasure, thank (-s, -worthy).

2Peter 3:18

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

Peace:

εἰρήνη

eirēnē

i-rah'-nay

Probably from a primary verb εἶρω eirō (to *join*); *peace* (literally or figuratively); by implication *prosperity*: - one, peace, quietness, rest, + set at one again.

Philippians 4:6-7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

John 14:27

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

And the Source of these extravagant blessings over those we wish to bless? *God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!*

*STUDY POINT: Using a concordance, find all of Paul's most common greetings to his churches in the New Testament. Why do you think he uses the same greetings repeatedly? Exegete or break down these greetings into their main components. What is Paul actually saying through these greetings?

The missing Person in Colossians 1:3? The Holy Ghost, Whom Jesus sent as our Helper to dwell within us:

John 14:16-17

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

Beloved, there you have it. *Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!* The Holy Trinity.

Philemon 1:4

*(KJV) I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,
(NIV) I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers,*

Paul's primary work was prayer. As he prayed, he was thankful to God for all the saints whom he had brought to Christ, or those he had discipled. It is pleasing to God when we regard our brothers and sisters as He does, thanking Him for their changed lives, their spiritual gifts and talents, and all the ways God is growing them. People are not utilities that we control and move around but precious souls whom God created and desires to love and redeem. So, thankful prayer on behalf of the saints is our God-ordained responsibility! In the case of this verse, Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus are the blessed recipients of Paul's prayers.

Philemon 1:5

*(KJV) Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;
(NIV) because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.*

Oh, that the world would taste and see that the Lord is good! And how might that happen?
Through the fruit we bear:

John 15:4-8

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.

Paul, and indeed the neighbouring cities and regions, heard about the vertical love the Colossians had cultivated with Jesus:

Colossians 1:4

Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints

But here in Philemon 1:5, Paul is commending Philemon himself for the love and faith - the spiritual fruit - that he was bearing! This is the fruit of the Spirit that can be tasted and seen!

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

*QUESTION FOR MEDITATION: Being very honest with God in prayer, ask God to bear more spiritual fruit in your life in those areas where you believe there is a lack. See Galatians 5:22-23.

So, two verses should come to mind here as we look at the fruitful lives of Paul and Philemon:

Matthew 22:37

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

Matthew 22:39 *And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*

Our continual, intimate connection to and love for Jesus will result in our bearing the fruit of faith and love for others. The vertical relationship with Jesus, and the horizontal relationships with the people God puts in our lives, form a cross! This is amazing, since it is for love that Jesus went to the cross:

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

1John 4:7-8

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

1John 4:19 *We love him, because he first loved us.*

Philemon 1:6

(KJV) *That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*

(NIV) *I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.*

The Bible teaches nothing of solo ministry. This verse celebrates the partnership we can have with other servants and ministers in the Body of Christ. Indeed, our connection to the church family means we have all the prayer support, love, and resources to thrive in our God-ordained ministries. Paul makes it clear here that part of our growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus (2 Peter 3:18) is understanding that our partnership with others helps us understand God better. We essentially learn to esteem others better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3) being a valuable part of their growth in the Lord, just as they are to ours. This is the glorious way that God builds and fortifies His church!

Philemon 1:7

(KJV) *For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.*

(NIV) *Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.*

Philemon was an encourager:

Hebrews 3:13

But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

And Philemon had not only encouraged Paul with his love, but all the Saints in the Colossian church.

My prayer for you, beloved, is that if your ministry is not specifically one of encouragement, that you would consider making encouragement a greater component of it. Would you do that for me? Would you do that for Jesus, who encourages us when no one else can?

Psalm 63:1 A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.

O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is;

Like King David in his dry season, we all need encouragement in ours.

Amen.

- Reverend Darren McClelland