

Philemon (part 1)

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For the next few weeks we will spend some time considering the short, but poignant, epistle to Philemon. In introducing the epistle, Albert Barnes writes, *“It is exquisitely beautiful and delicate. It is a model of courtesy and politeness. It presents the character of the author in a most amiable light, and shows what true religion will produce in causing genuine refinement of thought and language. It is gentle and persuasive, and yet the argument is one that we should suppose would have been, and probably was, irresistible. It is very easy to conceive that the task which the apostle undertook to perform was one which it would be difficult to accomplish - that of reconciling an offended master to a runaway servant. And yet it is done with so much kindness, persuasiveness, gentleness, and true affection, that, as the letter was read, it is easy to imagine that all the hostility of the master was disarmed, and we can almost see him desiring to embrace him who bore it, not now as a servant, but as a Christian brother.”*

“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” (Philemon 1-3).

It is very likely that Paul is sending this letter while a prisoner in Rome. Traditionally, it is associated with the period in his life (60-62 AD) when he authored Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Based on Colossians 4:17, it would appear that the recipients of this letter are the members of the church in Colossae, with special emphasis on Philemon. Compare the list of names in Colossians 4:10-14 with that of Philemon 23-24. A couple details stand out from the introduction:

- Notice some of the adjectives that describe these people: *“beloved brother”, “fellow worker”, “our sister”, “fellow soldier”*. These were no superficial Christians that caught Paul’s attention. Rather, they were active, engaged, committed to the work.
- *“The church in your house”* is a great reminder that our homes are not really our own. Sometimes we think that a house is a safe-haven from responsibilities and commitments. It is where we take a break from serving others. But every blessing we have, including our homes, comes from God and ought to be used in His service. Philemon was likely somewhat prosperous, and must have seriously taken to heart Paul’s sentiments on the subject of hospitality and sharing (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

“I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake. For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother” (Philemon 4-7).

We start to develop an incredible picture of this epistle’s namesake. There is nothing half-hearted or stunted about anything he does. He invests himself in his faith and the needs of others. Consider:

- *“I thank my God always...”* Do you think anybody thanks God for you? Have you done enough to help others to even be remembered in their prayers?

- *“Because I hear of your love...”* Not that we serve God *in order to* capture the attention of others (Matthew 6:1), but that will be a natural result of an effusive faith. Philemon lived his life in such a way that Paul heard about his faith and love from five hundred miles away, locked in a cell. What kind of impression do you leave on others?
- *“I have come to have much joy and comfort...”* This is no small compliment from the apostle, since his disappointments in other people were well-chronicled (2 Timothy 4:10, 2:17-18, Galatians 1:6, 2:11ff, 2 Corinthians 12:21, Acts 15:36ff). Paul was a man who, in his darkest hours, felt isolated and abandoned, even ignored or neglected (1 Corinthians 4:8-13). That Philemon was a “refreshing” influence on those around him is a testament to the kind of man he was.