

AM Philemon

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[0 : 00] So let us now turn to the Word of God and we're going to read this morning from Paul's letter to Philemon. It's on page 1202 if you're using the church Bibles.

And we're just going to read through the whole of this short letter together. So from Philemon verse 1.

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy, our brother. To Philemon, our beloved fellow worker. And Apphia, our sister.

And Archippus, our fellow soldier. And the church in your house. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers. Because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. And I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

[1 : 09] For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother. Because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required.

Yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you. I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus. I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. I am sending him back to you. Sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel.

But I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever.

No longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother. Especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

[2 : 31] So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand.

I will repay it. To say nothing of your owing me, even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.

Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Epaphros, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. And we ask God to bestow his blessing upon the reading of his word to us this morning.

[3 : 41] So I'm going to begin this morning by telling you a short story from the ancient world. And it's not a very nice story, but I think it's important because it helps us to really put ourselves in the first century and to understand how the different classes of society were viewed.

So we're going to go back to the year 61 AD. It's not long after the time of Christ. And there was a very wealthy Roman politician whose name was Lucius Perdanus Secundus.

They liked their big names in Rome. And unfortunately, Lucius was one day murdered by one of his slaves.

Now, he was a very wealthy man. And as such, he had 400 slaves that belonged directly to him. And during the trial of this one slave who was accused of murdering his master, the prosecution

argued that all 400 of these man's slaves should be executed for the crime that only one of them had done.

And yet, they were all to be punished. Now, the common people were up in arms. They thought this was a horrible thing. You know, if one man committed this crime, why punish all these innocents?

[5 : 09] But despite their protests, the prosecution won its case. And all 400 of Lucius' slaves were sentenced to public execution.

On the day of the execution, the government had to deploy the Roman army in order to make sure that the executions could be carried out because of the uproar and the protesting by the common people.

Again, I said it wasn't a very nice story. But this is really how the Roman world viewed people who were slaves. Generally, they weren't considered to be human beings.

They were property. They were less than the person who owned them. It was really quite not a nice thing to be. While some slaves were undoubtedly treated well by their masters and many were granted freedom and things like that, the majority of them had a very awful life.

They either worked to death in mines or things like that, labor camps and all that. It wasn't a very nice thing. Now, I say this because I want you to contrast how the Roman world viewed a slave to how Paul the Apostle viewed a slave.

[6 : 28] Because that's what we're reading about here. We're reading about the relationship between a slave and his master. We have the slave who was Onesimus.

And Philemon who was his master. Philemon was a very wealthy man. He probably lived in Colossae. We don't know for sure. And it would appear that at some point during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus, Philemon heard the gospel that Paul preached and was saved.

And so he began to serve Christ by his life. He opened his house for Christians to meet in as a kind of little home church. We also know that at some point after his conversion, one of Philemon's slaves, the man we've already met called Onesimus, ran away from home.

And on top of that, it's also believed that he would have stolen quite a significant sum of money or something very expensive from his master as he fled. And you think, in modern day terms, running away from home and stealing, while still crimes, are not really very serious crimes in the grand scheme of things.

But the reality for Onesimus in the first century was that as a runaway slave, he was automatically sentenced to death unless his master showed lenience.

[8 : 03] And also for theft, for a slave to steal from his master, again automatically gave the death penalty. So Onesimus ran away from his master.

We're not told why. It's just one of those things. But if you read the letter, and you think about what it's saying about who Philemon was, and you remember that it's Paul who's writing, you can probably work out that it's not because Philemon was a particularly harsh master.

I don't think that's the case. I think, based upon a bit of wordplay that Paul uses, that we'll look at in a bit, it was rather that Onesimus himself was maybe a bit lazy, didn't really like his job, maybe he was a bit dishonest, and he just got fed up of his life.

Rather ironically, Onesimus' name means useful, whereas a useful servant he was not. But in God's amazing providence, however, Onesimus ran away to Rome.

Of course, Rome was the big, huge capital of the empire. I think it was about three million people who lived in Rome at that time, which was huge for the ancient world. Very easy to get lost, very easy to disappear and never be heard from again in that city.

[9 : 23] And yet, he found himself in the company of Paul, who was imprisoned in the city during that time. And under Paul's ministry, Onesimus, like his master before him, was converted and became a Christian and became a servant of both Christ and of Paul.

It's a really amazing story. If that was the only story you told, that would be great, but there's a lot more to it. However, despite his newfound faith, his newfound purpose, Onesimus was still guilty of two capital crimes.

He was still a fugitive from the law. And Paul, I think, probably couldn't let that stand. Because he probably knew Philemon, he knew where he'd come from.

He counted him a friend. And he knew that this issue had to be put to rest. So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, back to his master, to make reconciliation with him.

And he sent this letter along with him to gently exhort Philemon to accept Onesimus back into his house.

[10:36] So we're going to look at three things today as we consider working for the gospel together. We're going to look at workers who are working together for Jesus. So the first thing we're going to look at today is workers.

Let me just read through the first three verses again for you. There it says, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, our beloved fellow worker, and Naphia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul starts off his letter in his kind of usual fashion, which you're undoubtedly familiar with.

But there's also quite a unique thing about the way he starts this letter in that this is the only place where Paul introduces himself as a prisoner right off the bat.

Paul does call himself a prisoner in a few of his other letters, a prisoner for Christ. He does that in Ephesians 3.6, for example. But this is the only letter where he introduces himself as a prisoner.

[11:47] And I think this is a very clever tactic by Paul. Paul was a brilliant man. He had these brilliant ways of writing and making, building arguments to kind of, you know, compel people.

Not compel, that's the wrong word. But to convince people to do things. And he starts off right off the way by saying, I, Paul, am a prisoner. Paul knows that he belongs to Christ.

Paul knows that he is a servant of Christ. He describes himself as a slave to Christ. And he is in prison. And Paul is saying here, I am only in prison because my master has permitted it to happen. And it is by his providence that I am here. Paul, while an apostle, is placing himself in the role of the lowliest servant.

The same role that Onesimus would have had in his life. Paul was an apostle. He was a very special man who was chosen by God to perform a certain task.

[12:58] And who was inspired by the Spirit to write a huge chunk of our New Testament. But he describes himself as a slave, belonging to a master, as a prisoner.

It used to be common, but still is common, for ministers to wear clerical collars. They did this in order to symbolize their slavery to Christ.

As a slave may wear a chained collar, as they used to, to show their bondage, so a minister would often wear a collar of sorts to show their bondage to Christ.

This has fallen out of fashion, really in our own denomination. But it has been picked up by most churches around the world.

It was actually a Presbyterian invention that everyone else nicked. So, you can say that whenever anyone challenges you on that. But, if you are a Christian, it doesn't matter if you're a minister, or if you're an apostle, or whatever, if you are a Christian, you are a servant.

[14:02] You are called to rest in Christ, but to work for him also. So, that's how Paul is introducing himself here. He then goes on and addresses Philemon and his family, we think.

So, he talks about Philemon himself. He says, my beloved fellow worker. And then he talks about Athia, who may have been his wife, may have been his sister, or perhaps just a member of the church.

We don't rightly know. Describes him as our sister. And then we have Archippus, who again, may have been their son, may have been another relative, or again, just a fellow member of the church. We just don't know. As our fellow soldier. His language here is talking about fellowship already. It's like, we are co-workers. We are working together.

We're all in the same boat. Right off the bat. He puts all Christians on an equal footing. Saying, we are all servants of Christ. We're all brothers and sisters together.

[15:06] We're all workers together. And then goes on from verse 8. And he says, Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ, to command to you to do what is required, yet for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you.

I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.

I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf, during my imprisonment for the gospel.

But I prefer to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this, perhaps, is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh, and in the Lord. This is a great paragraph here. Paul is simply saying, look, we are all workers for the gospel together. Paul addresses Onesimus directly.

[16 : 35] He calls him his beloved brother. He calls him his child. He calls him useful. Remember that play on his name. Look at this man who ran away.

Look at this man who maybe stole from you, who robbed you. Now he is our brother. He's my brother. He's your brother. Paul is so affectionate towards Onesimus.

Now you can maybe imagine how Philemon would have felt. You know, he was a nice man, but when you've been wronged, when someone that you trusted ran away, when he possibly took a significant sum of money from him, he maybe was not best pleased with his former slave.

Now, there are many, many different Christian denominations around the world today. And while there are some that I believe we should avoid any contact with because they are in such grave error and heresies which they may teach, but there are many that we can work alongside of.

And indeed, I think we should when the occasion calls for it. because although we may have small differences and little bits about practice and things, we are all fellow workers working for the gospel together.

[18 : 03] And in our nation, let's be frank, there's not that many of us left who are faithfully standing up for Christ. So we all need to work together when we can.

We may disagree on things and that's okay. We don't have to all agree on everything. But often, these disagreements can be overcome for the sake of gospel work in our land.

One day, someone also may walk into this church who you know very well or used to know. Maybe they wronged you in a way. And maybe now, they profess faith.

They've been converted. They've been changed. They've been born again. And they come back and they're like, they come to you and they ask you for forgiveness. This is hard for us.

I know it's hard when we have to forgive someone who sins against us. And yet, we are commanded that we must do. Remember in Luke 17 where it says, if your brother sins, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him.

[19 : 13] There's no if or but. There's simply, if he repents, forgive him. That's what we're called to do as Christians. Verses 8 to 10 of Philemon tell us Paul's attitude to the problem at hand.

Paul knew that he, you know, he was an apostle. He was a big guy in the church. He was important. He could have commanded Onesimus and Philemon to work together, to put their differences aside, to forgive one another, and to get on with kingdom work.

But that's not what he does. He doesn't say, do this. He instead appeals to Philemon's Christian character. He goes right to his heart.

He wants him to forgive him for love's sake. As Christ loves you, so you should love your brother. Paul also appeals to Onesimus' Christian character.

Can you imagine saying to someone, I know you ran away from this man. I know you robbed him. You've done him wrong. But you need to go back there and ask for forgiveness.

[20 : 27] And it wasn't a short journey. It was quite a distance. But you are guilty of a crime which the state says is punishable by death. But to be unreconciled with a brother I think is a lot worse than anything the state might do to you.

So go back home and ask your brother for forgiveness. There's that wonderful verse in John 13 verse 34.

It says, A new commandment I give to you that you love one another just as I have loved you. You are also to love one another. We shouldn't work together with others simply because we have to. We shouldn't forgive one another simply because we have to. We should do it because we love people. We want to work together. We want to forgive.

We need to be repentant to one another when we wrong each other and we will because we are sinful. We will make mistakes. We will upset people. It happens. We need to be repentful and we need to be forgiving towards one another when we are wronged by a brother or a sister.

[21 : 47] And this is one of the wonderful things the Holy Spirit does is he helps us to break to repair these bonds that have been broken to repair relationships that may have otherwise been

unrepairable.

because we cannot work together we cannot work together if we are loggerheads with each other. We cannot do gospel work if we are too busy squabbling amongst ourselves. We cannot be useful if we do not work together. And that is our second heading is working together. And again Paul really he is a master wordsmith.

I would love to have taken writing lessons from him. We have already looked at how Onesimus' name made useful so Paul uses that to compare his previous state with his new which he says here in verse 11 formerly he was useless to you but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.

As a slave as your property Onesimus was useless. He wasn't very good at his job. He probably didn't like being with you very much so that's why he ran away.

[22 : 57] He was useless he wasn't any good but now now he is a brother. He is finally worthy of his name. Now he is useful to you.

Not just to Philemon but also to Paul to the church and even to God. He is useful now. God loves to use broken people to do amazing things for Christ in their lives.

He loves to use broken people like Onesimus. He loves to use broken people like you and like me to do remarkable things for Christ. That is a remarkable remarkable thing because this is the power of the gospel that we are seeing here in this short letter which often gets overlooked.

It is only a page. It is easy to miss and yet the gospel is so clearly shown the transformative power is so clearly here that we can become useful to God whereas before we were useless to him whereas before we were in rebellion against him whereas before we hated him and hated everything to do with him now we can be useful to him.

This is the power of the gospel. And friends we are in a weird time. We are still in COVID coming out of COVID don't really know what is going to happen in the next year or so and the church has been shaken by it.

[24 : 31] I don't know your own personal circumstances here but I know other churches who have struggled and been shaken quite heavily by COVID whether it is by people dying or leaving or struggles with differences of opinion about how services should be done.

All these things that have come because of COVID but just because we have had a speed bump we have had a little setback it doesn't mean we still haven't got work to do for God and as we go into the future not knowing what is happening we can be assured that God knows and that he is working through you here to do amazing things and we are going to need to be useful to God going forward.

for the kingdom of God. We are going to have to work together for the cause of Christ. We are going to have to put differences aside we are going to have to forgive and repent and we are going to do it for Christ.

Together Philemon and Onesimus while once they were in conflict with one another now they are working together they are loving one another they are serving one another they are serving God together it is a remarkable thing it is a beautiful thing.

Paul again his rhetoric was amazing he reminds Philemon of his role in the church he gives him lots of compliments there is nothing wrong with giving people compliments we think sometimes we are worried they might get a big head and things but encouragement is important he said in verse 4 I thank my God always and I remember you in my prayers because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ for I have derived much joy and comfort from your love my brother because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you Paul says to Philemon look at what you've already done in the short time you've maybe been a Christian you've done amazing things and yet there's still more to do verse 6 is a very interesting verse and it says

[27 : 05] I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ the word that Paul uses here for sharing the English translation we have of sharing is a Greek word koinonia which is a difficult word to translate sharing is one use which is why we have it here but there are also other ones that could be applied there's partnership it's another valid translation or participation and fellowship these are the kind of images that Paul is giving here when you think of Christian fellowship what comes to your mind I know in many places they think it's just spending time together you know having a meal or going out for coffee or whatever it is and yet fellowship is much more than maybe we make it out to be being in a

fellowship means being a group of people who are meeting together to pursue a shared interest or a shared goal now I like Lord the Rings maybe many of you do as well if you haven't read it you should and the first book in that is called

The Fellowship of the Ring and what is that suggesting it's not suggesting that these guys just got together and had a nice time it's rather there's a group of people from all sorts of different backgrounds and professions and all that all came together to do something important and that's what fellowship is being united in a single cause and a single purpose with a whole group of people who may be very different from us but yet we are to work together Paul is longing he's begging for these two brothers to be reconciled so they can be in fellowship so they can work together for the glory of Christ verse 12 he says I'm sending him back to you sending my very heart I would have been glad to keep him with me in order he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but by your own accord for this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while that you may have him back forever no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant as a beloved brother especially to me but how much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord so if you consider me your partner receive him as you would receive me this short letter is a letter about reconciliation between two brothers but not reconciliation for its own sake it's about reconciliation for the gospel

Paul says in verse 17 receive him as you would receive me now I don't know about you but if the apostle Paul rocked into Dumfries free church this morning we wouldn't simply place him on a chair at the back of the room and then carry on as normal I would like to hope we would put him to use thinking here's this wonderful godly man with such great gifts we want to hear him speak we want to put him to work we need to embrace our brothers and we need to work together for God's glory that's what Paul is asking Philemon to do he's saying Philemon accept this man who wronged you who betrayed you take him into your home forgive him embrace him as a brother and then work with him to further the cause of Christ's kingdom on earth so we have workers working together finally for Jesus Paul is very confident in this letter that Philemon will accept

Onesimus back into his household as a brother because Paul himself knows the transforming power that Jesus has in a person's life Paul knows that the unconditional wholehearted love of God in Christ has already done so much transformative work in Philemon and Onesimus that they cannot help but forgive one another Christ has not only paid the penalty for our sins he now gives us the power through grace supplied by his spirit to live changed lives to live lives of reconciliation lives of peace lives of unity and lives of mutual servanthood Jesus does this so we can work together for him for his glory for his sake in our modern day the measure of our life is often found in our productivity we're measured by how we use our time how much stuff we produce whatever it is how much we earn how much we spend it's all measured in numbers sadly this is even true of some churches whose success is not measured by service to their saviour and the making of disciples and the saving of souls but it's simply into how many seats are filled or you know how much money is in the collection plate or you know things like that we need to measure our success not on what is on the outside but what is going on on the inside are we faithfully following Christ today are we faithfully following our king in obedience to the great commission that he gave us are we making disciples are we giving God the glory are we preaching the gospel are we sharing it with those that we love and those that we know if we are doing things like that then it doesn't matter if we have a hundred people or a thousand in our church today we are a successful church leading people into closer fellowship with Christ serving him for the glory of the kingdom and the sad truth is the effects of your ministry whatever they are may never be seen in your lifetime the fruits of what you may plant in people's lives it may take a while to grow you may never see them but trust in God that he will not let his words fall into nothingness why do we do all these things a lot of what I've said today is hard forgiving people asking for forgiveness putting aside differences so we can work together why do we do all this in the first place we do it friends because of what Christ has done for us we are sinful creatures unfortunately we cannot deny it's a part of who we are part of our makeup and every sin drives us further and further away from

[34 : 51] God into more and more debt our debt to God is so vast that even just for one sin one little lie one little stick of bubble gum stolen from a shop or something like that that's all it takes there's not a lot one bad thought about a person imagine if every time we sinned we owed God a billion pounds I don't know about you but I don't owe him quite a lot already but by the end of our

lives the amount we owe to God will be insurmountable there will be no hope we could ever pay it back of course that's why Jesus came Jesus came and did what none of us could do and paid off that huge unpayable debt there's that wonderful word that Jesus cried out on the cross sorry you're getting a couple of Greek lessons today that word tetelestai maybe you've heard it before simply means it is finished it is paid in full it is done the debt is wiped clean

Jesus writes us a blank check saying fear not because I have paid your debt now if you owed a huge amount of money to someone and another person came and paid it off on your behalf how would you be how would you react to that person wouldn't you be thankful I'd hope I'd hope you would would be wouldn't you love the person that cleared your debts somebody paid off a trillion pounds worth of debt that was in your name wouldn't you love them for it wouldn't you give your life into serving them as thanks for what they did for you this person who cleared your debts because in a way that's what being a Christian is we have an impossible debt that has been cleared by the son of God the son of

God who did not sin once he was perfect in every way he gave his very life as payment for us and he rose again from the dead defeating death and sin forever that's why we follow him that's why we serve him that's why we work together for him that's why we forgive one another that's why we dedicate our lives to serving him because he gave his to save ours I don't know you you may have been following Christ for years you've even come to church for years and never made a commitment to Christ well now is the time to say God I know I'm in your debt I know I can never pay it off but Christ can so let Christ pay off my debts today and then

Lord help me to serve you that should be our prayer today Romans 1 those wonderful verses verse 15 says so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome for I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes to the Jew first and also to the Greek for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith as it is written the righteous shall live by faith so as we come to a close this morning friends let us live by that faith let us serve Christ together by that faith let us work together by faith and do the task that God has sent us to do Amen Lord we thank you for the wonderful God to achieve

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