

Abounding Grace Christian Church

The Letter of Paul to Philemon – Part 2

I. Exposition.

A. Verses 3-5 – **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,”**

1. **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...”** – This is a customary greeting of the Apostle Paul in virtually all of his letters, with occasional slight differences. Nevertheless, it shouldn’t be taken as a meaningless phrase which Paul didn’t genuinely intend. He desired that experience the grace and peace given by the Father and Jesus. Regarding the same greeting to the Thessalonians, Dr. Thomas Constable writes:

“The shortened greeting customary in the Pauline Epistles appears here. Grace was the common Greek salutation meaning ‘greetings’ or ‘rejoice.’ In Greek peace is equivalent to the Hebrew *šālôm* meaning “favor,” ‘prosperity,’ and ‘well-being.’ It is interesting that those two words of salutation always occur in this order in the New Testament. Theologically God’s grace is the basis for and leads to man’s peace”¹

2. **“I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers...”** – Paul habitually prayed for those he brought to Christ and for churches he helped establish (cf. **Ephesians 1:16; I Thessalonians 1:2**). The word **“mention”** means; **“to recall and to respond by making mention of”²** The idea is, whenever he remembered Philemon and the church in his house, he would lift them up in prayer. Other instances – **Ephesians 1:16; I Thessalonians 1:2**.

3. **“...hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,”** It is uncertain whether or not Paul ever went to Colossae. Epaphras, who was probably a convert of Paul’s, is credited with having started the church there. But, Paul heard of their **“...love and faith...”**. Several other translations express it something like: **“...because I hear of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints...”³** Regarding the word **“saints”**, Dr. Bob Utley writes; **“This is literally ‘holy ones,’ those set apart exclusively for God’s service. This is not a reference to a sinless lifestyle, but to believers’ forensic (legal) position in Christ.”⁴** The New English Translation has a footnote which reads;

“Although Paul’s comment here may appear as a stock expression to the casual reader, praising Philemon for his track record of faithfulness to Christ demonstrated in love for the saints is actually integral to the author’s argument in this short but pithy letter. Paul will soon ask Philemon to demonstrate this love toward Onesimus, his runaway slave.”⁵

B. Verse 6 – **“...that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.”** – This is understood as a part of what Paul prayed for Philemon. It is also considered to be a very difficult verse to interpret because of the different ways the word **“sharing”** could be translated.

1. **“...that the sharing of your faith...”** – The word **“sharing”** is a well-known Gr. word ***koinonia*** and means; **“fellowship, partnership, participation, communion”⁶** David Pao writes;

“So that your partnership in the faith may become effective.... Anticipating his requests, Paul appeals to Philemon’s partnership with him and his other coworkers in the gospel ministry.”⁷

¹ Thomas L. Constable, “1 Thessalonians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 690.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 348.

³ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), Phm 5.

⁴ Robert James Utley, *Paul Bound, the Gospel Unbound: Letters from Prison (Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon, Then Later, Philippians)*, vol. Volume 8, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 1997), 149.

⁵ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005),

⁶ William D. Mounce, *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1192.

⁷ David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 369.

2. **“...may become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.”** – In his prayer, he states that the way the partnership in ministry will become more effective. The word **“acknowledgement”** means; **“full knowledge”**.⁸ So, Paul prays that Philemon’s understanding of everything Christ has accomplished in him might increase.

“I pray that the faith you share with us may deepen your understanding of every blessing that belongs to you in Christ.”
– Philemon 6 – New English Translation (NET Bible).

C. Verse 7 – **“For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”** Paul commends Philemon for his attitude of love toward the believers and states that **“...their hearts...have been refreshed by (him).”** The word **“refreshed”** means; **“to cause to rest, to soothe, refresh, to take rest, repose, refreshment,”**⁹ This same word is found again in **verse 20.** (cf. **Matthew 11:28; I Corinthians 16:18; II Corinthians 7:13**).

D. Verse 8-11 – **“Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ— I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.”**

1. Here, the apostle Paul makes his appeal to Philemon. He first states that he could just be bold and command Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus. Paul states that this would be **“fitting”**, which means to do the right thing. This New Living Translation reads;

“That is why I am boldly asking a favor of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do.”

2. **“...yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you...”** – The word **“appeal”** means; **“to ask for something earnestly and with propriety—to plead for.”**¹⁰

3. **“...being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”** – It seems Paul is referring to himself as **“aged”** in order to emphasize that he has wisdom and experience. Edwin Deibler writes: **“Being an ‘old man’ (presbytēs) meant that Paul had authority (since older men in those days were considered wise and thus authoritative) and also that Paul’s position as an imprisoned old man greatly restricted what he himself could do for Onesimus. Also, the reminder that Paul was imprisoned might appeal to Philemon’s sympathy. Thus Onesimus’ restitution depended on Philemon.”**¹¹

4. **“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains,...”**

- a. **“...for my son Onesimus...”** – In calling Onesimus his son, Paul was expressing his affection and also the fact that he was a **“spiritual son”** in the sense that Paul led him to Jesus. Dr. Robert Utley writes;

“Rabbis use this phrase to describe their students, but in this context it refers to Onesimus’ salvation through Paul’s witness (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14–15; 2 Cor. 6:13; 12:14; Gal. 4:19, 1 Thess. 2:11; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1; and Titus 1:4).”¹²

- b. **“...whom I have begotten while in my chains,...”** – Paul is informing Philemon that while he was under house arrest (imprisonment), Onesimus had apparently visited him and had become a true believer. The word **“begotten”** means; **“the male role in causing the conception and birth of a child—to be the father of, to procreate...”**¹³ Christianity is not about religion, it’s about a true spiritual birth which takes place inwardly when one receives Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Jesus said **“...unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** (John 3:3). See also; **I Peter 1:3; 22-23; Titus 3:5.**

⁸ H.G. Liddell, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), 289.

⁹ Mounce, 1083.

¹⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 407.

¹¹ Edwin C. Deibler, “Philemon,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 772.

¹² Robert James Utley, *Paul Bound, the Gospel Unbound: Letters from Prison (Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon, Then Later, Philippians)*, vol. Volume 8, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 1997), 151.

¹³ Louw and Nida, 256.