

The Greeting of the Letter

Philemon 1:1-3

Philemon 1:1-3: *“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer,² to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Background Notes

Philemon is only one chapter long, but it isn't the shortest book in the New Testament. The epistles of 2 and 3 John are both shorter than Philemon. However, Philemon is the apostle Paul's shortest letter. Philemon is one of Paul's "Prison Epistles" – so called because they were written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment.

In the early 60s AD, Paul was confined under house arrest by the Roman authorities while he was awaiting trial in Rome. Acts 28:30-31: *“Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.”* It was from this situation that the apostle Paul wrote the four Prison Epistles of the New Testament: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and this personal letter to Philemon.

House arrest doesn't seem like too bad a deal. Paul wasn't in shackles or in solitary confinement in a dungeon. While under house arrest he was free to have visitors, free to teach, free to write letters, and free to send fellow workers on missions. But don't get the idea that house arrest was pleasant. No way! Paul was confined to that one house at all times, and he was chained to a Roman guard at all times. When he wanted to sleep, the guard was there. When he wanted to attend to personal matters, the guard was there. He had no privacy.

But Paul did not complain. In fact, he used this situation as an opportunity to spread the gospel. The guards probably changed about every four hours, and you can be sure that every guard chained to the apostle Paul heard the gospel! Although we don't have an absolute "proof text" to back that up, do you think you could be chained to the apostle Paul for four hours and not hear the gospel?

In Philippians 1:12-13 Paul wrote, *“I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ.”* So there's no doubt that those guards heard the gospel! Paul used his difficult situation to spread the gospel.

What do we know about Philemon? Philemon was a rather well to do Christian who lived in Colosse. He and his wife, Apphia, had a home that was large enough to house the whole Colossian church. Verse 2: *“to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.”* Archippus was possibly Apphia and Philemon’s son. Verse 19 indicates that Philemon may have been one of the apostle Paul’s converts: *“I will repay – not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.”* In other words, Philemon most likely owed his salvation to the apostle Paul’s preaching.

This letter to Philemon was written about Onesimus, one of Philemon’s slaves, who had run away from his master. We don’t know all the details, but it appears that Onesimus stole some of Philemon’s property, ran away, and ended up in Rome. And there, of all things, Onesimus came in contact with the apostle Paul - and Paul led Onesimus to the Lord! *“I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains” (v10).*

Now, in order to get this messy situation straightened out, Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Because Onesimus had become a Christian, as a Christian he must do the right thing and return to his master – even though the punishment for a runaway slave could be extremely severe. So Paul’s letter to Philemon was really a letter of intercession or appeal for Philemon to extend mercy to Onesimus. And because the letter to Philemon is also a book of the Bible, it is the word of the Lord to us as well.

Doctrinal Points

1. The hardships of believers are opportunities for Christian service.

In verse 1, Paul referred to himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He used the word “prisoner” because he literally was a prisoner, confined while awaiting his trial in Rome. But notice - that Paul didn’t say that he was a prisoner of Rome, or a prisoner of Nero, who was the Roman emperor at this time. No, Paul viewed his life from God’s perspective. He had the big picture. He was ***a prisoner of Jesus Christ.***

What did Paul mean by that phrase - *“a prisoner of Christ Jesus”*? He meant that his imprisonment in Rome was ***not by chance.*** As always, the Lord was in control of the events of Paul’s life. Paul was not Nero’s captive, nor Rome’s captive, nor Satan’s captive. God had ordained Paul’s hardship and confinement, and Paul knew that God had good reasons for his arrest and eventual imprisonment in Rome.

So Paul used the hardship of imprisonment as an opportunity for Christian service. Remember what we read in Acts 28? Paul ***took advantage*** of ***every opportunity*** to serve the Lord - even the hardship of being confined under house arrest. Besides teaching and preaching, Paul wrote four books of Scripture from this situation. Talk about taking advantage of the opportunity!

Furthermore, in Philippians 1 (another Prison Epistle) he wrote, *“I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (Philippians 1:12-14).* Under house arrest, Paul would have been chained to a Roman guard at all times. This was quite a hardship, but Paul used this hardship as an opportunity to serve the Lord.

What about us? Do we see our hardships as opportunities for Christian service? Most of us back off from Christian service when hardships come our way. If we had been in Paul’s situation, we probably would have given up any idea of Christian service. We’d just be thinking of survival! Maybe you’re undergoing a difficult time now, or perhaps you will face hardship in the future. Maybe a hospital bed. Maybe a loss of a job. Maybe even the loss of a loved one. Look for those ***special opportunities in difficult circumstances*** to serve the Lord.

A Christian businessman I know is undergoing hard times in his business, and he may have to shut down the company. But he’s not discouraged. In fact, he’s looking to see what doors the Lord may be opening for Christian service as a result of this severe hardship. The hardships of believers are opportunities for Christian service.

2. The homes of believers are opportunities for Christian service.

Verse 2: *“To the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.”* Apphia was probably Philemon’s wife. Archippus may have been their son, or perhaps he was a close friend of the family, or maybe he was a leader of the Colossian church. But there’s a good possibility that he was their son. What a committed family!

Philemon was a beloved friend of the apostle Paul, and he was also a “fellow laborer.” Like Paul, Philemon was actively involved in the work of the Lord. And Paul referred to Archippus as a “fellow soldier.” Archippus was committed to “fight the good fight”!

Philemon and his family opened up their home for God’s use. Do you think the floors or the furniture got scratched up when the whole Colossian church met in their home? You’d better believe it! (And this was antique furniture. How would I know that? What else would you call furniture from the 1st century?) [laughter] Seriously speaking, there’s a lesson here. Philemon and Apphia saw beyond broken dishes and damaged furniture. Philemon and his wife saw their home as a means for Christian service.

How do you view your home? Is it a beautifully decorated showplace? Or is it a home that God can use? Think of the opportunities when believers use their homes for the Lord – Bible studies, fellowship meals, youth group meetings, and much more. Every home we’ve owned has been dedicated to the Lord to be used for His glory. Some of you may not be homeowners. Well, use your dwelling, whatever it may be!

I challenge you to dedicate your home to the Lord! You may end up with a broken lamp or some scratched furniture, but God will bless you, and others will be blessed, too! Your home is an opportunity for Christian service.

Practical Applications

1. Are you a “beloved brother”?

In verse 1, Paul addressed Philemon as “*beloved*.” Many translations have “beloved friend” or “beloved brother.” In the Greek language it is just “*Philemon, the beloved*” and the words “friend” or “brother” are understood. So Philemon was not just a Christian brother; he was a *beloved Christian brother*. And in verse 2, Philemon’s wife Apphia was “beloved Apphia.” She was a beloved Christian sister.

Are you a beloved brother or beloved sister? If you’re a Christian, you’ve been brought into the family of God, so you’re automatically a brother or sister. But are you a **beloved** brother or sister? Paul probably spent happy times in Philemon and Apphia’s home. Do your fellow believers like to spend time with you because you’re joyful and encouraging? Or do they breathe a sigh of relief when you leave because you’re a complainer or a constant critic? Would you be missed if you had to move away, or if you die?

A good friend, whom I’ve known for at least 25 years, doesn’t have a lot of charisma. He’s not a well-known preacher. He doesn’t even have a lot of abilities. He’s simply a soft-spoken, gentle, pleasant, kind, helpful Christian that you like to have around. People like to spend time with him. He’s a **beloved brother!** We need more Christians like that.

If the fruits of the Spirit increasingly characterize your life, you **will** be a beloved sister or brother. Christians whose lives are characterized by gentleness, faithfulness, and love for others, and who exhibit joy, peace, and patience will definitely be beloved brothers and sisters! (Read Galatians 5 for further practical application!)

Would you classify yourself as a beloved sister or brother? Would others classify you as a beloved brother or sister? It’s a good question for self-examination. Are you a beloved brother?

2. Don’t forget - grace always comes before peace.

In verse 3 we have a typical Pauline greeting: “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Notice that grace precedes peace. Paul always placed “grace” before “peace” in his greetings.

That is also true from God’s perspective. Grace always comes before peace. There can be no human peace apart from God’s grace. So whether it is peace *with* God in reference to our salvation, or the peace *of* God in reference to our rest of soul, **peace is only possible because of the grace of God!** Don’t forget - grace always comes before peace!