

Some Final Thoughts, And the Benediction

Philemon 1:22-25

Philemon 1:22-25: *“But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. ²⁵ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”*

Background Notes

In the late 50s the apostle Paul was arrested in Jerusalem on the spurious charge of “disturbing the peace of Judaism.” He was imprisoned for two years at Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast of Judea. When Paul saw that his case was going nowhere before the Roman rulers in Caesarea, he appealed to Caesar, and was sent to Rome for trial. His ship voyage to Rome was described in Acts 27. So when Paul wrote this letter to Philemon in the early 60s AD, he was under house arrest in Rome.

While Paul was awaiting his trial before the highest court in the Roman Empire, he wrote four books of the Bible, often called the Prison Epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Paul expected to be released from this first Roman imprisonment, and we assume he was. We read about this expectation in the Prison Epistles and in the chronology of the rest of the New Testament. In Philippians 1:25-26 Paul wrote, *“And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.”* So Paul expected to be released as a result of his trial in Rome.

Philemon was a well to do Christian who lived in Colosse, a city that was located in present-day Turkey. In Philemon verse 22 Paul wrote, *“But meanwhile also prepare a guest room for me, for that I trust that through your prayers, I shall be granted to you.”* Paul expected a good outcome from his trial there in Rome before Nero, and we believe that God did answer these prayers. We believe that Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment and continued his missionary travels, including a visit to Colosse.

Paul’s purpose for writing this letter to Philemon was to pave the way for the return of Onesimus, Philemon’s runaway slave who had become a Christian in Rome. Now Onesimus was returning to Colosse to get things right with his master. The fact that Paul asked Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, because he expected to come for a visit, certainly would have motivated Philemon to follow through on Paul’s suggestions about Onesimus!

Even though Paul was an apostle, he didn’t use his apostolic authority to command Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom - but he came close to strongly suggesting it. Verse 14: *“But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that*

your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.” And verses 15-16, *“For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”* And verse 21, *“Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say.”*

What more could Philemon do than to free Onesimus - especially since Paul was coming for a visit? What would you do if you were in Philemon’s sandals, and you knew the apostle Paul was coming to check the situation out? So the traditional view is that Philemon followed through on Paul’s strong suggestions! And the fact that Philemon saved this letter indicates that he did indeed grant Onesimus his freedom.

By the way, no one can read the book of Philemon and conclude that the New Testament condoned slavery. No way! While the New Testament does not command Christian masters to release their slaves, it certainly does not condone slavery. In fact, it was New Testament Christian principles that led to the abolition of slavery.

The closing benediction to the letter indicates that Paul meant the letter to be read to the whole church at Colosse - not just by Philemon. Verse 25: *“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”* The “your” here is plural in the Greek language. That most likely means the entire church at Colosse - not just Philemon and his wife. In fact, look back at the salutation (v1-2): *“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.”* So the letter is not only addressed to Philemon, but to the entire church at Colosse as well.

Doctrinal Points

God provides all kinds of fellow workers!

Verses 23-24: *“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.”*

Paul listed five of his fellow workers in these verses. Each of these men had a different function and role to play in the ministry, and each one provides us with a different lesson about Christian service.

a. God provides the “Epaphrases” (v23).

Epaphras was from Colosse. In fact, he and Philemon had probably helped to start the church at Colosse. Now Epaphras was in Rome as part of Paul’s ministry team. In his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote, *“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God” (Colossian 4:12)* Epaphras was so concerned about the spiritual growth of Colossian believers that he *“labored earnestly in his prayers”* for them! Aren’t you glad that God provides people who pray like Epaphras – “laboring earnestly in prayer” for their fellow-believers?

Paul described Epaphras as a fellow prisoner. Perhaps Epaphras voluntarily submitted to live in house arrest along with the apostle Paul so that he could assist him with various details of the ministry.

Would you be willing to submit yourself to “imprisonment” so that someone else’s ministry could expand? There are Christians who give themselves to serve selflessly in ways like this. God provides “Epaphrases.”

b. God provides the “Marks” (v24).

In Mark, we have a great lesson on how God picks up the pieces in the life of a believer who’s made a mistake. Remember, Mark went on the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas, but Mark quit and went home before the mission trip was over. Mark’s mistake prevented him from going on Paul’s second missionary journey. Mark failed, and as a result he was set aside from ministry with Paul for a time.

However, God picked up the pieces in Mark’s life. God gave Mark the great privilege of writing a book of Scripture, the Gospel of Mark. And now Mark was back and working side by side with the apostle Paul in Rome. At the end of Paul’s life, Mark was one of the few people who didn’t desert Paul in his final imprisonment. And Paul said that Mark was useful to him in the ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

What a great and encouraging lesson we have in Mark! Maybe, like Mark, you’ve failed somewhere along the way. Don’t give up! God can pick up the pieces and make you useful again in His service. And for those of you involved in a Christian ministry, God may send a few “Marks” your way. Don’t close the door on them just because they’ve had a failure in the past. Remember, God provides “Marks.”

c. God provides the “Aristarchuses” (v24).

Aristarchus appears to have been a behind-the-scenes brother who supported the apostle Paul and his ministry. Aristarchus was a long-term loyal helper who was mentioned several times in the book of Acts. He was even on the ship voyage to Rome with Paul (Acts 27:2). In Colossians 4:10 Aristarchus was called a fellow prisoner. So possibly, like Epaphras, Aristarchus voluntarily submitted himself to house arrest to help the apostle Paul.

Here Paul called him a “*fellow worker*.” God provides long-term loyal helpers in the ministry like Aristarchus.

Maybe you’re a behind-the-scenes type of person. Maybe you’re like Aristarchus - in a supporting role in your church or in a ministry. Praise the Lord for “Aristarchuses”! We need more of them! Without the solid, faithful behind-the-scenes helpers, ministries would be weaker and far less effective for the Lord. God provides “Aristarchuses.”

d. God provides the “Demases” (v24).

Demas “sent his greetings” in Colossians 4:14, and Paul described him here as a “fellow worker.” But nothing more was said about him there. Unfortunately, by the time 2 Timothy was written (about five years later than this epistle to Philemon), Demas had deserted the apostle Paul. Why? He forsook the ministry because he “*loved this present world*” (2 Timothy 4:10).

In Christian ministry and service, some believers are not as committed as we would like them to be. Sometimes we will encounter “Demases,” who disappoint us. But in His sovereign ways, God provides the “Demases.” “Deserting Demases” certainly teach us to look more to the Lord for help and encouragement. God has His reasons for allowing “Demases” to come along our way. So God provides “Demases.”

e. God provides the “Lukes” (v24).

Good old faithful Dr. Luke! Luke was Paul’s traveling companion and personal physician, and he carefully documented Paul’s life and ministry in the book of Acts.

Luke was educated and trained as a doctor, and he used that education and training in service for the Lord. What a blessing to have “Lukes” in the ministry! God provides the “Lukes.”

Maybe you’re a “Luke,” educated and well trained in a different field, not necessarily in preaching or teaching. Don’t feel that you’re not ready to serve the Lord until you’ve been to seminary! God can use your education and training for His glory! God provides the “Lukes.”

Practical Application

Would you be happy to show hospitality to the apostle Paul?

In verse 22, Paul told Philemon to prepare a guest room for him. Paul wasn’t asking Philemon to reserve him a room at the Motel 6 down the road! No - Paul planned to stay in Philemon’s house.

Would you be happy to invite the apostle Paul to stay in your home? You would likely say, “Sure! Of course!” But think it through. Would you have to hide some videos or books or magazines before the apostle Paul knocked on the door? Would some TV programs or videogames have to be put on hold? Would the conversation and behavior around the house have to change? Convicting questions – right?

Would you be happy to invite the apostle Paul to stay in your home?