

FOR LOVE'S SAKE
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Philemon
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There's a very small epistle in the New Testament, called Philemon. I preached this message some time ago, but someone was heard to remark, "I didn't even know where that Book was in the Bible. Well, it's over by the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament. It's the shortest of Paul's epistles, the **Book of Philemon**. This little Book contains some great lessons and I want you to turn with me in your Bibles now and I'll make a few introductory remarks and then I'm going to tell you a story from the Book of Philemon.

Now, here's my subject: The title of this message is "**FOR LOVE'S SAKE**" or **FOR THE SAKE OF LOVE**, whichever way you can remember it. Now, here's the story, you open your Bibles to the Book of Philemon and let me tell you the background of this epistle.

There was a well-known man by the name of Philemon who lived in Colossi. That's where the church was to which Paul wrote the Book of Colossians, the epistle to the Colossian church. There was a man who lived there, by the name of Philemon and he was a believer, a true Christian. He was known throughout all that area of Colossi. In fact, there was a church, which met in his home of Philemon. Some say that Philemon was one of the 70 disciples, which the Lord sent out in **Luke Chapter 10:1**, when he sent out 70 disciples to preach two by two. I'm not sure about that, but that is what has been said, also someone else said that at one time, he was the bishop of Gaza. Evidently, Philemon, who lived in Colossi, had a great house and a great household and had a church that met in his home. He had many servants, which was common in those days.

Well, there was one of his servants whose name was Onesimus. I don't know how long Onesimus had been in the household of Philemon or how long he had worked for him, but he was what you call a slave or a servant, in the house of Philemon. Onesimus had embezzled some funds and had stolen some property, (some money from Philemon). He had robbed his master, and had run away from Colossi, away from Philemon's house. He fled to the city of Rome. How long he was with Philemon, I do not know, but I do believe that he did steal some funds, or property, when he left the household of Philemon and went to Rome. Paul wrote later to Philemon, he said, "If he owes you anything, or has wronged you, put it on my account and I will pay back whatever he's taken." So, he fled to Rome.

Now, the third person that we meet in this epistle is the apostle Paul. Paul was in Rome at this particular time. Paul was in prison. It was a strange type of prison. Paul was confined to a certain house, to a dwelling. He wasn't in a dungeon, he wasn't in a public prison, but he was in a home. He was confined for a length of time to this home and he had guards all about him, but Paul was allowed in this home, in this confinement. He was allowed to have people come to see him. He wasn't allowed to leave; he was under guard, in confinement. People could come and see him.

He had some friends there. Luke was with him, John Mark was with him, Epaphras was with him, and Demas, who later left him, was with him. These men were all there with him. Timothy was even with him. He could preach to people who came to his house. He had several friends that came to hear him on a regular basis.

Now, here's what happened. Here's what led to the writing of this epistle. This is the reason that this epistle was written, and this is the reason our God has preserved it for our instruction and for our teaching. Here was Philemon, the wealthy man, down in Colossi who had these servants, and one of them was named Onesimus. He had stolen some property and money and had run away from home, but he came to Rome. Here is what I believe, I believe that like the prodigal son, he came to himself and he realized what he had done. He had a good master, he had a good home, and he was well cared for, and wasn't mistreated. Here he was in a strange city and had stolen this property, and had used it up like the prodigal son, and he came to himself and he realized how foolish he was. He realized what he had done and what a condition he was in, so he came to see Paul.

You say, "How in the world did Onesimus, the slave, know Paul?" Probably, it was through Philemon. I don't believe anyone could have been with Philemon very long without hearing about his friend, the apostle Paul, who preached the gospel and who was the apostle to the Gentiles. But anyway, here was Onesimus, the runaway slave, in Rome and he came to the house where Paul was in confinement, where Paul was preaching. He knew Paul and I believe he came to Paul to get some help and to ask Paul if he would intercede for him with his master Philemon.

Well, anyway, Paul preached the gospel to him. This runaway slave, this thief, came to the knowledge of the gospel. That's what Paul said, in **verse 10**; "*Onesimus is now my son, whom I've begotten in jail.*" He wrote to Philemon, and wrote him this epistle, and he said to him, "I would have kept him here with me," but he said, "not without your permission, so I'm sending him back to you. I'm sending this runaway slave, this thief, this embezzler, who has come here, to Rome and heard the gospel and God in His grace and mercy has brought him to a knowledge of Christ Jesus, changed his heart, changed his life, regenerated him, and made him a new creature in Christ. I'm sending him back to you, back to Philemon, to his master, and I want you to welcome him and love him and receive him."

I want you to see this in this letter, as Paul wrote to Philemon and gave this letter to this runaway slave. He said, "Take this to your master."

Now, you have it there, opened in front of you, the Book of Philemon. This is the letter he wrote. I want you to notice in this letter; I think this is the key to all of this. I want you to notice the many references in this letter, 25 verses, the many references to the Lord Jesus Christ. There are 25 verses in this epistle and (ten times) the apostle Paul mentions the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now here's this apostle and he's sending back to his friend, Philemon, a wealthy man, a believer, a man in whose home, a church met, a godly man. He's sending back, this man who has wronged him, who has stolen from him and who has embezzled his funds. He said, "I want you to take him back and love him and receive him, forgive him and receive him as a brother."

All the way, through this epistle, Paul bases this on his love for Christ, Philemon's love for Christ, and Onesimus' love for Christ. Paul bases everything he says here, every request he makes, he's basing it on his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. All that he instructs Philemon to do, to receive this slave, is because he loves Christ. Onesimus, the slave is to be taken in as a son of God, as a brother in the Lord.

Now, my friends, who we are and what we are and what we do and our motive for what we do is because of our love for Christ. That's the basis on which Paul writes this letter to Philemon. It's like he said to the church of Ephesus, he said, "*Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you.*" He said, "You be kind, one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, on what basis?" (Christ forgave you)!

Then, in John 15:12, he was telling his disciples, he said, "*A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.*" On what basis? "*You love one another, as I have loved you.*" That's the way you are to love one another, as "*I have loved you.*"

He sat down by the fire, talking to the apostle Peter, after Peter had denied him and led the other disciples out on a fishing trip and the master came and appeared to them, after He arose from the grave, He said, "*Peter do you love me?*" He said, "*Yes I do!*" He said, "*Feed my sheep.*" He asked him three times, "*Do you love me?*" Every time, Peter would say, "*Well Lord, you know I love you.*" Finally, he said, "*Lord you know everything, you know I love you.*" He said, "*Well, feed my sheep.*"

My friends, this is the key to this Book and the understanding of what Paul is saying here, is a love for Christ, our relationship with Him. I want you to see that, so take (**verse 1**), it starts out this way. Here's this letter from Paul to Philemon. He says, "Paul, I'm the author of this epistle, "*I'm a prisoner of Jesus Christ and Timothy our brother who is with me and he shares in this letter. I'm writing to Philemon, to my dearly beloved and fellow laborer in the Lord.*" Now Paul starts this letter off to Philemon, by saying, "I'm a prisoner, but I'm not a prisoner of Nero, I'm not a prisoner of the Roman Empire. I'm not a prisoner of the powers of this city; I'm a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I'm here because this is where my Lord wants me. I'm here because it is the will of my Master.

It's like, when Joseph gathered his brothers around him, down in Egypt, after he had revealed to them who he is. He said, "*I am Joseph, your brother.*" They were frightened, they had sold

him into slavery, and they had lied about his death and had mistreated him. They were the cause, humanly speaking, of all of his troubles. He said to them, *“Don’t be upset and don’t be afraid, what you did to me, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. I’m here because God wanted me here.”* And that is what Paul is saying here; I’m a prisoner.

Paul was a prisoner in Rome; God led Onesimus to Rome. If Paul had not been there in prison, Onesimus would have never heard the gospel. He came to Rome and heard Paul. Paul said, *“I’m a prisoner in this house of confinement, but I’m here, by the will of God.”*

Old bishop Samuel Rutherford was in prison in Aberdeen, years ago, over in England for preaching the gospel, in a very severe lock-up. He would write to his friends. This is how he would begin his letters, He would write, *“From the Lord’s palace in Aberdeen.”* He regarded where he was, to be where God wanted him, a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

John Newton wrote:

Content with beholding his face
My all to His pleasure resign,
No changes of seasons or place
Would make any change in my mind.
While blest with a sense of God’s love
A palace, a toy would appear,
And prisons would palaces prove
If God would dwell with me there.

Paul said, *“I’ve learned that whatsoever state I am to be content.”* So, when he sits down to write this letter to Philemon, he says, *“I’m a prisoner, but not of Nero, not of Rome, I’m a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and I’m writing to you, my beloved brother, in His name.”*

Then, in **(verse 2)**, he says, *“And greet our beloved Apphia, (that was Philemon’s wife), and greet Archippus, our fellow soldier in the church,”* which meets in your home and the pastor of the church.

Then he says in (verse 3), *“Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* I’m a prisoner of Christ. I pray that you might have the grace of Christ and the peace of Christ.

Those are the two most treasured possessions that Paul could wish for his brother, grace to forgive, grace to save, grace to pardon, and grace to redeem. *“For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourself, it’s the gift of God, not of works, that any man should boast.”* I pray for you from God the Father through Jesus Christ, His grace and peace.

Do you know of anything more valuable than those two things? Do you know of anything that you would rather have than those two things? *“Oh, that we might come boldly before the throne of God’s grace in Christ Jesus and find mercy to help us and grace in our time of need.”* And then, to have peace, peace and joy in the heart from the throne of God.

Not many days ago, I visited in a hospital room, with a beloved friend, about 80 years of age. There was a possibility, perhaps, that she would not survive the night. We went down to the hospital room to visit with her and talk with her, with what we thought, might be our last visit together. As I bent over her in the bed, I said, “Are you resting in Christ?” She looked at me and said, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and His righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, I holy lean on Jesus’ name. If it’s God’s will for me to live, I’ll be happy to live. If it’s God’s will to take me home tonight, I’ll be happy to go, because I have peace, peace in Him.”

Let me tell you, grace and peace, and do you know where it comes from? It comes from our Lord Jesus Christ. He said, “*My peace I’ll give unto you, not as the world giveth.*” “*Let not your heart be troubled, don’t be afraid,*” my peace I freely give you!

This is what Paul is praying for his beloved brother. I’ve got some matters to talk to you about; I want you to understand some things before we talk about these matters. I’m a prisoner of Jesus Christ. My prayer and hope for you is that you might have that grace and that peace that God’s given me. I pray that it might be grace multiplied.

Look at **verse 4 and 5**: Paul said, “*I thank God for you.*” I thank God for you Philemon. Oh, how we thank God for faithful believers and faithful brothers and faithful supporters. He said, “*I make mention of you in my prayers.*” Listen to this now, “*Hearing of your love and your faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus Christ, and toward all His people.*” Look at those verses. “*I thank God for you, I pray for you and I’ve heard of your love for Christ, your faith in Christ, and your love toward the people of God.*” Did you get that? Paul said, “I’ve heard about you, I’ve heard about your faith and your love and your works and your dedication.

My friends, I have always believed that a true Christian does not need to wear a religious uniform to show he’s a Christian. I’ve always felt that a true believer didn’t need to wear a cross or a lapel pin that says, “I love Jesus” or a bumper sticker or a t-shirt, or carry a sign saying that I’m a Christian. If he really is a child of God, folks will hear about it. Folks will find about it. They will find out about it, hear about it through his attitude or her conversation or their works. This is what Paul says about this man. I’ve heard about your love for Christ. I’ve heard about your faith in Christ, I’ve heard about your love for God’s people.

Then, in **verse 6**, Paul says, “Your works and kindness is towards others, not to you, but to your Lord, while they acknowledge what is in you is by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Do you see that in **verse 6**? People acknowledge that what you are and what you give and what you do is not because you are better in your nature, but because Christ lives and dwells in you and that the good, which is in you, is through Jesus Christ and your relationship with Him.

Now, look at **verses 8 and 9**. Now, in these verses, he tells Philemon, “*I’m sending back to you, Onesemus whom I’ve begotten in my bonds, and I want you to receive him, love him and forgive him.*” Look at **verse 8**. Paul says, “I could command you to do it, I’m an apostle.” He says later, “You owe me your life and I could command you to receive this man, but I’m not going to do it.” Look at **verse 9**. “I rather beseech you for love’s sake, because I am your

friend and your brother and I'm Paul the aged and I'm the prisoner of Jesus Christ." Now what I ask you to do, you do it because you love Christ, because you love me and because you love this dear man. And there you have it, my dear friend.

There you have the motive for everything we do, which is acceptable to God. For all that we do that's acceptable with God, it's for love's sake. It's for the sake of love. God will accept nothing else. He'll accept no other foundation. He'll accept no other work, or merit. No Sir! If we do things for reward, no sir! If we do it out of service, no sir! If we do it out of duty, responsibility, restitution, tithe or whatever, do it because you love me.

Paul gives us this basis. "*This love of Christ constraineth us.*" It was because God loved us that He gave us His Son. "*God so loved the world that He gave His Son.*" That was the basis on which Christ came, the foundation. "*Christ, having loved His own, loved them to the end.*" That's what took Him to the cross, His love for His Father, His Father's will and His Father's love for the people. Christ said, "*If you love me, keep my commandments,*" if you love me.

When He sends this runaway slave back to his master, he says, "Now Philemon, you receive him as you would receive me, my own bowels, my own innermost being. You receive this young man and you love him. You receive him not as a servant, but as a brother. You do it for one reason, because you love Christ and you love His people and you love me His servant. Now, that's the basis on which you do it."

Now look at **verse 10 and 11**. Paul said, "*I have begotten him in my bonds.*" In **verse 11**, "*In times past, He was unprofitable to you.*" I know that, he was no account, he was worthless, he was a thief, and I know that. In times past, he was no count. But now it's different, he's profitable. Listen, not only to you, but also to me. You mean a man like Onesimus, a runaway slave, a thief, could be profitable to the apostle Paul? Yes, because of one reason, God's in him, Christ is in him. That's what's happened. How do you account for this? It's the grace of God.

This man met the Master. He didn't just meet the Master's servant, Paul, he just didn't meet the Master's doctrine, he didn't just meet the Master's people, he met the Master. The gospel came into his heart and changed him and made him a new creature in Christ Jesus. Christ our Lord lived in his heart and because the Lord lives in this man's heart, there will be strong evidence of His presence. And Paul is confident, he's sending Onesimus back to Philemon and he says, "Now here comes a man, he's not the same." He was unprofitable, he was worthless, he was no account but now he is profitable to you and to me and to all God's people. You watch him! He'll labor in love and he'll work in faith.

Now, verses **13 and 14**. Paul said, "I would have kept him here but he might help me in your place, but I wouldn't do it without your willingness. I wouldn't do it because your benefit should not be of necessity, but willingly." In other words, he said, "I'm not going to keep this man here and write and tell you that I'm keeping him and then you would have to let him stay because I said to." No sir, I'm going to send him back to you because I don't want any service from you except that which is willing.

Somebody often says to me, “If you need anything, now ask me.” No, they’re not going to ask. Let it be not of necessity, not of responsibility, but willingly.

Now, look at **verse 15**, I love this, “*Perhaps, (Paul says), he departed from you for a season that you should receive him forever.*” Don’t you know that morning when Philemon got up and called Onesimus to come and do his duty and he was gone? Philemon was upset and he began to check around the house and some money was gone, and some property was gone, gold and silver was gone, and maybe some of his wife’s treasures were gone. His heart was just broken. Here was one of his servants, one of his employees that he had for years, maybe his father worked for him too, maybe some of his brothers or sisters worked for him, he was gone! His property was gone with him and Philemon was heart-broken and stunned and then Paul sends this letter. Here comes Onesimus back and he has this letter. Paul said, “*Remember Philemon, perhaps he left you for a season.*”

It was a terrible time, it was a great trial, it was a great heartache, but God was in it all. God planned it all, (and he left you for a season) that you might receive him forever. That ought to teach us not to fret over some of these temporary things in life, over these trials and sorrows in life.

I had this experience one time. One of my sons, 18 years of age, had finished High School. He was 17, almost 18. He left home, I didn’t want him to go, but he left and went to another state, he and some more boys. They left and were gone a long, long time. Two, three or four years, I don’t really remember. It was a long time and I didn’t see him for a long time. He lived a rough life there, but finally he came back home. He came back home in a repentant nature and heard the gospel and God saved him. Now, he’s a pastor of a church and preaching the gospel.

That’s what Paul is talking about here. Onesimus left home but God was in it all. He went down there to Rome and he heard Paul preach the gospel and God opened his heart to receive Christ and he was saved and came to know the gospel and came to love the gospel. Paul sends him back to Philemon, and says “Now, you receive him for Christ’s sake; forgive him for Christ’s sake, love him for Christ’s sake, because perhaps, all of this, he was gone for a season was in order that you might have him back forever and forever and forever.”

Did you know that? That’s right! “*All things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose,*” for love’s sake. That’s the foundation of all that we do with which God is pleased, in which God will accept, which He will use for His glory. It’s for love’s sake.

