









“...no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother... So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.”
The epistle of Paul to Philemon—a shocking letter.

Look at Isaiah 66:22-23—what's going on here?

- The OT looks forward to a new creation that was destined to come during the last times (cf. Is. 2:2-4, 40:1-5; Rev. 7:9-10).
- This new creation would include “all flesh”—a “great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” – Rev. 7:9.
- They have renewed hearts—they have come for one purpose: “to worship before Me.”
- And this great multitude has left behind the things that used to separate them: “nation...tribes and peoples and languages.” They now have one heart and one purpose.

So now take a look at 2 Cor. 5:16-17

If we are going to “regard no one according to the flesh” now as believers, what kinds of things are we going to have to let go of?

When we regard people according to the flesh, we often do so because we think that those distinctions matter the most...and we see in Scripture that those distinctions are the ones that need to go away.

- So it is the gospel now that determines how we think of fellow believers.
- And—too—it is the gospel that determines how we think of unbelievers (see Matt. 9:36)

Paul's letter to Philemon ~

If Philemon had thought of Onesimus "according to the flesh," what would he have thought?

- Useless, worthless
- Thief
- Runaway
- Deserving of shame, branding as a runaway slave, and possibly even death.

But Paul was asking Philemon to think of Onesimus according to the gospel, as in Christ ~

- As a "beloved brother"
- Notice that Paul uses the same word to refer to both Philemon and Onesimus: *brother* (v. 7, 16, 20)

Paul's letter to Philemon ~ an outline:

- Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3
- Paul's thanksgiving & prayer for Philemon, v. 4-7
- Paul's appeal to Philemon, v. 8-16
- Paul's confidence in Philemon, v. 17-22
- Paul's final greetings & prayer for Philemon, v. 23-25

“Paul, a prisoner...” ~ with few exceptions Paul begins his letters noting that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ. He mentions his imprisonment 5 times in this letter...but why not his apostleship?

- Paul and Philemon know each other well—he appeals not with authority (v. 8), but with love (v. 9)

John Calvin's note on Paul, the prisoner:

“The singular loftiness of the mind of Paul, though it may be seen to greater advantage in his other writings which treat of weightier matters, is also attested by this epistle, in which, while he handles a subject otherwise low and mean, he rises to God with his wonted elevation. Sending back a runaway slave and heir, he supplicates pardon for him. But in pleading this cause, he discourses about Christian forbearance with such ability, that he appears to speak about the interests of the whole Church rather than the private affairs of a single individual. In behalf of a man of the lowest condition, he demeans himself so modestly and humbly, that nowhere else is the meekness of his temper painted in a more lively manner.”

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

- We talked in lesson 1 (see the website) about Paul's imprisonment—how he ended up there, what he thought about it, and how the Lord used it for the spreading of the gospel and the encouragement of the saints.
- We also talked about who Philemon was. Many scholars think that Apphia was Philemon's wife, and Archippus their son, though we can't be sure.
- And we also looked for a bit at the very early church—what we might have seen had we shown up on Sunday morning at Philemon's house.

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

Why did Christians meet in private homes then?

- Christianity was very small—growing, yes, but very small percentage-wise in the 1st century.
- The Roman Empire was not overly impressed with Christianity; it wasn't a legitimate religion according to Rome. Christians were atheists to them.
- ESV Study Bible note on 1 Cor. 16:19 – “There is extensive archaeological evidence from many different cities showing that some homes were structurally modified to hold such churches.”
- So Philemon opened his home for the church to meet in, as did Nympha in Laodicea (Col. 4:15) and Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19).

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

So Paul, the prisoner for Christ Jesus, writes to Philemon "and the church in your house."

- Paul was a prisoner for Christ, and in one sense, so was Philemon: a bonds slave of Christ, compelled by the love of Christ to forgive, even as he had been forgiven by Christ. So Paul appeals to him from love, not authority.

Why would Paul address this personal and private letter not only to Philemon, but also to "the church in your house"?

- Philemon would be accountable to the church, and they could help him to forgive and restore.

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." ~ v. 3

Paul has identified himself and his audience in v. 1-2, and now he says something directed at them. A question: this is his standard greeting in all 13 of his epistles...is this just kind of a throwaway phrase? Kind of a nice Christiany-sounding phrase, but one that doesn't mean a whole lot?

It's safe to say that Paul doesn't waste words, and neither does the Holy Spirit who inspired Paul, or breathed/spoke through him, as he wrote (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:21).

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...” –

Let's define some words first: what is grace?

The Gk word is *charis*, meaning *grace*, or *favor*.

- In Luke 1:28, 30, Mary has found *favor* (lit., *charis*) with God. The thought is that God has an attitude of kindness toward the recipients of grace, determining to show goodness and favor towards them.
- In Acts 6:8, Stephen is “full of grace,” God had determined to bless and use Stephen for His good purposes.

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...” –

- John describes Jesus' mission to the world in 1:14, 16, 17—we have received “grace upon grace.”
- The gospel is “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), and to preach it is to proclaim “the word of His grace” (20:32).
- We see grace most clearly in the substitutionary, sacrificial death of Christ (Rom. 3:24-27; Heb. 2:9).
- Gifts of grace cannot be earned (Rom. 4:4, 11:6), so salvation is “by grace...through faith...it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). God's favor towards those who have transgressed His law.

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...” –

- God saves for this reason: “so that in the coming ages He might show the *immeasurable riches of His grace* in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7).
- This is the kindness that He has shown us: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).
- But wait, there's more: Rom. 6:14, 15:15; 1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 8:1-2, 12:9; and Heb. 4:16!

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...” – What is peace?

The Gk word is *eirene*, which includes the cessation or absence of war...but it doesn't even come close to stopping there.

- Maybe a better, more full, way of saying it would be this: it is not just the absence of war, but the presence of God—contentment in the storm.
- In Luke 2:14 the angels erupt in praise, proclaiming that God has given peace...but with a limitation: God bestows His favor upon people, but not all—only those who have been reconciled to Him. The favor, or peace, of salvation.

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...”

- Peace is Jesus' parting gift to His disciples (John 14:27; 16:33; 20:19, 21, 26).
- Jesus has achieved the highest and best kind of peace for us through His death on the cross: we can have the ultimate state of well-being—peace with God (Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14-18).
- This kind of peace is what we are to pursue among people (2 Tim. 2:22; Heb. 12:14; Matt. 5:9).
- And that sense of well-being with God will grow as we mature in Christ, a direct result of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...” – a few thoughts:

- This is what has been called a *prayer-wish* of Paul's; there are many in his letters. Like we said earlier, this shows up in all 13 of his epistles.
- We could say this about this little phrase: it gives us a glimpse into the pastoral/shepherding heart of Paul for all believers, including those he had not met before (the phrase is first used in Rom. 1:7; Paul had not met with the church in Rome previously, his letter was his introduction of himself and his gospel to believers in Rome).

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...” – a few thoughts:

- Paul seeks what is highest and best for believers: there is *nothing better* than the undeserved favor of God toward sinners, and the ongoing, blessed sense of well-being, favor, and right relationship with God.

With this phrase Paul reminds believers of the Source of that which is the highest and best:

- “God our Father” – the eternal, unchanging, Most High God who reveals Himself to His people as *Father*: the One who cares most tenderly and personally and deeply.

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...” – a few thoughts:

With this phrase Paul reminds believers of the Source of that which is the highest and best:

- “the Lord Jesus Christ” – the One who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth, who exercises that perfect authority for the good of His precious sheep. This is another affirmation of the critical truth of the deity of Christ.

From the ESV Study Bible note on 2 Cor. 1:2 – “A wordplay on the normal Greek greeting. Whereas the Greeks said ‘Hello’ (Gk *charein*), the Christians said, ‘Grace’ (Gk *charis*).

Paul's introduction to his letter to Philemon, v. 1-3

“Grace to you and peace...” – a few thoughts:

Paul, through this simple prayer, reminds his readers again of the astonishing wonder of the gospel—how God communicates His kindness and favor to sinners:

- Of the importance and centrality of the cross.
- Of the fact that we stand in right relation to God only by His gracious intervention and keeping.
- Of the truth that we continue to stand justified before Him not by good works, but only by the great grace and kindness of God.
- “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” – Rom. 5:1

John Calvin on grace and peace ~

“Nothing is more desirable than to have God propitious to us, and this is signified by *grace*; and then to have prosperity and success in all things flowing from Him, and this is intimated by *peace*; for however things may seem to smile on us, if God be angry, even blessing itself is turned to a curse. The very foundation then of our felicity is the favour of God, by which we enjoy true and solid prosperity, and by which also our salvation is promoted even when we are in adversities...

John Calvin on grace and peace ~

“And then as he prays to God for peace, we must understand, that whatever good comes to us, it is the fruit of divine benevolence. Nor must we omit to notice, that he prays at the same time to the Lord Jesus Christ for these blessings. Worthily indeed is this honor rendered to Him, who is not only the administrator and dispense of His Father’s bounty to us, but also works all things in connection with Him. It may, however, be the special object of the Apostle to show, that through Him all God’s blessings come to us.”

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8:9)