

In the Flesh, in the Lord

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Philemon 1-25

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and co-worker; to Apphia our sister; to Archippus our fellow-soldier; and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Believe it or not, we have read an entire book of the bible this morning! So, congratulations. That wasn't so hard, was it? The book of Philemon is just 25 verses long, but make no mistake: these verses are jam-packed with meaning. When I was growing up, my father was a professor of theology, and he used to teach a semester-long course just about this letter.

One of the most fascinating things about Philemon, I think, is its history of interpretation. Over the course of Christian history, people have interpreted this letter in very different and even

opposite ways. And this is most clearly seen with the issue of slavery. In the South, for more than a hundred years leading up to the Civil War, slave-masters and preachers invoked Philemon as biblical proof that God approved of the slave trade and of slave labor in the Americas: “the apostle Paul sends the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon!” they pointed out. “Clearly, if Paul thought that slavery was evil, he wouldn’t have done that! And in fact, sending a slave back to his master suggests that Paul thought slavery was a part of the proper order of things! We might even say that Paul was in *favor* of slavery. At the very least, he wasn’t out to abolish it. And if the apostle Paul didn’t want to abolish slavery, why would you, Christians today, try to do so?” That’s what slave-masters and southern preachers said.

At the same time, abolitionists had a different interpretation and preached a different message. To begin with, they weren’t going to answer the ethical question of slavery by appealing to one bible verse here, another bible verse there. In their minds, what Paul said to one person or to one community two thousand years ago could not be mechanically applied to all people and all communities, today and in the future. What Paul told someone to do in one context back then is not necessarily what God is telling all of us to do in this context now. No, what we need instead, the abolitionists argued, is a thoughtful allegiance to the *spirit* of scripture, rather than a slavish allegiance to the *letter* of scripture. And as the abolitionists surveyed scripture as a whole, they discerned not a spirit of slavery, but a spirit of freedom. If we look at the direction that God is taking the world, they said, we see a path that leads toward liberation and peace for all of God’s children, all equally valued and equally loved, because all are one in Jesus Christ.

How did Paul’s letter to Philemon point in that direction? How did the abolitionists see that spirit of freedom at work in these words? For one, they saw that Paul clearly *wanted* Onesimus to be set free. Specifically, he wanted *Philemon* to set Onesimus free, and to make that decision on his own — although Paul is certainly pressuring him to do so in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. I’m reminded of my sister Alyssa, who was nannying a temperamental three-year-old named Jude and who was trying to win him over by giving him choices throughout the day, to help him feel a sense of independence. So, when it was time for Jude’s nap, she said to him, “Jude, would you like to walk up the stairs on your own to take a nap, or would you like me to carry you up the stairs for a nap?” He looked up at her, wide-eyed, and said, “I have choices!” And she said, “Yes, Jude, you do.” And he said, “You can carry me up the stairs for my nap.” It seems that Paul is doing something similar with Philemon, using various persuasive tactics to try and win him over to the idea of emancipating Onesimus.

But we won’t focus on that this morning. Instead, I want to focus on one verse, verse 16: what it meant for the abolitionists and what it might mean for us today. In this verse, Paul expresses his desire that Onesimus be no longer a slave, but a beloved brother. Paul then says that Onesimus is already a brother to him, and that he should be all the more so a brother to Philemon, “both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

For abolitionists, this phrase “both in the flesh and in the Lord” functioned as a theological argument against the slave trade and slave labor: put briefly, they argued that slavery

contradicted the truth of a person's status in the eyes of God. Slavery in this era said that some people — specifically, darker-skinned people of African descent — are not worthy of independence and are inherently inferior to lighter-skinned people of European descent. It is fitting, then, that Africans become slaves and that their primary responsibility be to obey “the white man.” That was slavery's message. But scripture's message — the spirit of scripture's message — runs contrary to that. To quote Paul in Galatians 3, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one, are equal, in Christ Jesus.” In Paul's day, and in his crowd, each of these three pairings in Galatians 3 was a hierarchy: Jews were supposedly superior to the Gentile Greeks, free people were supposedly superior to slaves, and men were supposedly superior to women. So, Paul is saying that, for the community of Christ followers, these hierarchies are bogus. The spirit of scripture resounds with the proclamation that all people are equally loved by God and all people are equally set free in Christ. Later on in Galatians, Paul writes, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Now, you can imagine the rebuttal of the slave-masters and southern preachers: “But Galatians isn't talking about *physical* slavery; it's talking about slavery to sin! Christ has set us free from the power of sin, yes, but not from the earthly order of the master-slave relationship! Just because slaves should be freed from sin, like everyone else, doesn't mean that they should be removed from their role as slaves.”

But here's where the abolitionists return to verse 16: Paul says that Onesimus should be a beloved brother to Philemon “both in the flesh and in the Lord.” In Paul's mind, there are these two realms — the realm of the flesh and the realm of the Lord, or the realm of the spirit — and Paul is saying that Onesimus isn't meant to be a slave in the flesh but a brother in the Lord. No one is meant to be treated as inferior in the flesh but equal and honored in the spirit. The two realms of flesh and spirit shouldn't contradict each other; they should echo each other. They should rhyme. So, Paul says, if we are made to be equal kindred in Christ, then we should behave as equal kindred in the world, right now.

That's the theology of abolitionists in the 19th century. And I'd say that it's the theology of our church's liturgy every week. When we recite the Lord's Prayer together, we pray that God's Kingdom would come and that God's will would be done on earth as it is in Heaven.” Have you ever thought about how bold, how dramatic that prayer is? We are praying that *Heaven* — God's reign of perfect freedom and peace and unity and joy — would be put into place, would be acted out in our screwy world, here and now. We are praying that these two separate realms of flesh and spirit would eventually not just rhyme, but join together.

Jesus invites us to pray this prayer to God, but Jesus also invites us to be a part of bringing that prayer to fruition. We are invited to participate in bringing heaven to earth. Sounds like too big of a task for us, of course, but we are meant to go about it in small ways. A couple of weeks ago, I paraphrased a quote that I'll read verbatim now: “With every decision, conversation, gesture, comment, action, and attitude, we're inviting either heaven or hell to earth.” And this task of

inviting heaven to earth *is* too big of a task for us on our own. But that's why the Spirit of God accompanies us. May the Spirit give us wisdom to know what it means for each of us to live in the flesh as we are called to live in the Lord, and may the Spirit give us courage in the flesh to carry it out. Amen.