WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT WEEK OF JUNE 12, 2023

June 12

Grace and peace to you this day.

This week we will continue our walk through the books of the Bible in order with a brief look at the book of Philemon. Philemon was written by the apostle Paul in 60 AD while he was under house arrest in Rome. It is one of the shortest books in the Bible, comprising only a single chapter, but at the same time, one of the most personal.

Philemon was a close personal friend of Paul’s and a man of some wealth. On of his slaves, Onesimus, had apparently stolen something from him and fled to Rome where he met Paul and accepted Jesus as His Savior. Paul was so moved by Onesimus’ conversion and sincerity that he wrote a letter to his friend Philemon asking him to take Onesimus back, and then some, as we shall see. Paul opens his letter like this:

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker…” (v. 1).

This greeting is somewhat unique among Paul’s thirteen letters in that unlike most of the others, he does not identify himself as an apostle. He often did so in the other letters in order to invoke his authority. Instead, here, he immediately identifies himself as a “prisoner,” and not of Rome, though he certainly was. Instead, he identifies himself in the very first sentence as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”

What are we to make of this? Is Paul complaining somehow that his life of faith has constrained him? Is he protesting his circumstances, wishing for the day when he was free of those chains, or is something else going on here? This is what I think:

Paul is mentioning his imprisoned state in the Lord as a badge of honor. His spiritual chains bind him not to a jail cell or a dungeon wall, but to the Lord Himself. His imprisonment is one of obedience and devotion. He is so consumed by his faith in Jesus and the need to spread the Gospel that it has literally left him no other choice in life, and thus his “imprisonment.”

People sometimes view the life of faith as a life of “do this” and don’t do that.” Viewed in that context, it can seem like life in a jail cell. But that’s not how Jesus intends it. The life he intends for you, and for me, when we place our trust in him, is, in fact, the opposite. When we bind ourselves to Him, we experience the life He intends, which is a life not of imprisonment, but of freedom. Freedom from worry. Freedom from sin. And, freedom from the grave itself.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
June 13

Grace and peace to you this day.

Continuing today with the opening greeting of Paul’s letter to his friend Philemon:

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 1-3).

In modern times, it is customary, if not expected, when writing a letter (does anyone even do that anymore?) or a personal email to someone, to inquire about their family. It usually goes something like this:

“Hi Joe, I hope this finds you and yours well.” Or “Hi Joe, How are you? How’s your family doing?” You get the idea.

In the time of Paul, that was not necessarily the case. Philemon is a very personal letter between two friends, Paul and Philemon, about a sensitive matter – the return of a runaway slave. Notice here that Paul doesn’t simply ask about Philemon’s family, which would have been a bit unusual unto itself, but not necessarily out of the ordinary. Instead, he addresses the letter equally to Philemon, his wife Apphia, and their son Archippus. That certainly would have raised eyebrows, to say the least, especially given the somewhat delicate nature of the subject matter.

Certainly, as the wife, Apphia would have overseen the running of a wealthy household, including its slaves. But never would she have been involved in the purchase or the freeing of a slave, nor would a son. So, what is Paul’s purpose in including both Philemon’s wife and son? Here’s what I think:

I think that having experienced the risen Jesus Himself, no one knew better than Paul how Jesus sees through and overcomes barriers. Paul described himself as a “Pharisee of Pharisees” and yet Jesus saw that not as a barrier, but as a blessing. Social, racial, ethnic, sexual, and class barriers abounded in Paul’s time. But the Kingdom of God removes them. As Paul says famously in his letter to the Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28).

For Paul, these are not just words, but words to live by. In divided and divisive times, may they be so with us as well.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
June 14

Grace and peace to you this day.

Paul’s letter to his friend Philemon was not only bold in its request, that Philemon accept back a runaway slave, it was also full of risk. After all, Paul had no legal basis for his request. The slave, Onesimus, was property, and he did not belong to Paul. Upon return, Philemon would have been within his legal rights to have Onesimus sold, he could have had him flogged, and he could have had him killed. Or, he could have just made his life very difficult.

So, Paul took a risk. What goes unmentioned in this letter is how he was able to convince Onesimus to give up his life on the run and return to his master, knowing that the potential consequences were as stated above. One can imagine that Onesimus would have been most reluctant, at least at first. In any case, this is part of what Paul says in returning Onesimus:

“I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary” (vs. 12-14).

Paul returns Onesimus viewing him not as a slave, but as a fellow “prisoner” of Christ. Paul realizes the fate that could legally befall Onesimus. And yet, in an earlier passage, he refers to him as a “son” (v. 10) and here we see that he refers to him as his “very heart.” In a truly remarkable phrase, he refers to him as someone who could replace Philemon himself in working with Paul.

Once again, we see the power of faith and how we as Christians are called to mirror the love, and the grace, and the mercy that Jesus extends to us. And, as in Paul’s example, we are just as called to encourage those around us to do the same.

I can’t help but wonder what the state of our world would be like if we said, in effect, what Paul is saying: “I know what you legally can do, but I am asking you as a brother in Christ to guide your actions by a spirit of grace, as a reflection of the grace that has been extended to us, and not by the unsparing letter of the law.”

Come to think of it, I think we know the answer.

Tomorrow: Paul takes an even bigger risk.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
June 15

Grace and peace to you this day.

As we finish our brief look at the apostle Paul's letter to his friend Onesimus, in his concluding paragraph, Paul makes a truly bold claim, and a truly daring request:

“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord” (vs. 15-16).

First, Paul reminds us that in God’s kingdom, nothing happens by accident or coincidence, and God can use anything and everyone for His purpose, even a runaway slave: “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever…” Paul sees God’s hand at work not only in Onesimus’ hasty departure, but in his humble return. That is Paul’s bold claim: God has a purpose in this.

Given, then, that Paul sees God’s purpose, he makes a daring request: that Philemon take Onesimus back “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”

Think about what Paul is asking: “Even though you have the right, I request that my ‘son’ Onesimus not be killed, not be flogged, not be sold, but that you take him back. And not as a slave, but as a dear brother."

We don’t know how the story ends, and what eventually came of Onesimus. But I do know this. In a devotional I studied many years ago, I read something that has stuck with me ever since: “In Christ there are no risks.” And so maybe the important part isn’t whether Onesimus was accepted as a slave or a “dear brother.” Instead, I think the important part is this: you and I will see him one day.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
June 16

Grace and peace to you this day.

Here’s your musical devotional for the week. Turn up the volume and enjoy!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xro1sWjN78

IHS,

Pastor Lou