

LII. Traveling Route 66: The Bible in Biblical Perspective  
*The Journey with Christ, the Promised One*  
“Philemon—The Book of Emancipation”  
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This is our 52<sup>nd</sup> study on our way, travelling Route 66. We are in the book of Philemon and we will read it in its entirety in this study. I think there is a total of 227 words in this book. One time I was with Alistair Begg and we were talking about this epistle and he said “This is the epistle that I always tell people to read it and take a note for this is the way to write a letter to somebody.” This is a personal letter. The Apostle Paul mostly writes letters to churches but he writes some of them to individuals, such as Timothy, Titus and here Philemon.

The opening verses in Philemon 1:1-3 says [1] *Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker* [2] *and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:* [3] *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Before we read further I'd like to take a moment to tell you why I think this epistle is so important to us and important for us. There is no doubt that when people come savingly to Christ they surrender to Christ as Lord and they trust in Him alone for their salvation. They follow Him as Lord but that doesn't save them. They follow Him because He has saved them as they follow Him intentionally by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore disciples are under command. We are under orders. The Lord does not give us suggestions. The Lord gives us imperatives and commands. He calls us to obey them and follow them. That is why we're given titles and descriptive terms like soldier, slave, servant and follower. It is because we are called to obey.

What is interesting, is that in the Bible, while disciples are expected and called to obey the commands of their Lord, discipleship is winsome, persuasive and it draws us to obedience. There is no greater example, I believe in all of the Bible, than those two facts than this epistle. Jesus says in one form or another 38 times by Himself or through the Apostles in the New Testament to love one another. Do you think that is a suggestion or a command? It is a command. What is interesting is how He draws us to it while commanding us to do it. The Apostle Paul has clearly picked up on that in this particular epistle. So now let's walk our way through it.

Who writes this epistle? We are told by the writer himself. Paul writes it in the company of Timothy.

To whom is it written to, when is it written and where is it written? He is in prison in Rome. There is some discussion as to whether he might have been in his earlier imprisonment in Caesarea by the Sea but I don't think so. What is clear from a number of passages is that Luke is with him. Let's get the flow here. On Paul's last missionary journey, he leaves Ephesus and heads back to Jerusalem, knowing that when he gets there the Holy Spirit has already told him he will be put in chains. He was arrested in Jerusalem. Then he was imprisoned for two years at Caesarea by the Sea. He was imprisoned in Herod Agrippa's palladium in kind of a house arrest. During that time he had the chance to witness to Agrippa, Felix and Festus. Then when they were going to let him go he decided he wanted the chance to witness to Caesar and his household so he

appealed to Caesar. So he was put on a ship and went to Rome for two more years of imprisonment. So the Apostle Paul found a way to start a prison ministry without raising any funds whatsoever. He got a government supported prison ministry and led soldiers and members of Caesar's household to Christ. It was an amazing thing.

Someone else Paul led to Christ while in Rome was a runaway slave whose name was Onesimus and that becomes the occasion for this letter. While he was there in that imprisonment we know that he wrote four letters that are included in the canon of Scripture. He wrote Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, all of which we have covered already. The fourth letter is Philemon and we are covering that in this study. So he wrote these from his Roman imprisonment.

When did he write this? It is somewhere between 60 to 62 A.D. It seems as if the letter to the Colossians was joined with this letter. In other words, when the bearer of this letter showed up who was Tychicus, he had both letters in his hand. One was to be read publicly to the church which is the letter to the Colossians. The other was a personal letter handed to a leader in the church, a man rich enough to have slaves and have a house big enough where the church could meet in. His name is Philemon. When Tychicus shows up he is accompanied by the runaway slave, Onesimus. The personal letter which was to be private initially became public and it was a personal letter from Paul to Philemon which we will now look at and has a total of 23 verses.

Now why did he write it? He wrote this to announce the spiritual emancipation of Onesimus for he had been delivered of the slavery of sin. Onesimus had been saved under Paul's ministry. Paul is announcing the spiritual emancipation of Onesimus to Philemon, now calling upon Philemon to physically emancipate him from his bondage as a slave. The name Onesimus means useful but actually if you kind of read between the lines it seems as if while he was a slave with Philemon he was not very useful. In fact, he had run away. Was this because of Philemon's harshness toward slaves? The issue of whether he should own slaves or not, we'll leave aside for now but the Scripture doesn't indicate there was a harshness about Philemon when it comes to how he treated his slaves or others or even how he treated Paul.

So very likely the fact of slavery which is a demeaning position and Onesimus' own response to it had now led him to run away. When you run away from someone, how do you hide? There are two ways that you hide. One is that you go somewhere where nobody is and nobody can find you. David did that when he went out into the wilderness. Another way to hide is to go where everybody is and get lost in the crowd. If you choose strategy number two there is not a better place to go hide in a crowd than Rome. There is a big crowd there. So he runs away. The penalty for a slave that runs away is death. It is a capital offense. So he runs away at the risk of death and he obviously decides to go to Rome.

Now isn't it *lucky* that he ran into Paul? No, not lucky. What has happened is the good providence of God which has led Onesimus to get lost in the crowd and somehow end up with the Apostle Paul who has ministered to his owner Philemon. What happens is that he is converted. Now the Apostle Paul is going to announce his conversion and Paul will call upon Philemon persuasively and what a way to write a letter! Paul will persuade and draw Philemon toward emancipating Onesimus physically, this one that has now been returned to him by the hand of God's saving grace and providential guidance. So let's take a closer look at the book of Philemon.

First I want to give you an outline of the book of Philemon. The introduction is found in Philemon 1:1-3. I have basically divided the letter up into two parts. There is the prayer of thanksgiving which is found in Philemon 1:4-7 and then there is Paul's request. He basically has one request but kind of throws in another couple of requests on the side. His request is in Philemon 1:8-22 and then his conclusion is in Philemon 1:22-23. We will conclude our study by looking at the themes of this book but first we'll start with Paul's prayer of thanksgiving.

Philemon 1:4-7 says [4] *I thank my God always when I remember you (speaking to Philemon) in my prayers, [5] because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, [6] and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. [7] For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.*

That is quite a testimony concerning Philemon's life. The Apostle Paul is saying in his prayer life that he is thanking God for the mere remembrance of Philemon. Remember the virtue of triads that show up in Paul's letters? They are faith, hope and love. Here they are worked in again in Philemon. He is giving thanks to God for his love and his faith which has been vertical toward the Lord Jesus, and horizontal toward the saints. Then he goes from thanksgiving prayer to intercessory prayer. Philemon 1:6 says [6] *and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.* So did he expect Philemon to be doing personal evangelism? Absolutely, because he said 'you're sharing your faith.'

I know I've said this before but I just want you to know that it is of no burden to me to repeat myself. I believe to share your faith it would be good for you to take the time to take our Bridge to Life class. My prayer is that every member of Briarwood would take this class. It is our one verse evangelism. It takes about one to two classes to get through it so that you can conversationally share the Gospel with people. Also I think you should commit to heart memory your testimony. I think you ought to have three testimonies. There is your elevator testimony, your lunch testimony and your evening guest meal testimony. When you don't have a lot of time you need to be able to share your testimony before you get to the fifth floor. The next one is when you have lunch with someone who you have for that hour which would be your fifteen to twenty minute testimony. Then there is a time where you have an evening with people where you can ask questions and in the context of it share your testimony in a winsome way.

Notice how the Apostle Paul expects Philemon to be sharing his faith in Christ with other people. I believe every Christian is a missionary. I do not believe every Christian is a frontier missionary or a pioneer missionary but I do believe we're all sent ones. I do believe we're all called to share the Gospel with other people in our circle of influence and relationships. That is what Paul expects of Philemon. Paul says to Philemon that he prays the sharing of his faith may become effective in every good thing for the sake of Christ.

Philemon 1:7 says [7] *For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.* Philemon's love of the brethren has comforted others but it has also comforted Paul. Paul says as you have loved me I rejoice and your love for the saints draws me into this relationship with you. I believe the Apostle Paul means every single word of this. He is

also setting Onesimus up. Take a note for here is a good way to write a letter and disciple people. Start off with what the Lord is already doing in their life to get them where the Lord is leading you to lead them where they ought to be in their Christian life. He has affirmed where they are and now he is going to draw him to where he wants him to be.

Here is Paul's request. Philemon 1:8-14 says [8] *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,* (In other words, what Paul is about to say is not a suggestion. This is a great way to command without commanding which is what Paul is doing here.) [9] *yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—*[10] *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.* (Likely Paul was the key instrument in leading Onesimus to Christ as he showed up in Rome as a runaway slave.) [11] *(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)* [12] *I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.* (Philemon has the power to set Onesimus free or legally put him to death – before he was useless, now converted he is really useful) [13] *I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,* [14] *but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.*

Paul is speaking of a regenerate Philemon. There is a clue here that tells me why I think he is regenerate and it is because he just said his will has been set free. When you're non-regenerate your will is not set free. You're a free moral agent so you're making choices but your will is not free because it is under the bondage of sin. You are dead in your sins but now Philemon has been set free by the power of regeneration. So now he can make right choices in life to honor Jesus Christ. God has given him the ability to do that. Paul's outline on this is that he is converted, he has sent him back to him, and Paul wants Philemon to rejoice in Onesimus' conversion, set him free from slavery and send him back to Paul. Paul has work for him to do where he is at. That is what Paul is hoping and praying for but Paul will not do that on his own accord even though he could. He is asking Philemon to do that from his heart and for him to make the right choice as Paul persuades him, draws him and appeals to him.

Philemon 1:15-17 says [15] *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,* [16] *no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.* (He wants Philemon to make him his brother by putting Onesimus on an equal standing with him and the Holy Spirit has made him his brother in the Lord. [17] *So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.* Do you think Paul is putting a little bit more pressure on Philemon here? Paul is basically saying to him that what Philemon decides to do, Paul will take it personally. He is not threatening him, he is just letting him know. Onesimus has his heart. He is Paul's child. Paul knows what Philemon ought to do and what he decides to do not only will affect Onesimus but Paul and the Lord. So what kind of decision will Philemon be making? Paul knows very likely there has been quite an expenditure to purchase this slave and maybe expenditures to try and find him after he had run away. So what does Paul say?

Philemon 1:18-19 says [18] *If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.* [19] *I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to*

*say nothing of your owing me even your own self.* Paul says I'll pay for it but you really owe me anyway. Philemon if you'll just start backtracking all that I've done in your life you'll see the benefits of my ministry but if that's not enough whatever he owes you I'll pay it to you.

Philemon 1:20-22 says [20] *Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.* (So make the right decision and here is what the result will be in Paul's heart) *Refresh my heart in Christ.* [21] *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.* [22] *At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.*

So almost the whole thing is this request of Paul that Philemon receive Onesimus as a brother, set him free, consider sending him back to serve on Paul's team back in Rome in assisting him in his imprisonment and Paul will pay but Paul says Philemon owes him. By the way, this is for the Lord. This will refresh me (Paul). I have made a lot of expenditures in your life. I am confident that you will do the right thing and in fact I think you'll go beyond what I have said. I believe that because of what I believe the Lord is doing in your life.

I believe discipleship is giving the commands of the Lord for people to follow with obedience. I'm not saying there isn't a time where you might have to drop the hammer from time to time but I believe this is the way you draw disciples into obedience – Christ-centered, grace-driven and you're persuading them in light of the truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and what Christ has done in their life to what they ought to be doing in their life. This is a great handbook on discipleship and drawing people into obedience to Christ.

Then he ends by stating two more requests – would you prepare your guest room for me. I think the Apostle Paul would have made a great encyclopedia sales person. He can ring any bell and ask any question. After making this tremendous request and bringing all this to bear he turns and asks him to prepare a room for him. There is something else at work here also. Where is Paul when he writes this? He is in prison. Why would you prepare a guest room for someone who is in prison who by the way could be put to death in a Roman prison?

In Philemon 1:22 Paul says [22] *At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.* So he is asking for a room and that Philemon will pray for him to be delivered that Paul will be set free. When I (Paul) am set free then I'll come see you, Philemon and I'll be glad to stay in your guest room that I know you have already prepared for me. The Lord will set me free through the prayers of His people.

Here is another lesson here. God's sovereign providence is not dependent upon us and our prayers but God has decreed that His sovereign providence works through our prayers. It's not God can't act until I pray but God has chosen and designed His providence to work in the context of the prayers of His people. My prayers do not determine God's will. They participate in God's will and then they line me up with God's will. Jesus said "Father, if there by any way let this cup pass from Me, but not My will but Thy will be done." Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. I want Your Name to be glorified. I want Your Kingdom to come. I want Your Will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. The Apostle Paul knows that God's providence will be at work in Philemon's life through the prayers of His people. So he calls for Philemon to

pray and then for God's providential blessing that Paul might have this guest room that he would graciously give because he has graciously prayed and God graciously will set him free.

Then Paul concludes with this. Philemon 1:23 says [23] *Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you.* Epaphras is a citizen of Colossae and very likely one who has ministered there. In fact there are twelve names in this epistle. Obviously Jesus is the first and foremost listed here. There is Philemon and very likely the evidence seems to be Philemon's wife is Apphia and very likely Archippus is his son because of the way he is mentioned back in the letter to the Colossians. There is Epaphras who is from Colossae and is there with Paul in prison and has been there with him for the two years. In other words, here is Paul is concluding by saying to tell everyone hello back home.

Philemon 1:24 says [24] *and so do Mark (John Mark), Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.* John Mark is the man who was the cousin of Barnabas who went on the first missionary journey, who before they even got to the first preaching point washed out. He went back and then when Paul decided to go on the second missionary journey and Barnabas wanted to go get John Mark, Paul said no. Barnabas and Paul had a disagreement about John Mark going. Barnabas is a nice guy but he has little stubborn streak in him too. The Apostles didn't want to have anything to do with Paul but Paul made sure they had something to do with him back after Paul was converted.

So after their disagreement you end up with two missionary teams. There is Barnabas and that's the last time you hear of Barnabas who takes John Mark with him and then Paul takes Silas and later picks up Timothy. The amazing thing is that by the time of Paul's first imprisonment John Mark has left Barnabas (who I think was martyred for the faith) and he becomes the secretary to Peter. John Mark helps write I and II Peter and Peter's Gospel called Mark as Peter dictates the Gospel that John Mark writes. Aren't you grateful for Barnabas? Now he moves on from Peter and now John Mark is with Paul in the Roman imprisonment.

If you fast forward to II Timothy when Paul goes back to his second imprisonment where he is going to die, he says to send him John Mark for he is useful for him in the ministry. You almost want to say to Paul "John Mark is a useful guy on your team, huh? No thanks to you! You were ready to write him off." I don't think Paul was ready to write him off but I think Paul would have had a place for John Mark but just not a team that was going behind enemy lines. At the time he was looking for a special ops team, not a platoon of possible leaders. He was looking for proven leaders but Barnabas is always developing leaders and he clearly developed John Mark who then ends up with Peter and eventually Paul.

Does that tell you something about Barnabas? He takes the man that Paul wouldn't take with him and he not only reclaims him and matures him so that he is useful for Peter and useful for Paul, but he does it in such a way that when he shows up in epistles like this, he shows up with Paul. Wouldn't it have been very easy for Barnabas to put a real dislike in the heart of John Mark for Paul? Yet his reclaiming did it in such a way that he was ready to go back to the guy who said "he doesn't make my team."

So there is John Mark, Aristarchus and Demas. Unfortunately Demas will be one on Paul's team that will desert him in the second imprisonment for the pursuits of this present world. Then there is Luke who was with him at Caesarea. Luke probably did his

investigating of the eye witnesses to write the Gospel of Luke when he was with Paul at Caesarea. Now Luke is with him at this first Roman imprisonment. Paul says “My fellow workers...” Then Paul ends with this benediction in Philemon 1:25 which say [25] *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

I'd like to conclude with two themes that we can draw from this epistle. It was nice to be able to cover an entire book in one study without having to just look at it from about 30,000 feet in the air. In the next study in the series we will be covering Hebrews and I would not mind having to do 65 studies on the book of Hebrews. So it will be difficult for me to only get one study to explain the book of Hebrews. This one was much easier to cover with only 25 verses and 200 plus words.

The first theme from Philemon is that the Apostle Paul is telling us that Christians are called to love, encourage, and forgive one another with redemptive reconciliation. Yes, it was wrong for Onesimus to run away but forgive as you have been forgiven. Encourage him. Do what now needs to be done. Not only don't put him to death but I want you to set him free. I'm convinced because of God's grace in your life, Philemon, that's what you will do.

The second theme is while Christian love is rightly commanded, it should be cultivated personally and persuasively. Christian love is right to command. My father was well aware of that in that Christian love was going to be in our family. When I was about 14 or 15 years old I started thinking more highly of myself than I ought and so I began to the process of ignoring my mother. I want you to know that my dad didn't read the book of Philemon. My dad rightly commanded me. I will never forget his conversation with me right before I had the opportunity to go to the closet to get the belt. He said “Son, I met her and loved her long before I met you and loved you and if I have to make a choice between you and her, you're history. I have already called the Stonewall Jackson Reformatory in Concord, North Carolina and they have a place for you. Love your mother.” There was a behavior modification that took hold in my life so I am not all the way opposed to the command to love one another.

There is probably a time for it, but O the blessing when you and I take the Gospel of grace, not only have it work in our life but we learn it in such a way that we can draw one another to love Christ and love the brethren. So that the world would look, see and say “My how they love one another. Josephus tells us in his history the comments about the early Christians was one, they die well. Number two it is amazing how they love one another. That's what you do in the family of God. We are commanded to love one another but in disciple making we draw people into it as we see Christ's love to us and Christ's love through us to others.

Here's the rub. It's kind of easy to love your friends because you get to choose your friends. You don't get to choose your family. God has given you the family that you are growing up in. God has given you His family. They are His children. You don't get to choose them. He chose them, just like He did you and me. He has called us, commanded us and draws us to love one another. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could spend together in Your Word. Thank You for this marvelous, wonderful, insightful epistle that is personal, persuasive and passionate. Father, it is an amazing letter. I pray that You would open it up to our hearts for even

now we have only skimmed it. There is so much in its depth and its connections to other letters in this Bible that You have given to us. Father, I pray that we would hear the clear commands and we would learn how to appeal, persuade and encourage so that the reconciling work of redemption would be seen, for we not only have a message of reconciliation but we have a ministry of reconciliation. We want the world to see it that we who love You because You first loved us, will love one another with a passion that manifests grace, mercy and all of those marvelous attributes of redeeming, reconciling love. Help us to love with kindness, goodness, gentleness and patience and that we would love not seeking love but love because we have been loved and the world might see a people who count one another no matter what station in life as brothers and sisters and who encourage one another to grow in the grace of Christ throughout life that Christ would be exalted. We would not only be recipients of love but we would be instruments of Your love for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.