

PHILEMON

PREFACE

The short book of Philemon at the end of the Bible is a very personal one as Paul opens his heart to his dear friend Philemon about his run away slave, a man named Onesimus. God in his grace had worked in Onesimus' heart and he had come to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour.

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I am very grateful to Peter for both this book and the talks he recorded on Philemon for the Serving Today radio programme for pastors and Church leaders.

It is our prayer that God will use what he has written to enlarge your own appreciation of the grace of God, and that it will be reflected in your own life for God's glory.

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Chapter 1. Introduction and Paul's circumstances

Introduction

About 1900 years ago an old Jewish man sat dictating a letter. He was under house arrest and was chained to a guard but he was still active in his Master's service. His future was uncertain but he was strangely confident. The man was Paul and he was writing to his friend Philemon who lived in Colossae which would be in present day Turkey.

Philemon had been converted about five or six years earlier when Paul was preaching in Ephesus where a church had been established. From there the Word of God had spread out into almost the entire region and a church had been planted in Colossae, probably through the preaching of Archippus and Epaphras, who worked with Paul. This church met in Philemon's house.

In those days communication was very difficult but churches kept in touch by letters and by visits and they prayed for each other. In this way Paul heard that there were some problems at Colossae and, as he was sending a letter to Ephesus, he also wrote to Colossae then he added this personal letter to Philemon.

Isn't it fascinating to think of it? Just a scrap of papyrus, a note added to a much weightier letter and entrusted to the care of Tychicus and Onesimus who would act as the postmen. Off it goes, down the Apian Way from Rome and then east to Brundisium where it is taken onto a ship and across the sea to Troas. From there it went on by road

to Colossae to Philemon who read it. Maybe it was passed round and finally put away.

Then it was taken out and re-read, copied and eventually it became part of the canon of Scripture. It was translated from Greek into Latin into English and many other languages. The Bible itself has been banned and burned at times but here today we have this letter preserved by God for you and me.

Here it is for our instruction and encouragement. Here we have Paul, not in his apostolic but in his personal role, pleading on behalf of a wrongdoer. Here we read of Onesimus transformed by salvation. Here we get to know Paul's friend Philemon.

It's amazing how relevant the letters of the New Testament are, they were written almost two thousand years ago but they were not written by someone unlike us or talking in a strange fashion. Mediaeval men and their superstitions, although much nearer in time, are further away from us in culture. Paul and Philemon were Christians and this is what makes this letter so practical and useful to us.

Let's think about Paul's circumstances as he wrote to his friend.

Paul's circumstances

He is a prisoner, persecuted for the gospel. He is about sixty and, after the hardships of his missionary work, he will be feeling his age. He is a long way from home and friends. But even in this there is a consolation. There is a hymn which is sung at communion times which tells us of this comfort:

*“Clouds and conflicts round us press
would we have one sorrow less?
All the sharpness of the Cross,
all that tells the world is loss,
death and darkness and the tomb
only whisper, “Till He come.”*

Paul looks at his chains, he thinks of the persecution he has suffered from the Jews; he thinks of the failure of Roman justice and then he writes, *“Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”*

This poor world is spoiled by sin where even the best of things show the results of the Fall. There are around us evil men, evil plans and evil events. There can be persecution, disappointments, illness and accidents. It is just as it says in Romans, *“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”* I am afraid these things **will** form a large part of our experience before we reach our Father's home. But these are part of the *“all things,”* which *“work together for good to them that love God.”* I

do not say that lightly; I am old enough to have seen it for myself.

These things however are not outside the Lord's control. These things are not the attacks of an all powerful enemy. These things are not fate or chance or luck. They are all in the providence of God our loving heavenly Father who works all things for our good. That is why Paul does not think of himself as a prisoner of Rome, of Judaism or even of Satan, but a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul tells of the hardships he endured. He had been attacked and stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned, slandered and often in other dangers. These are things to which we are all called, to a greater or lesser extent, if we are going to be faithful to the Lord and his Word. A Scottish minister, Samuel Rutherford, said *"You'll not get leave to steal quietly to heaven in Christ's company without conflict and a cross."*

Now this is not something we call ourselves to. The Lord orders these things and does not ask for self-made martyrs. It is not something we naturally welcome and embrace but when they come we have to say, "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to Him." At least part of the benefit is that if we do content our hearts and submit to the Lord we will grow spiritually. Rutherford said, "I see grace grows best in winter!"

You might like to bring out the idea in your preaching that there are two reasons why, like Paul, we are able to be content in difficulties. One is that we have a view of eternal glory with the Lord. Paul mentions this in Romans 8:18 where he says, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* The other reason is that, in faith and trust, we look beyond the circumstances and recognize that all things are in God's providence and that we are in His care.

Chapter 2. Paul's greetings and prayer for his friends

As Paul writes he thinks of his friends in the church which meets in Philemon's house. Let me introduce you to them.

Philemon

Firstly there's Philemon. Paul calls him *"our dear friend and fellow-worker."* You know that Paul was poor, that he was a prisoner and that he was in peril of his life, but there is no note of self-pity nor of any envy of Philemon. And, although Philemon may have been rich, it is quite possible that he might have coveted, in a good way, what Paul had.

Philemon was quite wealthy but he does not fall into the condemnation of those who misuse their wealth and power selfishly. It is worthwhile pointing out that riches in themselves are not wrong. It is the love of riches and the misuse of them which are sinful. We can be poor and yet

have that love of money which, says Paul, is the root of all evil.

Why does Paul call Philemon “*a dear friend*”? Was it just because they got on well? Because they were about the same age? Enjoyed the same pastimes? This would be no more than friendship, it would not be true fellowship. The real reason was that they were both Christians, loved the Lord and were faithful to His truth. This is where fellowship is founded. Their love for each other was not merely a “Christian duty” deprived of all warmth, affection and heart. It was not merely a fellow feeling. It was a warm personal relationship in the bonds of Christ. Let me say in passing such love cannot condone sin and it cannot live in backslidden hearts.

Philemon was also Paul’s fellow labourer. Was he a preacher? We are not told. Was he an exhorter, a witness for the Saviour, and elder, an example? All of these are labours and all worthwhile.

Certainly Philemon was not content, having been saved, to sit at ease doing nothing. In one way or another he was up and busy for the Master. You could point out that while we are not saved by good works we are saved for good works. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God has ordained before that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

Apphia

Philemon’s wife Apphia is mentioned next. What a support a good and godly wife is. I have a friend who was a missionary in Brazil for many years. His wife hated the place they worked in which was two thousand miles up the Amazon, hot, steamy and plagued by insects. But Ethel Geddis gave herself wholeheartedly to the work and never at any time gave her husband any reason to forsake the work the Lord had called them to. And you know, in time she grew to love, not the place itself, but the work and the people there. A good wife puts God first.

No doubt Apphia, as well as supporting her husband, was much involved in the ministry of hospitality of the very best kind, the kind that makes you feel at home and at ease. There is a hospitality that is concerned to produce the best of food and the cleanest of houses but alas it leaves the guest feeling uncomfortable. Apphia I am sure made her guests feel really at home.

Archippus

The next believer mentioned is Archippus, Paul’s fellow soldier. It is an interesting title to bestow on someone. Paul would not have called just anyone a soldier; they would have had to earn the name. A soldier is disciplined and faithful. He is accustomed to hardship and obedience. A good soldier would be cheerful and have a high morale. Such a man was Archippus. Perhaps it would be

worthwhile reminding your congregation that we are all called to be soldiers of the Lord. There are no ‘civilians’ in the Christian life; no one is neutral. The devil is at war with every Christian. An old Salvation Army chorus says,

*“The devil and me, we don’t agree! Glory!
Hallelujah!
I don’t like him, and he don’t like me! Glory!
Hallelujah!”*

That is good practical theology!

Then Paul says, *“and to the church”*. We need to remember that in the New Testament the term church always refers to believers and not to buildings. And so all of God’s people are included in Paul’s greetings. We don’t know their names but the Lord knew them each and every one. Sometimes reading through the lists of names in Chronicles I am tempted to wonder why they are all there but then I pause and recall that although unknown to me they were each one known to the Lord.

Paul’s prayer for them

Now let us look at Paul’s prayer for them. *“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* The grace, the benevolence and blessing of the Father bestowed on us freely through His Son our Saviour. Someone has said that grace is God giving us what we do not deserve. Because of this grace there will be the peace

of a heart at rest in God. Not untroubled by circumstances but still at rest in the love of God. We saw in our first study that Paul knew this grace and peace in his life even though he was a prisoner in Rome.

Take special note that though they were healthy believers Paul still prayed for them. None of us can do without prayer; we are not perfect yet! We are not immune from temptation or from discouragement. Pray for one another.

They were spiritually healthy believers, but only grace had made them so. Do not despair! When you look at others who seem to be so spiritual and you feel yourself to be so weak just remember, He can make all grace abound towards you and that grace will always be sufficient. That is easy to say when all is well but we have to prove it to be so and rely on it to be so when the battle is raging. God is so good to us His children. Here we’ve seen encouraging examples and we have the promise of his grace and peace for us in all our need.

Chapter 3. Philemon’s Christian character

We have discovered that Paul was in prison when he wrote to Philemon, but he was still busy. We have been introduced to some of Paul’s friends and we have found out a bit about Philemon too.

What kind of man was Philemon?

Philemon is a good example of a saved man, a saint of God. Paul often mentions that he has heard good reports of the Christians that he writes to and here is no exception. Philemon had a good name, a good reputation. Many hundreds of years ago Solomon, the wise king of Israel wrote, *“A good name is more desirable than great riches”* and this is what Philemon had. Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if every Christian had a life like that?

Paul can write to Philemon, *“I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers.”* But you know, so often this is not the case and we find ourselves praying for brothers or sisters who are causing us concern, who are wandering from the path, who are not in good spiritual health or who have fallen into some sin. We pray for them with concern, with fear for their state and with sorrow because of their soul's condition, not because of some external trouble. Would we not rather be remembered in prayer with thankfulness and joy, as those who have a good name as Christians?

Philemon is such a person and the very thought of him brought joy to Paul's heart. Now Philemon would not have said this of himself, he was not the kind of man who would blow his own trumpet, telling others how good he was. The Bible says, (Proverbs 27:2) *“Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips.”* He was a good and gracious man who lived to

please God. Sometimes it is worth reminding our congregations that our heavenly Father sees that we are living to please Him. Even if no one else ever notices this, He sees and He approves. That should be a real encouragement to every one of us. There were those in Jesus' days who liked to be seen to be good but their goodness was all pomp and show and not real. The Pharisees prayed in public, they threw their offerings into the church plate so that everyone would see how generous they were, they put on a long face when they were fasting so that others would notice. But the Lord said that they got all the reward they wanted. They got the praise of men and they had nothing in heaven. Philemon was content to do what he did for the Lord and not to impress others.

However Paul shows us a good example here. He noted the fruit of the Spirit in Philemon's life and he was thankful for that. We too should be looking out for opportunities to say a word of thanks or encouragement to those around us and to pray for them with gratitude to God for their testimony. Isn't it good to hear of those who are faithful servants of God and to encourage them? John wrote, *“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”* (3 John 4)

What had Paul heard about Philemon that caused him to thank God?

He had heard of his love and his faith. The grace of God in a life always shows itself. If we have a saving faith this

produces evidence in the life. Love is the child of genuine faith. Of course, no one can love God or be truly good until they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. What were the characteristics of the love that Philemon showed?

His love was **practical**, it was not just talk. The Lord Jesus said that if we love him we will keep his commandments. Our lives will be affected; our attitudes and our behaviour will be changed. Those who do not love him cannot really be our close friends. Philemon's love toward the Lord Jesus showed itself in godly living.

His love was **personal**. We love the Saviour because he first loved us. This love is not some abstract and cold theological idea or just the acceptance of some doctrinal point. Philemon's love for the Lord Jesus was personal. This is a love which increases the better we get to know the Saviour.

Philemon's love was **sacrificial**. It always costs to follow the Lord. It is not a light thing to take up the cross and to deny ourselves, is it? But we do it with a sense of privilege and out of love for Him. We will see that this was the case in Philemon's life.

His love was **universal**. That is to say it was not confined to the narrow limits of his friends and the local church. In Paul's day the heathen were amazed that Christians showed love and concern for others even outside their own

congregations. The love that Paul admired in Philemon was a love that went beyond a narrow circle of friends.

Such love is a mark of the believer. Jesus said, (John 13:35) *“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”* Philemon's faith was spoken about because of the love he showed. His life lined up with his belief, his practice with his profession

Let me close this chapter by just a passing reference to Paul. He writes, *“I always thank **my** God...”* Philemon's God was Paul's God. Paul didn't write about a God he had studied in theory. He wrote about his own God and Saviour. Paul believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for himself, he knew God in a personal way and he loved God. This is what inspired his prayers, his concerns for others and his service for the Lord. Isn't it a wonderful thing to know God for yourself? May this knowledge inspire us to serve Him like Paul and Philemon because, whether others notice our efforts or not, they are pleasing to God.

Chapter 4. Philemon's testimony and ministry

Philemon, as we have discovered had a good character and reputation. He also had a good testimony and a good ministry.

What was Philemon's testimony?

Let's think about his testimony. When we look at verse six we find it difficult to grasp just what it is that Paul is

praying for but let's see what we can make of it. The word that I think is important is the word translated in the Authorised Version as "communication". Now over the centuries this word has changed its meaning to some extent. It used to mean sharing, not just talking to someone. So it can mean sharing in the sense of passing on the truth to them but also it can have the idea of generosity or liberality. Summing up the comments of several gifted men would lead me to think that what Paul is saying is, "I pray that the liberality you show to others would have an effect on them when they realise that your actions spring from the good things that Christ has done in you." He's praying that Philemon's generosity; his practical kindness and his love would be seen by others for what it was – the result of Christ dwelling in Philemon's heart. So you see his testimony and his manner of living go hand in hand.

Here we find that Philemon talked about the Lord and about salvation but he also lived this out in his life. If I say, "I believe" you have to take my word for that but, if I practise what I preach, you can see it in action. This demonstration of our faith and love is what James wrote about in his letter to the saints. Remember what the Saviour said, (Matthew 5:16) *"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."* Paul prays that Philemon's good works and his testimony would be linked in the minds of those who were looking on.

Did Philemon have some kind of ministry?

Philemon had a good ministry. I do not know whether Philemon was a preacher or not but he still had a very important ministry. Although Paul had never personally enjoyed Philemon's hospitality he had heard good reports about how much of a blessing it had been to others. Philemon also provided a meeting place for the church in his house. As we know he showed his love in such practical ways. Often we hear about the trials and the afflictions of our brothers and sisters, many of whom are suffering for the Lord. It is worse when we hear about the bad behaviour or poor testimony of some. But Paul has only heard good news about Philemon and it delighted his heart. He says *"you brother have refreshed the hearts of the saints."* The saints' hearts are refreshed by Philemon's kindness and care and by his fellowship and prayers. If we look around us in our congregations or amongst our friends and acquaintances we will soon find opportunities to show kindness, to give help and to support and encourage others. There is a ministry for every child of God and we should encourage each one to be active in serving the Saviour.

Is this what we mean by fellowship?

Let us think about this idea of fellowship. Fellowship is more than just friendship or a common interest. For many years before I was saved I attended a church where the gospel was unknown. I was friendly with quite a number

of folk there and after the services we would talk about cars or football or tell jokes. Now that was just friendship. When I got saved I had different subjects of conversation: the Bible, the Saviour, the sermon, the Christian life. That was fellowship. We should do what we can to encourage this genuine fellowship in the Lord among His people so that they don't slip back into the old ways. Listen to what God says about this,

“Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name.” (Malachi 3:6)

Fellowship is shown in another way: by our lives being an example and encouragement to our brothers and sisters in the Lord. No example is too small to have an influence for good or for evil. A godly life, no matter how simple or humble, has a great influence for good.

Philemon had a testimony which was backed up by a godly life and a gracious ministry. It is not that we must either testify or live a godly life, we must do both. When you think about witnessing or telling others about the Lord and about salvation you will know that it is not always easy to do this.

What can hinder us from witnessing?

Can you think why it is not always easy to witness? Sometimes we are shy, but if we pray then the Lord will give us the opportunities to speak for him. Sometimes, for various reasons, we are afraid to speak. It may be we feel our lives do not match up to what we say. It may be that we are afraid we will not know the right things to say or we will not be able to answer the questions or arguments of others. Sometimes we may be afraid of ridicule. However, we can take courage. Even the most stammering testimony will tell for the Lord. Although our lives must be consistent with what we say, we will never be perfect so we must still take the opportunities we have to witness. People don't always ridicule us but often they respect us when we speak to them about the gospel and, even if they do mock, we find we do not care because it is a privilege to bear reproach for the Saviour's sake.

Can we encourage our congregations to develop a life, a testimony and a ministry like Philemon's?

Chapter 5. Onesimus the slave of man and of sin

Why did Paul write to Philemon? He wrote to ask him to be kind and forgiving to Onesimus the slave who had run away from him. It seems he had stolen money from his master Philemon and had run away to Rome. Onesimus was a slave of men but he was also a slave of sin.

A slave of man

Slavery is a subject which often causes a great deal of heated argument and not much careful thought. We usually think of it as being the uncontrolled right of a slave owner to all of his slave's service and we also think that the slave had no rights at all. However, listen to what Paul writes to the Colossians,

“Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” and to the Ephesians he says, *“Slaves, obey your earthly masters ... just as you would obey Christ. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven.”* (Colossians 4:1)

What is the Bible's view of slavery?

It might seem strange that the Bible does not condemn slave ownership as sin, but it does condemn the kidnapping of men and the brutal treatment of them. It does condemn the removal of men's rights. These things are condemned in the strongest terms and, for example, man stealing or kidnapping was punishable by death. The raiding of weaker countries to take slaves was and is wrong. The evils of the slave trade are just that, evil.

There was no campaign in the New Testament against slavery. However, the great change that the gospel made

in the attitudes of Christians did work against the idea of having slaves. The principles which the preaching of the gospel established destroyed slave trading and slavery. The abolition of slavery followed on from Christianity and the Reformation hastened its end. Those in Britain who laboured to end the slave trade, such as William Wilberforce, John Newton and John Wesley, were all Christians.

The New Testament taught a slave's master to treat him with justice, with respect and with dignity and to show him care and kindness. Many did this. In Luke, for example, we read that a centurion had a slave, who was dear to him but he was sick and ready to die. When the centurion heard of Jesus he sent to him begging him to come and heal his slave, which he did. Philemon was a good and caring master like this. Also the slave was urged to serve his master with a good will, heartily and cheerfully. He was to think of his service as being for God and not just for a man. Sadly Onesimus was not like that; he was unwilling and rebellious. His name means “Useful” but he was anything but useful.

A slave of sin

Poor Onesimus! He thought by running away he could be happy. Maybe he thought he would be able to come and go as he pleased, do what he wanted and not what others told him to do. He would be free. “If only I had the

money; if only I had the freedom; if only I lived in Rome instead of this miserable place.”

Maybe he thought that Philemon’s house was too strict a place to live in. There were no wild parties like there were in other houses. There were no great drunken feasts with plenty left for the servants to gorge and drink afterwards. There was no immorality. They were too straight-laced. If he could get away he could have a great time. The world and the flesh enticed him.

Poor Onesimus! So easily taken in by the world and the temptations it offered. **WE** are not so silly! The world the flesh and the devil don’t catch us out! We are not tempted by the attractions and pleasures that sin offers! I wish that were true, but alas sometimes we are just as foolish as Onesimus and allow ourselves to be deceived.

Onesimus was clever but sin turned that into cunning. He had a trusting master and it was not too difficult for him to steal some money and escape to Rome. Onesimus escaped from one bond service, the service of a kind and caring master, but he changed it for the hard service of an evil and malicious taskmaster, the devil.

In Rome no doubt, like the prodigal son in the parable, he found friends to help him spend his money, friends who introduced him to opportunities to sin, friends to help him develop bad habits which he couldn’t break. If we want to,

we will soon find the way to sin an easy road and there will be plenty of friends to encourage us along it.

It’s amazing how often those like the prodigal son have to get to the stage of being among the pigs and having nothing but pig food to eat before they think of home. Do you know some who are tempted to wander away from their heavenly Father to “enjoy themselves” a little? Some who think they can flirt a little bit with sin? Like Onesimus they will find it’s a very difficult thing to get free of, a pleasure that will cost them dearly. What made Onesimus change? What made him stop in his new freedom? Was it poverty when his money ran out? Was it his conscience that perhaps troubled him in his wickedness? These might have stopped him but they could not set him free.

I am sure we remember how strong the bonds of sin were, how habits we were ashamed of kept us in slavery. Can we forget how our feeble attempts to be good or moral were in vain? Like Onesimus we were slaves to sin and self, slaves to the approval of our companions, slaves to the devil.

The name Onesimus means useful, profitable but he was useless, a total loss. That’s the life of the sinner: useless and unprofitable, a slave to sin.

Chapter 6. Onesimus the slave of Christ

In the last chapter we left poor Onesimus in a dreadful state, a slave to man and worse a slave to sin. Now let us see how all that changed completely.

How did his circumstances change?

He had arrived in Rome with high hopes, with money to spend and with a new freedom. But his money soon vanished and with it many of his new so-called friends. His hopes were disappointed. His freedom had left him perhaps with nothing more than some bad habits and poverty. We sometimes think these things will make a man turn to the Lord; after all it was in circumstances like these that the prodigal son "*came to his senses*". However, by themselves, circumstances, good or bad, do not lead a man to the Saviour. Many a man becomes hardened by difficulties and afflictions. Also we just need to look around to see that prosperity seldom produces a heart that is grateful to God. However, other things happened to Onesimus. Somehow he came into contact with Paul. Maybe he met a fellow countryman who knew Paul but, whatever the circumstances, he found himself listening to Paul as he preached the gospel.

Was it just his circumstances that changed?

Now we see another change, a changed heart. It was the same gospel message he had heard in Philemon's house and rejected. But now the Holy Spirit has opened his heart and his understanding to the truth. You remember we are told in Acts about Lydia, "*The Lord opened her heart to*

respond to Paul's message." Onesimus now hears with a different attitude and he is troubled. His conscience is awakened not just to the crime he has committed in stealing from his master but by the fact that this was a sin against God. He began to be convicted of his sinful nature and of specific sins in his life. He realised he was separated from God by his sin and condemned by a holy God. He needed to be saved. As Paul told him the wonderful news that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners Onesimus listened eagerly as he had never done before.

He repented, but what does that mean? It means he changed his mind about himself and saw he was nothing more than a lost sinner. He changed his mind about his sin. He no longer thought it was unimportant but realised it was an offence against God and against His law. He changed his mind about God. He had thought nothing of God but now he recognises that He is the Lord of all, holy, just and good. He turned from his sin and his own ways to serve the living God.

He heard how the Saviour had taken our sins upon himself and had carried that awful load to the cross of Calvary where He had died to pay the price for us. Onesimus believed. Not just in his head but with his heart he trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ to be his Saviour. He repented and believed the gospel and he was saved. Now that is a huge change of heart. Listen to how God describes this

change when he called Paul on the Damascus road. He sent him to, (Acts 26:18) *“to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.”* What a change was made in Onesimus’ heart!

What was the result of these changes?

Now there is a changed life. Such a change had been brought about that Onesimus, once unwilling and disobedient, is now eager to serve his Lord and Saviour; he is the willing slave of the Lord Jesus. Paul tells Philemon that he would have liked to keep Onesimus with him in Rome for the work of the gospel. He had not only found a place in Paul’s service but also a place in his heart. Paul says, *“He is a dear brother.”* In Colossians he says that Onesimus is a faithful and beloved brother. No one is saved by good works but good works are the fruit of salvation. Ephesians tells us that we are made anew in Christ for good works which God has ordained for us. This was one noticeable change in Onesimus. Another is the change in his attitude to Philemon. When Paul suggests that he should return to him he does not resist or disobey. He is prepared to go back to try to make amends for his previous wicked behaviour. The Bible is clear that restitution, putting wrongs right, is a mark of genuine repentance and this should be evident in the lives of those who are converted, and of us too if as Christians we stray.

As you can see this is very different from the easy conversion of some who think that they can be saved

simply by accepting the truth about the gospel or that they can have Jesus as Saviour but carry on in their old ways and disobedience. There is a real change of heart and life when a person is saved.

Do you sometimes despair of seeing some person saved? He or she just seems so hard and so opposed to the gospel. Well, take heart from the story of Onesimus. He was just like that. He hated the gospel and despised those who were Christians. He stole from his kindly master and ran as far away from the truth as he could. He lived for his own pleasure and never seemed to have any concern about his soul. But despite all this we see that at last he listened, repented and found salvation. There are no hopeless cases in the work of the gospel, not until they are dead.

Maybe we ourselves can identify with Onesimus once slaves of sin and useless but now useful and servants of the Saviour. Like him we find joy and gladness in serving our new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ and in bringing glory to his name.

Chapter 7. The grace of God in Paul’s life - a gracious request

We have seen how the grace of God was shown in Philemon and Onesimus. Now, I want us to think about the grace of God in Paul’s life and, in particular, in the way Paul doesn’t demand what he wants but he graciously asks a favour of Philemon.

How do we see this?

Paul asks that Philemon will receive Onesimus kindly, “*I am sending him, who is my very heart, back to you*”, he says. Onesimus is no longer just a servant but a fellow Christian. That is how Philemon is to treat him. Then he says, “*he is very dear to me.*” Onesimus is someone loved by the Lord Himself. We have to remember that the saints who so upset us and try our patience, the saints we find it hard to forgive, have all been bought by the blood of the Lord Jesus who loved them and gave Himself for them. Onesimus is also beloved by Paul so much so that he would have liked him to stay with him in Rome. Philemon is gently reminded that if he hurts Onesimus he will hurt Paul.

Despite the wrong that he had done to him Philemon would also love Onesimus. Philemon was not some surly, unforgiving hard-hearted man. As a Christian he would be overjoyed at the news of Onesimus’ conversion and he would indeed welcome him as a beloved brother in the Lord. Paul asks that Onesimus will be received just as Paul would be. In Matthew chapter 25 we read,

“Then the King will say ... I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked

after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

Any kindness shown to Onesimus would be kindness to Paul and, even more importantly, would be kindness to the Lord.

Paul asks that Onesimus’ debts should be forgiven. This is possibly a reference to what Onesimus had stolen. That is not a strange request because the Lord Himself taught us to pray, (Matthew 6:12) “*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*” There are people who have an unforgiving spirit and that is very dangerous because the Lord says they will not be forgiven. When we consider just how much the Lord has forgiven us surely none of us should find it hard to forgive our brother or sister.

Why should Philemon agree to this?

Let’s look at the reasons that Paul gives for his request. Quite justifiably, Paul could have told Philemon what to do. Instead he chose to beseech, or ask him. He did have

authority in this situation but he chose to plead rather than demand and he backs up his request with reasons.

- Verse 9, love is the first of these, that Christian love between Paul, Philemon and Onesimus.
- Verse 9, he reminds Philemon of his situation. He is Paul the aged and thus due consideration. He is Paul the prisoner deprived of liberty and many other things. He is not some new young evangelist but a well-trying warrior of the Lord.
- Verse 17, he knows that Philemon holds him in esteem.
- Verse 19, Paul gently calls Philemon to remember how much he owes to him.
- Verse 21, he expresses his confidence in Philemon.
- Verses 18 and 19, here Paul makes it clear that he realises that Onesimus owes what he has stolen. He is not so spiritual that he forgets the practical issues and he says that if necessary he himself will repay the debt. The Bible is always practical!

In all of this Paul is teaching Philemon that he has an opportunity to show his love and grace. Paul wants Philemon's action to come from his own heart out of love and not out of obligation. How often we find it hard to be sure of our own heart's motives. We want to serve the Lord because we love Him. Sometimes we do it as duty or because others put pressure on us. As a pastor you have the difficult task of motivating your congregation to service but not in a way that means they do it grudgingly

or only to please others. Do you see how we have to lead folk to serve and sacrifice from love just as Paul leads Philemon here?

There is of course great reward in all of this. Philemon would not just have his servant back, he would have a brother in Christ. Onesimus had been worse than useless but now he is a changed man and is worthy of his name which means useful.

Onesimus had been lost to Philemon for a time but now he has him back as a brother for evermore. Our losses are never pleasant but they are always for our eternal benefit. Remember for example how Joseph could say about the way his brothers treated him, (Genesis 50:20) "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*" We may not understand it in this life but we will benefit even from our losses here. Another benefit or reward is the pleasure of bringing joy to others as Paul talks of in verse twenty. It is true that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Have you seen how gracious and wise Paul is in making his request to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus? Maybe there are lessons for us to learn from this.

Chapter 8. The grace of God in Paul's life - a gracious concern

In the last chapter we saw how graciously Paul asked Philemon to receive and forgive Onesimus. Now I want us to think about how graciously he shows his concern for Onesimus.

Paul's Labour

Paul was a prisoner. He couldn't travel, he could not go to the church meetings, he could not go to others, he was a prisoner. More than that, he could well have been taken out and executed at any moment. What would you do in a situation like that? Despite these difficulties Paul was always looking for opportunities to serve the Lord Jesus, and you can think of the many ways he found to do this. He wrote letters to the churches, showing his concern for them. He prayed continually for his brothers and sisters in the Lord showing his concern for them. He continued to preach to others even if they were few in number. He was concerned to bring the gospel to men and women.

Often we are liable to decide that we will serve the Lord tomorrow. Some think they need to be better prepared. Some think they will serve the Lord once they have got over some problem or difficulty. Some think they just need to wait for the right opportunity. These are all just excuses for not being obedient. If we think like that we will never do anything. Of course we need to prepare and study to make ourselves better servants of God. Of course we need to pray and look for opportunities to witness, to tell others about the Saviour. But we should be getting on

with the work right now while we are preparing and praying.

Paul, even in prison, brought the gospel to Onesimus as we read in verse ten. No doubt he prayed for him and spoke personally to him. He showed a gracious concern for this young man and his need of salvation. And, praise the Lord, Onesimus was converted.

Paul did not sit back then and think that that was an end of it. No, he himself could not go out but he had friends that could. Maybe it was one of them that brought Onesimus along to hear Paul. Once Onesimus was converted Paul began to teach and to train him until he could say that he was profitable or useful. It is an important part of the ministry of the pastor to train up men and women and to develop their gifts so that they can serve the Lord in whatever capacity they can. We are not told in what way Onesimus was useful but Paul makes it clear that he would have liked him to stay with him in Rome to be his assistant. Are we making sure that we are developing everyone in our congregations to be useful in some way in the Lord's service?

You can see how the grace of God in Paul caused him to labour for the Lord and gave him a concern to see men and women saved and growing in grace.

Paul's love

Do you remember how Paul writes about Onesimus? He calls him “*my son*”, he says he is like his own flesh and blood and he tells Philemon that he is now a brother beloved by both of them. In this letter he gives a good report of him to Philemon.

Just think how much Paul had changed. He had been a proud Pharisee who did everything in his power to destroy the church and persecute the believers. Now he is a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now he is writing with love to someone he once would have despised because he was not a Jew. Now, in his chains, he is writing with loving concern about a mere slave. Now by the grace of God these people are his brothers and you can see how he loves them.

One of the great joys of the Christian life is meeting brothers and sisters from other countries and nations. There are many things that make us different, our language, our customs, our dress our food but there is one thing that makes us all the same. We are all sinners, saved by grace, washed from our sins by the blood of the Lamb and on our way to glory. Here is Paul the Jew, the educated man talking of his love for those who were not Jews and of one who had no education but they were his brothers in Christ. That is the grace of God.

Paul’s longing

We see, in verses 20 and 21, Paul’s desire and longing for spiritual growth in the lives of those he knows. We know that he does not demand obedience from Philemon but presents the opportunity for him to respond in a spiritual way, a way that will bring blessing to Paul, to Onesimus and to himself. It will be a blessing for Paul because, if Philemon does what he is asked, he will be demonstrating that the love of God is at work in his heart and this is always good to see. As we have seen earlier, Philemon was converted through Paul’s ministry. This is why it would be such a joy and so refreshing to Paul’s soul to see him walking in the truth. It will also bless Philemon because whenever we obey the Lord we know His blessing.

He is confident that Philemon will respond positively to his request, indeed he writes that he is sure that Philemon will do even more than he asks. It is always best to expect the highest from our brother rather than to be content with second best. People often respond well when they know we expect the best from them. Thirdly, it will be a blessing to Onesimus to be reconciled to Philemon and to know the joy of Christian fellowship with him. In all of this Paul’s concern and his longing for the blessing of his brothers show the grace of God at work in his life.

Chapter 9. Timothy our brother

We have thought about Paul, Philemon and Onesimus but in the first verse we also read of Timothy and we are going to look at him.

How often do we hear, or make comments like, “Nobody understands me...” or “No one knows just how difficult my life is...” We all think that somehow it is easier for someone else to be a Christian. **We** have family difficulties. **We** have financial worries. **We** face problems at work. **We** have not had the opportunities that others have had. It may be that some of this is true, but does that mean the Lord is unfair? We would never say that...but sometimes we think it.

Timothy might have looked at Paul and said, “I could never be like him. I am so different, I couldn’t serve the Lord.” He **was** very different from Paul but he still became a faithful servant of God. Paul, as you know, had been well educated and had a strong personality. Since his dramatic conversion, he had had many years of experience not only in preaching the gospel but as a leader of men. He was bold and confident and well respected. As we read his biography in Acts and in his own letters we see that he was well able to endure suffering. Now Timothy was very different!

What was Timothy’s background?

He was (Acts 16:1) “*whose mother was a Jewess and a believer*” called Eunice, a Jewess who had married a

Greek. She and her mother Lois taught Timothy the Old Testament Scriptures when he was a child. All Christian parents have the serious responsibility to teach their children the Bible. We cannot save them but we can sow the seed in their hearts, and water it with our prayers and trust that the Lord will bring it to fruition.

Timothy’s family lived in Lystra, a town in what today is Turkey. Paul visited that town with Barnabas on his first missionary campaign. They preached the gospel and while they were there, the unbelieving Jews stirred up the rabble to a riot and they stoned Paul leaving him for dead. However, he recovered and went on as far as Derbe. Then he and Barnabas decided to revisit the towns they had preached in to encourage the new believers. That was a brave thing to do considering the attacks they had suffered. During the campaign it appears that Eunice, Lois and Timothy were converted.

When Paul moved on they remained rejoicing in their salvation. The Word of God now had a wonderful new meaning for them. The Messiah it spoke of had become their Saviour. They continued to teach young Timothy and then he began to study the scriptures for himself. We read of this in a letter that Paul wrote to him years later. He applied himself eagerly and diligently to his studies and he grew in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ

There are many who have the same great privileges as Timothy. They have been brought up by Christian parents and they themselves have professed salvation at a young age. Sometimes however, as they grow older, these benefits give rise to problems. They cannot tell of a dramatic conversion like Paul and some wonder if they have just followed the teaching of their parents. Is this real or have they just copied their parents? This is a real problem and many face it. For example three famous missionaries in China, Isobel Khun, Hudson Taylor and James Fraser, all had this struggle. Were they just indoctrinated by their parents? They faced up to the question and came to the assurance that their experience was genuine and real in their own lives. Timothy may have had similar difficulties but he came to that place of personal assurance and experience. He made his calling and election **sure** and he pressed on in his spiritual growth.

How did Timothy develop?

He became a soldier of Jesus Christ. Timothy was active in the church in his hometown and in Iconium. Others recognised his abilities and gave him encouragement in his early ministry. We read in Acts that he was well reported of by those who knew him. When Paul returned on a second missionary journey he was impressed with this young man. He discussed things with the church and they all agreed and called Timothy into the ministry to work with Paul.

Timothy went with Paul on his travels working closely with him at first in Philippi, Thessalonica, and then Berea where he stayed for a while working with Silas. Gradually he was given greater responsibility. He was sent to see how the church was doing and to encourage them in Thessalonica. With all this increasing responsibility he spent less and less time with Paul, not of choice but of necessity. But he did rejoin him in Rome where Paul was a prisoner. He was a faithful worker and friend.

Paul, writing to the Philippians, complains that many around him had no interest in others. They were just self-centred and were not concerned about the work of the gospel or the things of God. He says, however, that Timothy was very different. He had a great concern for the work and for the churches. He had been like a son to Paul and had served faithfully with him in the gospel. When Paul wrote about elders in his first letter to Timothy, he listed the qualities that such men had to have and you can be sure that Timothy was blameless, vigilant, serious and self-controlled. He had a life that was consistent, not one thing in church and another away from the church. His studies had never stopped and he was well able to teach others. He was patient, he wasn't after money, he wasn't a drunkard and he wasn't hot tempered. He was a man of God.

The Lord had given Timothy gifts and he had diligently developed these. Timothy was not a copy of Paul but he was a good and faithful soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 10. Timothy's character

We have talked of the privileges and problems of Timothy's background and we have seen how his ministry developed. As I mentioned, he was a very different character from Paul so let's see what he was like.

Was Timothy bold like Paul?

Where Paul was bold Timothy was timid. He did not have Paul's confident approach. In his second letter to him, Paul reassures him concerning his own personal faith.

"I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also." (2 Timothy 1:5)

He reminds him that his ministry had been recognised by others who had approved of his call. *"Don't be ashamed of the gospel or of me although I am in prison,"* he tells him. It may be that seeing the way Paul was persecuted and ill treated by society and thinking how the Jews were turning completely against the gospel that Timothy had begun to doubt. Maybe he wondered how he would do if he was called to suffer for the Lord Jesus' sake. These things made him rather afraid. By reminding him of all that

the Lord Jesus has done for us Paul encourages him to press on despite his fears.

Timothy may have written or spoken to Paul about temptations that worried him. Maybe he thought that as a Christian he should be above the reach of such things. Paul wisely tells him not to fight them but to flee from them, to remove himself from the place of temptation.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians to say he was sending Timothy to visit them he tells them to be sure to treat him with respect. Now why would he do that? Probably because Timothy was a bit shy and retiring Paul had to say to him "Don't let people despise you because you are young."

Confidence was not Timothy's strong point and he did not have an impressive personality. Doubts and fears were never far away in his life. He is hardly the kind of man that you would think Paul would entrust with responsibility in the Lord's work. But there is another side to Timothy.

Did his lack of confidence prevent him serving the Lord?

Timothy was faithful. There are two kinds of bravery. There is the kind that just does not see the danger and can completely shut it out of mind. Then there is the kind that sees and understands the danger but presses on with the

job anyway. Timothy was like that. Although afraid he stood firm. He knew the persecution that awaited him; he had seen it in Paul's life. He himself was imprisoned with all that that could mean. Do you remember Gideon? He is one of the heroes of faith, but he too was afraid and suffered doubts. He asked the Lord to confirm his call not once but twice! He had to go down to spy on the enemy camp to reassure himself that what the Lord said was right! But he was a hero of the faith because, despite all that, he obeyed God. That's like Timothy, despite his fears he was obedient to the will of God.

Because of this he showed great faithfulness in his ministry and in his fellowship with Paul. He did all he that Paul asked and he did not forsake him as some did. Paul was in prison when he wrote to Philemon and his opening greeting shows that Timothy was there with him. Timothy did not have good health but he never used that as an excuse to avoid responsibility or work. He did learn as Paul said to endure hardness as a good soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ.

How, if he was so timid, did he manage to do all this? Well, for all the attacks of doubt and lack of confidence, he had strong convictions. A man may have beliefs but these can fail in time of trial. When we have convictions then we have no choice but to stand firm because they have laid hold on our heart. Martin Luther, the great reformer; when faced with tremendous opposition had to say, "*Here I*

stand, I cannot do otherwise." His conviction that the Bible was the final authority in matters of faith meant he could not submit to men. Timothy was like that; he had dedicated his life to the Lord Jesus because he was convinced that He was the Saviour, the Messiah. This conviction was what kept him pressing on and gave him strength despite his natural timidity and weaknesses.

Now a man can be faithful to a cause, dedicated and diligent and he could even suffer much for this but all of that could be for nothing. Do you remember that Paul wrote to the Corinthians about this? In chapter thirteen of his first letter to them, he says you can do all that but if you don't have love it is nothing. Timothy did have the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit. He loved the Lord, he loved his fellow saints and he loved the lost. Paul told the church in Philippi that Timothy cared for their state and that was why he sent him to see how they were doing. Timothy's dedication and faithfulness sprang from this love and affection.

How did he develop these characteristics?

I would suggest that there are two or three ways. Firstly, we know that he studied the scriptures and it is there that the Lord reveals Himself and His purposes to us. Secondly, he made the most of his fellowship with Paul and the other saints as we read. Thirdly, he was much in communion with the Lord in prayer. It is no great secret is it?

We may not be as great a theologian as Paul, not as bold as he was, but we can encourage ourselves and our congregations as we look at Timothy, our brother, who despite his natural fears and weaknesses served the Lord faithfully.

Chapter 11. Five in fellowship

We have been looking at the lives of the people who appear in this letter. We have seen how the grace of God showed in their lives saving them, sanctifying them and making them more like the Lord Jesus. In these last two chapters we are going to think about five of those in fellowship with Paul. They are not very well known but let's see what we can find out about them.

Do you not find it very disappointing when you meet someone who says he is a Christian but somehow you cannot warm to him? There is a sort of deadness about him. But how different it is with others. It may be you see there are faults in their lives, you may not agree with all their views on doctrine but you recognise that they are saved; they show the grace of God in their lives. This is the common mark of all Christians all over the world and in all ages: they know the grace of God, abundant, powerful and free. Don't you rejoice when you meet the saints of God and enjoy their fellowship! Well, we are going to meet some now.

Epaphras

The first of the five we are going to meet is Epaphras. He is mentioned in only five verses of the Bible: in Colossians 1:7 & 8, 4:12 & 13 and in our book verse 23. Only five verses, but what a man! We are told that he was **concerned** and burdened for the saints and prayed, (Colossians 4:12) "*that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*" That is a good ambition.

- To stand, not to be tossed about with every fancy new doctrine. To stand, not here today and gone tomorrow. To stand, reliable and faithful.
- Perfect here means sincere and upright. Wholehearted in the gospel. It also has the idea of being transparent, no shady or hidden sides.
- Complete, fully persuaded. You remember we spoke of people who had convictions. They were anchored solidly in the truth.
- In all the will of God. This is one of the most demanding things in the Christian life, to be consistent in every area, to be obedient in all our ways.

That was Epaphras' prayer and concern for his Christian friends and it is the Lord's concern for us. As well as this he was **zealous**. There was some fire and warmth in his life! These men were not merely in a religious job like so many today. They were the Lord's servants and they were soldiers in the battle. Epaphras, we are told, laboured

ferently in prayer. Who else are we told prayed like this? James says Elijah prayed earnestly or praying he prayed! That's the kind of prayer that the Lord wants to hear. It was because Epaphras was concerned that he prayed like that. He wanted to get an answer; he wasn't just saying prayers.

He was concerned and zealous and because of this he was **faithful**. His ministry was not a shallow effort given up when things were a bit discouraging. When there were difficulties he kept going. When there was discouragement he stood firm. He was steadfast in his love for the Saviour and for His work. He was a faithful fellow servant with Paul and he voluntarily shared in his imprisonment when to be a friend of Paul's was to be in danger.

I heard recently of a place where there had been three pastors in a few years. Not one of them had lasted. Indeed two of them had not only left the work, they had forsaken the Lord. They were nothing like Epaphras. What Epaphras prayed for others he showed in his life. He did stand. He was that perfect or sincere man in his love and concern for the Lord and His people. He was complete and his convictions kept him faithful. We need to be men like Epaphras concerned, zealous and faithful.

Aristarchus

The next one of Paul's companions is **Aristarchus** who is mentioned in Acts 19:29, 20:4 and 27:2, also in our book and at the end of Colossians. In Acts 19 we read that the whole city of Ephesus was filled with confusion because of a riot over Paul's preaching and they caught Gaius and Aristarchus and dragged them to the theatre. It was a dangerous thing to be a friend of Paul! Many find excuses to avoid difficulty or danger; many keep well away from trouble but not Aristarchus. He had committed himself to the gospel and he would see it through. We are not to be foolish and go looking for trouble but like him we are to show **loyalty**. Aristarchus was not in trouble in Ephesus for some political reason or for wrongdoing but because he was a Christian. His faith was not some hidden thing but was clear in his life and in his behaviour as well as in his words. Because of his loyalty to the Saviour he was also loyal to Paul. He went with him on his travels as we read in Acts 20 and even went with him to prison in Rome as we read in Acts 27. He was not a fair-weather friend but a man of great loyalty.

He was also very **supportive**. While we as individuals must rely on the Lord for His grace He has not left us without human support. The Bible says, (Psalm 68:6) "*God sets the lonely in families.*" There are many whose only family are their brothers and sisters in the Lord. The Lord Jesus promised that if we leave our family for His sake he will make it up to us a hundred times over. That is one of the great benefits of the local church and

why it is not only wrong but stupid to forsake it. I hope that in your area of work you know the support of someone like Aristarchus or perhaps you are such a support to someone else. That is a wonderful ministry.

So who else are we going to meet in this chapter?

The last three men are Mark, Luke and Demas.

Mark

Once Mark was a failure. He forsook Paul and Barnabas when they were in Cyprus. Later, when Paul and Barnabas were preparing to make another missionary journey, they disagreed strongly about whether or not Mark should go too. Barnabas wanted to take Mark but Paul thought he was untrustworthy and he and Barnabas split apart. We need to remind ourselves often that our example, good or bad, is never too small to have an effect on others.

It was a sad time and no doubt it was a grief to Mark. He had fallen but he didn't stay down. The prophet Micah says, (Micah 7:8) *"Though I have fallen, I will rise!"* and that's what Mark did. I can understand it when someone falls or maybe grows a bit cold but I cannot sympathise with those who won't get up again. *"He restores my soul,"* says the 23rd Psalm and that is often our experience. The marvellous thing is the Lord doesn't just give us another chance; He gives us a new beginning. Paul had considered that Mark was not fit to serve God but the Lord had restored him. Now he is faithful and useful and

Paul wrote to Timothy that Mark was profitable to him for the ministry. A bit like Onesimus isn't it? You see failure, although sad, need not be final.

Luke

The beloved doctor Luke was also with Paul at this time. He was a cultured and educated man and his very careful research and studies enabled him to give a trustworthy account of the life of the Lord Jesus. About 100 years ago, Professor Sir William Ramsay decided to undertake some research to show that the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were unreliable. He spent a considerable time in the Bible lands and sailing in the Mediterranean studying all the evidence. Against his original aims he concluded that Luke was a very accurate writer and an excellent historian. It is just another little bit of evidence that the Bible is absolutely reliable. There are those who think that they do not need to study or apply themselves but the example of Luke says the opposite. There are many calls in the Bible to study and there is no excuse for laziness.

Luke was not just some dry student. He was a compassionate man and he tells the story of the Saviour and recounts the Acts of the Apostles with warmth and feeling. Because of his compassion he won the confidence of many. For example we learn so much of Mary's life, her thoughts and her sorrows from Luke to whom she told those secrets of her heart. An ability to listen attentively to people is crucial if we really want to be of help to them.

Believers are all different and there is no one simple solution to their problems, which is why we have to be able to listen to get to the root of the matter. That is how people learn to confide in us. As believers it is often necessary to seek help from our brothers and sisters and it is good if we have someone like Luke with whom we can discuss a difficulty or a problem.

Demas

Demas, the last man we are to think about, was a dreadful disappointment. His name is well known but for a very bad reason: he was a deserter. How did he wander away from such fellowship? One thing is certain, it was not in one sudden jump. Despite serving with Paul, despite the friendship and help of Luke, despite the warmth of the fellowship and the godly examples all around him, he grew cold and fell away. As that happened he was attracted to the world and strayed from fellowship with the saints. It is just like the seed that fell among thorns in the parable. The life choked out of him. He was still there with the others but no longer one with them in their worship and service and eventually he left.

If Demas could stray from such a fellowship, the fellowship of Paul and Timothy and the others, that surely should teach us to be careful. We need to cultivate the good characteristics of those who were Paul's companions.

How will we do that and how will we teach our congregations to do it?

Verse 25 says, *“the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your soul.”* The letter started with Paul praying for grace for Philemon. We have seen that grace in the lives of Philemon, Paul and Onesimus. Now the letter closes with a prayer for that grace.

“Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;

‘Twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will see me home.”

So wrote John Newton, a man who once had been captain of a slave ship and an atheist but was marvellously changed by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace saved Paul, that fanatical opponent of the gospel. Grace gave Timothy a new heart and courage in his service. Grace made useless Onesimus into a useful servant of God. That same grace is available to us all in all our needs.

What is grace? Grace is God giving us what we do not deserve. It is that favour by which He turns us from our wicked ways to bow to the Lord Jesus Christ. I must stress that it is God's favour given to those who do not deserve it at all or in any sense; it is all of His love. Grace bestows all the blessings of God upon us and the Holy Spirit applies these blessings in our lives. His grace enables us to persevere, to press on and to grow spiritually. We

cannot buy or earn grace but we can seek for it in various ways. We can pray asking the Lord to give us grace. We can read and study and meditate on the Word of God. We can listen diligently to the preaching of the Word and apply it in our lives. The Lord told Paul, (2 Corinthians 12:9) *“My grace is sufficient for you.”* That is true for us all.

So we have seen in different ways and in different people how the grace of God worked to make them more like the Lord Jesus. Let us too by that same grace seek to be like those we have studied and more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

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