

## 23-25 The Gospel Makes Us "Useful"

Paul ends his letter with, *"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."* How can our lives be worth something without the gospel? No matter how much wealth or fame we might acquire in this life, it would be useless and unprofitable (Matthew 16:26). In a sense, because material gains do not guarantee satisfaction. Should they were to satisfy, this type of satisfaction would be short-lived. It all dies with death. Instead, the blessings God offers are certain, they are spiritual, and they are eternal (Ephesians 1:3-10).

The Lord's grace is what Onesimus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, and Paul's co-workers found. In the words of the apostle, *"But by the grace of God I am what I am ---"* (1 Corinthians 15:10). Apart from Christ, we are only sinners who deserve God's wrath. We owe it all to God, especially the life we enjoy in Christ. His grace makes us useful. All his letters end with this sentiment, that we may all be blessed with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### Conclusion

From Paul we learn about tenderness and courtesy, among other virtues. From Philemon we learn to be hospitable, loving, and faithful and to be a blessing unto others. From Epaphras and Paul's other companions we learn about fellowship and the need to collaborate in the gospel among brethren who continue to do the Lord's work, even during unfavorable circumstances (v. 23). From Onesimus we learn that it is the gospel that gives us a sense of worthiness and usefulness in the Lord. The work we do is never done in vain. *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast and steadfast, growing in the work of the Lord always, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain"* (1 Corinthians 15:58).

-- J L  
Maldonado  
April 26, 2025

# The Divine Plan of Salvation

- ◆ *Hear the Gospel (Good News) of Christ (Romans 10:14; 10:17)*
- ◆ *Believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Mark 16:16; John 8:24)*
- ◆ *Repent of sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38)*
- ◆ *Confess before men that Christ is the Son of God (Matthew 10:32; Romans 10:10)*
- ◆ *Be baptized (immersed) in water for the forgiveness of sins (Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16)*
- ◆ *Persevere Faithful in Christ (Revelation 2:10; 2 Peter 1:10; 3:18)*

*Do not be deceived  
into following another  
gospel  
Obey God's Plan of Salvation*

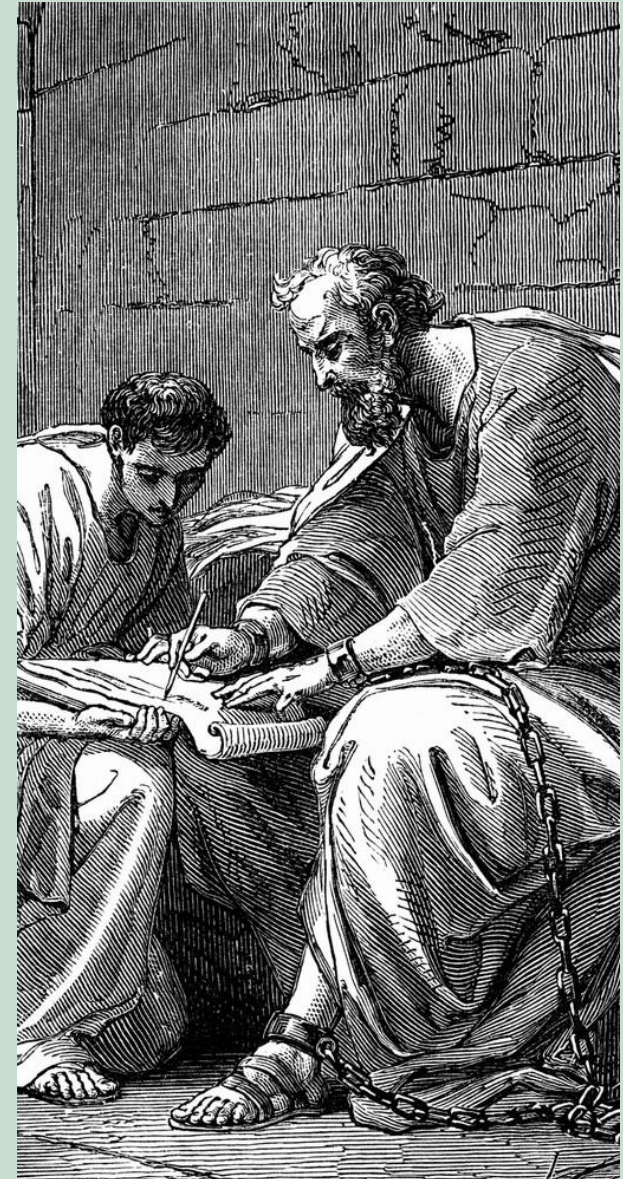
Presented by:



## Paul's Letter to Philemon

# USEFUL

A Fugitive Made Useful by the Gospel



064-E Useful

## Introduction

Paul's letter to Philemon is a tender and courteous plea on behalf of Onesimus, the slave who had run away from his master. My intention in this brief writing is not to make an exhaustive commentary on the letter but rather to make known the achievements of the gospel in those who submit to it. In some, the gospel slightly changes their hearts for the better, while in other cases it brings about radically positive changes in their personal lives. Every aspect of the gospel is for the good of mankind. If anything, the gospel is **"the power of God unto salvation"** (Romans 1:16). It is light that shines in this dark world and illuminates the way to eternal life.

## 1-3 The Gospel Calls For Fellowship

The letter addressed to Philemon is written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. He was a prisoner **"of Jesus Christ,"** for preaching the Truth of the gospel, that was his "crime." Though chained, he was not a criminal, he was free from sin, (Acts 26:29). Philemon was a steadfast Christian in the faith in the city of Colossae (Colossians 4:9). He was a man of certain means, having at least one slave and a large house where the church met (1:2). In addition, he was a brother loved by Paul, also a collaborator in the gospel. He was upright, fair, and generous, among other qualities. The letter is also addressed to Apphia, possibly his wife, to Archippus, possibly their son, and to the church in the house of Philemon. All are called to have good fellowship with one another, and to work together for the worthiest cause, the gospel of Christ Jesus.

## 4-7 The Gospel Causes Change

Paul thanks God for Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints. He also remembers Philemon in his prayers with thanksgiving. It is good and right to thank God for exemplary Christians who demonstrate a good level of spiritual maturity and devotion to the Lord. Because of Philemon, the hearts of the saints were comforted by his benevolence and charity. In view of his spiritual qualities that he practiced on behalf of brethren in need, is he not also expected to be generous toward Onesimus? Where did Philemon learn to do good and be generous? He learned it from the gospel. It is precisely what the Lord Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout his ministry. This is the same thing that Peter says to those gathered in Cornelius' house, **"(You know) how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him** (ESV, Acts 10:38).

Just as Peter tells those gathered in Cornelius' house that God is no respecter of persons, Philemon would be no respecter of Onesimus when upon returning to his former position.

## 8-16 The Gospel Achieves Reconciliation

These verses are the heart of the letter. It is Paul's request, Paul's plea to Philemon to receive and forgive Onesimus who fled from him. But what has changed in Onesimus' life between his running away and his home-coming? The gospel. Onesimus has obeyed the gospel, he is a Christian. In verse ten, Paul says, **"I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment."** Paul, while in prison in Rome, converted Onesimus. He was his spiritual father, and at the same time, his beloved brother in Christ. Paul's request is not for **"a slave"** but **"for my child."** Before, it was a relationship between **"master"** and **"slave"**. Now, the relationship is special, it's one between brothers in Christ, and in view of this, Onesimus will be reunited with Philemon through the reconciling power of the gospel.

The name **"Onesimus"** means **"useful"** or **"profitable."** Paul says, **"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and me"** (Ver. 11). Before, Onesimus was useless in the sense of not sharing Philemon's ideals and being disobedient to the point of fleeing from his presence. But now, Onesimus will bring honor to his name for he is now **"useful,"** to both Paul and Philemon. He is now a useful and faithful servant of the Lord doing God's will (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-24).

It is the power of the gospel that makes great changes in people. Surely, this also changed Philemon's heart as he sees Onesimus in the light of the gospel. It is the gospel that makes one a **"new creation"** (2 Corinthians 5:17). Without the gospel's influence, we are ordinary people, rebellious against God's will and are like Onesimus, **"useless"**. Do we want to be useful? The gospel calls us to follow Christ, it calls us to do God's will. It is the power of the gospel that makes us useful to God.

In view of Paul's respect for Philemon and affection for Onesimus, how could Philemon refuse the request to receive Onesimus? He could not refuse.

In 1:15,16, Paul suggests that Divine Providence was behind the events in the life of Onesimus which led to his conversion. Paul says, **"For this perhaps is why he parted from you for a while, that you may have him back forever, 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."** As in the case of Joseph (Genesis 45:8), God turned evil into good. God changed that **"darkness"** into **"light"** and all three were blessed.

## 17-20 The Gospel Is About Forgiveness

The passage implies that the runaway Onesimus, had in a certain sense defrauded Philemon. It is not impossible to believe that a slave would steal from his master, this happened (Titus 2:10). Surely, it cost money to transport from Colossae to Rome. That is why Paul says to him, **"If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account** (v. 18). He tells him not to let any debt prevent you from receiving Onesimus. Paul says, **"I will repay it"** (v. 19).

Another implication is that Philemon's conversion was made by Paul, when he writes, **"... owing me even your own self"** (v. 19). On the basis of this Christian love, Philemon was to forgive the debt that Onesimus owed him. In reality, it is Philemon who owes Paul a double debt. One, his conversion. The other, sending back his runaway slave, but no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. In any case, Paul is willing to repay the debt to Philemon.

By forgiving Onesimus, Philemon will contribute to maintaining unity in the church at Colossae (the church met in Philemon's house, v. 2). This would bring much joy to a chained man (v. 7). Surely, Paul saw great potential in Onesimus. His appreciation for him is evident. He says that he is now useful and will be of great value to the advancement of the gospel. Any help that benefited Onesimus would be of great benefit to both Philemon and Paul. Any contribution from Philemon in favor of Onesimus would enrich him even more. Paul tells him, **"Refresh my heart in Christ"** (v. 20). Seeing that his pupil will be welcomed by Philemon, Paul will feel refreshed, his heart comforted.

## 21-22 The Gospel Compels Us To Do Right

The gospel compels us to be better, better Christians, parents, children, masters, and servants. The power with the gospel highlights our mistakes and corrects our shortcomings. Everything about the gospel is good and leads us to do what is good, what is just, what is right. In the case of Onesimus, it was only right that he should return to his master. It was the right thing to do for him to return to Philemon and thus correct his mistake. But why should he return? According to the world not guided by the gospel, it is folly to return while being "free". Should he return, he'd risk being scourged, or worse yet, die. The world says "no." In some cases, those caught were branded with an "f" for "fugitive." But the gospel, while not taking a political stance on slavery, protects the slave (Onesimus) and restrains the master (Philemon). In Philemon's case, he would do right to receive him.

It is Paul's wish that his prayers will be heard, and that God will grant him freedom. Once free, he would soon be able to visit the church in Colossae.