

Philemon

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[0 : 0 0] The fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ is remarkably powerful. Remarkably powerful for! Good! I wonder whether you are aware of that. It may well not be the case without you being! entirely aware of the fact that you are aware of the fact that you are aware of the fact that it is also possible for the fellowship of believers to be less in our experience than it ought to be. And what we call fellowship may be no more than a loose association of people who assemble or something we just call church. Or maybe we think of fellowship just as human friendship which in itself is a wonderful thing. But it is not the same as the fellowship of believers. In fact I have a hunch that the concept of Christian fellowship is being forgotten by us and many churches in this city. What is a Christian fellowship? What is so good about it?

It is not the same as we rightly focus on the ministry of the word and on training as churches. That actually we lose the basic wonder and power of the fellowship of believers. It is one of the reasons that I am such a big fan of Sunday evening worship. And I am kind of having services at both ends of the Lord's Day. I don't think the Bible commands people to come on Sunday night. I wish it did but it doesn't. And I am preaching with the converted a little bit aren't I? Because you are all here. But it is because I think that the fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ is remarkably powerful. And I think we live in an isolated city. And then we live in a city where churches are kind of bought into that where they say come for an hour on Sunday morning, maybe an hour in midweek. And I don't think that builds strong enough fellowship of believers. And if you are wondering what I am talking about, I suspect that that is evidence that my concerns have some basis. In the corner of the New Testament, and there is a short little letter, it is not the shortest letter in the New Testament, but in most Bibles it fits on one page and it is a gem. And the Book of Fighting I have already grappled with this letter. And I think the big theme is the power of the fellowship of believers.

The power of the fellowship of believers. Because behind the letter is a remarkable back story. It is a story of the power of the fellowship of believers. And I think it is true to say that the letter itself, the preservation of this letter, its very existence on the pages of the New Testament is an eloquent testimony to why the fellowship of believers is so, so powerful and vital.

[3 : 0 7] As we read through this letter, we hear a deeply moving call to know and to experience, to taste, can I say, the power of this fellowship. And to appreciate the power of the letter, I think we need to hear the back story. So here it is, some of the details are unclear to us, and there are some gaps in the evidence, but the main lines of the back story have been enough that I am going to take the liberty of filling in some of the gaps myself. So the story begins with a rather wealthy businessman who lived in the town of Colossae, his name was Philemon. It may be that his business took him in the year around about AD 53 down from Colossae to the coastal town of Ephesus, it wasn't that funny. And I am sure that he had visited Ephesus many, many times. But on this occasion when he gets down to the success of the fire, it is quite a stir because there is a Jewish man named Paul who would gather crowds in a hall in the town kind of Ephesus lunchtime talks, ELT. And he was arguing about a man called Jesus.

And Paul claimed that he was not only the Lord and Messiah, but he was the Lord and the Judge of all people in every place at every time. And other remarkable things were happening around Paul. People were being healed, evil spirits were leaving people. And like many others in Ephesus at that time, Philemon goes along to hear it. And he is persuaded. He is persuaded by this astonishing message. And in fact Philemon came to faith in Jesus, the Messiah Lord. Philemon actually got involved in some way with Paul and his work. It's likely that he returned to Ephesus a number of times over the coming years. And he supported and he helped Paul and his missionary labors there. And then about the same time as the first visit we mentioned, another citizen of Colossae had

much the same experience as Philemon. His name is Epaphras. Now unfortunately the details are sketchy, but both of these men, Epaphras and Philemon, returned to Colossae. And we know that Epaphras told many of his fellow citizens the message that he had heard. What had become to him, and known to him as the word of truth. The gospel as he had learned it from Paul, he passed it on to others. And a number of them understood the grace of God in truth and they came to faith in Jesus the Messiah, the Lord. Epaphras was so excited with the news he went on to other towns. He went on to Heropolis and Naedicea, which were near to Colossae and there were similar results. And in Colossae, the new believers in Christ Jesus began meeting together in Philemon's house. And no doubt Philemon from his time with Paul was able to provide some kind of leadership and encouragement to the growing gathering of new believers that met under his roof. But our sense we must turn to one member of Philemon's household. He was a slave. And he was called Onesimus.

[6 : 24] Onesimus was not caught up with whatever strange ideas his master had brought back with him from Ephesus. And no doubt as the gatherings had started to take place in the house, as he heard the Colossae believers sing hymns, psalms and spiritual songs. They were perplexing to him.

And again, we wish we had more details but we don't. But apparently for some reason Onesimus chose to run away from his master. And in the process it appears that he may have in fact robbed him.

For slaves to run away from their masters was not unusual, but it was dangerous. It seems Onesimus couldn't hang around Colossae for obvious reasons. But he found his way eventually to far off Rome, the capital of the then known world. Now some years have passed since Paul had been preaching in Exodus. It's now about the year 60 or 61 AD. And much had happened to Paul through those years. We cannot follow that now. But by the time Onesimus came to Rome, by remarkable providence to Paul was in Rome. Paul was there as a prisoner. He lived in his own rented flat with a soldier guarding him. The Book of Galactics tells us that he lived there two whole years at his own expense. And that he welcomed whoever came to him. And he proclaimed the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he taught about the Lord Jesus with boldness and without hindrance.

And we're tantalised, aren't we, by the lack of answers to the many questions. But among those who came to him was apparently a man called Onesimus. And what drew Onesimus to the friend of his former master we can only guess at. The fact is that Paul led Onesimus to Jesus.

Onesimus, the runaway slave, became a believer. And as we will see in a moment, deep affection grew between Onesimus and Paul. And Onesimus assisted Paul in a number of ways. Well, some time passed, and then one day there was another surprise for Paul. There was a familiar face.

[8 : 35] From those days back in Ephesus, it was Epaphras. And here the lack of details gets really frustrating. The circumstances of Epaphras coming to Rome are unknown to us. We don't know why.

Well, in the way, as is the way he came into contact with Paul. But it seems that he, Epaphras, was like Paul, a prisoner of the authorities at some point. He was a prisoner somehow in connection with his faith in Christ. But what we know is that Epaphras, when he came into contact with Paul, shared with Paul the news of what was going on back in Colossae and Hierophilus and Laodicea. We know from the book of Colossians, don't we, that Epaphras told Paul the news of their solid faith. The news of their extravagant love. News of their confident hope. News of their reordered lives under the headship of King Jesus. And Paul, of course, was overjoyed, you can see, and he was so thankful to God. However, two things needed to be done. First of all, Paul needed to make contact with this group of believers that met in his old friend Philemon's house back in Colossae. And Paul needed to reassure them that they were firmly established the faith. And that they continued to walk in Christ Jesus the Lord. So he wrote a letter to confirm and strengthen and stabilise the faith of the Colossae believers, which is what we've just studied for the last number of weeks. But secondly, what was now to be done about Onesimus? The slave who's been converted, who had run away from Paul's dear friend and brother Philemon, in whose house the Colossae believers now met. And who himself, like Onesimus, had faith in Christ.

Well, Paul carefully wrote another letter, and he sent off the two letters to Colossae, by the hand of his long-trusted colleague Tychicus. But along with Tychicus, he sent to Onesimus and Onesimus. And when Tychicus and Onesimus reached Colossae, words would soon spread that a letter had

arrived from Paul. The man who taught Epaphras and Philemon the news about the Lord Jesus. The news that they'd all come to believe in. And they'd all gathered, as I imagine it, in Philemon's house. It was their custom to do so, but this time they gathered to hear the letter read. I tried to imagine what was happening with Onesimus. We don't know, do we? And of course I'm only guessing. But I asked the question, did Onesimus join the gathering at that point? Was Onesimus kept out of sight for the time being? Did he slink into the back row during the third hymn? [11:37] We don't know, do we? But when Tychicus finished reading the longer letter, the letters of the Colossians. I picture Epaphras saying, brothers, I have another letter from Paul that he wants you all to hear. It's brief, but it's very important. And the assembly waited in silence and he began to read, he read this, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy, our brother. To Philemon, our beloved fellow worker. And Atvia, our sister. And Archippus, our fellow soldier. And the church in your house. Grace to you. And peace from God our Father. And the Lord Jesus Christ.

He kept reading, but there's a change of tone. And we miss it in English, so I'm not telling you what it is, but it's very, very important. It is the you's from verse 4 onwards down to verse 21, our singular. And as Kitchick had read, he might have lifted his eyes occasionally to look directly at his host Philemon. These words were directly for him. So he read on, Philemon, Philemon, I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers. Because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have towards the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. 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. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, Philemon, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. And I suspect everyone in the room is listening very, very carefully, aren't they? What was it that Paul was going to say to their esteemed host? What was so important that a separate letter had to be written to him? And I have no doubt that Philemon was listening very carefully too.

Well, I'm not going to wait actually until the next time to answer those questions. Because I want to spend a few moments just noticing the profound importance to the careful way Paul introduces this letter and what it teaches us about the fellowship of believers. And how it compares us as a prepared philemon between the rest. So in verses 1 to 3 we see the introduction. Now it's no surprise that if you've read the New Testament or all of you've read the letters that it's a standard opening of an ancient letter. You have the sender, you have the recipients and you have a word of greeting. It's very simple to email isn't it? You have the to, you have the from and then you have the subject. And that is how ancient letters began. You can see that in the difference of Paul's New Testament letters. But as in John Paul puts a little twist on it there are some small surprises of how Paul employs this form in the particular letter.

So he introduces himself, doesn't he, in verse 1 can you see it? Paul, a prisoner for Christ Christ Jesus, he's the writer. Now notice he does not introduce himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God like he did in Colossians. Paul draws attention this time in his letter not to his apostolic authority but to his bondage. Paul writes at the start of the letter and draws attention to his suffering and to his humiliation. We can translate it a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

[15:28] And from the very first words of this letter there is a hint of what is to come. Christ Jesus changes all human situations. Christ Jesus changes all relationships. And you might think that Paul was in bondage for offending the Roman authorities in some way but he says no. He is there because he's been proclaiming Christ.

You might think he was there because he's been punished for some wrong. But no, he says he is there for the sake of Christ and his gospel. You might think he was under the power of the soldier who was guarding him in his flat.

No, he was a prisoner who belonged to Christ. Well as with the longer letter he adds it's with Timothy our brother. And Timothy would be known to some in Philemon, almost certainly known to Philemon himself. And Timothy joins in the sending of the letter. So it's quite clear that Paul is the writer. So let's see the recipients. The next surprise is that Paul signals out a particular person to Philemon. He is the main person addressed by the letter. And then he adds some others. The letter is addressed through verse 1 to Philemon our beloved fellow worker. Most of the Christians that were meeting in Philemon's house they'd never seen Paul, they'd never met him in the flesh. But of course Philemon has. And if you've got the story right, they worked together in Ephraim after several years kind of on and off after Philemon himself became a believer. And how good it must have been as Philemon heard those words, to hear this affirmation of Paul's love for him after all the

years that had passed. Second name is answered, Aphia our sister.

It's a reasonable guess that Aphia was Philemon's wife. The letter was to address, wasn't it, Philemon's household. And so the inclusion of Aphia, well of course that is understandable. And right.

[17 : 37] And the third name is Archippus, our fellow soldier. He'd been singled out at me in the longer letter. We saw that last week where Paul had encouraged the believers to go and say to him, see to it that you fulfill the ministry that you've received from the Lord. Chapter 4, where he's indeed. He may well be the son of Philemon and Aphia. And for that reason he's included here, it would make sense. He may have had some leadership in the gathering, and that may be why his name appears. But certainly he and whatever ministry he had was well known to all. But perhaps the biggest surprise so far is the next group of people addressed. Who is the next group of people? It's the church. The whole assembly of believers in Philemon's house are addressed into what is going to turn out to be a very, very personal letter to Philemon.

It's quite shocking. So at the end of verse 2, and the church in your house. Of course, Philemon's house. Now I think that is strange particularly from our point of view, because we have a very hard and fast distinction between public and private matters. And when we get to the main part of the letter next time, we will see that this is a particular word to Philemon. And yet it seems that it's deliberative in the hearing of the whole assembly. The greeting in verse 3, if we just get technical for a moment, is plural. So it's the hollow gathering, and it is the same at the end of the letter in verse 22. It's plural. Paul will refer to you and your prayers, plural, referring to all the believers there. And also the closing greeting in verse 25 is directed to them all. So this letter is addressed to the individual

Philemon, but he addresses him in the whole presence of the gathering of believers. Now I don't think that that should be regarded as a tactic to increase the pressure on Philemon to do what Paul is proposing in due course. It's certainly not a public rebuke or anything that nature. Philemon has done nothing wrong. There's no criticism on all of Philemon in this letter. But rather I think, let's recognise the corporate nature of the Christian fellowship.

You see, if Philemon's wife, and his wife should rightly be included in the matter that he's going to be raised with Philemon, then so should the whole household of God in that place.

The matter that Paul will raise with Philemon was not, despite our first impressions, a private matter. And I want to argue with you that we, much that we tend to think of as private matters, perhaps should be recognised, should be recognised to be far less so than we're inclined to think.

[20 : 54] If we take the fellowship of believers seriously. I'll talk to you about that later. Let's just look at the greeting briefly. It echoes the greeting in the longer letter. It says, Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is what God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ mean to those who believe, grace and peace. But it's at this point that the letter becomes a word to Philemon.

So we've seen the greeting there, let's see in verses 4-5 of Thanksgiving. It's addressed to Philemon, as we've seen in the hearing of the gathering in his house, but it is to him, verse 4.

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers. It's another glimpse, isn't it, to the Apostle Paul, it was a serious prayer. And we saw that in the longer letter, but we get a glimpse into it here.

Philemon was on his prayer list. He may have been there for some, he may not have seen him for some years, but now news of Philemon came to Paul in Rome via Epaphras, if you remember.

[22 : 06] And Paul thanks God, no doubt, because his prayers for Philemon over the years have been graciously answered. So what news that Epaphras brought about this precious brother Philemon?

Because I hear of your love and of the faith that you've had towards the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. How brilliant is that? The man who'd come to faith in Christ in Paul's company in Ephesus is continuing strong in faith.

And it is love for God's people. And Paul is thrilled. We'll look at the prayer in verse 6. As we learned in the longer letter, Paul gives thanks, but that doesn't mean he stops praying.

He stops asking, what did Paul pray for Philemon? I assume that what Paul prayed in Colossians, for all the Colossian believers, he prayed for this man. And we can go back to the start of Colossians and flesh that out of it.

But he prayed particularly for this man, verse 6, 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.

[23 : 16] It's difficult to listen to. It's difficult to take in. It's very difficult to kind of translate.

But what it says is magnificent. The best translation that I've found is the Holman translation. It says this, your participation in the faith. Your participation in the faith.

He's referring, listening, to the reality of Christian fellowship. What Christian fellowship is, is it is sharing in faith in Christ Jesus.

That is what we have, that is what we believers have in common tonight. Our faith in the Father of Jesus Christ. And our sharing in this faith. Our participation together in this faith. That is fellowship. Well I began tonight by saying that the fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ is very, very powerful. Remarkably powerful. And the whole story behind this letter to Philemon is the story of the power of that fellowship.

[24 : 29] The fellowship between Paul and Philemon. All those years back in Ephesus. The fellowship between Paul and Epaphras when he became a believer. The fellowship between Paul and Onesimus when he came to Rome.

The fellowship between Epaphras and the believers back in Colossae. And what Paul prayed for Philemon was that his fellowship in the faith. His participation in the faith. His sharing in the faith with Paul.

With his brothers and sisters in Colossae. And very importantly, as we'll see in the rest of this letter. With Onesimus. That his participation in the faith.

His fellowship in the faith may become effective. And this is going to turn out to be the test case of the power between believers. How will Philemon and Onesimus' participation in the faith affect what happens to them?

This wronged master. And this returning runaway slave. Both of whom are now believers. I'm going ahead of myself.

[25 : 36] But here is Paul simply praying that your fellowship in the faith may become effective. His prayer.

Is that the fellowship will become effective at the end. The rest of verse 6. Again, if I can over literally put it. If I can over kind of literalise it. Paul.

In knowledge of every good thing. Which is a manus for Christ. Now that seems strange to our ears. But I suspect that Paul's meaning is very close.

To what he prayed. For all the believers. Namely that they would be filled. Remember what he prayed? That they would be filled with knowledge. It's the same word here. Of God's will.

That they'd bear fruit in every good word. And they would grow in the knowledge of God. And it's in the context of knowing and understanding the astonishing good. That God is doing among us.

[26 : 36] By uniting us with Christ. That Philemon's fellowship in the faith will become effective. That isn't to say that Paul. That Philemon's fellowship in the faith was not already powerfully effective.

As far as Paul is concerned. In verse 7. He says. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love my brother. Because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed for you. This fellowship had been working.

And Paul was delighted and comforted by Philemon's love. And this was not simply his love for Paul. But his loving ministry to the believers who had met in his house.

The news which Epaphras no doubt had brought to Paul. So here is fellowship of the work. He is delighted and comforted by Philemon's love.

Not only for himself. But for the ministry of all the believers who had met in his house. But what is that going to mean? What is that going to mean in this particular situation?

[27 : 43] As they all sit and listen. To what is going to happen with the runaway slave. Who is returning? Well, come in two weeks time.

And you will find out. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we have a great day.