

ViralStJames Bible Study #3: Philemon

The Background: Letter from Lockdown – Paul’s Letter to Philemon

Understandably, the restrictions on our freedom that we have been experiencing since late March become increasingly wearing. However, the situation that Paul finds himself in as he writes this short letter to Philemon is worse, locked up and in chains as a prisoner, probably in Ephesus. Despite his situation, he can still find time to be thankful, and it is clear that he has not been forgotten by his friends who have been telling him about how the faith of those in the churches he has founded is growing. We recently received a hand written letter from one of our God children, and it was a joy to read and think of the thought that had gone into it.

Even in prison, Paul does not stop his ministry, and this letter from his prison sees him encouraging his friend Philemon (probably a leader of a small group of Christians in Colossae) to think through the practical application of his new-found faith. It reminds us that being a Christian isn’t simply about worshipping, getting together once a week on a Sunday, (even if only virtually!), or simply getting our ticket to heaven. It is about understanding how our new status as followers of Jesus impacts the way we live now, the everyday actions we take, and that sometimes we may have to pay a price. In this short letter, Paul urges Philemon to be reconciled with his runaway slave, but not on the basis of magnanimity, from a position of power, but because the good news of Jesus has at its centre forgiveness, love and equality of status. It is a short letter, but one that has resonance today and leaves a lot to ponder on!

The Passage

Philem. 1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Philem. 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philem. 4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵ because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷ I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

Philem. 8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹ yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back

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forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Philem. 17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Philem. 22 One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

Philem. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

Philem. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

The Questions

- 1) How does Paul begin his letter from lockdown? (v 3-7)
- 2) What does Paul specifically ask for in prayer for his friends? (v6-7)
- 3) Put yourself in Philemon's position. You have a position in society. Your slave has runaway, possibly stealing things owned by you (v18). He doesn't appear to have been much use whilst with you (v11). How would you feel about being asked to welcome him back as you would a friend? (V17)
- 4) On what grounds does Paul base his request? (v9; v17)
- 5) Why do you think it is important to Paul to make this request to Philemon?
- 6) Are there echoes here of Matthew 25 v 34-40?
- 7) Can you think of any occasion when you have gained a fuller understanding of 'the good things we have in Christ' through taking action?
- 8) Have you got any opportunities to encourage others at this time of lockdown - to refresh others – perhaps through writing a letter, sending an e-mail, making a phone call?
- 9) What do you take away from this reflection?

The Space for notes
