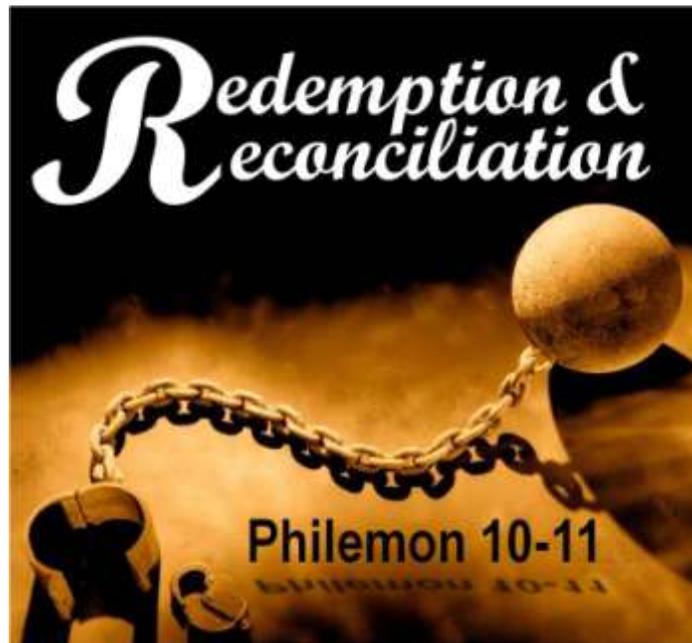


Basic Training Bible Ministries

“A Living Parable of God’s Redemption”

A Study in the Book of Philemon



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The Book of Philemon

A Living Parable of God's Redemption

Introduction and Background

The little book of Philemon is considered the most personal correspondence to come down from the hand of Paul. In it, he pleads on behalf of a runaway slave (which in Rome was a capital offense), who compounded his crime by theft from his master, Philemon. Remember that in Rome there were over 60,000,000 slaves—nearly half the population. According to Roman law, a master had total ownership and authority over his slave, even to life and death. Pliny tells of a master who had his slave put to a horrible death for breaking a crystal goblet (Robertson, *Introduction to Philemon*).

However, somehow (Paul suggests by the providence of God, Phl 15), Onesimus came into contact with Paul in Rome. At this time, Paul was living under house arrest and was allowed visitors and helpers (cf. Act 28:30–31; Phi 4:21–22; Phl 23–24). Paul was able to lead Onesimus to faith in Jesus Christ, having previously (it appears) led his master to the faith (Phl 19b). Thus Paul labors to effect, not just reconciliation between master and slave, but between two estranged brothers in Christ. The spiritual balance of grace and truth, freedom and responsibility permeates the letter. The careful student will find in this brief note powerful instruction for evangelism, discipleship, and peacemaking among fellow believers. The book was probably written in 63 AD, shortly before Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment.

I. The Author and the Recipients, Phl 1–7

This very personal letter comes from the hand of Paul, who identifies himself, not as an apostle, but rather as the “*prisoner of Christ Jesus*.” By placing His Messianic title before the name, Paul emphasizes the incarnation of our Lord Jesus for the purpose of accomplishing our redemption through the cross. The greeting is also a declaration that the suffering of Paul is due—not to any wrongdoing on his part—but because of his faithfulness to the Gospel message. Timothy, his faithful co-worker, is included in the opening as a witness of all Paul is about to declare to Philemon. The letter is addressed primarily to Philemon, but also to Apphia his wife, Archippus, the pastor (Col 4:17) and to the entire house church (Phl 2).

A. Lives Providentially Intertwined, Phl 1–3

In each and every assembly of believers, we see God's providential hand at work linking different lives together to provide each one an opportunity to serve the Master. Consider the parable of the workers in the harvest (Mat 20:1–16). The landowner represents our Lord, who is constantly seeking workers for His harvest of souls (cf. Mat 9:37–38). The emphatic thrust of the story is seen in the statement that introduces and concludes the story (cf. Mat 19:30 with Mat 20:16), “*the last will be first, and the first last*.” The great thing about this—as illustrated by another parable in Luk 14:7–14—is that each of us has the freedom and power to choose which we will be here and now. And our choice whether to be first or

last will have eternal consequences. I trust that Philemon chose to place himself last—and Onesimus first.

1. Gleanings From the Greeting

Here we see four evidences of Paul’s humility, which resulted from his own personal transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ:

- First, his use of “Paul” (little) in place of “Saul” (mighty)—the name he did not utilize until he had nearly fourteen years of growth (cf. Gal 2:1), when he fully entered into his apostolic ministry (Act 13:9). His Hebrew name would have been given to him at his circumcision, when he became a “*child of the covenant*.” “Paul” was his Greek name, given for use in the world. As an act of humility, he chose to be called by this secondary name.
- Next, his identification of himself simply as “*a prisoner of Christ Jesus*.” To him, suffering with Christ was a higher privilege than that of being named an apostle.
- Thirdly, he included his co-worker Timothy in the greeting. It was never his desire to be a “one man show.”
- Finally, his transparency. Paul sends this letter, and his inspired dealings with Onesimus, not only to Philemon, but to the open consideration of the entire local assembly. It was always Paul’s desire to live and to “*walk in the light, as He is in the light*” (1Jo 1:7).

2. Intimations of Spiritual Warfare

Paul calls Archippus a “*fellow-soldier*,” a term only used in one other passage, referring to Epaphroditus (Phi 2:25), of whom we will see more later. The warfare analogy reminds us that the call to discipleship is a call to war. Jesus warned in Luk 14 of the demands of discipleship, including humility (Phl 7–14), active responsibility (Phl 15–24), and willingness to engage in personal warfare (Phl 25–33). Here, the foolish king of Phl 31 illustrates the believer who enters into discipleship not fully committed to following through to spiritual victory. In this light, let us consider some essential points on spiritual warfare, drawn from Phl 1–3.

Conditions of Spiritual Warfare

1. The use of “Paul” reminds us that all victory is by God’s grace, not our efforts. 1Co 1:26–31;
2. Paul speaks of being a “*prisoner*” or being “*in chains*” five times in the letter. But he changes from the word *desmios* in Phl 1, simply meaning “*prisoner*,” to *sunaiçmalotos* in Phl 23, meaning “*prisoner of war*.” All who pursue Christ-likeness will indeed suffer persecution (2Ti 3:16).
3. In the title “*Christ Jesus*,” the central issue of the spiritual war is encapsulated. It is all about His identity (the God-Man), and His redemptive work on the cross (cf. Isa 7:14; Isa 9:6–7; Joh 4:25–26, Joh 4:42; 1Jo 2:2, IJo 4:9, and IJo 4:14).
4. The use of “*Timothy our brother*” and “*Philemon our beloved*” and “*beloved Apphia*” reminds us that Satan’s malice is directed toward the unique family of God during this

- present “*dispensation of the grace of God*” (cf. Eph 3:2, Eph 3:14–15 with Eph 1:3, Eph 1:6, Eph 2:1–10, Eph 3:1–7; 2Co 5:14; Gal 5:6; Joh 13:34, Joh 14:21–23, Joh 15:12–14).
5. The fact that Paul uses the term “*fellow-soldier*” only for Archippus (Phl 2) and Epaphroditus (Phi 2:25) indicates something of the weight of responsibility that rests on pastors to lead in the spiritual battle. It is believed by some (myself included) that “*Epaphras*” the “fellow P.O.W.” of Phl 23 is an abbreviation of “*Epaphroditus*.” See his five-fold commendation in Phi 2:25.
 6. Mention of “*the church in your house*,” (Phl 2), reminds us that the local church is the God-given base of operations for every believer (cf. Mat 16:18, 1Co 1:2; 2Co 1:1; Eph 3:21; 1Th 1:1; 2Th 2:1 and esp. Col 4:15–16). Since Colosseae, Hieropolis, and Laodicea were so close, it may be that the letter to Philemon was actually “*the epistle from Laodicea*” mentioned there. Onesimus is mentioned in Col 4:9 who—along with Tychicus—carried both letters at the same time.
 7. The greeting “*grace to you and peace*” (Phl 1b), though common, should never be taken for granted. It is sent “*from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.” It is a perpetual reminder that we have a secure standing in grace and that peace is available to all who choose to live in the light and power of it (Rom 5:1–5; Eph 2:8–10; Phi 4:6–7; Jam 1:21–25).

B. The Relentless Demands of Faith, Phl 4–7

It is evident that Paul, and many other believers, had relied on the gracious provisions of Philemon in the past. This does not hinder Paul from making an even greater demand on him for Onesimus. Like the persistent knocking of a true friend, in the parable of the neighbor at midnight (Luk 11:1–13), Paul just kept knocking at the door of this man’s liberality. It is a good wake-up call to be reminded that the claims of faith are ever increasing.

1. Goal Achieved, Goalposts Moved

Philemon had proven to be a gracious and hospitable man (Phl 4–7), and for this Paul often gave thanks. In reminding him of his “*love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints*,” Paul is doing two things. First, he is indicating that what is done for fellow-believers is really done for our Lord. Secondly, he is preparing Philemon for a really big request—on behalf of Onesimus—who is now also a fellow-believer. Once we have achieved our previous “benchmark” in the spiritual life, another, higher standard is set. The normal Christian life is one of ever-greater goals and objectives.

2. Affecting Effectiveness (the “much more” of the Christian life)

Jesus loved to talk about the “*much more*” nature of the grace of God (Mat 6:30, Mat 7:11, Mat 10:25). The Apostle Paul was impressed by this and adopted the term (Rom 5:9–10, Rom 5:15, Rom 5:17, Rom 5:20) in speaking of the infinite supply of redemptive grace. But it is in the parable of the mustard seed (Mat 13:31–32; Mar 4:30–32; Luk 13:18–19) and Jesus’ application of its meaning (Mat 17:20 with Luk 17:5–6) that we see the “*much more*” of faith in the believer’s life. The principle of the mustard seed is that it holds within itself the power of growth—from the smallest of beginnings, to a “*tree*” (large shrub), which gives shelter to the

little birds of the air. Actually, the sheltering of the sparrow is a common theme in the Old Testament to speak of the security of the believer under the Father's care (cf. Psa 84:3, Psa 104:16–17; Eze 31:5–6). Even so, the believer who continues to grow in grace and truth (2Pe 3:18) will be a shelter for those who are weaker in the faith. In the ancient world, the mustard tree was renowned for three things:

- Fragrance—it was known that birds were attracted to its aroma.
- Pungency—the crushing of the leaves gave a strong flavor used in food.
- Security—though really a large shrub, it was tall enough for the birds to safely nest in its branches.

When Paul says—in light of his past service—that he is praying “*that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus,*” he is working to “stretch” Philemon in his faith. The word translated “*acknowledgment*” is literally “*knowledge*” (Greek: *epignosis*), which speaks of a growing, experiential grasp of God's grace provisions in his life. Paul—by prayer—seeks to “affect” or influence the desired “effect” of Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus. This leads us to a consideration of spiritual growth.

The Elements and Activities of Spiritual Growth

1. Effective prayer (Phl 4–7)—as a response to the Word of God and expression of dependence upon the indwelling Holy Spirit—is an essential element of spiritual growth (Rom 8:26, Rom 8:34; Eph 1:15–16, Eph 3:14, Eph 6:18; 1Th 5:16–19; 1Ti 2:1–6; Heb 5:1–4; 1Pe 2:5–9).
2. “*Love and faith*” (Phl 5), along with “*hope*” (assurance), are the building blocks of spiritual dynamics in the life of the Christian (cf. Gal 5:6b with 1Co 13:13; 1Th 1:3; Jam 2:14–17; 1Jo 4:20–21).
3. The word translated “*sharing*” (Phl 6) is *koinonia*, meaning “fellowship, joint-participation.” Biblical fellowship always has an active connotation (Joh 15:1–8; 1Jo 1:4,7).
4. The phrase “*may become effective*” in Phl 6 anticipates a future potential of something even greater than past works. Past accomplishments lay a foundation for greater future works. The word “*effective*” is *energeo*, which speaks of operational power (cf. Eph 1:19, Eph 3:7, and Eph 3:20, where the word also occurs). Growing believers are going “*from strength to strength*” (Psa 84:5 and Psa 84:7).
5. The use of the middle voice in the word “*become*” implies that Philemon's volitional response is required. We must choose to grow, and Christian service involves a never-ending chain of wise decisions based on an accurate understanding of God's Word. (Jos 24:15; Phi 2:1–9, Phi 2:12–18).
6. Again, the word “*acknowledgment*” is really speaking of experiential knowledge, based on consistent application of the Word of God to life. The idea of growing through various stages is suggested by passages such as Phi 3:7–14, Phi 4:11–13; 2Pe 1:5–8.

7. Evidence of personal spiritual growth is found in one's effect on others. In Phl 7, Paul mentions "*great joy ... consolation ... refreshment*" as Philemon's effect on other believers. Check out Rom 16 for a roster of effective believers and their impact on those around them.

II. Paul: An Illustration of Taking up the Cross of Christ, Phl 8–19

In the three parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son (Luk 15:1–24), we see examples of the constantly seeking person of our Lord (Luk 19:10). His search is for the great "*pearls*" and "*hidden treasures*" of the souls of men (Mat 13:44–46). He cannot be satisfied until every last "*lost sheep*" is brought into the fold, and the angels of Heaven rejoice over each one (Luk 15:4–7). The believer who chooses to "*take up his cross daily*" (Luk 9:23) is gradually imbued by the indwelling Spirit with this "*mind of Christ*" (Rom 12:2; 1Co 2:16; Phi 2:5). Thus Paul—in his winning of Onesimus and his dealings with Philemon—becomes a living example of the works of redemption, imputation, and reconciliation.

A. The Prisoner, the Pauper, and the Patrician, Phl 8–14

In this living drama, God brings together three men to illustrate His great plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. One, Philemon the patrician, is the justly offended party. The second, Onesimus the runaway slave, is the guilty party. And finally, Paul, the prisoner of Rome, is the mediator who is able to have empathy for both the offended and the offender. Like his Master, Paul is constantly seeking to find the lost and bring them home. Let's note some of the "road-signs" of redemption. God's redemptive plan works, not by command, but by the appeal of love, v.8-9. That is to say it is "*by grace, through faith*" or "*not of law, but of grace*":

- There must be an intercessor, a mediator, an ambassador between the offended and the offender, Phl 9b, and that person will suffer for the work they do. Paul calls himself "*the aged*," but this may have meant "*the ambassador*" (cf. Eph 6:20; also Job 9:32–33; Job 19:25–27 with 1Ti 2:5–6).
- Redemption makes possible the "new birth" ("*I have begotten*"), which results in a "new creation" ("*Who once was unprofitable ... but now is profitable*"), Phl 10. Since "*Onesimus*" means "profitable," Paul uses a play on his name. The great reformer, Martin Luther, said, "*We are all God's Onesimus.*" Only in Christ can we find the ideal of our true self, as intended by God.
- The new believer is equipped by God with gifts of grace to make him/her a source of service and blessing to other believers, Phl 13 (Rom 12:3–8; 1Co 12:4–7; 1Pe 4:10–11). Also, the return of Onesimus to his master shows that we still must deal with consequences of previous decisions. However, as a believer, the mercy of God is with us, to work all things together for the ultimate good (Rom 8:28, Rom 8:37).
- In the new spiritual life, wishes and desires must all be subordinate to God's will and in consideration of the freedom of others. Paul "*wished*" (Phl 13) to keep Onesimus with him, but without the "*consent*" (Phl 14) of Philemon,

Paul “*wanted*” to do nothing. God is sovereign, but He does not (as a rule) impose His will on us. The Christian life is all about Jesus Christ and His Word having first place in our decisions and actions (Col 1:18; 1Pe 3:15; Rom 8:4–8; Gal 5:16).

B. God’s Redemptive Plan Portrayed, Phl 15–19

In the parable of the new wine and old wineskins (Mat 9:17), Jesus proclaims the coming of a new spiritual order. The shadow Christology of Old Testament Judaism—which was a preview of coming realities (Heb 10:1 with Heb 3:5)—was about to be made “*obsolete*” (Heb 8:13) by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The “*old*” could no longer contain the “*new*.” God’s mighty work of redemption for all mankind (Rom 5:18; 1Ti 2:6; 1Jo 2:2), resulting in regeneration (new birth) for those who believe (Tit 3:4–7), continues to bring radical change into common lives. Here Paul brings the divine genius of redemption into focus in the situation of Philemon and Onesimus:

- Paul suggests (Phl 15) the providential working of God in permitting Onesimus to run away, in order to come into contact with Paul, and to find Christ. Providence speaks of God’s working through all events to bring about His purpose for good. Providence is implied in the name Jehovah-Jireh (“*the Lord will provide,*” Gen 22:8 and Gen 22:14); and by His providential working, His sovereignty, justice, love, omniscience, and omnipotence are demonstrated. Just compare Gen 50:20 with Rom 8:28, and consider how God has worked in your own life.
- He then indicates the end desired by God (Phl 16) that Philemon would receive Onesimus, not just as a returned slave, but “*much more,*” as “*a beloved brother.*” The principle is that where grace prevails, the results are always “*much more*” than could have been humanly expected (Mat 6:30, 7:11; Rom 5:9–10, Rom 5:15, Rom 5:17, and Rom 5:20).
- Paul then uses the principle of substitution, himself representing Onesimus, and Onesimus representing Paul (Phl 17–18). This is precisely what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross (2Co 5:21). He took our sin and penalty, and gives to us His standing before God (Eph 1:6). The key word in the phrase “*put that to my account*” is *ellogao*, which comes from *logizomai*, which means “to impute, to place to one’s account.” Just as Jesus was imputed with our sins, and paid the debt (2Co 5:21), so Paul—acting as a minister of Christ—is willing for the debt of Onesimus to be charged to him. Paul pays the debt; Onesimus is received as an honored guest! This is why we stand before God “*accepted in the Beloved*” (Eph 1:6).
- This co-identification is referred to repeatedly by Jesus in His High-Priestly prayer (Joh 17:16, Joh 17:18, Joh 17:21–23). So much of our struggle as believers is due to our inability to look into the mirror of God’s Word and see ourselves as God sees us and, thus, to live according to whom we are in Christ (cf. Jam 1:22–25 with 2Co 3:18).
- With the statement “*I will repay*” (Phl 19), Paul has turned this epistle into a legal document, binding himself to be held accountable for the debt of Onesimus. Apparently, before running away he had robbed Philemon,

probably for traveling money. But, by example, what Paul's letter is for Onesimus the entire New Testament is for us as believers! Jesus Christ has taken upon Himself all our sin, and bestows upon us His own righteousness, life, and all the spiritual riches, which He possesses (Eph 1:3, Eph 1:6).

So powerful is this section from Phl 8–19 that it is worth reviewing and expanding a bit as we consider the undertaking of Jesus on our behalf, so well portrayed by the appeal of the apostle on behalf of a weary, runaway slave.

The Victorious Undertaking of our Mighty Redeemer

1. The work of Jesus Christ on our behalf is all of grace (Phl 8–9)! Grace is unmerited favor. Not only is it undeserved, it is totally unobtainable unless bestowed by one in a position of power and authority. When we speak of grace, we are talking of the unlimited provision of mercy coming from the fountain of God's infinite love for His creatures. All that He has, all that He can give, has been given us through the suffering and sacrifice of His beloved Son. Paul's appeal is not of law, not by demand, but rather an appeal of grace. Onesimus has no rights, and is justly to be condemned, yet becomes the object of love and mercy.
2. By regeneration one is transformed from a guilty sinner to a beloved son, (Phl 10–11). Faith in Jesus Christ results in new birth (Joh 3:3, Joh 3:7), producing a totally new creation (2Co 5:17). Just as an "*unprofitable slave*" can become a "*profitable brother*," so we become "*children of God by faith*" (Gal 3:26). Our standing before a holy God is forever altered (Rom 5:1–2), and as we grow we will more and more reflect the family likeness of our Lord and Savior (Rom 8:29; Rom 12:2; 2Co 3:18).
3. As children of God, we are dynamically equipped to serve Him (Phl 12–15). Every believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God (Rom 8:9–11). Each one is gifted by the Spirit (1Co 12:4–7) to accomplish specific work in the plan of God (Mat 25:15; Mar 13:34; 1Pe 4:10–11). Like Onesimus, we will all face the consequences of past bad decisions. However, as we confront them with a bold trust in the power of God, we will see how He transforms not only men but also situations—for His eternal glory.
4. Spiritual growth brings a gradual transformation into the likeness of Christ (Phl 16–19). Because Paul was willing to be a mediator for Onesimus, the runaway slave was able to learn what it meant to stand in Paul's place before his master. The path of discipleship leads to the likeness of the Master (Mat 10:24–25; Joh 13:13–17). As we are conformed to His image, we are enabled to be His voice, His hands, and His feet to a lost and dying world. It is a wonderful thing to witness the character of Christ in a fellow believer. It is a thing of wonder when, by His grace alone, someone is able to see Him in us!
5. The focus of the abundant life is always about giving, never about getting (Phl 19). "*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*" (Mat 6:12). As we have been forgiven much, we ought to forgive the little owed to us (Mat 18:27–33; Eph 4:32). Paul takes on the debt of Onesimus, knowing how much he has been forgiven (1Ti 1:15). His reminder to Philemon "*that you owe me even your own self*," suggests that Paul had led Philemon to Christ as well. Paul's goal is not to call in a debt, but to remind Philemon of what it meant to be forgiven. When we are overwhelmed by the riches of God's grace given to us, we find it easy to demonstrate His benevolence to those around us, forgiving as we have been forgiven.

*“Go give to the needy sweet charity’s bread.
For giving is living,” the angel said.
“And must I be giving again and again?”
My peevish, petulant answer ran.
“Oh, no,” said the angel piercing me through,
“Just give till the Master stops giving to you!”
~ Author Unknown*

III. Faithful Men as Rivers of Living Water, Phl 20–25

Each of us must choose the degree to which our lives will be useful in our Lord’s service. In the parable of the sower and the seed (Mat 13:1–9, Mat 13:18–23), Jesus speaks of the effect of God’s Word in lives with varying degrees of humility and receptivity. But the real thrust is found in Jesus’ repeated warning “*let him hear ... hear the parable*” (Mat 13:9, Mat 13:18). The point is that we choose our own level of responsiveness to the Word. Paul’s final challenge to Philemon in these verses is to choose to stand among men who are heroes of the faith, not to align with those who have fallen by the wayside.

A. In the Company of Heroes

In these verses, Paul suggests three goals for Philemon, then identifies five men with differing characters and accomplishments, as an impetus to his own service. All these men are identified at this point as “*fellow-laborers*,” Phl 24. Paul lists three goals:

- To be spiritually profitable to Paul, Phl 20
The phrase “*let me have joy*” is the aorist middle optative of the verb *onaimen*, meaning “to gain or make a profit.” Just as Onesimus is now able to be “useful, profitable” to Philemon, so he can also be a source of spiritual gain to the apostle. The middle voice means he has to choose to do so, and the optative mood expresses Paul’s wish that he will so choose. Paul trusts that he will be “refreshed,” given rest from concern, by Philemon’s response (cf. 2Co 7:13 with 2Ti 1:16).
- To manifest the “*much more*” of God’s grace, Phl 21
Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will even excel beyond his requests. He uses the perfect participle of *peitho* to speak of a past conviction of Philemon’s character that remains in a fully persuaded condition. The word “*knowing*” is from *oida*, which speaks of full and mature knowledge. And finally, the phrase “*you will do even more*” is from *huper* with *poieo*, meaning “to do or go above and beyond.” As we have noted above, the “*much more*” quality of God’s grace, it is also worth noting four indications of it in this epistle:
 1. “*More (huper) than a slave, a beloved brother*,” Phl 16
 2. “*Especially (malista) to me*,” Phl 16
 3. “*How much more (poso de mallon soi) to you*,” Phl 16
 4. “*You will do even more (kai huper + poieo) than I say*,” Phl 21
- To prepare lodging for Paul, Phl 22
The English translation “*meanwhile*” is from the Greek *hama*, meaning literally, “at the same time,” i.e., that you are receiving Onesimus. Paul’s

anticipated release and coming visit would add weight to Philemon's hoped for response, if he is to "*receive him as you would me*" (Phl 17). Paul believes that his soon release is a direct result of the prayers of Philemon and others.

Five Faithful Men, Minus One, Phl 23–24

Every believer must face the fact that, while our salvation is secure in Christ, our eternal reputation is in the process of being written day by day. We may be faithful for years, only to fail in the end. While rewards for past faithful service are also secure, the greatest eternal rewards are reserved for those who finish their race (Phi 3:12–14; Heb 12:1–3; 2Ti 4:7–8; Jam 1:12; Rev 2:10). In the names that follow we see varying degrees of faithfulness, and one sure example of falling short of the grace of God.

1. Epaphras—very possibly one and the same as Epaphroditus, Phi 2:25–30. He is the only other person Paul ever calls a "*fellow-soldier*," along with Aristarchus. His record contained in the passage cited above is impressive. He is also called a "*faithful minister*" and "*bondservant of Christ*" (Col 1:7, Col 4:12), as well as a "*fellow prisoner*" with Paul (Phi 2:23).
2. Mark—it is often asserted, based on 2Ti 4:11, that Paul mended his broken relationship with Mark (see Act 12:12, Act 12:25; Act 13:13; Act 15:36–41 for background). However, this epistle shows that the breach had already been mended at least five years before 2 Timothy was written. John Mark illustrates the fact that those who are final victors in the Christian life are not those who have never fallen, but rather those who refuse to be defeated! In Col 4:10, we see that he was with Paul in his first imprisonment.
3. Aristarchus—mentioned in Act 19:29, Act 20:4, and Act 27:2, he was a citizen of Thessalonica. Again, in Col 4:10, he is identified as Paul's "*fellow-prisoner*," no doubt to his faithful service and association.
4. Demas—although mentioned with Luke in Col 4:14, this man's last reference in Scripture is a tragic one, for Paul writes, "*Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.*" While the phrase could mean he was lured away by worldly desires, I am more inclined to think the dangers of association with Paul became such that Demas left, having no desire to risk imprisonment, and possible death. Whatever the case, here is a man who once stood among the giants, and in the end chose to take the easier path. We should all beware lest we make the same tragic choice.
5. Luke—for such a faithful person, it is amazing that Luke, "*the beloved physician*," is mentioned only twice in the New Testament (Col 4:14; 2Ti 4:11). He is the author of the Gospel by his name, and the book of Acts. He first joined Paul on the second missionary journey, and many believe he was "*the man of Macedonia*" (Act 16:9). It is also strongly believed he was the brother of Titus, or "*the brother whose praise is in the Gospel throughout all the churches*" (2Co 8:18). His admiration of Paul is seen throughout the Acts, and in the last record of him, he alone was with the great apostle (2Ti 4:11).

B. The Disciplines of Discipleship, Phl 20–25

In this passage there are many lessons relating to the life of the disciple:

- A disciple is a source of joy, refreshment, and encouragement to other believers, Phl 20, cf. Rom. 15:32; 1Co 16:18; 2Co 7:13; 2Ti 1:16.

- A true disciple contributes to a strong sense of “*Esprit de Corps*,” or team spirit, Phl 21, “*having confidence ... knowing you will do even more than I say.*” Paul’s “*confidence*” was a settled conviction based on experience.
- The essence of discipleship is obedience, Phl 21, cf. Luk 6:40, Luk 6:46–47. This obedience is an active expression of submission and loyalty to God’s Word.
- Discipleship is a never-ending pursuit of the high calling of conformity to the character of Jesus Christ, Phl 21. “*You will do even more,*” cf. 2Co 8:1–4 with 1Th 4:1, 1Th 4:10; Phi 3:14.
- Discipleship seeks a fine balance between faith and works, between praying and serving, Phl 22, “*prepare a guest room ... through your prayers.*” When we pray we ought to be prepared to act in the fulfillment of that prayer.
- The disciple takes into account both the privileges and pains of faithfulness. “*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner (Phl 23) ... Epaphras ... a faithful minister of Christ*” (Col 1:7).
- The prospect and prize of discipleship is that we might take our place among heroic saints—past, present, and future. The caution is that we might be named among those like Demas, whose praise was turned into the ashes of final failure.

Conclusion:

The parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl (Mat 13:44–46) fits well in the story of Onesimus. Paul, like the wise merchant, was always on the lookout for hidden riches and costly pearls. In the runaway slave Onesimus, instead of the worthless and useless human most people saw, he found one whose life could shine throughout eternity as a trophy of the grace of God. In this story, we see the providence of God leading a hurting slave to a healing apostle, to honor the cross of a seeking Savior. You may at this point identify with Onesimus. If so, you need to seek the truth from a faithful witness of Jesus Christ. Or, you may identify with Philemon, having been betrayed by someone you trusted. If so, you need to forgive, just as Christ has forgiven you. Or, you may be privileged to play the part of Paul, and be the mediator, the healer of wounded souls, and the guide of the blind to the light of the Gospel of Christ. Each of us, no doubt, has been in the place of Onesimus or of Philemon at some point. Let each of us desire to be like the Apostle Paul, just as he himself sought to emulate his Savior in all things (1Co 11:1).

Related Doctrines by Section

The Doctrine of Persecution, Phl 1–2

1. Paul uses the word “*prisoner*” three times and “*chains*” twice in this letter. From the common word *desmios* (Phl 1 and Phl 9), he changes to *aichmalotos* in Phl 23, a word used for a prisoner of war.
2. Persecution is the norm for all growing and serving disciples of Jesus Christ, Luk 9:23; 2Ti 3:11–2.
3. Jesus Christ takes the persecution of His people personally and will avenge it, Joh 15:20; Act 9:4–5; Rom 12:19; Rev 6:10, Rev 16:6.
4. Believers should meet persecutions with rejoicing, and pray for persecutors, Mat 5:10–12; Act 5:41; Rom 12:14; 2Co 12:9–10; 1Pe 4:12–14.
5. Persecutions provide special opportunities for effective witness to the love and power of our Lord Jesus Christ, Luk 21:13–19; Act 8:1–4; Phi 1:12–18.
6. Persecutions will increase as the coming of the Lord draws nearer, Rev 3:7–13.
7. The power to meet and overcome persecutions is three-fold: faith in the work of the cross, growth in God’s Word, unconditional personal surrender, Rev 12:11.

The Doctrine of Effective Prayer, Phl 4

1. The epistles of Paul are built around his prayers. Consider Ephesians:
 - a. Eph 1–3, the wealth of the believer; prayer for enlightenment, Eph 1:15–23.
 - b. Eph 4–6, the walk of the believer; prayer for enablement, Eph 3:14–21.
2. Paul’s prayers for Philemon (Phl 4–6) are of thanksgiving for present service on his part (Phl 5 and Phl 7), and for greater service in the future (Phl 6).
3. What is needed today is not just more prayer on the part of God’s people, but for far more effective prayer, cf. Jam 5:16b.
4. There are certain elements of effective prayer related to faith:
 - a. We must pray believing (in faith), Mat 21:22; Jam 1:5, Jam 5:15.
 - b. We must pray in the Spirit (i.e., agreement with), Eph 6:18 with Rom 8:26.
 - c. We must pray according to God’s will, Mat 26:39, Mat 26:42; 1Jo 5:14–15.
 - d. We must pray according to Jesus’ model, Mat 6:9–13.
 - e. We must pray with understanding of God’s chain of command, Joh 16:23–24.
 - f. We must pray persistently, Mat 7:7; Luk 18:1; 1Th 5:17.
5. Lack of prayer results in lack/loss of blessing, Jam 4:2–3.
6. One of the chief components to effective prayer is that we pray for others, Mat 6:9–15; Jam 5:16.

The Doctrine of Growth/Discipleship, Phl 4–7

1. The call to enter eternal life is a free gift, but the call to discipleship is costly, Mat 11:28–29; Luk 9:23, Luk 14:25–22; Eph 2:8–9.

2. To be a disciple implies personal spiritual growth and consistent active following of His purpose, 2Pe 3:17–18.
3. This results in personal transformation in three areas, 1Th 1:3–10; Rev 12:11.
4. Paul challenges Philemon, in light of past growth and service, to become even more effective in his service, Phl 5–6 with 1Th 4:1, 1Th 4:10; Phi 1:9–11.
5. True spiritual growth is never purely personal or isolated, but is rather aimed at collective benefit and blessing, Eph 4:11–16.
6. The one-word summary for growth is “*fellowship*,” Phl 6; Phi 1:3–11.

The Doctrine of Profitable Faith, Phl 10–16

1. Living faith (fellowship; sanctification, growth) is fruitful and productive, bringing glory to God, Joh 15:1–8.
2. Spiritual fruit is the evidence of regeneration and the indwelling Spirit, Rom 8:9–11 (resurrection life), Rom 8:12–17 (witness of the Spirit).
3. The growing, fruitful Christian life is “*useful, profitable*” to others, Phl 6, Phl 20, with Jam 1:21–27, Jam 2:14–17.
4. The “profit” of Onesimus is not only his salvation, but his service, Phl 13, Phl 16.
5. The fruit of the Spirit is a by-product of living in the power and fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Gal 5:16, Gal 5:22–23.
6. The “*much more*” power of God’s grace (Mat 6:30, Mat 7:11) is manifested through the believer in his growth and fruitful life, Phl 16, Phl 21; Rom 5:15, Rom 5:17, Rom 5:20.

The Doctrine of Substitution/Imputation, Phl 13 and Phl 19

1. The heart of this letter is Paul’s willingness to identify with Onesimus, so that Onesimus can identify with Paul, Phl 10, Phl 13, Phl 17. This is precisely what Jesus Christ did for us at the cross, in a much greater way.
2. Note there is actually a three-fold substitution or identification: Paul with Onesimus, Phl 17; Onesimus with Paul, Phl 18; Onesimus with Philemon, Phl 13.
3. When Paul says in Phl 19, “*I will repay*,” he reflects our Savior, 2Co 5:21, in His identification with the world of sinners. He willingly took our sins upon Himself; we by faith willingly take His righteousness for ourselves.
4. These same words were put in the mouth of the Good Samaritan in the story Jesus told, Luk 10:35.
5. Note how Paul’s identification/substitution, Phl 17, leads to imputation, Phl 18. Having identified Onesimus with his merits in the mind of Philemon, he then identifies himself with the debts of Onesimus, Phl 18–19.
6. An often-missed aspect of this truth in the epistle is the phrase “*in your behalf*.” Phl 13, where the preposition *huper* is used as a preposition of substitution, just as it is in 1Co 15:3 of Christ in His substitution for us.

The Doctrine of “Hearing,” Phl 21

1. When Paul speaks of Philemon’s anticipated “*obedience*,” Phl 21, he uses the noun form of the verb *hupo + akouo*, which speaks of the act of hearing a command and obeying it.

2. It is interesting that faith is spoken of as a by-product of "*hearing the Word of God*," Rom 10:17.
3. It is in this line of thought that faith in Jesus Christ is spoken of by Paul as "*obedience to the faith*," Rom 1:5, Rom 15:18; Rom 16:19 and Rom 16:26; cf. 2Th 1:8; Heb 5:9.
4. This idea is implied by Jesus who often followed His teachings with the words, "*He that has an ear let him hear*," Mat 11:15; Mat 13:9, Mat 13:43; Luk 8:8, etc.
5. In the letters to the seven churches, it is evident that this "hearing" is dependant upon submission to the Spirit of God, Rev 2:7, Rev 2:11, Rev 2:17, Rev 2:29: Rev 3:6, Rev 3:13, Rev 3:22.
6. Jesus made it very clear that spiritual illumination is reserved for those who "*will to do His will*," Joh 7:17. Submission must precede instruction.
7. In the Beatitudes, Jesus summarized the truth this way, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*," Mat 5:6.