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God's Good News Story: The Church Alive & Growing

The Letter to Philemon

The Ties That Bind: Faith, Family, Forgiveness

Pt. 1: A Family Tied Together in Faith and Purpose

Led by Praise Team just before Offertory

- Blessed be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love.
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like that to that above.
- 2. Before our Father's throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one
Our comforts and our cares.

Text: John Fawcett. Music: Wendell Kimbrough

Today we move to the 2nd of Paul's 'Prison Epistles'... The Letter to Philemon. To be accurate we don't have a 100% positive knowledge on the exact order of the Four "*Prison Epistles*" (*Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians*). But I think we can logically deduce that Colossians and Philemon were written closely together because of the content, people involved and similar verses.

The overarching theme for The Letter to Philemon is
The Ties That Bind: Faith, Family, Forgiveness

Date: 60-62 ad/ce...Paul wrote this letter and his letter to the Colossians while in prison in Rome.

Background

The letter was sent to Colossae, probably around the same time as the Letter of Colossians. The Church there was led by Philemon who appears to have hosted a house church with Apphia and Archippus, both leaders in the local Christian community. It is likely that Paul sent Onesimus and Tychicus, who is named in Colossians 4:7–9 to bring from Rome both the Letter to the Colossians Church and this personal appeal letter to Philemon.

Purpose of the Letter:

Interestingly enough, Paul's choice of sending the letter with Onesimus was a bold move. That's because Onesimus had formerly been a slave/servant to Philemon. It is supposed that Onesimus stole some articles from Philemon in the past and ran away to Rome. Onesimus providentially came into contact with Paul who led him to faith and disciplined him. Paul's primary aim in sending this letter seems to be to intercede for Onesimus, appealing to Philemon to forgive his runaway slave and receive him not as a servant, but as a beloved brother in Christ. Under Roman law, Onesimus's theft and flight were punishable by severe penalties, even death.

Paul offers to repay any debt Onesimus owes and urges Philemon to welcome him “*as you would welcome me*” (v. 17), modeling the radical forgiveness and reconciliation found in the gospel. The letter is celebrated for its courtesy, tact, and generosity, serving as a profound example of Christian love, advocacy, and the transformative power of grace within the early church.

Philemon 1:1-7...¹ *This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy. I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker,*² *and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church that meets in your house.*³ *May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.*⁴ *I always thank my God when I pray for you, Philemon,*⁵ *because I keep hearing about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God’s people.*⁶ *And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ.*⁷ *Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God’s people.*

1. A FAMILY THAT GATHERS

Imagine with me for a moment: It’s a quiet evening in the city of Colossae. The sun is setting, casting golden light through the windows of a spacious home. Inside, the furniture has been pushed aside, and the aroma of bread and oil fills the air. People begin to arrive—men and women, young and old, some well-dressed, others in simple tunics. They greet each other with warm embraces and laughter, gathering not as strangers, but as family.

Let’s get the bio background on each of the family present:

Philemon

Philemon is a prominent Christian in Colossae, likely converted through Paul’s ministry, who hosts a church in his home. Paul addresses him as a beloved friend and fellow worker, highlighting their close spiritual bond. The letter’s central plea is for Philemon to forgive and welcome back Onesimus, his runaway slave, not just as a servant but as a brother in Christ. Paul appeals to Philemon’s faith and love, trusting he will act generously and reflect the gospel’s power of reconciliation.

Onesimus

Onesimus was a slave belonging to Philemon who fled, possibly after wrongdoing, and providentially encountered Paul while Paul was imprisoned (likely in Rome or Ephesus).

Through Paul's influence, Onesimus became a Christian and proved himself useful to Paul in ministry. Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon, urging that he be received not as a slave but as a beloved brother. Onesimus's story embodies the gospel's power to transform social relationships and personal identity.

Apphia

Apphia is greeted as “*our sister*” and is traditionally understood to be Philemon's wife, sharing in the leadership and hospitality of the house church. Paul's inclusion of Apphia in the letter suggests her significant role in the Christian community and the decision regarding Onesimus. Her mention highlights the importance of women in the early church and their partnership in ministry.

Archippus

Archippus is addressed as “our fellow soldier,” indicating his active role in ministry, possibly as Philemon and Apphia's son or as a leader in the Colossian church. Paul's greeting to Archippus affirms his commitment to the gospel and his partnership in the faith.

In Colossians, Archippus is exhorted to fulfill his ministry, suggesting he had pastoral responsibilities. His inclusion in Philemon's letter reflects the interconnectedness of the early Christian leadership

Now, let's go back in our mind and take a look into this church family gathering as they unfurl this precious letter from their Beloved Paul. They sit in anxious excitement to hear his words—words that will challenge, encourage, and unite them.

They also sit in a tense uneasiness as one of the ones who brought this letter is Onesimus, a familiar face but with a complicated story. They talk among themselves quietly saying ... ‘Wasn't he that slave in Elder Philemon's household, didn't we hear he had run away, carrying with him not just some stolen articles, but also the broken trust of a master’. Now, this slave, this servant stands among them, but not as a fugitive, but can it be, as Paul has written, now as a brother in Christ—one whom has been transformed by an encounter with Paul and the grace of God.

Can this be so? Paul is not physically present, and we have never actually met him, but he writes these things and he has as his witness the beloved brothers that we do know, love and respect—Timothy, Epaphras, Mark, Demas, and Luke—they are all mentioned in the letter, their prayers and greetings are like a seal of authenticity which weave together invisible threads of connection between distant city of Rome and our hearts here in Colossae.

Let's look at how we today on Broussard should ponder on this.

The miracle of the early church is this: people from every walk of life, every background, gathered together by something greater than themselves. Not by blood, not by status, but by the love of Christ—a family that gathers, united in faith and purpose.

As we gather here today, we join in that same story. You and I are part of that same Church Family—diverse, imperfect, but bound together by the same tie that held them: Faith in God and the love of Jesus Christ.

2. A FAITH THAT CONNECTS

As the church gathers in Philemon's home, you can sense something deeper than friendship in the room. These people are not all related by blood, nor do they share the same background or social standing. Some are wealthy, some are servants, some are leaders, and some are just beginning to find their place. Yet, as they look around, there's a warmth—a sense that they truly belong to one another.

What binds them together isn't family name or shared history. It's something far stronger: faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul, writing from prison, calls Philemon “our dear friend and fellow worker.” He refers to Onesimus, once a runaway slave, as “my very heart.”

These are not just polite words; they are the language of deep, spiritual connection—a bond forged by faith, not circumstance.

It's the same connection we sing about in that old hymn:

“Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.”

These words echo through the centuries, reminding us that the love of Christ creates a fellowship that is heavenly in its depth and beauty.

Paul puts it plainly in his letter to the Galatians 3:28:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ

Jesus.” In Christ, every barrier falls away. The things that once divided—race, status, gender—are replaced by a new identity and a new family.

Over the past 19 years I have seen many a man and woman come to our church, feeling like an outsider. Not really knowing anyone, and I'm sure wondering if their past could truly be forgiven and would they ever fit in. But time after time I have seen you, The Church in Broussard, welcome them, pray for them, and invite them into our family. We need to continue and improve as a church family doesn't define people by their past, but with a loving, wise & caring faith let's reach and bring them into the family of God, no matter where we've come from.

AMEN? Today, I challenge us all—not just to sit in the same room, but to truly connect. To pray for one another, to share our joys and burdens, to live out the “one another” commands of Scripture.

Because in Christ, we are more than a gathering—we are a family, tied together by a faith that connects.

3. A PURPOSE THAT GROWS

So, one more time...Picture the church not as a building or a static group, but as a living, growing family. In Philemon’s home, you can almost hear the laughter of children, the quiet prayers of elders, and the conversations that linger long after the meal is finished. This family isn’t content to simply exist—they are alive, growing, and reaching out.

Paul, writing from his prison cell, is deeply thankful for what he hears about this church. He says in **Philemon 4-5**... *“I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all the saints and your faith in the Lord Jesus.”* Paul’s gratitude isn’t just for Philemon’s personal faith, but for the way that faith overflows—refreshing and encouraging everyone around him. This is a family with a purpose: to nurture each other, to support one another, and to welcome others into the circle of God’s love.

Think of a tree planted by streams of water. Its roots are intertwined with those of other trees, drawing

strength from the same source. Its branches stretch wide, providing shade and shelter. When one branch bears fruit, the whole tree is nourished.

In the same way, when we are tied together in faith, our purpose is not just to survive, but to thrive—and to help others grow.

Let’s be a Church Family with a growing purpose: every member is needed, every act of love matters, and together we become a living testimony to God’s goodness.

I invite you to consider: How can you help our church family grow? Who can you encourage, serve, or invite in? Maybe it’s a phone call, a prayer, or a simple act of kindness. Remember, you are not just part of a crowd—you are a vital member of a family that is alive and growing.

We are a family that gathers—not because we look the same or come from the same place, but because Christ has drawn us together around His table, making strangers into siblings and outcasts into kin. We are connected by a faith that runs deeper than blood, a tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, breaking down every barrier and building bridges where the world draws lines. And we are called to a purpose that grows—roots intertwined, branches reaching, each of us needed, each of us bearing fruit, so that the church is not just alive, but thriving, not just surviving, but overflowing with grace.

This is who we are: a family, a faith, a purpose—
alive and growing in the story God is still writing
through us.

As we close, let's return to the words of our hymn:
Let's sing and reflect on the unity and purpose God
gives His family and commit ourselves to being a
church that is truly alive and growing.

*Blessed be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love...
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like that to that above.*

Invitation:

Christians it is a time to call us to be a family of faith
and purpose that graciously reaches out and brings
others into the Family of God

Non-Believers: This is a call to come and join the
Family of God, turn away from sin, accept Jesus as
Savior and Lord and be born-again.