*DAILY DEVOTIONS*

May 23 - 28

*Letters of Paul*

**Monday, May 23 Philemon 1-3**

*“From Paul, a prisoner”*

Paul begins his appeal to Philemon by identifying himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, the only time this description appears in a salutation in Paul’s letters. He may simply want to inform Philemon of his personal situation. But he may also wish to engage his readers’ sympathy. His prisoner’s chains come up frequently in the letter, and the image of a dear friend shackled for the cause of Christ would have an emotional effect.

Perhaps the primary reason for identifying himself as a prisoner is to remove any power issues before he makes his request of Philemon with respect to the slave Onesimus. Luther argued that Paul “empties himself of his right to compel Philemon to waive his rights.” He diminishes his own status and will boost Philemon’s before asking something that can threaten his friend’s prestige in the community at large. As a prisoner, Paul shares the social alienation of the slave, and chains were also something used to keep would-be runaway slaves from escaping. He therefore appeals to Philemon as a friend in distressed circumstances, not as his spiritual director.

*We possess certain rights, Lord, but we lay them down for your sake. Amen.*

**Tuesday, May 24 Philemon 4-7**

*“Thanksgiving for Philemon”*

Paul must have spent a significant amount of time in prayer each day, giving thanks for and interceding on behalf of all his churches, coworkers, and their benefactors. He tells Philemon how he prays for him and lets him know the basis of his thanksgiving to God for him. Paul is not trying to soften up Philemon with praise before broaching the topic of Onesimus’ status. He normally offers congratulatory thanksgiving in his letters. His tribute to Philemon for his faith and love is identical to his praise of the Colossians (Col. 1:4).

Several social factors press on Philemon that might sway his decision in a direction away from what Paul is asking of him. He will lose face in the community if he capitulates to a runaway slave. Philemon may have been a figure of some status in the wider society, and he will forfeit that standing if he becomes known as someone soft on slavery. He must also bear the financial cost of freeing a slave and cope with possibly throwing his whole household into an uproar by his extreme leniency. The right decision requires an extraordinary exercise of faith and love.

*Doing the right thing, Lord, can be very costly. Amen.*

**Wednesday, May 25 Philemon 8-12**

*“I am boldly asking a favor of you”*

“Boldness” refers to the right to speak freely, frankly, and fearlessly, which any Christian may do. Paul’s right to speak with candor does not derive from his apostolic office. Any Christian, apostle or not, bishop or not, can tell a brother or sister in Christ to do what they ought to do. Such people may obey out of deference to the authority of the one who speaks boldly or out of fear of punishment (loss of face or position) for failing to comply. Paul would rather that Christians do what is good out of faith and love because they know it is the Christian thing to do.

Paul wants his friend to do what is right but will not command, because he wants Philemon to draw his own conclusions and to make his own decision about what is fitting in Christ to do. Paul understands that interfering directly in a master’s relationship with his slave is as impertinent as someone today ordering about another’s children or meddling in how they should be disciplined. Most parents do not appreciate unsolicited advice on how they ought to raise or discipline their children; masters in the ancient world did not want to be told what to do with their slaves.

*Thank you for those in my life, Lord, who remind me to do what is right. Amen.*

*DAILY DEVOTIONS*

May 23 - 28

*Letters of Paul*

**Thursday, May 26 Philemon 13-16**

*“Receive Onesimus as a brother”*

Paul continues to speak with reserve as he moves into his actual request. The passive voice, “you lost Onesimus for a little while,” is a euphemism for Onesimus’ illegal flight. Behind the use of the passive voice is the presumption that God has been active and involved in the case all along, so that the running away, as well as the service that Onesimus has been to Paul and the now difficult but critical decision that Philemon must make about what to do about Onesimus’ return, is all within the scope of God’s active work in each of their lives.

Philemon has lost a slave for a brief time so that he can gain him back forever as a brother. By receiving him back as a fellow Christian, Philemon does so in the knowledge that regardless of what he does or does not do with Onesimus, he and Onesimus will be together in eternity. In the flesh, Onesimus remains legally Philemon’s slave; but spiritually, he should be regarded and treated as much more – as a brother. In other words, Paul affirms that Onesimus, the man, is far more than a piece of property. He is Philemon’s equal before the Lord.

*In you, Lord, there is neither slave nor free, for we are all one in Christ. Amen.*

**Friday, May 27 Philemon 17-18**

*“Paul’s pledge”*

Verse 17 is the letter’s climax: “Welcome him as you would welcome me.” Paul not only intercedes for Onesimus but identifies with him. Onesimus, the runaway slave, returns home as Paul’s apostolic representative. We would hardly expect Philemon to treat Paul as a slave, but we would also hardly expect him to receive Onesimus as Paul’s ambassador and clad in his honor. But Paul asks Philemon to receive his slave not only as a brother but as he would his partner.

Again, Paul does not try to throw his apostolic weight around but makes his request as a partner and laces it with accounting terminology: “if he owes,” “charge it to me,” “I will pay.” Paul tries to forestall any possible unwillingness to receive Onesimus back with open arms by incurring a debt of honor to make restitution for any wrong committed by Onesimus. Paul knows very well that Onesimus has wronged his master and may perhaps owe him a considerable sum of money, stolen when he made his escape, so this pledge is not simply rhetorical appeal merely for the sake of argument.

*We welcome one another, Lord, as we would welcome you. Amen.*

**Saturday, May 28 Philemon 19-25**

*“Conclusion”*

Since the letter is being read aloud to the church (see verse 2), it is necessary for Paul to notify the listeners, who cannot see the change in handwriting, that he has taken the stylus to write out his promissory note. This IOU is a legal and business-like guarantee that expresses Paul’s willingness to bear the cost of Onesimus’ return. Paul goes on to subtly remind Philemon of the basis of their relationship. He suddenly converts Philemon from a creditor, whose debt will be paid in full, to a debtor, who cannot possible repay the price of his life.

Friendship in the ancient world was a reciprocal relationship that continued when friends exchanged gifts, services, and benefits. Philemon’s positive response will be a benefit to Paul that will refresh his heart. He describes the benefit, however, as “in the Lord.” Simply readmitting Onesimus as a slave would provide no real benefit in the Lord to Paul. The apostle will truly have a benefit in the Lord only if Onesimus is free to serve the gospel, not just his master.

*We owe you our lives, Lord, a debt we can never repay. Amen.*