NOTES ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

Paul's Epistle to

Philemon

Gene Cunningham

As Jesus Christ prepared to send the disciples for the first time throughout Israel with His message, He included in their instructions this admonition: *"Freely you have received, freely give"* (Matthew 10:8). This six-word summary of grace explains the financial policy of the publications and audio ministries of Basic Training. All audio materials and publications are provided **without charge** to anyone who requests them. For a list of available material, visit our website.



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"Endure hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."
(2 Timothy 2:3)

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Preface

While I was teaching in Myanmar/Burma in March 2019, some of my long-term, advanced students suggested that I go through the New Testament and provide basic notes, which they could then be able to print as a study Bible. They specifically asked that I focus on issues that are a major area of confusion in the churches where they work. Therefore, the following commentary will focus on these five primary areas:

1. What is the nature of God's grace and how is it received?
2. What is God's plan of salvation and the clear message of the Gospel?
3. What is the Bible's teaching on the security and assurance of the believer?
4. How is the believer to live the Christian life and be effective in witness/service?
5. What does prophecy say about the last days and the order of end-times events?

Practical Suggestions

These notes are purposely brief in nature. This work is not intended to be a complete commentary. All through the work I have kept in mind those who live in remote areas of our world, who labor to both understand and to teach others the Word of God. They do not have access to Bible school or seminary training. Neither are they able to afford the vast array of books available to pastors and teachers who live in more advanced countries.

I encourage all who utilize these notes to study them with an open Bible. Pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–21) as you study. Read the context of the passage carefully. Look up and compare the references that are provided. Above all, let the Word of God, and not these notes, guide your insight into God's Word. As I always tell my students: "Never take my word for anything; search the Scriptures and prove what is true" (Acts 17:10–12; 1 John 4:1)

Before you begin any study of the Word of God, take a few moments to make sure that you are in fellowship with God, filled by means of the Holy Spirit. Comprehension, like everything else in the Christian life, is a gift that can be appropriated only by faith. The Bible clearly lays out three requirements that must be met before we can expect to understand God's Word. All three require nothing from us but faith.

1. *We must be believers in Jesus Christ* (John 3:16).
   It is impossible for unbelievers to understand the Word of God (1 Cor. 2:14). Jesus declared to the leading religious leader of His day that apart from spiritual birth, man is blind to the things of God. *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit ... You must be born again"* (John 3:6–7).

2. *We must be filled by means of the Spirit* (1 Corinthians 2:12).
   Only the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God. As believers, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but when we sin, we break fellowship with God and cease to function in the power of the Spirit. When we confess our sins, God is always faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). The moment we confess, we are restored to fellowship and are again under the control of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, able to learn.

3. *We must approach in faith* (Hebrews 11:6).
   Only when we approach in humility, with child-like faith, will the Word of God make sense to us (Matt. 18:4; Heb. 11:3). Where we find Scripture at odds with our ideas or our desires, we must submit to the authority of the Word. Intimacy, understanding, and power are reserved for those who are willing to do God's will (John 7:17).

DEDICATION

"This will be written for the generation to come,
that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord."
Psalm 102:18

While it is my hope and prayer that these notes will be helpful to all current students of the Word of God, I send them forth with a special dedication to the 144,000 Jewish evangelists who are yet to come on the scene of world history (Rev. 7:1–8). They will be the heroes of the faith in the coming time of Tribulation following the soon coming Rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

To these brothers and sisters of the future, I want you to know you have been thought of, prayed for, and loved—before you even knew your mission. We of the Church Age salute you for the sufferings you will endure and the victories you will win. We bid you to be strong in the Lord, for your victory is sure in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the labor put into these notes by many hands and through many prayers, be a help to you as you boldly proclaim the name of Jesus Christ in a dark and dangerous time!

INTRODUCTION

The little personal letter that we know as Philemon is one of the great prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). Even though he was in a Roman prison (Acts 28:16, 30–31), Paul continued to be more than a conqueror (Rom. 8:37) over the circumstances which put an end to his missionary travels.

The four epistles, which he wrote to the churches from prison, are the most elegant and sublime of all his letters. Here, in the little drama of Philemon, we see the great truths of the other three epistles brought to light and life in the rough and tumble Roman world. The runaway slave, Onesimus, led to faith in Christ by Paul, is sent back to his master, Philemon. How or why Onesimus fled, we are not told. And how in the bustling capitol city of Rome he came into contact with Paul in prison, is not explained. In this letter, we are told what matters. Paul is a picture of Christ, who came *"to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke 19:10). Onesimus is a picture of every sinner: willful, guilty, and in need of the grace and forgiveness of God. Philemon is the picture of Christian virtue—a man of faith, love, and generosity to others. He was terribly wronged and rightfully able to inflict vengeance, yet Paul, knowing his true character, urges him to forgive and receive back his runaway slave as a beloved brother in Christ.

All the great doctrines of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians come into play in this little story. There are lessons in this letter for every husband, every wife, every child. There are also spiritual standards set for every local church, in dealing with sin and shame, and their consequences. There are also sure guidelines that are profitable for every problem that plagues society, reminding us that the solution to all social ills is the message of the Gospel, and the life-transforming power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

PAUL'S EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

Paul's Greeting
Philemon 1–3

v. 1 ***"Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ."*** Paul reveals here that if we live in fellowship and obedience to Jesus Christ, no evil can touch us but by divine permission. He sees that somehow God has designed his imprisonment for the greater fulfillment of His plan. It is by surrender to the will of God that His purpose is revealed (Rom. 12:1–2). Much of that plan is revealed in the prison epistles, and in the events of this little epistle. Paul mentions his prison circumstance five times (vv. 1, 9, 13, 22, 23). ***"To Philemon."*** He is the one who Paul calls a ***"beloved … fellow laborer."*** There was a strong bond of love and respect between these two. Philemon apparently lived in either Colossae or Laodicea, which were near each other.

v. 2 ***"To the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house."*** No doubt Apphia is the wife of Philemon; and Archippus, is most likely their son and the pastor of the church that met in their house (Col. 4:17). The only other time Paul uses the term ***"fellow-soldier"*** is of Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25. He may be the ***"Epaphras"*** mentioned in Colossians 1:7 and 4:12. It is interesting that while Paul is writing to Philemon on a personal matter, he includes his family and the church in this letter. The defection of Onesimus had affected them all, and all would need to heed Paul's instructions in receiving him back.

v. 3 ***"Grace to you and peace."*** This is Paul's typical greeting, combining the Greek greeting, *"Grace"* (*Charis*) with the Hebrew greeting, *"Peace"* (*Shalom*/*Eirene*). The order is important, and by this greeting, Paul does three things:

1. He establishes that unless grace is received, there can be no peace.
2. He brings both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures together into one.
3. Whereas Paul's gospel was always *"for the Jew first and also for the Greek"* (Rom. 1:16), in this salutation, he places the Gentile greeting first.

"From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Though this greeting comes through Paul, it is directly from God. It expresses His will and plan for all who come to Him by faith.

Philemon: A Man of Christian Virtue
Philemon 4–7

v. 4 ***"I thank my God … in my prayers."*** As Paul reveals the content of his prayers, we are given insight into the kind of man Philemon was.

v. 5 ***"Love and faith"*** were qualities that marked Philemon as a mature and fruitful believer (Gal. 5:22–23; see 1 Cor. 13:4–8a). Genuine faith works through love (Gal. 5:6), by the power of the Spirit (Zech. 4:6; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:18). ***"Toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints."*** We serve our Lord by serving His people (Mark 10:45; 1 John 3:10, 16, 23).

v. 6 ***"That the sharing of your faith."*** The word *"sharing"* here means "fellowship," in the sense of active participation. ***"May become effective."*** Paul prays that he will become even more effective in his faith and love. He may even be preparing Philemon for his request on behalf of Onesimus. ***"Every good thing which is in you in Christ."*** By the study of God's Word, we learn who we are in Christ (Eph. 2:4–7). By facing tests and trials, we come to realize who Christ is in us (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–21; Col. 1:27–28). God was at work in the life of Philemon (Phil. 2:13).

v. 7 ***"We have great joy and consolation in your love."*** Paul, Timothy, and his prison team were greatly encouraged to hear of Philemon's ministry to other believers. ***"The hearts of the saints have been refreshed***

by you." The word *"refreshed"* means to "give rest, comfort, relaxation." It carries the idea of the lifting of burdens, and replacing them with comfort. There is a great ministry that each believer can fulfill in this area (v. 20, Rom. 15:32; 1 Cor. 16:18; 2 Cor. 7:13; 2 Tim. 1:16).

What stands out about Philemon in these few verses is the picture of a mature and faithful servant of the Lord Jesus Christ:

1. He had a loving, faithful, and effective family.
2. He opened his home to the church. Obviously, a prosperous man, he would have welcomed the poor, the crippled, and the outcasts into his home.
3. His life and conduct were marked by faith, love, and service to others.
4. His reputation was such that Paul, in prison in Rome, heard reports of his faithfulness and effectiveness.
5. He was no doubt blessed by God because he was such a blessing to others.

Onesimus: The Sinner/Slave Now a Brother in Christ
Philemon 8–16

v. 8–9 ***"I might be very bold in Christ to command you."*** Paul was an apostle, and his command would have the weight of Christ's command. ***"Yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you."*** Paul desires that Philemon respond voluntarily, by love and not by demand (2 Cor. 5:14). Coerced obedience does not rise to the level of obedience by loving surrender. ***"As Paul, the aged … a prisoner of Jesus Christ."*** Paul has endured years of abuse and sufferings (2 Cor. 4:7–15; 6:4–10; 11:23–33; 2 Tim. 3:11).

v. 10 ***"I appeal … for my son Onesimus."*** Somehow this runaway slave had come into contact with Paul in Rome, and Paul led him to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. ***"Whom I have begotten while in my chains."*** Paul expresses the same love and concern for Onesimus that he often expressed for his faithful son Timothy (1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1).

v. 11 ***"Who once was unprofitable … but now is profitable to you and to me."*** Paul is making a play on words here. "Onesimus" in Greek means "profitable" or "useful." Though he once failed to live up to his name, now he is *"profitable"* both in name and in his new nature (1 Cor. 6:9–11; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:1–7).

v. 12 ***"I am sending him back."*** It must be understood that according to Roman law, a slave was the property of his master. There were an estimated 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. Paul's actions here do not imply that he condoned slavery. In fact, Christianity effectively put an end to slavery, but did so not by revolt, which would have been disastrous in the early church, making them open to charges of treason against Rome. Rather, Paul's solution was for masters to treat slaves as Christ treated them, and for slaves to serve their masters as they did Christ (1 Cor. 7:21–24; Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10). ***"You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart."*** Paul's love for Onesimus could not help but affect Philemon, who loved Paul. The phrase "sending back" was used in the Roman court of law for a case that was referred for legal decision. It is worth considering that when this letter was handed to Philemon, Onesimus, who accompanied Tychicus back to Colossae, was probably standing nearby (Col. 4:7–9).

v. 13–14 ***"Whom I wished to keep with me … But without your consent I wanted to do nothing."*** Notice how Paul puts the higher desire, to seek Philemon's consent, over his own personal desire. ***"That on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains."*** Onesimus could have been a great helper to Paul in prison. Remember that Paul was under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30–31). Onesimus could have acted as a messenger, could have gone out to buy supplies, and in many ways, could have been a comfort and help to Paul. Yet, Paul takes the sacrificial way—as was right in the Lord. ***"That your good deed might not be by compulsion … but voluntary."*** Later in v. 21, when Paul says that he believes Philemon will do even more than he asks, I am inclined to believe that Philemon gave Onesimus his freedom and sent him back to Paul.

v. 15 ***"Perhaps he departed … for this purpose."*** Here, Paul is looking at the hand of providence—God working behind the scenes to accomplish His will. The word *"departed"* means to "escape by flight," and the passive voice of the verb indicates God as the active agent of his escape. ***"That you might receive him forever."*** The eternal salvation of Onesimus is of inestimable value, both to Paul and to Philemon.

v. 16 ***"More than a slave—a beloved brother."*** The new birth transforms every human relationship. ***"Especially to me but how much more to you."*** In the miracle of regeneration, Paul has now gained a new son in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4), and Philemon had gained a new brother. The unity of the Body of Christ is based on the equal standing of every believer in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 4:1–6; 6:8; Col. 3:10–11).

Paul: A Reflection of the Lord Jesus Christ
Philemon 17–22

In this section, we see one of the greatest examples of the great foundational doctrines of the Christian faith made practical in daily life. Paul requests that Philemon receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself. Thus, Jesus Christ represents us before the Father as *"accepted in the beloved"* (Eph. 1:6). At the same time, Paul offered to pay any debt Onesimus had incurred. This is a picture of our Lord voluntarily paying our debt of sin on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21).

v. 17 ***"Receive him as you would me."*** Since Paul later (v. 22) requests that a guest room be prepared for him, is it possible that Onesimus would be placed in that room? In the Upper Room Jesus prays to the Father for each of us to be received as one with Christ (John 17:21).

v. 18 ***"But if he … owes anything, put that on my account."*** This is a picture of Jesus Christ taking our debt upon Himself. God the Father imputed our sins to Christ on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21), so that we might receive His own righteousness (Rom. 4:3, 5). This type of written debt is called *"the handwriting against us"* (Col. 2:14). It meant a written bill of debt that must be paid.

v. 19 ***"I, Paul, am writing with my own hand."*** Paul is not using a secretary to write because he wants Philemon to know his own hand is signing the debt for Onesimus. ***"I will repay."*** How amazing it is that Paul, a poor missionary, offers to pay the debt of Onesimus to his wealthy owner! ***"You owe me even your own self besides."*** Paul had led Philemon to faith in Christ, and reminds him that he also is indebted to Paul for bringing him to eternal life.

v. 20 ***"Let me have joy from you in the Lord."*** This is another phrase used in the ancient business world, "Let me gain some profit from you." ***"Refresh my heart in the Lord."*** According to Paul, one of the great ministries we all can engage in, is the ministry of refreshment (v. 7; Rom. 15:32; 1 Cor. 16:18; 2 Cor. 7:13; 2 Tim. 1:16).

v. 21 ***"Having confidence … that you will do even more than I say."*** This verse suggests that besides forgiving and receiving Onesimus back, Philemon might go beyond and give him his freedom. Fifty years later, Ignatius, on his way to martyrdom in Rome, writes a letter to the bishop of Ephesus, whose name was Onesimus. And he commends that pastor for being "profitable to Christ." Who knows what secrets of history may one day be revealed to us?

v. 22 ***"Meanwhile, prepare a guest room for me."*** Perhaps this is a guest room that Onesimus would keep ready for Paul's coming? ***"I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you."*** The word *"granted"* means "to be given by grace." Paul anticipates that his release may be near, due to the prayers of God's people. Again, as in v. 15, Paul sees God as the invisible mover in the events of men.

Farewell Greetings
Philemon 23–25

The Apostle Paul never saw himself as a "one man show." He was but a member of the Body, and he always recognized those who were his co-workers (Romans 16).

v. 23 ***"Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus."*** Epaphras was a minister and messenger of the Colossian church (Col. 1:7; 4:12), possibly the very one that met in the home of Philemon. It may be that Archippus (v.2) took over the ministry when Epaphras was imprisoned.

v. 24 ***"Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers."*** Here, we see that Paul and Mark are now reconciled (Acts 13:13, called *"John"* here; 15:36–41; 2 Tim. 4:11). Tragically, Demas will later desert Paul out of love for the world (2 Tim. 4:10). Each of us is writing a story with our lives by the choices we make every day. Let us strive to have a good ending to our story.

v. 25 ***"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."*** The letter begins and ends with the offer and provision of the grace of God (Heb. 4:16). It is always available to us, but we must receive it by faith in Jesus (God's Word—John 1:14) and through His Spirit (Col. 2:6). The grace of the Living Word is conveyed to us through His written Word. His Grace is always sufficient for us (2 Cor. 12:9–10) if we will only rely on it. The spirit that is full of grace and truth is invincible!

CONCLUSION

This little epistle is a summary of how all the doctrines in the other prison epistles should be put into practice in the events of daily life. Paul illustrates the character and love of Christ, first, by leading Onesimus to faith in Christ and sending him back to face the consequences of his actions. Secondly, he exhorts Philemon to receive him as a brother and forgive his betrayal of both theft and flight.

By obeying the instructions of the Apostle Paul, both Onesimus and Philemon will demonstrate how the Word of God conveys to us both the "grace and truth" that is the fullness of the character of Christ (John 1:14).

In the example of the lives of these three, as well as the others mentioned (vv. 2, 23–24), we are enabled to see the practical outworking of God's Word in matters of daily life. Whether we are a minister of the Gospel, like Paul, or a wealthy and influential Christian (Philemon), or a poor sinner who has just come to faith in Christ (Onesimus), we are called to *"proclaim the praises of Him who called* [us] *out of darkness into His marvelous light"* (1 Pet. 2:9).