I WILL PAY IT BACK

Philemon 1-24

Key Verse: 19a

“I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back…”

Philemon is one of Paul’s prison epistles along with Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, written to an individual. In this letter Paul shows how Onesimus who had run away from his master Philemon has been changed in Christ and asks Philemon to forgive and welcome him, not as a slave but a brother in the Lord Jesus. This would be sensational in that culture of Roman world, for according to some historians there were about 60 million salves in the Roman world and slavery was an essential part of the ancient world. This epistle is just a very short story with no apparent doctrine or theology. Yet it conveys a core of Christianity, forgiveness, which is a fundamental need of mankind, and which involves reception, restoration and restitution. We cannot fully fathom the depth of this letter. In this epistle we see in Paul the likeness of Christ, who died a substitutionary death for the forgiveness of man’s sin. This epistle ends with the benediction, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” In this study may God lead us to go deeper into the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the opening introduction, Paul says of himself, a prisoner of Christ Jesus. This is an unusual introduction, quite different from his usual ones in other epistles, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus.” He was a prisoner confiscated in a Roman prison. At this point his life landed at the prison in his faithfulness to Christ Jesus. With this I.D. Paul is writing to Philemon, his beloved fellow worker, to Apphia probably his wife, to Archipus, a fellow soldier, possibly his son, and to the church that meets in the home of Philemon, Colossian church. Philemon’s family was a wonderfully blessed family of the Lord. And the opening the words of Paul in this letter would be very appealing to Philemon the main recipient. He greets with standard greeting, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace is the source of salvation and peace is its result.

Then comes Paul’s thanksgiving and prayer in verses 4-7: “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. You love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.” What a compliment! Philemon was a man of faith and a man of love. His faith in the Lord and his love for all the saints were well known. His faith was expressed through love. His life of faith and love refreshed the hearts of the saints, and so Paul had great joy and encouragement. Christian life is more than keeping one’s faith further going through sharing the faith, which enriches our Christian life. The sharing or fellowship of one’s faith expressed through love is really beautiful. Paul prays for its effectiveness with a full knowledge and understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Philemon was a good Christian master. In this prayer and compliment for Philemon Paul shows that Philemon is the one who has the characteristics of a forgiver.

Now we get into the main part of this letter. Paul says in verse 8, “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love.” For certain churches Paul had to exercise his apostolic authority for building them up, not for tearing down. However, for Philemon in the Colossian church meeting at his house Paul did not need to do so, because there was a beautiful love relationship between the two. So he appeals on the basis of love.

Paul continues in verses 9 and 10, “I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.” Paul appeals as an old man and as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. How appealing it is! Hard to reject. Paul’s appealing was for the sake of Onesimus. At this point we can think of Onesimus further. He was a nonbelieving slave. He had run away, stealing money, or something of value, from Philemon his master to fund his escape. Such an act was a grievous and serious offense, with severe punishment attached, even death. If slaves were found, they were branded with an “F” *fugitivas*, and they were tortured, and some were even crucified. Running away was not tolerated, because people had valued investment in slaves, and slaves had great responsibility. Anyway, he ran to Rome and miraculous met Paul, which forever changed his life. At that time not all of Paul’s confinement was in a dungeon; sometimes in a house with some freedoms where people could come and go. At the encountering of Paul, Onesimus undoubtedly heard the gospel of Christ Jesus. And surely through Paul’s shepherding with tremendous effort he was transformed in Christ Jesus. Onesimus became a new creation in Christ. Paul mentioned two times the sonship of Onesimus to him, saying, “for my son Onesimus, who became my son.” Paul was sure that Onesimus was his spiritual son, like Timothy and Titus. A former slave became a spiritual son of Paul, a matchless apostle of Christ in history. According to a tradition he became a pastor of Ephesian church. No one can limit the changing power in Christ Jesus.

Paul says continually in verse 11, “Formerly he was useless, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.” This is a play on words. Onesimus means “useful.” Onesimus is a very common slave name. Maybe good slaves were just called useful, and bad ones were called useless. It’s almost a nickname rather than a given name. And nobody cared about the family of a slave anyway.

Onesimus, meaning “useful” indicates, perhaps, something of the fact that he was a useful slave, but he became useless. Then after the transformation in Christ Jesus he has become useful, truly useful, Paul says, “both to you and to me”, meaning useful to those who are related to him. He is totally a new person, now living up to his name. His being useful is not from a pragmatic sense, but before God, offering timely help at each time like a ready, humble servant, for Christ’s kingdom work. In that sense God wants each of us to be useful in serving our Lord Jesus Christ.

Until now it was a pleasant part to hear. Now there is a painful part. Paul says in verse 12, “I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.” When Paul says, “who is my very heart”, how precious Onesimus has become to Paul! Who can send his or her own heart to someone? It must have been very difficult to Paul also. In sending Onesimus, he was literally sending his heart. He says, “I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could have your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.” Keeping one’s very heart with him itself would be a great comfort and joy. Again, Onesimus was useful and so a very necessary person to Paul even taking the place of Philemon. How effect and beneficial Onesimus’ staying in Rome could have been to Paul, who was in his imprisonment state!

Paul continues in verse 14, “But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do will be spontaneous/voluntary and not forced.” Yet, at this situation Paul knew that he had to send back Onesimus to Philemon his master to resolve an unsolved issue between the two. Onesimus’ being transformed in Christ Jesus and becoming useful was one thing; the relationship being restored with his former master was another. Onesimus was ready to be sent back. But how would Philemon respond was a good question. There’s some risk in this, because Onesimus was due punishment. But Paul decides to send Onesimus with a letter asking Philemon to forgive him.

Paul further says in verse 15, “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.” What a faith in the providence of God! What Onesimus did was evil. But God intended it for good. If Onesimus had not run away, he could have remained just a good slave. But through his evil deed, God worked out for good, something wonderful that Onesimus would become a dear brother to Philemon forever; in other translations “have him back for good” is “have him back forever.” It does not necessarily mean that Onesimus would be emancipated from his slave state. An important thing is as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:20-22, “Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Where you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freeman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called in Christ’s slave.” It is also written in Colossians 3:11, “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, salve or free, but Christ is all, and is in call.” All are equal in Christ. Philemon was to regard Onesimus as a dear brother, and Onesimus was sure to obey his master as working for the Lord (Col 3:22-23). Paul continues here in verse 16, “He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord”, that is both in the flesh and in the Lord. Regardless of his slave status Philemon would have Onesimus back as a dear brother forever in the providence of God. Paul doesn’t mitigate the guilt of Onesimus, Typically, what Onesimus had done would have generated irreparable damage to the trust of Philemon. But where God is at work, all that goes away in the providence of God. How can we fathom the providence of God. God wants us to have faith in his profound providence amid evilness or failures of men.

Then Paul says in verse 17, “So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.” “Welcome him” “accept hm” or “receive him” is Paul’s straightforward appeal to Paul. This could be the end of the story. But Paul goes further, “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back.” I think this statement makes Philemon so profound. It is a clear law of God that restitution had to be made. For example it is written in Exodus 22:1-4, “If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep…A thief must certainly make restitution…If the stolen animal is found alive in his possession—whether ox or donkey or sheep—he must pay back double.” Stolen good had to be paid back even double, fourfold, or fivefold. Restitution is always the final component of forgiveness. Justice demanded restitution, and deserved full restitution. But a considerable money or valuable goods Onesimus had stolen was used up and gone, and he was unable to pack it back. Totally impossible. Paul wrote, “Charge it to me; I will pay it back.” Paul was very serious writing this part with his own hand. That’s his signature on his promise. He gives a personal signature. It’s a way of signing a blank check for Philemon, and he can fill it in. Whatever Onesimus owed, Paul would pay. Whether he was rich enough to pay back the money, we don’t know. Yet, Paul made it clear that he would pay it back. We see in Paul the sacrificial sprit of Christ.

Again, restitution is a very important concept in the Bible. There are five offerings that had to be made for sinners to come to God written in Leviticus: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering. The guilt offering is related to restitution. First of all, Paul’s word, “I will back it back” reminds us of Jesus’ paying back all our debts to God through his own life. Because of our sin we made an unpayable debt to God, breaking God’s heart and destined for eternal punishment. According to a Palmist our sins were more than the hairs of our head (Psalm 40:12). But Christ Jesus paid it all through his own life. In the parable of a prodigal son, the son took his father’s inheritance and waisted it all in his wayward wild living. Returning to his father in repentance, the son knew he had to pay it back. The only way for him to pay it back was working in slavery for his father throughout his life: “I’ll go home and work for my father.” However, in his surprise, when he returned, his father welcomed him and embraced him conditionality without demanding anything, any payment. It is God’s welcoming repentant sinners and embracing each one unconditionally in Jesus Christ, who paid it all.

Also, in our Christian life, the idea of “I will pay it back” is very important. Before coming to Christ, we wasted our life, God’s given resources, time and many other things, specifically in our selfish life. We should live with the attitude of paying it back. So Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:15, “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer life for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” Selfish life was enough. Peter said in 1 Peter 4:3, “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.” Flesh, lustful, pleasure-seeking life is enough. Idolatry life is enough. Easygoing, lazy life is enough. Day-dreaming life in vain thinking is enough. Proud life is enough. Neglecting study is enough. Carefree life is enough. Worrying life is enough. Irresponsible life is enough. Disobedient life is enough. Unbelieving life is enough. Enough is enough. In short, selfish life is enough. Live a life that strives to pay it back. Live a life that compensates what has been wasted, that is to live for him who died for me and was raised again.

The idea of “I will pay it back” can also mean “Don’t take advantage of others” in our Christian life. A husband should not take advantage of a hardworking wife or vice versa. Each should take each one’s own cross. Be a good husband, a good wife, a good parent, a good child, a good employee, a good employer, or a good citizen. Be a blessing, not a burden, being helpful and useful to others.

When we think of our lives, we received much help from many people from birth until now. God put them in our lives, and we are what we are through such help, direct or indirect help. It leads us to have a debtor’s heart, which makes us thankful and humble striving to pay it back. A life with a debtor’s heart is really beautiful, while a life with a creditor’s heart is terrible. A debtor’s heart makes life easy, but a creditor’s heart makes life so difficult. One good way to pay it back is to pay it forward those who need my help in life. Samuel realized that he had a debt of prayer before God as a shepherd. In his farewell speech he said, “As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you.” (2 Samuel 12:23). And Paul said in Romans 1:14-15, “I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, bott to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.”

Thank God for guiding me and M. Sarah to visit Korea and have an opportunity to share the gospel with our family members, for we are debtors to them before God. Through the study of 2 Corinthians God gave me his words, “He died for all” (5:15) and “We are Christ’s ambassadors” (5:20). Knowing that Christ died for each of the family members, and I am a ambassador of Christ to reconcile each one to God, I was strengthened to preach the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection for them and pray for them. M. Sarah and I could see that those who were close to death or experienced the reality of death were humble to hear the gospel of Jesus earnestly and pray together from the heart. It is the case of Sarah’s first sister. She is 88 years old. When we visited her around seven years ago, he had gone through stomach surgery more than seven years ago and was living with one third of her stomach. Still, she survived, but could hardly hear others’ voice. People there thought that our visiting would be of no use. However, somehow, we went there. To anyone’s surprise she was so enthusiastic to hear the words of the gospel and responding with Amen to my prayer for her. Because of her great limitation of her hearing ability, M. Sarah wrote John 3:16 on a paper and gave it to her. She read it aloud and folded it and put in in her pocket, implying that it was so precious to her. I could believe that she would read it repeatedly each day and remember and believe the words at her deathbed. I felt that God somehow saves his chosen ones. M. Sarah’s brother is 84 years old, and he could not get up on his bed because of his illness. He has been a Christian for long years, but not his Christian life was questionable. This time, to our surprise he was really humble and asked us to pray for him. He also prayed in repentance with the hope of God’s eternal kingdom. God also worked in my sister. She is not that old, just two years older than I. Several days before our visiting it was not easy for me to talk with her even on the phone because of her hard life. When we visited, she did not come to the family gathering for dinner at first in our visiting. However, several days later some family member could meet with her. At this time she talked about her experience of the reality of death, our grand mother’s devout life in Christ and my missionary’s life, and the importance of having faith. When I delivered the gospel of message of Jesus’ cross for our sins, she listened and willingly prayed with us and showed her positive attitude to go to a church. M. Sarah’s 2nd sister is 80 years old. Her health is weak, yet she seems to manage her life well in her intellect with own will power and noble life. So she gently rejected the gospel. M. Sarah’s 3rd sister, 76 years old, is a devoted Christian and has been a good cowoker to us. She looked like a happiest woman in the world because of her love for Jesus, although she lives alone. She said that she wrote the whole Bible five times with her own writing and goes to church to pray getting up 3 am every day. My first brother’s family are dedicated to the church and are blessed in many ways, with material blessings also. He served us a lot. My mother is 91 years old, yet she is healthy, eating well and walking well. She is not desperate for salvation. I should pray more for her. I am a debtor especially to my 2nd bother, for he has been taking care of my mother living together for the last more than 30 years in my place. He had his pride because of his seemingly upright life. May God have mercy on me to pray more earnestly and persistently for their salvation. Thank you for your prayers for our visiting to Korea. Paul said in Acts 16:31, “…Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” I realize anew that we should pray for the salvation of our family members based on this promise of God and with a debtor’s heart.

Paul said in 19, “…I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.” As for Philemon, when he knows this grace of God through Paul, it would not be difficult to forgive and welcome Onesimus. One a occasion Jesus told a parable of the unmerciful servant. We are the ones whose billions of dollars of debts were canceled. When we know this, cancelling hundreds of dollars owned to us would not be difficult. It means that when we think of God’s forgiving grace through his Son Jesus Christ, we can forgive others, endlessly forgiving our spouses and friends, even enemies, having no grudge toward anyone. Whether the other part accepting my forgiving heart or not is not my concern. God will deal with it. As for my part, forgive. That’s an important and blessed Christian life.

Paul writes continually, “I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.” As for Philemon, the way to refresh Paul’s heart was to welcome Onesimus. In that way he would be a blessing.

In verse 21, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.” Forgiving and loving is God’s command.

In Verse 22, “And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.” How great it would be when Paul sees Philemon and Onesimus serving the Lord together with restored relationship in the house church of Philemon.

In verse 23, “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.” These five coworkers would be the witnesses to this beautiful work of God. Finally, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

We thank and praise God for Christ Jesus who paid all our debts with his own life. In this grace may we live with the spirit of “I will pay it back”, forgiving, compensating what has been wasted, being a blessing, having a debtor’s heart, trying to pay it forward to other needy people, especially serving our own Onesimus as Paul did.