

## THE FINAL FOUR

### Philemon

The most potent force in the universe is **GRACE**. In the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* we found that *peace* can mean one thing to one nation and the opposite to another. And religions disagree about grace. Some say it's *received*; others say it's *achieved*. Let's see if God can solve this conundrum for us.

**Let's read Romans 3:27-4:8 (p. 1018); 2 Corinthians 5:16-19 (p. 1048); and Ephesians 2:1-10 (p. 1062).**

**DISCUSS: In one phrase or sentence take a shot at defining grace.**

The Bible defines God in **3 words**: “**God is love**” (1 John 4:8). When our first parents, Adam and Eve, sinned, it broke God's heart. That's why, in just **2 words**, “**Jesus wept**” (John 11:35). Jesus' last utterance on the cross was only **1 word** in Greek: “**Tetelestai**” – meaning “It is finished, paid in full” (John 19:30).

Graham Cooke chimes in, "Grace is the empowering presence of God that enables you to become the person God sees when He looks at you. He sees you complete in Christ. He doesn't see anything wrong with you. He sees Jesus in you!"

Grace is the balm for one of life's deepest hurts, i.e., family altercations. It can be hard to forgive a wound inflicted by a loved one. That's precisely what this biblical booklet operates on surgically. With John 1, Romans 8 and Philippians 4, it's the last of four seminal portions of Scripture we're calling “The Final Four.”

Under the rubric of forgiveness this letter to Philemon summarizes all Paul taught about love, grace and acceptance. A paradise with no hatred, jealousy and hurt feelings will not be created by more laws, by social or genetic engineering, tolerance or more weaponry. Only the Gospel's power emancipates us from slavery to sin.

**Let's read this disarming, practical letter to Philemon (p. 1089).**

This wee letter was written in 62 A.D. while Paul, about age 60, was imprisoned in Rome for the first of two times. A few years earlier he'd stayed three years in the ancient Turkish city of Ephesus to form a “house church” of new Christ-followers, one being Philemon, a revered citizen of Colossae 100 miles away. Apparently his wife is Apphia, and Archippus is their son (Acts 19:1-10, p. 1002).

### “For Christ's Sake”

#### Philemon 1-3

Onesimus has wronged let's-call-him-Phil who some say is his older brother. Unable to repay him, he offers to be one of his Phil's slaves. In that day owners often “became family” with their slaves, but no one, certainly not Paul, condones slavery.

It's repulsive, inexcusable and incompatible with the level ground at the foot of the cross (**Galatians 3:1-5, 21-29, p. 1057**)

Of the Roman Empire's population of 120 million, half were slaves. Onesimus fled to Rome for sanctuary to disappear into its teeming masses. He may have sought Paul on purpose since Phil and Paul were friends. Or he may have chanced upon the great apostle who introduced him to the Savior and enlisted him to run errands.

**DISCUSS: In your life what seemed like a coincidence then, but not now?**

This pastoral post card to Phil inspired Englishman William Wilberforce to lobby the House of Commons for 45 years to abolish slavery in the British Empire. Along with his letter is the slave, sent by Paul to make restitution (**Colossians 4:7-18, p. 1073**). Paul urges Phil to treat the man who'd robbed him as an equal "in Christ."

All we think, say or do is for the sake of someone or something. Paul's in prison for "the sake" of Jesus Christ. What would people do if you opened every conversation with "I bring you grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ?"

**DISCUSS: For what's or whose sake do you engage with people and things?**

### **Proposition Prep Philemon 4-7**

Ramping up for his "big ask," Paul tells Philemon that he prays and thanks God for him and his well-known service for Christ's sake. Paul delights in being Phil's spiritual partner which brings them both to a deeper understanding of how God is at work in their lives (**Colossians 3:1-4, 23-24, p. 1072**).

**DISCUSS: What would it be like to have a partner in doing God's business?**

### **Unchained Melody Philemon 8-21**

As an apostle and God's first ambassador to the Gentiles, Paul could've shamed Phil into welcoming Onesimus, but that's not grace-in-action, so Paul couches his ask in love (**Romans 5:6-11, p. 1019**).

**DISCUSS: How could you create an environment where issues can be discussed openly, frankly and with mutual respect?**

"Onesimus" means *useful, helpful, profitable*. That could imply exploitation, but not to Paul who'd become his spiritual father (**1 Corinthians 4:14-17, p. 1033**).

Grace does not shove, even before an unbeliever turns to Christ (**Psalm 145:8-9, p. 570; Romans 2:1-5, p. 1016**). Wisely, Paul gives his “partner in the Gospel” time to learn to think Christianly and embrace Onesimus. (**Ephesians 6:5-9, p. 1065**).

**DISCUSS: Describe how grace could work in a situation you’re now facing.**

God’s plan incorporated Onesimus’ misdeed, his escape to Rome, his meeting Paul and his return to Colosse to face Phil. Not fun, but as Joseph consoled his jealous brothers who’d come to Egypt for life-giving grain, “You plotted evil against me, **BUT GOD** turned it into good in order to preserve the lives of many who are alive today because of what happened” (Genesis 50:20).

Paul beseeches Phil to do with Onesimus what Jesus has done for us. Love isn’t enough to fix our problem. Love has to pay the bill. While hanging from that cruel cross Jesus told His Father, “I know that sinner, (*your name goes here*), owes you a debt. I’m doing this for him, so when that stubborn, selfish clown whom I personally created is at last ready to surrender his will to Yours, remember, Dad, I paid for all of his sin by taking his place on this cross. So put all that He owes You on My account.” We were slaves of sin, but we’ve been set free!

### **“No Place Like Rome” Philemon 23-25**

Paul sends regards from his posse in Rome: Epaphras co-founded the Colossae church. Mark, Peter’s spiritual son, who wrote the Gospel of Mark, and who early on deserted Paul but was forgiven and rejoined him. Aristarchus, Paul’s mentee. Demas was the one who forsook Paul, opting rather to love “this present world” (2 Timothy 4:10). And Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.

Short on text but huge in impact, this letter warns us that if we don’t forgive others, bitterness takes root in our hearts and chokes off the “abundant life” God offers.

**DISCUSS: When and how has forgiveness been a struggle for you?**

Dr. Gary Chapman, author of *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*, comes to our rescue with his sequel, *The Five Languages of Apology: How to Experience Healing in All Your Relationships*. Chapman explains that asking for forgiveness is not just mumbling a hasty “Sorry.” We’re to say each one of these.

1. “I’m sorry.”
2. “I was wrong.”
3. “What can I do to make it right?”
4. “I’ll try not to do that again.”
5. “Will you forgive me?”

We're all fugitive sinners, needing God's grace, forgiveness and freedom. Do you think God the Father really answered His Son's prayer, "Father, forgive them because they don't know what they're doing?"

**Jesus was praying for guess-whom. Yoom, that's whom! Have you given Him thanks for what He did in order for you to be forgiven and adopted into God's forever family? If not, no better time than now.**

His Deal

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