

“Learning to be Content”
Philemon 1

The epistle to Philemon is a personal letter from the apostle Paul to Philemon and his household. God has wonderfully preserved this personal appeal and included it in the canon of Scripture. We are, as it were, looking over Paul’s shoulder and reading his mail, albeit 2,000 years later. Its initial purpose had been accomplished but it remains for our benefit. Inspired by God it is still applicable and relevant to believers today (2Tim. 3:16).

The letter begins with the author’s name because correspondence in ancient times was written on a scroll and often with no outside markings as to its place of origin. The person receiving a letter would want to know immediately who it was from as they began to unroll it. Paul identifies himself not as an apostle (Rom. 1:1; 1Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; etc.) as in his other letters, but as a prisoner. Yet Philemon would have known Paul as an apostle because Paul and/or his fellow servant in the Lord Epaphras (Col. 1:7; Phil. 23) had founded the church in Colossi where Philemon resided. The apostles (Greek *apostolos*, one sent) were few and unique (Matt. 10:2; Acts 8:1, 14:14, 1Cor. 12:28; 2Cor. 12:12; 1Thess. 1:1, 2:6). They were foremost in position (Eph. 4:11) and along with the prophets were the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:19-22, 3:5). Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone and *the* apostle and high priest (Heb. 3:1).

Paul describes himself with the common Greek word for prisoner (*desmios*, one bound). But he means more than an ordinary captive (Matt. 27:15-16; Acts 16:25, 28:16; Heb. 13:3). He was a prisoner for the purposes of Jesus Christ and the furtherance of His Kingdom (Eph. 3:1-13). Paul suffered greatly for His Master’s cause (Acts 9:16; 1Cor. 4:9-13; 2Cor. 4:4-11, 11:22-33). He had learned to be content when he abounded and when he was abased (Phil. 4:11-13). The Greek word translated learned is in the active voice, meaning it was up to Paul, no one else, to understand that God was working everything that happened to him for the good (Rom. 8:28). It was for Paul (and is for us) a lifetime process. We must learn that our sufficiency is not in ourselves, but from God (2Cor. 3:5; Phil. 4:19).

Paul also mentions Timothy as being with him. Timothy was a son in the Lord, a disciple, and himself a recipient of Paul’s letters (Acts 16:1, 17:14-15, 18:5, 19:22; 1Cor. 4:17, 16:10; Phil. 2:19; 1 & 2 Timothy).

