

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 25 April 2021. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced, and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Above a Servant

Philemon 16-25

In the last few weeks, we have been studying the letter of the Apostle Paul to his friend, Philemon, who lived in the city of Colossi. As you will remember, Philemon had a servant named Onesimus who had stolen from him, and had run away to the city of Rome. However, while Onesimus was in Rome, God caused him to cross paths with the Apostle Paul, who was a prisoner under house arrest. Paul led Onesimus to Christ; and after becoming a Christian, Onesimus realised that he needed to go back to his master in Colossi, and repay him for what he had stolen. Thus, Paul wrote a letter to Philemon, on Onesimus's behalf. In this letter, Paul beseeched his old friend Philemon to forgive Onesimus, and to receive him just as he would receive himself. Not only that, but he asked Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom, so that he could come back to Rome and assist him with the Gospel ministry.

Now, as we saw last week, this story is filled with striking pictures of salvation. The Holy Spirit arranged this whole scenario, and directed Paul to write this letter, so that we might have these beautiful pictures of redemption. Philemon is a type of **God the Father**; Paul is a type of **Christ**; and Onesimus is a picture of **all Christians**. Like Onesimus, we were “unprofitable” to God because of our sin. We have all robbed Him of the glory that belongs to Him, and have gone astray. However, just as Paul reconciled Onesimus to Philemon, so Christ has reconciled Christians to God, and has made us “profitable” to Him again.

Christian, Christ didn't save you merely “by the skin of your teeth.” Your position in Christ is secure, and your privileges are amazing! As we finish this letter this morning, I pray that you will see the fulness of your riches in Christ. If you do *not* know Christ, my prayer is that you will be reconciled to God, just as Onesimus was reconciled to his master.

Not one of us is worthy of salvation. Yet, God's Word makes it clear that Christ saves “*to the uttermost*” those who come unto God by Him (**Hebrews 7:25**). The ground underneath the believer's feet is not shaky; it is solid and immovable. Not only is the believer's *salvation* secure, but he is now elevated to a position of honour, blessing, and responsibility in Christ. The title of this message is ***Above a Servant***.

Read Philemon 16-25.

The first picture of salvation in this passage is that...

I. Christ calls His people “brethren” (v. 16).

Last week's message ended with a beautiful picture of salvation. Let's read that verse again. (**Read verse 15 again.**) Looking back on this whole situation, Paul could clearly see God's hand in it all. God had taken something evil, and had worked it together for good. Onesimus had stolen from Philemon, and had left him for a season; but God allowed this to happen in order that Onesimus might meet Paul at just the right time in his life, when he was ripe to hear the Gospel. Onesimus had to come to the “end of his rope” before he was willing to receive the Gospel. God allowed all these things to happen so that Onesimus might be saved, and so

that Philemon might receive him again forever. In this, we see a picture of our salvation. God receives sinners back to Himself; and not only does He receive them, but He receives them *forever*. The child of God is not on probation: his position is secure.

Now, let's look again at **verse 16. (Read verse 16.)** In this verse, Paul takes his request to Philemon to yet another level. Not only did he ask Philemon to *receive* Philemon again, but he also asked him to receive Onesimus with a status of *honour*. He beseeched Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a servant, but **“above a servant”**—as a ***“brother beloved.”***

The Scriptures don't tell us what happened after Onesimus delivered this letter; but we do know, from extrabiblical records, that Philemon did exactly what Paul requested. Onesimus *did* become a minister of the Gospel. According to the records, Onesimus later became the pastor of the church of Ephesus, after Timothy had moved on. The *new* relationship between Onesimus and Philemon was far superior to that of a master and servant: they were now brothers in the Lord, and co-workers in the Gospel! The earthly master-servant relationship ended long ago; but to this hour, Philemon and Onesimus are brothers in the Lord, in heaven!

I believe that there are a couple pictures of salvation in this. **First, those of us who are saved are Christ's servants.** We serve Him not only because He *created* us to serve Him, but because we *want* to serve Him, out of a heart of love. Christ has saved our souls from eternal death: how, then, could we *not* love Him, and serve Him forever? **Romans 12:1** says, ***“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”*** In **Exodus 21:2-6**, God commanded masters to free their servants after they had completed their seventh year of service. However, if, at the end of that seven years, the servant said, “I love my master, and I want to stay with him, and serve him forever,” they would make his oath legally binding; and they would bore a hole in the servant's earlobe, to show that that man had chosen to serve his master forever. *That* is the kind of relationship that we who are saved have with *our* Master, Jesus Christ. We willingly serve Him forever, from a heart of love, because it is only reasonable to do so!

Christian, you are God's servant; and you serve Him willingly. However, your position is far more exalted than even that of a servant. What did Paul say about his new relationship with Philemon? He called him a **“brother beloved, specially to me.”** Now, we all understand that Christ is our “Master”; **but did you know that Christ also calls you His “brother,” as well?** Unworthy though we are, He is not ashamed to call us His “brothers”!

Read Hebrews 2:9-12.

Read Romans 8:28-29.

In a moment, we will return to this matter of Jesus' being our Brother. First, though, I would like to look more closely at **Romans 8:29**. In this verse, Paul calls Jesus the **“firstborn among many brethren.”** This verse is used by some cults to “prove” that Jesus is a created being. They say, “See? Jesus is called the *‘firstborn.’* This means that Jesus was created by Jehovah God!” Brethren, please be ready to answer this argument! The word ***“firstborn”*** has nothing to do with being “created”; it has everything to do with *pre-eminence*. In the ancient world, the term “firstborn” didn't necessarily have anything to do with being first in order of

birth; rather, it had to do with being the *preeminent one* in the family. For example, the LORD called Ephraim His “firstborn,” even though he was *not* the eldest son in Jacob’s family. In fact, he wasn’t even one of Jacob’s twelve sons. He was Jacob’s *grandson*; and even between him and his brother Manasseh, he was the younger of the two. To put it in full perspective, Ephraim was the 2nd-born son of the 11th-born son of Jacob! Yet, he was called Jacob’s “firstborn.” Why? Because God chose to give him the position of pre-eminence in Jacob’s family. Let’s look at another verse that brings this into even sharper focus.

Read Colossians 1:17-18.

Verse 18 is *not* talking about Jesus’ being *born* or *created*, as the cults would have you think. The title “***firstborn from the dead***” simply means He is *preeminent* in the resurrection. Someday, *all* of us who are saved will be resurrected from the dead, with glorified bodies just like Christ’s; however, *Christ* will be the preeminent One in the resurrection. Why? First, because He is Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Secondly, because He raised *Himself* up from the dead, by His own power. (*We* certainly can’t do that. He is the one who will resurrect *us* from the dead!) Thirdly, Jesus is the “***firstborn***” of the resurrection because He was the *first Man* to be raised from the dead to immortality. He arose *first*; and later, we will all *follow Him* in the resurrection harvest.

So, let’s review who Jesus is to believers. Firstly, if you have been saved, Christ calls Himself your *Brother*. Secondly, He calls Himself the “***firstborn among the brethren***”—the Preeminent One. How’s that for a privilege? The Creator of the Universe calls you His “Brother”! He became flesh and died for your sins, so that you might become a child of God, and be called a “brother” to the King of Kings! Does that make you love your Saviour a little more? It should! If you are not saved, why do you reject such an offer?

Now, there is another picture of salvation in this passage. The picture is this:

II. Christ paid our debt to the Father (vv. 18-19).

(**Read verses 18-19 again.**) Can you imagine this? Paul is promising Philemon that he will repay whatever amount of money Onesimus had stolen from Philemon! I don’t know how much money Onesimus had taken from Philemon; but it must have been a goodly sum—at least enough to pay for his passage from Colossi to Rome, and to give him something to subsist on for a little while! Of course, Onesimus probably had no means to get honest employment to raise the money to repay his master. He had no status of any kind, because he was a slave! Any attempt to seek employment would have placed him in grave danger of being discovered as a runaway slave, and executed.

So, here was Onesimus, in a faraway land, undoubtedly broke, and unable to repay his master. Yet, Paul promised that he would pay the entire debt. By the way, how did Paul intend to come up with this money, and how did he plan to get it to him? They didn’t exactly have cheques, money orders, and direct debit in those days; and Paul surely didn’t have much money, since he was a prisoner! Paul did have some support from churches, which was delivered to him by his missionary co-workers; but he wasn’t an “ATM.” The fact that Paul was willing to pay Onesimus’s debt shows Paul’s faith, in at least a couple ways.

First, Paul knew that his God would always supply the resources He needed. Paul himself said, ***“But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).*** Paul believed this, and practiced it. Secondly, Paul was trusting that God would make a way for him to be released from prison, so that he could personally go to Colossi to deliver the money to Philemon. **(Read Philemon 22.)** Paul was so confident that he would see Philemon again, that he asked Philemon to get a room ready for him! We know, for a fact, that he *was* released for a couple years, and that he even went to Spain to preach the Gospel before he was arrested again, and sent to Rome for the final time. We certainly have an example to follow in Paul, don’t we?

Now, it’s not hard to see the picture of salvation here. Just as Paul paid Onesimus’s debt in full, so **Jesus Christ has paid our sin debt to the Father in full.** He has paid a debt that you and I could not possibly pay.

I love to use this analogy when I’m sharing the Gospel with people, because it is easy to understand. As sinners, we are morally bankrupt, and utterly unable to pay for our sin--except by spending eternity in the Lake of Fire. Unlike human debts, our sin debt doesn’t have to be large in order to damn us. **James 2:10** says, ***“For whosoever shall keep the whole, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”*** One sin makes each one of us bankrupt, and separated from God. That’s why Jesus paid the debt for us on the cross. Onesimus accepted Paul’s gift of repaying his debt; and likewise, when a person confesses his guilt and accepts the gift of salvation by faith, God takes the perfect righteousness of His Son Jesus, and puts it on that man’s (or woman’s) account, as though it were his. At the same time, all our *debt* was placed on *His* account, and He paid for it in full on the cross. The transaction is complete!

Read Romans 4:1-8.

In **Galatians 3:13**, Paul wrote, ***“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.”*** What a wonderful gift! Yet, this gift can be rejected, or ignored. People reject and ignore this gift every day. Some shove it aside, and say that they will receive it “later”; but, tragically, “later” never comes. Why this neglect of such a precious gift? There are several reasons. Oftentimes, people simply love their sinful ways, and are comfortable in it. They don’t want to hand over their lives to Jesus, because they think that they will be “miserable” if they were to give up their lifestyle. However, probably the biggest reason that people neglect salvation is plain old *pride*. Most folks don’t want to believe that they are really bad, and that their condition is utterly hopeless without Christ. The old English preacher, John Wesley, put it this way: “Own thyself guilty of eternal death, and renounce all hope of ever being able to save thyself. Be it all thy hope to be washed in His blood.” A godly pastor of a generation ago, A.W. Tozer, said this: “True faith requires that we believe everything God has said about Himself, but also that we believe everything He has said about *us*. Until we believe that we are as bad as God says we are, we can never believe that He will do for us what He says He will do. *Right here is where popular religion breaks down.*”

If you are trusting in your own goodness to get to heaven, I urge you to view yourself the way God views you. See yourself as hopelessly lost, and in desperate need of God’s mercy! Abandon what “popular religion” tells you, and trust Christ to be saved! Should you be saved already, you are fully aware that there is no remaining sin debt for you to pay. You know, and are confident, that Christ has paid your sin debt in full. However, you *do* owe a debt of love

and gratitude to the Lord. Therefore, love Him, brethren! Love Him with all your heart. Serve Him with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Now, how else is salvation illustrated in this account? It is this:

III. Christ finds great joy in redeeming us, and making us profitable (v. 20).

(Read verse 20 again.) As Paul ended his letter, he asked Philemon to let him have “*joy*” of him “*in the Lord,*” and to “*refresh*” his “*bowels* [in other words, his heart, or his inner being] *in the Lord.*” To put it another way, he is saying, “Brother, you are known for refreshing the hearts of Christians, by giving to them in their time of need. You have brought joy to many hearts. But do you want to bring *me* joy? Then, please, give me Onesimus for the Gospel ministry; and let me pay Onesimus’ debt!”

Once again, there is a picture of salvation in this. Even though we were unprofitable to God, Jesus Christ loved us so much, that He was willing to pay our debt so that we might be made profitable to God. Jesus said, “*All that the Father giveth me shall come to me.*” He didn’t say, “All that the Father giveth me shall be forced to come to me.” No, He said that they *shall* come to Him, willingly. Just as Philemon gave Onesimus over to Paul so that he might be of service to him, and just as Onesimus came *willingly*, so those whose sinful hearts have been changed by the grace of God come to Him willingly, with the desire to serve Him from henceforth. Christ finds great *joy* in receiving them, and in making them profitable to Him!

Read Hebrews 12:2.

What was the “joy” that was set before Christ as He walked up Calvary’s hill, with a heavy cross on His back, and with His flesh torn to shreds, and with a crown of thorns on His head, and with people laughing at Him and spitting on Him? What was the “joy” that He saw on the other side of the indescribable pain that He was suffering at the moment? **He saw the joy of paying our debt, and of making us profitable and serviceable to Him!**

In **Matthew 10** Jesus said, “*But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows*” (**Matthew 10:30-31**). God values us greatly, brethren! He values us for what we *can be*, after He has done His wonderful work of grace in our lives. He values us so much, that He considered it a joy to suffer for us. This realisation of what brings joy to our Saviour should be enough to make us take inventory of our lives, shouldn’t it? Ask yourself: “If Christ took such great joy in *making* me serviceable to Him, do *I* take joy in *being* serviceable to Him?”

Now, there is one more picture of salvation here. The account of Onesimus teaches us that...

IV. The Father gives us grace far beyond salvation (v. 21).

Not only was Paul sure that Philemon would free Onesimus, but he was sure of something else, as well: **he was confident that Philemon would do even *more* than he had asked of him.** (Read verse 21 again.)

There is one final picture of salvation in this verse. The picture is this: **the Father gives us grace that far exceeds the grace was needed to save us!** Not only does He give us “life” (an eternal relationship with Himself); He gives life “more abundantly.” He gives us good gifts (both material, and spiritual), which we are able to use for His glory. James wrote, *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights”* (James 1:17). God doesn’t give us these gifts grudgingly, either. Earlier in that same chapter, James wrote, *“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”* That word “upbraid” means “to rebuke, or scold, or to give someone a hard time.” God doesn’t reluctantly give His gifts to us: He gives us all things freely, and cheerfully. Let’s take a look at a couple other Scriptures.

Read Ephesians 3:20.

That phrase *“exceeding abundantly,”* when translated literally, means “super out-of-abounding”! What Paul is saying is that God’s grace far exceeds what is needed. If I could make an analogy to the sport of baseball, it is as though the batter has hit a “grand slam.” In fact, not only has he hit the ball far enough to make a complete “home run,” but he has hit the ball out of the ball park completely, and outside of the city! The batter has hit the ball so far beyond retrieval, that it cannot even be found! If it were possible (or needed), the batter could run a thousand home runs, and the ball would still not be found. So it is with our salvation. As **David** wrote, God has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. As **Micah** wrote, He has cast our sin into the depths of the sea. God’s grace toward us is so complete, and so infinite, that it not only lands us safely on the shores of Heaven, but provides us with everything we could ever need to live the Christian life! Let’s look at one more Scripture.

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-10.

In this passage, Paul is talking about God’s grace in relation to our giving. Paul is saying that God has all the grace that we need in order to stretch our faith, so that we can give far more than we ever thought we could do. This giving is not something that we would do on our own, because it goes beyond what *we* would consider to be “safe” or “reasonable” to attempt. It is “grace giving”—a giving that comes from God. It is a giving that we are enabled to perform as we trust completely on Him. The same is true in every other area of our lives. Anything we do that is truly “profitable” to God is all the product of *His* grace.

Christian, are you confident that God’s grace is exceeding abundant—that He can and will provide you with the grace that you need, in every situation? Allow me to tell you about a man who knew about this wonderful grace. He was an English tinker, who lived in the 1600’s. Before he came to know Christ as his Saviour, he was a wicked, godless, drunken blasphemer and rabble-rouser. However, when he came to know Christ, his life changed completely. He joined a Baptist church, and soon became a Baptist pastor.

But then, the evil times came. In 1660, the parliament, under the influence of King Charles II, made it a crime to be baptised into, or even to attend services in, any other religious sect but the Church of England. So, what did this pastor do? Did he shut his mouth, and do what he was told? No! He knew that infant baptism is heresy. He refused to attend the Church of England; he refused to use their *Book of Common Prayer*; and he refused to allow his children to be sprinkled. When the government said that it was illegal to gather in any assembly of

more than 2 people, he continued to hold church services, anyway. He was soon arrested for preaching in a “secret, illegal assembly” of about a dozen people, in a barn; and he spent 12 years in the Bedford jail. During those years, he could have been released at any time, by simply consenting not to preach anymore. His wife and children barely escaped starvation; and he had to support them by making shoelaces in prison, and giving it to his wife to sell. These were hard years. However, during that time, the Lord gave him the grace to write one of the greatest gems of Christian literature ever written—the allegory of the Christian life that we know as *Pilgrim’s Progress*. By the way, if you don’t know, by now, of whom I am speaking, his name is **John Bunyan**. Bunyan wrote this entire book on small scraps of paper, which his wife, and his blind, sickly daughter, brought to him while he was in prison. He also wrote a deeply personal testimony called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*.

Those were very trying years for Bunyan; but because of his sufferings, his influence became vast. After his release from prison, thousands of people flocked to hear the preaching of this uncompromising man who has once pastored a church of barely 20 people. His books are still, to this day, touching people’s lives, and helping Christians in their walk with the Lord. God’s grace was more than sufficient for a simple man like John Bunyan. It was “exceeding abundant.” However, it is “exceeding abundant” for *us*, too. Education and advantages have nothing to do with it. Bunyan was not a very educated man: but he was a man who believed that the grace of God was all that he needed. As for myself, I can testify that all that I am, or was, or ever will be for God, is *only* by His amazing grace. I have been told that my situation is “different” from others’, because I had the advantage of growing up in a happy Christian home. Don’t believe that for a moment! I could easily have rejected the Gospel (as did many of my friends, who grew up in homes just like mine); and I could have ended up living a miserable and broken life as the result, just as they have done. (In fact, some have committed suicide.) It was only by God’s amazing grace that He opened my eyes, showed me my spiritual poverty, and my need of Him, and enabled me to *respond* to His call of salvation. It is only by His amazing grace that He called me to Ireland, and led me to some of you, so that you might hear the Gospel, and be saved. It is only by God’s grace that He has preserved me from a debilitating disease that could have killed me 25 years ago (or at any time since then), and which still gives me pain every day. It is only by His grace that I have a loving wife and family; and it is only by His grace that I have a loving church family around me this morning.

It is only by God’s grace that *any of us* are saved, and serviceable to God. We come from very different backgrounds. Some of us come from Christian homes. However, most of us come from non-Christian homes—some which were happy, and some which were very unhappy. Some of us have gone through great sorrows (some of which are a result of sinful choices in life, and some of which are simply the result of living in a fallen world); and others have not had so many fierce trials. Some, like myself, have endured debilitating diseases. Some had great emotional burdens at the time of salvation, and others not so many. However, we were *all* hopelessly lost until we came to Jesus; and we *all* had to meet God at the same place, which is at the foot of the cross. Christ has, since the time of our salvation, turned our sorrow into joy, as He has cleansed our lives of sin; and it is all by His amazing grace.

Conclusion: When a person is saved, the Holy Spirit enters into that person’s heart, and makes him a new creature. Christ begins to weed out the sin, and gives him victory over it. **God makes that man profitable**—just as Onesimus was made “profitable.” **Christ calls that man His “brother.”** He assures

him that his **debt is paid in full**. He takes great **joy** in redeeming that man, and making him profitable; and, **He gives that man abundant grace** to live the Christian life in a way that is pleasing to Him.

Do you know the Lord? Have you received His amazing grace? If not, why not take up His on His offer? He loves you, and wants to save you! To those of you who are saved I would ask, “What are you facing today?” Do you need more grace? If so, God “*giveth more grace.*” God hasn’t saved you, but then left you to muddle through life on your own: He has more than abundant grace. *But*, you must trust Him!