

Love of the Lord God—Its Significance and Value

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主なる神の愛の意味と価値
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Those who have experienced the love of the Lord God and delight wholeheartedly in the conviction of being loved by him are truly blessed. In this article, I would like to discuss the significance and the value of the love of the true God.

God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love for us even when we were dead because of our offenses, made us alive together with the Messiah (by grace you have been saved). — Ephesians 2:4-5.
[International Standard Version]

As we continue our daily lives, I believe that the most important thing is to understand the true love of God through all experience. Believers are constantly exposed to severe blame and condemnation in their lives. It is only through the love of the Lord God that all difficult problems can be overcome and thus, we should always keep in mind how deeply we are loved by him. This exactly is what the “Epistle to Philemon” is trying to tell us.

This was an epistle filled with love. Paul wrote it to his old and intimate friend, Philemon, while he was captured in prison. This letter will fill all readers with heartfelt happiness.

All letters in the Bible were written in order to convey consolation, encouragement and joy to the readers. Among them, this particular letter Paul wrote from prison has a remarkably important meaning.

Indeed, this tiny letter was protected by the Holy Spirit, which implies that the content of this brief epistle was extremely valuable for all of us for sure.

In a sense, this epistle is itself a real-life example that shows the true meaning and value of the love of the Lord God. This letter consists of 25 verses, and begins with, “From: Paul, a prisoner of the Messiah Jesus, and Timothy our brother. To: Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker (Philemon 1),” and is closed by “May the grace of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, be with your spirit (Philemon 25).”

Although this was a very personal and intimate letter of love, some extremely important facts are revealed in there.

Through this very epistle, I would like to discuss the love of the Lord God from five different perspectives; Firstly, love lets us share pain with each other. Secondly, love pays our debt. Thirdly, love accepts with willingness. Fourthly, love drives our new life forward. And fifthly, love gives us true hope.

1. Love Shares Pain with Each Other

Let us begin with learning how “love is something to let people share pain with each other.” It was on behalf of a man called Onesimus that Paul decided to write this letter to his close friend, Philemon. This man, Onesimus used to be a slave owned by Philemon before he escaped for freedom. When he met Paul, Onesimus was hiding himself in the big city of Rome under fugitive status. Although it is not known how and why they came to know each other, Onesimus certainly heard about the gospel from Paul and repented of his sin, before he believed in and accepted the Lord Jesus. Later, when Paul decided to return Onesimus to the hands of Philemon, he wrote a letter to his old friend and let Onesimus carry it. Paul expressed his feeling about Onesimus in this line of his letter, “It’s like I’m coming along with him (Philemon 12).”

I, Paul, as an old man and now a prisoner of the Messiah Jesus, appeal to you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Once he was useless to you, but now he is very useful both to you and to me. As I send him back, it’s like I’m coming along with him. — Philemon 9-12.

It is absolutely undeniable that an uncountable number of people were led to the belief by Paul. It is also certain that Paul loved all these people from the bottom of his heart.

However, he showed exceptional love to Onesimus, which was expressed in this line, “It’s like I’m coming along with him.” Why was Onesimus so precious to Paul? It is deeply related to the circumstance through which Onesimus was led to repentance.

It is written in this epistle, “(I) appeal to you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.”(Philemon 10)

Unlike many other people who were regenerated by hearing the gospel and his testimonies from Paul or through encounter with him on his mission trip, Onesimus was reborn into new life while Paul was “chained in a prison.” The salvation of Onesimus was a ‘fruit’, which came straight out of the ordeal Paul faced in the prison. Paul’s suffering resulted in the salvation and the eternal blessing of Onesimus.

When we share pain with each other, our love is greatly strengthened. An example of such love can

be found in chapter 35 of Genesis. Several centuries B.C., a boy was born near the town of Bethlehem. This was an extremely difficult childbirth. The mother suffered from horrible pain of delivery and tragically, she lost her life after she gave birth to that child.

She called her son Benoni, “child of my pain” which was an allusion to her dying just after she had given birth. However, his father, Jacob, under such a desperate situation, gave his child another name, Benjamin, which meant “a son of the right hand.” It was an expression of how precious this new-born boy was, and how much he cared about him—his father felt this child was as precious as his right hand.

Similar things had to happen for the birth of Christians. Jesus Christ was crucified and experienced unimaginable pain. We were born as the outcome of the pain he suffered.

Our salvation was not a result of our own effort, but it was an outcome of the pain the Lord Jesus endured. For the Lord Jesus, we are all “children of his pain” and it is the very reason that he loves us endlessly. It can be seen in these words from the Bible.

You have only burdened me with your sins and made me tired with your iniquities. I, I am the one who blots out your transgression for my own sake, and I'll remember your sins no more. — Isaiah 43:24-25.

You used to be dead because of your offenses and sins.... But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love for us even when we were dead because of our offenses, made us alive together with the Messiah. — Ephesians 2:1, 4-5.

We are absolutely valueless. Nevertheless, we were bought for a very high price.

It was also true for Onesimus. We can well imagine that he often felt discouraged and hesitated on his way back from Rome to Colossae after the conversion. However, when he thought of what was written in the letter he was carrying, it must have helped him to muster the courage and strength. When Onesimus remembered that Paul, who sent him off to this travel, not only sympathized but loved him with the deep love of God, it certainly gave him new strength and courage.

We too go through so many things as we continue the journey of our lives. However, we are travelling not only with one letter, but a number of letters, which point to all books in the Bible. The Bible guarantees that we are not just loved by the Lord but are actually loved through the Lord Jesus. Let us convince ourselves that, just like Paul described

Onesimus as, “he is my very heart,” we are the very hearts of the Lord God.

It is an immovable fact that each saved person is the very heart of God. This is the foundation of the true worship. The love of the Lord is “the love that shares pain with each other.”

2. Love Pays the Debt

The second fact that should never be forgotten is that the love of the Lord God pays our debt off.

One of the largest concerns of Onesimus was that he did not know how he could pay his debt to Philemon. From this expression, “if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything.... (Philemon 18),” it has been generally believed that Onesimus stole some property of Philemon before he began to live as a fugitive and met Paul.

In those days, when slaves escaped from their owner and were captured, they were most likely sentenced to death. It is not hard to imagine that a slave would be so harshly treated if he stole the property of his master and escaped. I suppose that it was because Onesimus bore a huge amount of debt that he had to run such a long way to Rome.

How did Paul do with this serious problem of Onesimus? Men cannot stay insensible or irresponsible to the debt of the one they truly love. Paul did not urge his intimate friend Philemon to forget what Onesimus had done to him. Paul did not ask him to cancel or reduce the amount of Onesimus' debt. Instead, he decided to take the full responsibility by himself. “Charge it to my account. I am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it (Philemon 18-19),” so, wrote Paul.

Paul did not ask a favour of Philemon just because he was his intimate friend; instead he behaved solemnly and practically. The debt of Onesimus was indubitably too huge for him to pay off. We can readily understand that, when Onesimus found these words of Paul, “Charge it to my account,” in his letter, he felt so much relief and comfort.

If Onesimus' debt was worthy of death, it is even more unimaginable what the immeasurably huge debt of sinners to God deserves. How much grief are we causing to the Lord? Paul used the word 'if' in his letter, but there can be no 'if' in our cases, because we are all laden with enormous debt to God without exception; it is a debt called a sin. And that 'debt' is so huge that it could never be paid off by our own efforts.

“Charge it to my account.” Let us bend our ears to these sincere words of wonderful love spoken by Paul. This exactly is the essence of the gospel. The

Lord Jesus Christ paid all the debt of our sins. The Lord Jesus sacrificed his own life and allowed his body to be pierced telling them, “Charge it to my account.”

If Onesimus felt so shameful in returning to Philemon and instead attempted to pay off his debt through his own hard efforts, he would have ended up in tragedy. His debt was too huge and absolutely impossible for him to pay. If he thought of paying it back by himself, he would never have been able to return home. Likewise, if we try to pay our debt to the Lord God on our own, we would have had no chance to return to him.

Both those who have already been saved or those who have not been saved yet will find true consolation only when they look up to Jesus nailed to the cross. “Charge it to my account.” Let us listen again to these words of love of our Savior.

[He \(Christ\) himself bore our sins in his body on the tree. — 1 Peter 2:24.](#)

May we all understand that our sins have been totally redeemed and forgiven and be convinced that our debt was all cleared because the Lord Jesus Christ bore our sins on the cross and sacrificed his own life.

3. Love Accepts with Willingness

Thirdly, the true love, that is to say, the love of God is a love that is willing to accept everything.

Paul pleaded with Philemon to accept Onesimus just like himself by writing, “If you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. (Philemon 17)” I rarely see truthful words of love like these.

It is not hard to imagine what would have been waiting for Onesimus if he had come back to his master without this letter Paul wrote.

They hear the knock on the door. A servant of Philemon comes out. He sees this visitor standing at the door and tells his master. “It is Onesimus who escaped. He came back.” How did Philemon feel when he heard it? Even though he believed in the Lord, he was just a human. Thus, it was quite understandable for him to feel so uneasy, when he thought of what Onesimus had done to him in the past. He might have tried to remind himself that he was the believer of the Lord, which somehow worked to calm his mind and suppress his bitterness. However, it must have been extremely difficult for him to control his emotional disturbance. I suppose that, because of this, Philemon could at best show an indifferent or apathetic attitude to his former slave, Onesimus.

However, how would he have reacted if his servant told him that the Apostle Paul was there instead of Onesimus? All his family members would have had the warmest welcome and the whole house would have been filled with great joy, gratitude and praise. Paul was so much loved and esteemed by brothers and sisters in the Lord and he too knew that they would be greatly pleased to see him. And now, Paul pleaded with Philemon to welcome Onesimus, who once stole his property and ran away, in the same way he would welcome Paul himself.

It is not known to us whether Philemon actually could accept Onesimus exactly as he would have accepted Paul. However, it is absolutely certain that what Paul wrote in his letter implies how the God accepts us.

No matter what happens, we, believers of the Lord Jesus Christ are accepted because of the Lord Jesus. This exactly is the wonderful consequence of the salvation he has completed. Reconciliation between God and humans has been accomplished perfectly by the cross as well as the redemption of our sins. Therefore, in the name of the Lord Jesus, the Father God now accepts us, not as debt-burdened sinners, but as righteous ones. If anyone believes in the Lord Jesus and accepts him, they will be accepted as righteous by the Holy God because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. That is to say, Jesus is telling his Father God, “Please accept him (her), not as a sinner, but just like myself, as a beloved son or daughter of you, my Father God.”

It is absolutely indisputable that we, who believe in the Lord Jesus, will be accepted by the Lord God because of his Son, Jesus Christ. It is clearly stated in the Scripture.

4. Love Moves your New Life Forward.

In the next place, let us see how the true love serves as the driving force of your brand new life.

When Onesimus came back to his master and saw him, I suppose that Philemon was stumped as to whether he should welcome his slave as Paul asked him to, or not. The meaning of the name 'Onesimus' was 'useful' or 'helpful.' Nevertheless, what he had done to his master was in total contrast to what his name implied. Who could ensure that Onesimus would never do the same thing again?

Paul was especially mindful of their concerns when he wrote this letter. Knowing that Onesimus was burdened with huge debt, Paul guaranteed that this former slave was now completely transformed into a new person and wrote;

[Once he was useless to you, but now he is very useful both to you and to me. — Philemon 11.](#)

Paul expressed his confirmation that Onesimus had now become a useful person. Regeneration by the Spirit of the Lord meant that new strength—the strength of love of the Holy God was brought into the life of Onesimus. Paul begged Philemon on behalf of his former slave and wrote in his letter that he had experienced and was certainly aware that Onesimus had now become a useful man.

Once, we too used to be absolutely useless. The Lord God knows it very well. However, as we are accepted by the Lord God, we are newly reborn by the Spirit of the Lord and have been converted to someone useful for him. Now, he sees us as vessels to serve the Lord and other people.

Thank God that, though you were once slaves of sin, you became obedient from your hearts to that form of teaching with which you were entrusted! And since you have been freed from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness. — Romans 6:17-18.

The heart of Philemon was moved, not only by the attitude of repentance of Onesimus, but more so by the love of Paul, who, in addition to bearing Onesimus' debt, took the responsibility to guarantee for him.

But now, in union with the Messiah Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah. — Ephesians 2:13.

Likewise, the love of the Lord God does not merely cleanse and cancel our past sins. It also opens a whole new road in our lives. This is never a reward for our own efforts, but it is offered by the Lord God through his grace, his love and his strength.

It is the love of the Lord that brings you the salvation and provides you with new strength to live a life in Christ himself. Those who believe in the Lord Jesus wholeheartedly have all experienced that the love of God is the “source of all joy” and the “strength that drives their lives forward”

5. Love Gives True Hope

Finally, let us look at how the love of God gives us true hope.

We see this sentence near the end of this letter.

Meanwhile, prepare a guest room for me, too, for I am hoping through your prayers to be returned to you.— Philemon 22.

If Onesimus was accepted by his master again as Paul asked Philemon in his letter, he must have been deeply touched. However, as time went by and this thankfulness in his heart slipped away, he might

have returned to monotonous daily life. He may have been exposed to temptation in various ways, which could possibly put him in danger of turning back to the previous way of life. At such times, however, he could encourage himself by remembering the promise Paul made that he would come to see him soon.

He could live with an expectation that Paul might be on his way travelling towards Colossae, he might be getting closer day by day, or he might even arrive today. The expectation that Paul may come soon must have brought great joy, encouragement as well as emotional support to Onesimus.

I believe that he persuaded himself not to cause any grief to Paul, who was coming back soon, and that he pledged to himself to live appropriately as a servant of God so as to please Paul. Needless to say, brothers in the Lord thoughtfully prepared a place to stay for Paul.

It is not known whether Paul actually came to see him in Colossae as he had promised. However, our hope will absolutely become reality; the Lord Jesus will return soon.

And the fact that “the Lord is near!” is the greatest encouragement to the faith in our daily lives. The Lord Jesus may come back today. We need to be fully prepared for that day and no other preparation is required than to “serve the Lord sincerely.” Suppose, while Onesimus was serving Philemon every day as sincerely as we serve the Lord, one day, Paul appeared all of a sudden. Onesimus would be filled with exceedingly great joy. Onesimus presumably still remained as a slave, but they were at the same time dear brothers in the Lord now.

Perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a while, so that you could have him back forever, no longer as a slave but better than a slave—as a dear brother. — Philemon 15-16.

What is important for us is to serve the Lord sincerely as his useful and worthy servants. “Well done, good and trustworthy servant (Matthew 25:21),” so once said the Lord. He also taught;

When you have done everything you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless servants. We have done only what we ought to have done.’ — Luke 17:10.

We all know that the Lord loves us deeply. So now, why don't we begin to serve the Lord as his loyal servants? Love of the Lord is not something expressed in concrete action or emotion, but it points to no one but “the Lord Jesus Christ himself.” It is solely because we believed in and accepted the Lord Jesus that we came to experience the love of the

Lord.

Therefore, our testimony will go like this; “The love of the Lord God refers to the Lord Jesus himself—he is the one who shares my pain with me, who pays all my debt, who even accepts someone like me, who gives us the power to drive our new life forward and who offers us true hope, the hope to live.” We have experienced the love of God already.

Now, with his love within our heart, let us begin to serve the Lord as his faithful servants!