

A Letter to Believers

By Henry Mahan

Bible Text: Philemon

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Philemon is not a book that you read for devotions like you read the book of Psalms. When I turn to...have time to read and just for my own joy and pleasure I don't turn to Philemon. I turn to Psalms or one of those books. And then it is not a book that you read for doctrinal study like Ephesians, Hebrews. If I were going to teach a class here during the next week on Bible doctrine I probably wouldn't turn to the book of Philemon. I never have, you know, for this type of thing. And then as Doug prayed, if someone came after the service and wanted instruction, someone seeking the Lord, I doubt that I would turn to the book of Philemon. There would be no reason not to, but I would turn to the book of Romans or the book of John to instruct them in faith and these things. So it is really a neglected book.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands of how many have heard a sermon on the book of Philemon, but you'll hear one tonight. I call it, "A letter to a believer." "A letter to a Believer."

Now just hold the book of Philemon there open for a moment and listen to me. The apostle Paul—when this book was written, this epistle, this letter is what it is—he was a prisoner in Rome. But he had an unusual, unusual situation. And you will have to take my word for these things now. We're not going to turn to all of these dozens of references. But Paul was a prisoner in his own hired house there in Rome. And it seems to me—and I think I can show you this—that he had several prominent brethren with him. Oh, to be in jail for a little while with these fellows. I want you to listen. Look at verse 23. "There salute thee Epaphras," verse 23, "my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus; Mark, Marcus is John Mark." That's Barnabas' nephew. Aristarchus was with him. Demas was with him. This was before Demas left him. And Luke; Lucas is Luke.

Now Paul was in this hired house a prisoner, but these men were with him and were his fellow prisoners. Now this letter was written about the same the letter to the Colossians because Philemon was a member of the church at Colosse.

Now turn to Colossians for a moment. Let me show you these men again. Paul wrote Colossians four. Paul wrote these letters about the same time. And he mentions in Colossians four, verse nine, he mentions Onesimus. Onesimus had been there a while studying, learning under Paul. Verse nine: "With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you." He is from Colosse. "They shall make known unto you all

things which are done here. Aristarchus my fellow prisoner salutes you. Mark, sister's son to Barnabas (touching whom you received commandments, if he come unto you receive him."

Now, verse 14: "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you." Here Paul is in prison and he is surrounded with these faithful brethren, beloved brethren: Mark Aristarchus, Luke, Demas. And he was...Paul was allowed to preach during this time. He was allowed to receive people who came to hear him or to visit him. He was allowed to preach the gospel and teach people. And I sort of, in my own mind, visualized this scene. Paul is in his hired house and maybe he sits on the porch and people sit out in the yard. Perhaps he had a big enough room that people crowded into the room, but Paul preached. And these men preached with him. They were encouraging him and ministering to him.

And evidently one day when Paul was preaching the gospel a young man was there for the first time. And maybe he came back the second time. But nevertheless I think Paul even noticed him or recognized him and he was hearing the gospel and he was receiving the gospel. He was rejoicing in the gospel. And so I believe Paul might have asked him, "Who are you? Who are you? I've seen you before somewhere. Tell me who you are."

And the young man replied, "I am Onesimus. I am a servant; I am a slave of your friend Philemon down in Colosse. That's where you have seen me. When you came to the home of Philemon and when you preached in Colosse I was a servant, not a believer. I was a slave to Philemon."

Now, Philemon was a dear...evidently a very prosperous man who had a great household who had many servants. Onesimus was one of these slaves, one of these servants. And he lived in Colosse, was a dear friend of Paul, a faithful brother. And he was converted under Paul's preaching. Philemon was converted under Paul's preaching because here in verse 19 Paul said, "I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay you. If Onesimus has stolen anything from you and owes you anything I will pay you back. Albeit, however, I do not say to thee how you owe unto me your life, your own self." So that is evidence. Paul said to Philemon, "Now, if Onesimus has done you wrong and owes you something you charge it to me and I'll pay it. But I want to remind you that if it hadn't been for me you would be on the dung hill because you heard the gospel so you owe me your life. I want to remind you of that."

But we see this and just...So evidently Philemon was converted under Paul's preaching. And, evidently, Philemon had a church meeting in his home. They didn't have facilities like we have I'm sure, these large buildings and accommodations and so forth. Verse two tells me that.

Two, verse two of Philemon says, "And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in your house." So evidently Philemon had a church meeting in his own home. So here is where it sits here. This young sits here and Paul

said, “Now, you are Onesimus and you are a slave of Philemon, my friend in Colosse. What are you doing here? What are you doing in Rome?”

And he would reply, “Well, I’m a rebellious servant. I am a runaway slave. I stole from my master.”

The reason I think he stole some things is because verse 18 Paul said, “If he owes you.” How could a slave owe him anything? There’s only one way: He took something when he left the place. That’s the only way he could have owed his master anything.

So he said, “I stole from my master and I ran away from home. And I came here to Rome. But the Lord in his good providence brought me here to hear you preach. And the Lord has saved me. The Lord has saved me.”

I know that the Lord saved him because Paul keeps talking about him now being...“he was unprofitable.” You see here in verse 11, “In times past Onesimus was to thee unprofitable.” There is nothing more unprofitable than a rebellious servant agitating and unprofitable and troublesome. “He was unprofitable to you, but now profitable to thee and to me.” And then he said in verse 13, “I would have kept him here. I wouldn’t let him come back to you. That was my first inclination. I would have kept him here. But in your stead, you’re not here. He is. You’re down there in Colosse and he’s here and I would have kept him here that he might minister to me, help me, assist me in the bonds of the gospel.”

So he was in the bonds of the gospel. This young man was...this young man knew God. Paul talks about him, “in the bonds of the gospel, our beloved brother,” would have kept him as an assistant.

But he said to Onesimus, “Well, you have go to go back. You can’t stay under these circumstances.” That’s what Paul said in verse 14. “Without your mind I’m not going to keep him here without your mind. So I’m going to send him back.”

He said, “Onesimus, I’ve got to send you back.” But he said, “You stay here awhile and sit here and learn the gospel.”

How important that is. This young man didn’t become a minister to Paul and a assistant and a helper and all these things over night, would you think? But I just know he didn’t, not overnight. He was there for a while. He sat at the feet of the apostle Paul. He stayed there because in that letter to the Colossian Church Paul spoke highly of this young man. When he writes him with Mark and Aristarchus and the rest of them, this young man has made some progress in the gospel. He has grown.

Now here is the picture before we go into these...Here is a runaway slave, a runaway, a rebellious servant called Onesimus who has become a believer. And Paul sent him back home. That was a tough trip back home. But he didn’t send him with nothing in his hand. He sent him back to his master clutching in his hand a letter from the dearest

person in the world, to Philemon. Paul, he had a letter from Paul written with his own hand. That is something. He had...Paul didn't dictate this one. Look at verse 19. He said that Paul... "I Paul have written it with my own hands. You've got my signature on it."

So he comes here with a letter in his hand from the apostle Paul urging Philemon to receive him. Look at verse 15. "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; not now as a servant. I want you to receive him above a servant, a brother beloved especially to me but how much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord."

Now then the significant thing. As John was reading this I believe many of you noticed this. I'm sure that you did, especially the elders and preachers in the congregation. And John prayed for them. He said, "Let our...enable our pastor to preach Christ."

I'm not preaching Philemon tonight. I'm not preaching Paul. I'm not preaching Onesimus. I'm preaching Christ. And the significant thing about this short letter, 25 verses, is that the Lord Jesus Christ...Paul is writing here, putting a letter in the hand of a runaway slave who has been slaved to his master, to petition him to receive him as a brother and Paul mentions the name of our Lord 11 times, 11 times in 25 verses.

Every...you see, all that Paul knew...He said, "I'm determined to know nothing but Christ, nothing but Christ." All that Paul knew, all that Paul did, all that Paul...all for which he hoped and all that Paul requested of anybody else was based on our relationship with Christ. That was his heartbeat was Christ. It was because of Christ. It was in Christ. It was for the glory of Christ. And I want you to notice that. I will try to briefly bring out seven or eight things here, but number one is verse one.

He says, "Paul." He is the author, writing this letter to Philemon. "I am a prisoner of Jesus Christ."

Now, I dealt with this many times and I'm not going to enlarge upon it much tonight, but will simply say this: Whatever suffering and whatever difficulty Paul encountered, whatever trial and trouble came upon him, he always looked upon it as being the will of his master. I wish we could cultivate that spirit and that attitude. He wrote this. He said, "I have learned," and I'm glad he said he didn't know it already, he learned it, "In whatsoever state I am to be content."

How can you be content in whatsoever state? How can you be content in times of difficulty and pressure and failure and all these things, imprisonment? You can be content if you have one thing uppermost in your mind. "I am here. I am here according to the purpose of my Father, according to the will of my God. And somehow he is going to use this for his glory and my good." That is how you can do it. And that's the only way. The only way.

Bishop Rutherford, you know, someone said this: "Nero, the emperor, compelled Paul outwardly, but Paul inwardly knew that he was where his master intended him to be right

there.” That will keep us from trying to live in the future. And it will keep us from trying to always straighten out the past, if we know where we are by the grace of God.

Bishop Rutherford was in prison in Aberdeen for preaching the gospel. And every time he wrote to a friend from the prison in Aberdeen, he would date his letters this way. “From the Lord’s palace in Aberdeen.” Isn’t that something? That’s the way he would date his letters. “From the Lord’s palace in Aberdeen.”

If we wrote anybody from a trying place we would say, “It’s so hot in here and dark here and damp here and depressing here and troublesome here.” No, he said, “I’m writing from the Lord’s palace here in Aberdeen.

And he wrote to one friend and he said, “The Lord is with me here in Aberdeen. I care not what man shall do to me and no pen or words can express to you the present grace of my Lord here in Aberdeen.”

Paul writes...look at the next...in verse three. Paul says to Philemon, “Grace to you. Grace to you and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”

My friends, if there is any grace for sinners, if there is any goodness for sinners, if there is any peace in this world or the world to come for a sinner, it will be from the Father through Christ. “He that believeth on the Son of God hath life.” He that believeth not the Son of God need not talk about grace mercy or peace. He need not talk about hope or light because the wrath of God abideth on him.

“Grace, Philemon, grace no matter who you are. You are my friend and you've got a church in your home and you have been a strong supporter and all this. But I want you to know this. Any grace or mercy or peace that’s to you has got to come from the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.”

That’s the way it has to be and it will be. You see, we were like Doug prayed. We were chosen in him. We were redeemed in him. We were loved in him. We were accepted in him. We are blessed in him. God bless...Bless God who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ. That’s where it is. And that’s...He makes that very clear and very distinctive. “Grace to you, and peace.” Not rewards, not wages, grace to you.

Now notice verse five. “I hear...I have heard...I am hearing of your love and faith. I’m hearing of your love and faith. I’m hearing good things about you, Philemon.”

Paul wasn’t there a long time I don’t suppose. But he said, “I’m hearing some things of you. I’m hearing of your faith, your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and which you have toward all saints. I’m hearing about this.”

You know, where one finds true love for others, he says...this man Philemon, he said, “You love the saints. You love God’s people.”

But I'll tell you this: Where you find true love for others you will first find love for Christ. And where you don't find love for others...I don't care how doctrinal a man is, how accurate he is, how zealous or how moral he is, the only true love that any person has for another believer is because of the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost. Now that's just so.

Let's look at 1 John four a moment. And, my friends, I'm telling you this. This is one thing. I've said this over and over. I covet faith. I covet faith. I covet, secondly, love. I covet, secondly, love, faith and love, the ability to pray, all of these things. But I covet those two things. "Now abideth faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." And I say that a person can have religion. He can have morality. He can have zeal. He can have doctrinal accuracy. She, he, whomever. But I'll tell you they can't have that genuine sincere love of Christ for other people unless they love him first. That's where it is. And the more you love him the more you are able to love others.

First John four, listen to this, verse seven. "Beloved, let us love one another for love is not of the flesh. It is not of religion. It is not of doctrine. It is not a personal zeal and determination. It is of God. It is the gift of God. Love is of God. And everyone that loveth is born of God. That is the only way you could love."

You say, "Everybody loves their husband or wife." That's their husband or wife. Everybody loves his children. It's his children. He loves himself. You see, you can love your job. It's your job. You can love your neighbor. He's your neighbor. You can love your wife or your children or your momma or your daddy. But that's not love till you love somebody else's momma and daddy. That's right. That kind of love is of God. "He that loveth not knoweth not God. God is love God is love." That's right. And that's what...here's what Paul is saying to Philemon. Boy, I tell you...wouldn't it be wonderful if folks were hearing about our love and faith in Christ and our love for him...hearing about our love for each other. The things people tell me about how much you love folks, how much you love people. We want them to hear how accurate we are at...in our doctrinal position.

Verse six. Watch this. He says something else. And that's in Christ, you see. Everything, "A prisoner of Christ. Grace to you through Christ. I heard about your faith and love to Christ," in 12.

In verse six, "That the communication of thy faith may become effectual." What's he saying here, "That the communication of thy faith may become effectual?" With...this verse is connected with verse four. Let's go back to verse four. Paul says, "I thank my God making mention of you always in my prayers because I have heard about your love and faith which you have for the life Jesus and toward other people. And I pray that the exercise of your faith may become effectual. I pray this: That the...that faith and love and exercise and communication of your good works and kindness to others, God might effectually use it for his glory."

Make it effectual. You see, Paul didn't just want to preach. He wanted effectual doors to open where he could preach. He said, "Pray that effectual doors may be opened." We don't want to just walk a treadmill. We don't want to just exercise in good works. We want them to be effectual. And that's what Paul is saying. He said, "I make mention of you every day in my prayers. I love you and pray for you and I have heard about your love for Christ and your love for other people. And I pray that the exercise and communication of your faith and of your kindness and of your good works may become effectual." And watch this, "By the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. Oh, I tell you, Philemon, don't take credit for any good thing in you or of you because it is all in Christ. If there is good thing in you it's not there by nature. It's there by grace."

Isn't that what he is saying, Doug? He is saying, "We acknowledge...I acknowledge this. Every good thing which is in you is in Christ Jesus and from Christ Jesus and because of Christ Jesus." We can't take any praise or credit or glory for anything that we are, anything we have or anything we do. Sometimes we're tempted to do that and feel a little good about things. And I guess it's all right to feel good about feeling good or doing good, just so long as you don't take credit for it, as long as we remember that if it were not for his grace we would be the greatest rebel. So everything that is good in you is in Christ.

And then look at verse eight. Now, you know, he told him, in this letter John read he told him to receive Onesimus back. "Take him back. Take him back as a brother. Take him back and love him and forgive him and give him his work back and all these things."

And then verse eight Paul says, "Now, Philemon, though I might...therefore, though I might be much bold in Christ." And, I'll tell you, Christ gives his servants boldness. He said...and if a man is not bold in preaching and bold in the teaching of God's Word then he must not be God's servant because God's servants are bold. They have a boldness. To begin with they know, like Paul said, "I am not ashamed. I know whom I have believed. And I have a gospel that is so plain and clear to me that I say if an angel from heaven preaches any other gospel let him be accursed. I'm bold. God's servants are bold. They are not compromisers. They are not wishy washy. They are bold. They seek not to please men. And I might be bold in Christ to enjoin you to do that which is right." He said, "I could command you."

You know, our Lord told his disciples in Luke chapter 17—don't turn to it—he told his disciples, "If a brother trespasses against you, forgive him." And then he said to his disciples, "And if he trespass against thee forgive him again."

And Peter, I believe it was, said, "How many times? Seven times?"

And the Lord said, "Seventy times seven times."

That's a commandment. That's a commandment. Paul said, "I could...I could in Christ send Onesimus to you and command you to receive him. But," he said, "That's not the way I want it. That's not the way I want it. That's not the way it is going to be."

Verse nine, "Yet for love's sake." Oh, brother, dear friend, let's underscore those three words, "for love's sake." "For the sake of God's love for us, love one another as God loved you, as Christ loved you. Forgive one another as Christ forgave you. I say, dear Philemon, for love's sake, for the sake of God's love for us, for the sake of our love for him, for the sake of your love for me, for the sake of my love for you, for the sake of the love which we have for others, for love's sake I rather beseech you. I'm not going to command you."

You see that's what's wrong with all of this preaching today that puts people under oppression. I resent it. And I resent it for you. This thing of passing out pledge cards and saying, "The Bible commands you to tithe. You better do it or God will take it out the door in a coffin." I hate that kind of preaching. "You do this. You do that. You be here in the service every Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night or else," you know. Don't you hate that kind of preaching?

I like this kind of preaching for love's sake. That's the only kind that is worth anything. That's the one primary reason. He said, "Do it for love's sake. I rather beseech you being here is the fellow who is talking to you, Paul the aged and now a prisoner of Jesus Christ. And I beseech you for my son Onesimus who I have begotten in my bonds." In other words, "Here I am in prison and God let me be his instrument to preach the gospel to this young fellow and he has come to knowledge of Christ and I'm sending him back to you and asking you to receive him and forgive him and bless him and help him and don't do it because you have to. Do it because you want to. Do it for love's sake."

And verse 15, verse 14, you know, he said, "Without their mind I wouldn't do anything. I wouldn't keep him, but that thy benefit should not be, as it were, of necessity." Let's don't be motivated by necessity or duty or responsibility, but willingly.

Now verse 15. Now this is so interesting. "Perhaps he therefore departed for a season." The fact of the matter is he stole some things and ran away. He upset the whole household. I'm sure you can imagine when they started looking for him the next day Onesimus is gone and this is missing and that is missing and the other thing is missing and I'm sure Philemon must have said, "That ungrateful wretch."

You know, that's the way we would react. Here is a servant in our home and he has cleaned us out and he has gone off somewhere and we don't know where. And that good for nothing, ungrateful wretch, I gave him this and that and I'm kind to him and this is the way he repays me and Paul said, "Now, Philemon, let's get this thing in perspective. If you are angry, if you are upset by something someone has done through ill will or hatred or whatever, be comforted by the fact that maybe God is in this whole thing to bring him to Christ." That's what he is saying. "Perhaps he left you, he departed for a season that you should receive him forever. If he hadn't stolen those things and hadn't run away and

hadn't mistreated you and abused you he may not be coming back with this letter in his hand."

It's hard to see things that way, isn't it? All we can see is what has happened. But I tell you, if we are God's servants and we are God's people, I mean his people, his sons and children and daughters. And whatever it takes, "All things work together for good." Isn't that right? Whatever happens God will make it for good. I don't care what it is. Now, that doesn't say some things and most things or the greater part of things, but all things. Isn't that good?

Onesimus ran away from Philemon with evil in his heart, with stolen goods, but God almighty let him run right into the hands of the apostle Paul. If he hadn't have left Philemon he would have never been saved. He would have never been saved. I love that passage right there. We need to...I need to read that over and over again. "Perhaps he therefore departed for a season." And it was an upsetting season and a troublesome season and nobody but God knew the outcome, "that you should receive him forever."

Now, look at verse 17. Here is where most people preach this message and I'm going to dwell on it just a few seconds. "If thou count me therefore a partner, a brother, receive him as you would receive me. Receive him as you would receive me." That's a tall order, isn't it? But that's Paul's request. And here is his next. If he has wronged you or owes you anything you charge it to me. That's the gospel message right there.

Of course here was a run away rebel and there are some more runaway rebels, running from God. And the Lord Jesus Christ interceded. Now Paul is interceding for this man. He is interceding for Onesimus with his master. And my Lord Jesus Christ interceded for me with the heavenly Father and he said, "He has wronged you. It's not if he is wrong. He has wronged you and he owes you a lot. Charge it to me."

And he did. The Father charged it to him. And he paid it. "I'll repay it." And our Lord did pay it.

All right, quickly, verse 20, now. "Brother...brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord. Refresh my spirit." The word "bowels" in the Scripture usually means "my innermost being." They refer to the deep down. "I want you, Philemon, I want you to give me some joy. I want you to refresh my spirit."

And here Paul is in jail and there Philemon is down there in Colosse. How is Philemon going to give Paul joy and refresh his deepest innermost being in Christ? Do you know how? By receiving this man and by forgiving him and by doing what a believer ought to do. And I'll tell you this: There is nothing, there is nothing more encouraging to your brothers in Christ than to see you walking in compassion, truth and love. There is nothing that thrills our hearts quite like that. That's right.

John in 2 John kept using these two words: truth and love, truth and love, truth and love. He said, "My soul rejoices when my children walk in truth," the truth of the gospel, "and

love.” It refreshes him. Paul...and that’s what Paul is saying. When the word comes back to me and it will come back, I’ll know everything you did, I’ll know everything you said. It will come back to me. And what a joy...I would be so downcast and so blue and so unhappy to know that you reacted contrary. But when I hear that you embraced Onesimus like the father did the prodigal son and shed tears of joy over him, I’m just going to leap with joy. Isn’t that what he said? It’s going to make me so happy. It’s going to be glorifying to God. Let your light so shine that men may see your good works and glorify God. It’s going to be honoring to the gospel. You who preach the gospel, let’s put it in effect. Let’s adorn it. Let’s don’t love in word only, but in deed and truth. Let’s don’t just talk about what a man ought to be, what a man ought to do. Do it. It’s glorifying to God. It’s honoring to the gospel. It’s an example to others.

You will never know, perhaps on this earth, the influence you have been in just the slightest kindness and the slightest compassion and the slightest consideration. You will never know what effect of influence you have had on somebody else. You will never know. You will never know. God knows. You don’t have to know now. But that...just a word, a kindness, a forgiving spirit, a tender hand, a help, an assistance...you never know. They haven’t forgotten it.

And I tell you this: Works of faith confirm our faith. James says, “Faith without works is dead.” This thing of doctrine in creed only is dead. It’s that exercise, communication of faith. That’s what he calls in verse six a communication of faith.

What is communication? It is something going from one place to another, isn’t it? That’s real faith. And he said...look at verse 21. “But I have this confidence in you. I have...make me happy now by doing what you ought to do.” But he said in verse 21, “I’ve got this confidence in you and your obedience...having confidence in thy obedience. I wrote to you knowing that you will also do more than I say. You’re going to go the second mile. I just know that. I know my friend Philemon. I just...and I will be greatly disappointed if this is not true. But I know you are going to do a whole lot more than just what I say.” He’s going to do a whole lot more.

Isn’t that something? This is characteristic of God’s children. They don’t just do what they have to do or what they must do. They say, “What can I do?” That’s characteristic of God’s people.

All right. I close with this, verse 23. “There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus.” Do you see the name of the Lord Jesus is all the way through, all the way through? “My fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus.”

Here are these men: Paul, Mark, Luke, Aristarchus and probably Epaphras were all here in prison...a very...it’s like you and Bill and Ken last week, two weeks ago when they wouldn’t let you catch the plane, the police got after you and all this sort. But didn’t you have a little fellowship? Wasn’t you glad they was with you? What if you had been by yourself? And these fellows were in prison, but they had a fellowship. And I’ll tell you, that’s what our Lord was praying about over here in John 17. Turn over there just a

moment. This is a good note to close on. They had a fellowship. They had a family relationship and this is what our Lord prayed about in John 17, verse 20. Listen.

In John 17:20: “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one.” There is a oneness. “That the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.” That oneness of fellowship makes us fellow prisoners in the Lord, makes us fellow worshippers in the Lord, makes us fellow preachers of the gospel, makes us fellow workmen, fellow laborers, fellow whatever...fellowship.

Somebody asked brother Barnard one time, said, “What is fellowship?”

He said, “That’s fellows in the same ship and they are glad to be there.”

I’m glad for you, glad for you, glad for this fellowship. That’s protected by God’s grace. There’s...even come closer together.

All right. Mike’s... I don’t know what song you have selected, what number? 187?