

The Epistle of Philemon

Introduction:

- A. This epistle was not written concerning church business, nor does it teach some great doctrinal truth.
- B. It was written on behalf of a runaway slave named Onesimus:
 - 1. Onesimus had escaped but was captured, and in the providence of God and thrown in jail in Rome.
 - 2. Here he met the Apostle Paul, heard the Gospel and was saved.
 - 3. We are not told the circumstances concerning his release, but we do read that Paul tells him that he must return to his master.
 - 4. Slaves that ran away and returned to their master were usually put to death.
 - 5. However, the Apostle Paul knowing this writes the letter of Philemon for Onesimus to take with him when he returns.
 - 6. The letter is an apology for Onesimus, in which, the Apostle requests that his master receive him with kindness, and forgive him.
 - 7. Every word of this Epistle is very wisely put.

I. Verses 1&2

- A. **Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ** - The Apostle Paul begins by calling himself “a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”

- B. What Christian Brother would not grant him what he wished for when he was wearing a chain for the Lord's sake?
- C. If you received a letter from a beloved minister that you knew was in a dungeon, and most likely would be put to death very soon, you would be deeply touched and do your very best to do what he ask of you.

II. Verses 1b &2

“And Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house.”

- A. He joins Timothy with himself, to give double weight to the message.
- B. Philemon probably knew Timothy very well and highly respected him.
 - So by adding Timothy's name, there are two people asking him instead of one.
- C. Now notice the affectionate titles with which the Apostle addresses Philemon:
 - 1. “Our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer.”
- D. It is very likely that the person the Apostle calls “our beloved Apphia” was Philemon's wife.
 - 1. The Apostle includes her in the letter knowing that she would be likely to be more tender-hearted and might put in a good word for Onesimus, that her husband would all the more grant Paul's request.
 - 2. He also greets Archippus, who was the pastor of the church at Colossi.

Colossians 4:17, “And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.”

3. He also send greeting to those composing the church that met in Philemon’s house.
4. House churches were the common practice in this day and time.
5. House churches still exist and function, especially in countries like China or Saudi Arabia where Christians cannot meet publically or preach the Gospel openly.

III. Verses 3-7

“Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.”

- A. Even though this epistle is very small the Apostle uses the same salutation he used in the other epistles.
 1. Grace to you, and peace seems to be a word that was used inclusively of *all* the blessings that are applicable to Christians in common.
 2. It denotes an ardent wish that all the mercies and favors of God be conferred upon them.
 3. It is to be understood to imply invocation. I pray, or I desire that grace, etc., may be conferred on you.
 4. Peace is the state of freedom from war.

5. War conveys the idea of discord, calamities, and dangers, so peace is the opposite, and conveys the idea of safety, and prosperity.
- B. Paul recalls how much Philemon had done for the poor and persecuted saints.
 - C. When you are about to ask a favor of someone, it is wise to show your gratitude for what you or others have already received from him.

IV. Verses 8 -9

“Therefore though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love’s sake I rather beseech thee, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”

- A. In effect the Apostle says, I am an apostle, and humanly speaking your spiritual father, so I might have spoken to you as an authority figure and said, it is your duty to do this; but I am not going to do that.
 1. Instead I am going to ask you to do it as a favor to me.
 2. And in granting my favor you will be paying loving tribute to my old age.
 3. He again mentions the fact that now a prisoner of Jesus Christ.
 4. This plea would make it very hard for Philemon to refuse the request of the aged apostle who was suffering in prison for his stand for the Lord.
 5. Surly Philemon would do what he could to lessen the sorrows of Paul’s confinement.

V. Verse 10

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.”

- A. The order of the sentence in **Greek** is: "I entreat thee concerning a son of mine, whom I have begotten in my bonds—Onesimus."
- Here Onesimus is not named until Paul had mentioned that Onesimus was also spiritual son given him by the Lord as fruit of his labor while in prison.

VI. Verses 11-12

Verse 11, “Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.”

- The Apostle now tells Philemon why he should receive him back.
- In the past he was not a good slave, but now he will be profitable to you and to me.

Verse 12, “Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels.”

- A. He was your slave; therefore I have sent him back to you.
1. Paul had no civil power, and certainly no way of making Onesimus return to Colossi and his master.
 2. There is no evidence that Paul told him to go to Colossi against his own will (verse 13), or that he would have sent him away at all unless Onesimus desired to return.
- B. The use of the term “mine own bowels” says phrased “one whom I so tenderly love that he seems to carry my heart with him wherever he goes.”

VII. Verses 13-14

“Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: but without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.”

1. Paul tells Philemon that he would not have sent him back, but kept him to help him and to be his companion.
2. Yet he did not do so, even though he felt like Philemon would willingly consent to it.
3. Instead he sent him back that you may do as you please with him.”
4. Again this passage gives us the indication that Onesimus returning to his master was his own idea.

VIII. Verses 15-17

“For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.”

- A. Paul says that in the providence of God, this was permitted that Onesimus might be brought under the influence of the gospel, and be far more serviceable to Philemon as a Christian, than he could have been in his former relation to him.
- B. So what appeared to be a wrong on the part of Onesimus might have been permitted that he might receive a higher benefit.
- C. These verses closely resemble the words of our Lord in Matthew 18:5, “And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.”

1. It is almost like Paul is saying, “This poor child is in fellowship with me. Receive him, therefore, as myself.”
2. That is exactly what God does in the case of repenting and believing sinners; he receives them because He sees Christ in them.

IX. Verse 18

“If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account.”

- A. The Apostle Paul states the matter very delicately.
 1. He does not say that he had wronged him, but rather makes a supposition that he might have.
 2. I’m sure that Philemon believed that he had, even if he had done nothing more than escaping from him.
 3. However, Philemon viewed it, Paul asked that he charge it to his account rather than hold it against Onesimus.
- B. The same principle is true in imputation. The Lord Jesus Christ voluntarily assumed the elect sinners place and was treated as if He had been a sinner, thus paying our sin debt and setting us free.

X. Verse 19

“I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.”

- A. Paul had been the means God used to bring about Philemon’s conversion, The Apostle Paul gently reminds him of it as a reason why he should deal kindly with Onesimus for his sake.

XI. Verse 20

“Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.”

- A. “Let me have joy of thee in the Lord” indicates that if this request was granted, Paul would recognize the hand of the Lord in it, and would receive it as a favor from Him.
- B. Refresh my bowels means “Gratify the earnest longing of my soul.”

XII. Verse 21

“Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.”

- A. Roberts says that “Do more than what I say” can only mean that Paul “knows” (due to the verb tense) that Philemon will set Onesimus free. He prefers that it be Philemon’s idea and wish, rather than a command from Paul.
- B. Most scholars believe that Philemon did as Paul wished, even though we have no record of the fact.

XIII. Verses 22-25

“But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen”

- A. The Apostle Paul told Philemon to have a place ready for him to stay because he believed that the Lord would allow him to leave prison because of the prayers that were being offered up in his behalf.
- B. Salute Epaphras – Epaphras was a Colossian and well know preacher in the church at Colossi.

- C. It is very likely that he visited the Apostle at one time during his Roman imprisonment.
- D. Also greet “Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas.”
1. Marcus was Barnabas’s nephew. He was the son of that Mary, in whose house the church met, and prayed for Peter when he was in prison.
 2. He was also known as John Mark, whom Saul and Barnabas took along with them to Antioch, and caused contention between Saul and Barnabas. He later reconciled with the Apostle Paul who called him a faithful minister of the Gospel.
 3. Aristarchus was a Macedonian of Thessalonica; or very likely another convert of the Apostle Paul who followed him and helped him wherever he went.
 4. He was with him at the uproar caused by Demetrius at Ephesus. He also accompanied him into Asia and went with him in his voyage to Rome.
 5. Demas is mentioned in II Timothy 4:10. From this epistle it seems that he was restored.
 6. Lucas is the beloved physician, the constant companion of the apostle in his travels. He also wrote the book of Acts.
 7. By using the plural “your” the apostle in effect directs the epistle, not only to Philemon, but to all the Church at his house.

Conclusions:

- A. There seems to be an allusion to a deeper application to this book.

B. The application refers to the mediation and intercession of Christ for poor sinners.

1. We like Onesimus revolted from God and wronged him.

“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

2. But the Lord Jesus Christ sought us, and by his grace changes us.
3. Then He intercedes on our behalf with the Father, that we might be forgiven and received back into his favor.
4. There is no reason to doubt that the Apostle Paul prevailed and Philemon forgave and receive Onesimus back.
5. Since we know that the Father always hears the Lord Jesus Christ we have all the more reason to be confident that we are accepted through Christ intercession with the Father.

“To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”