

# Books of The Bible

## A Survey of Philemon - Further Considerations

### Introduction

In reading the books of the New Testament, there can be observed:

- a) Instructions for one who is wronged
- b) Instructions for the wrong doer
- c) What ought to have been done and that which the assembly had failed to do
- d) And the order of discipline

However, there is little to tell us in what attitude things which are delicate are to be handled. In dealing with an individual who has gone astray, the Holy Spirit, through Paul, informs the saints of the character of the individuals who ought to seek to draw such an one back into fellowship with God (Gal. 6:1).

This is where Philemon comes in. It is a case history of how to deal with delicate situations between two saints. There was the rights of an earthly slave owner and a slave who was a believer.

- a) The first observation is that salvation did not change the earthly position of the slave to the master. Onesimus was still the slave of Philemon! He was owned by Philemon. Salvation does not eradicate earthly governmental situations. If an individual becomes a believer when in jail for murder etc., he still has to serve his sentence. Salvation does not remove that sentence.
- b) That which we are faced with is, "To what extent does the grace of God affect this situation? Is the individual simply to forgive as the Lord told in the parable?" (Lk. 7:41-42).

In this letter, Paul is a supplicant to Philemon and for Onesimus.

- a) To Philemon he is an advocate and like the Lord, righteously faces the wrongs done and does not ignore them (1 Jn. 2:1-2). Furthermore, Paul declares that He will honor any loss Philemon knew through the thievery of Onesimus (v.18).
- b) For Onesimus, Paul pleads for him on the grounds of grace (v.19), not only earthly ("in the flesh" v.16), but also spiritual relationship ("in the Lord" v.16).

In the early days of the church, the homes of the saints were where the saints met together. Consequently, we read:

- a) "Greet the church that is in their house", that is the home of Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:5).
- b) "Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them" (Rom. 16:15).
- c) "Nymphas, and the church which is in his house" (Col. 4:15).
- d) "The church in thy house" (Phil. 1:2)

### The Recipient

Because Philemon's name is written first, it indicates that he was the principle person written to (v.1). Furthermore, he was the one responsible for the acceptance or rejection of Onesimus (v.10). He was obviously a well to do man who owned slaves. He lived with his wife Apphia and possibly his son Archippus (v.2). It is understood that Philemon was saved under the ministry of Paul (v.19), which must have happened while Paul was enroute somewhere since he had not yet been to Colossae. While the saints met in his home (v.2), he was not the founder of the church (Col. 1:7, 4:12, 17). His salvation was very real for when Paul wrote to him, he is called "dearly beloved" and "fellowlabourer" (v.1), and "Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints" (v.5).

### Author

There is no doubt that the author of this little letter is Paul for he speaks of himself three times:

- a) "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (v.1)
- b) "I beseech thee . . . as Paul the aged" (v.9)
- c) "I Paul have written it with mine own hand" (v.19).

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### Historical Reason For The Writing

Onesimus had in time past been a slave of Philemon. He was a Colossian (Col. 4:9) and possibly a family relative (v.16, note the words “in the flesh”). It is foolish speculation to try to determine why Onesimus ran away from Philemon, what he stole, or how he came in contact with Paul and heard the gospel. The major point is that he not only heard the gospel but accepted the free gift of God and became a real benefit to Paul. However, Paul could not keep him but must send him back to Philemon. This letter is Paul’s exhortation to Philemon that he might forgive Onesimus, and having received him as a brother, release him to serve with Paul.

### Suggested Key Verse

“I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds” (v.10).

### Aspects of God

Onesimus had been, and was still, a runaway slave, but now was not only converted but had shown a genuine desire for the work of the Lord. The difficulty was, if Paul sends him back to his master, (Philemon), then he deserves cruel punishment, for not only did he run away, but also stole from Philemon. Since Onesimus was now a believer, how can Paul encourage Philemon to withdraw the due punishment, yet not minimize the wrongness of the deed? It demanded great wisdom, but God encourages us to ask for wisdom when needed, and that is what He supplied Paul with (Jam. 1:5).

### Doctrines Presented

It is noticeable that in Philemon no major doctrines are taught, however, something more important than the teaching of major doctrines is seen, it is the practical outliving of those doctrines. This book is filled with practical Christianity.

- 1) The doctrine of fellowship. Four clauses are used to emphasize this.
  - a) In verses 7, 16, 20; Paul uses the term “brother” indicating the fact of fellowship.
  - b) In verse 1; He speaks of Philemon as “dearly beloved” indicating the genuineness and depth of fellowship.
  - c) In verses 5 & 7; He will refer to love, faith and joy, indicating the demonstration of fellowship.
  - d) In verse 1; He wrote of “fellowlabourer” and in verse 2, “fellowsoldier”, indicating the reality of fellowship.
- 2) The doctrine of christian obligations.
  - a) When Paul preached or proclaimed the gospel, it did contain the truth “Jesus is Lord”. Salvation was never meant to be a mere escape from Hell and a nice comfortable hereafter. Neither does salvation change previous or present obligations and boundaries. A slave was still a slave. If Onesimus accepted Christ as Saviour and Lord, he was under the Christian obligation to go back to Philemon and face that which was determined, and if possible, make restitution for that which he had stolen. I have no doubt that this would have caused him troublesome considerations. He could not have salvation and not go back, it was either salvation and go back facing the consequences or rejecting Christ as Lord.
- 3) The doctrine of grace demonstrated.
  - a) Every attribute of God is unfathomable and immeasurable, and when Paul speaks of it he will use adjective expressions. He wrote of “abundant grace” (2 Cor. 4:15); “exceeding grace” (2 Cor. 9:14); “the glory of His grace” (Eph. 1:6); and “the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7) for he was a man who, in heart, appreciated the marvelous grace of God. That grace was seen in himself for Paul was once a religious pharisee, a scourge to the saints (Acts 9:1), yet through grace he was saved. Also,

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Onesimus, a pathetic slave, a thief and a runaway, was by God's grace saved and a man who was a blessing to Paul.

#### Words and Plays on Words In Philemon

Paul uses five words/clauses which are found nowhere else in the scriptures. They are: "unprofitable" (v.11); "willingly" (v.14); "let me have joy", better "let me have profit" (v.20); "owest. . . besides" (v. 19); "repay" (v.19).

Paul plays on at least two words. In mentioning Onesimus whose name means "profitable", despite his unprofitability to Philemon, Paul asked that he might have profit from Philemon (v.20). Also, in verse 11 he speaks of Onesimus "unprofitable", but now is "profitable" ("serviceable" to me).

#### Aspects of The Truths of The Book Relative To Divine Persons

In every book of the Bible there are, to my understanding, four major observations to be made which are: Its revelation of salvation, God, Christ, and the Spirit.

- 1) In Philemon there is brought to our attention the truth of salvation and its transforming power.
  - a) To the ancient saints Paul wrote, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). This was a truth Paul not only knew but lived in the reality of. He who had been a persecutor of the saints (Acts 9:1) was at conversion a changed man.
  - b) Onesimus, who was a thief, was now a giver, giving his time and energy to the work of the Lord with Paul.
- 2) The manifestation of God's sovereignty.
  - a) One of the aspects of God clearly shown is His sovereignty as in the bringing of Onesimus into contact with Paul. There are many questions we would like to know the answers to but this is another aspect of God, He does not disclose all we would want to know but all that is needful for us to know. From what I understand, the city of Rome had some two million people and many of them slaves. It was an ideal place to run away from a master and Christian influence. While God, in His sovereignty, never caused Onesimus to run away, yet God used it to bring him into not only christian company and to be with the great evangelist Paul, but to make him aware of his need for salvation. God was in control of events and while Onesimus had no idea of the overruling hand of God, later he could have looked back and recognized it. He is the Source of peace and grace (v.3), and enables an individual to have a loftier perspective on things and happenings (v.15).
  - b) Praying to God is not speaking into the wind but is a high honor of being able to speak to the Supreme authoritative One (vv. 4, 22).
- 3) The manifestation of Christ.
  - a) In Philemon Paul is viewed as a mediator and is so set in contrast to Christ as Mediator. See "Christ In All The Scriptures", Philemon.

#### The Peculiarity of Philemon, A Case History

In reading the scriptures there are numerous examples of those who interceded for others. One can readily think of Abraham when he interceded for "Sodom and Gomorrah" (Gen. 18:23-33), or Lot when he interceded for Zoar (Gen. 19:20-22). God favourably answered Lot's prayer but not Abraham's, which at first glance is rather amazing, but the reason is clear. Abraham prayed on the grounds of man's merit, but man is underserving of any merit from God and consequently judgment falls. Lot prayed on the ground of God's mercy and judgment was spared. We have an intercessor who will never pray on the ground of fallen man's merit, but on the foundation of His own precious blood.

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The Spirit caused Jeremiah to write, “Then said the LORD unto me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of my sight, and let them go forth” (Jer. 15:1). Thank God we have an intercessor who, when He intercedes for us, will never be told that the mind of the Lord could never be toward us, cast them out of my sight.

- a) In Matt. 18:15-17 an individual has been offended and the Lord informs them that they do not ideally need an intercessor, they are to work things out themselves, at least try to.
- b) In the church at Philippi there were two ladies who did not see eye to eye. Paul exhorted them to be of the same mind but he did not act as a mediator (Phil. 4:3).
- c) Joab and the woman act as mediators for Absalom (2 Sam. 14:1-21).

These men were great interceders but all fail in comparison with the Lord. These were ordinary men but the Lord is, “God manifest in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16), who was “made of the seed of David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3), but never for a split moment of time ceased to be God. Paul, when writing to the Galatians, wrote a stupendous statement, “A mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one” (Gal. 3:20).

### Lessons From Philemon

In this letter there are several major lessons for the christian in this modern world, some of which are:

- a) Salvation does not nullify the relationships of the past. Onesimus was a slave and whatever caused him to be such is of no consequence. His salvation did not dissolve that slave / master relationship.
- b) Salvation is the forgiveness of God but that does not eradicate the wrongs done toward men. The wrongs of the past must be faced and if possible rectified. This was a principle of the Old and New Testaments for it is the moral character of God that demands it.

God let Onesimus run away. He could have stopped him but did not. Philemon could have caught him but there is no mention of him going after Onesimus. God had bigger purposes in mind. By Onesimus running away, Philemon, as a believer, was brought into circumstances which measured his spiritual development. It was not just taking Onesimus back but how he was to receive him, as if he was Paul. David took Absalom back but he was at a distance. Then a second matter must have crossed Philemon’s mind. If he sent Onesimus back to Paul, was it just a way of avoiding any possibility of future trouble and loss from him, or was he sending him back for the glory of God? If he kept him would there be the temptation to make his life hard because of that which had been done?

### The Thought Flow And Structure

Reference	Theme
Verses 1-3	Greeting
Verses 4-7	Paul’s approach built on the character of Philemon
Verses 8-16	Paul’s argument built on the conversion of Onesimus
Verses 17-25	Paul’s appeal built on the confidence he has in Philemon

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**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.  
John 16:13**

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