

THE
STUDY
ON
PHILEMON
REDEMPTION
DRAMATIZED
By
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“Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”—Philemon 1-3.

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Preface—by Grace and Glory Publications

Paul's letter to Philemon is a supplement to his epistle to the Colossians. The church in Colosse met in Philemon's home.

The letter was written in behalf of Onesimus, whom the apostle terms his spiritual son. The author of these notes has captured the epistle and made it the vehicle of some precious spiritual lessons. Read and rejoice.

Note from Publisher:

Grace Assembly is privileged to publish and post this commentary on our Web Site, www.graceassemblysandiego.com. We believe these commentaries rank among the best for Bible students who desire to learn about the Word of God and the Pauline Revelation. These commentaries were written during the early days of the latter rain outpour of God's Spirit and they continue to provide enlightenment to the reader. These are the original writings of the authors. Grace Assembly has not made any changes or additions to these writings other than format changes for the convenience of the Bible student. In the left hand column we have added the King James Bible version as it applies to the commentary on that page. Where the authors have referred to scripture references without quoting the scripture in the text, we have added the scripture as a footnote. In some places the authors have referred to Bible versions other than the King James. Since Grace Assembly holds to the King James Version as the preserved text, we, therefore, have added in the text the same scripture from the King James Version. We trust these ancillary changes will be helpful to the Bible student.

Philemon KJV

Chapter 1

1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy *our* brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,

1:2 And to *our* beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:

1:3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1:4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,

1:5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;

1:6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

Philemon Commentary

Introduction

The Apostle Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote this little letter to his friend Philemon. He sent it by the hand of Tychicus and Onesimus, at the same time that he sent the epistle to Colosse—¹Colossians 4:7-9. Timothy was associated with Paul in writing this letter, as was the case in several of his epistles. He was “likeminded” with Paul, as the latter declares—²Philippians 2:20.

Salutation

As was a custom of the apostle, he pronounced grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ upon those to whom he wrote; for Apphia and Archippus were also mentioned at the opening of the letter. Paul was always profuse in his thanksgiving to God for the grace shown to him, as well as His blessings upon others, as is the case here. He was also a man of prayer, mentioning the saints always before the throne of grace; especially when he heard of their “love and faith” which they had “toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints.” We naturally would think that such overcoming folk, filled with love and faith, needed no prayers; but not so did our dear spiritual father Paul infer. He knew the wiles of Satan. He had experienced something and somewhat of his darts. He realized that his power is exerted and his devilish hate manifested in great measure against those that are going in the way of victory; hence, he prayed for all these at all times. The following tells us to what purpose he entreated for them.

“That the communication (fellowship) of thy faith may become effectual (workable).” That is, that others may be benefited. “Others” may be written over every page of Paul’s writings. It was his deep-seated desire—yea, the absorbing passion of his life—to do good to others. He insisted that he was a debtor to all men, and he desired to pay all that he owed—³Romans 1:14. He also wanted all saints to realize their obligation in this direction. It is good to have faith and love in us, but that is not enough. Paul desired it to be fruitful, or communicated to others. Thus their faith and love would not be in word only, but in deed also.

¹ Colossians 4:7-9 “All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, *who is* a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is *one* of you. They shall make known unto you all things which *are done* here.”

² Philippians 2:20 “For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state.”

³ Romans 1:14 “I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise.”

1:7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

1:8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

1:9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech *thee*, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

1:10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

1:11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

1:12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

1:13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

1:14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

The Christian life must make progress, so the apostle always taught. This comes by way of knowledge of God's purposes for us, these being accepted and made practical in our life as is here stated—by the acknowledgment or knowledge of every good thing which is in us as well as in you—Verse 6. The mutual joy and consolation experienced upon this Christian pathway is wonderful. The depths of our being are refreshed, when we hear of the uplifting and blessing of the Gospel in the lives of others. The saints comfort one another by their progress, thus growing up into Christ in all things. Paul was strengthened and comforted through the love manifested by Philemon and the other over-comers at Colosse—Verse 7.

A Tactful Entreaty

“Wherefore, 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 an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds”—Verses 8-10.

Paul declared that he had authority to command the obedience of Philemon and other saints; but he did not use the power. Oh, what a marvelous condition of soul! What a great victory the apostle enjoyed over the despotic “bossy” old man. He relinquished the authority he might have insisted upon, and asked Philemon's obedience as a favor to himself. He called attention not so much to his age, as it would appear from the text, but to his dignity as an elder of the Church and an ambassador of Christ (though at the time of writing he says he was His prisoner). He was beseeching that favor be shown to Onesimus, a former slave, by Philemon. Onesimus, he said, was the fruit of his labor while he was in bonds. That is, he was saved in Rome while Paul was in prison there.

He further stated that Onesimus was not profitable before; but is now so changed that he is profitable not only to Paul, but will be so in the future to Philemon. “Onesimus” means “profitable.” The apostle apparently makes a play upon words here. He said that Onesimus had not lived up to his name heretofore; but now he will be profitable or useful in the fullest degree—Verse 11.

Paul besought Philemon to receive him, even as he, Paul, and so deal with him. For though he desired to keep Onesimus with him, yet he would not do so without Philemon's permission. He did not desire, as he said formerly, to insist on his authority; but wanted Philemon voluntarily to yield and receive Onesimus—no more as a servant but, as he, Paul, had received him, a brother beloved.

Oh, yes, sin has leveled all men. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”—Romans 3:23. But grace also levels, or makes all men

1:15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

1:16 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?

1:17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

1:18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth *thee* ought, put that on mine account;

1:19 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.

1:20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.

1:21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.

equal. In the new creation, all who believe are brethren, beloved of God and of one another. Hence, Paul wrote, “If thou count me therefore a partner (comrade), receive him as myself”—Verse 17. What condescending love and fellowship are exhibited to that erstwhile erring runaway slave! It is Divine. The apostle also said that probably Onesimus had “departed for a season” that he might be received back—not for a short time, but “for ever.” He further stated, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account.” He affirmed emphatically with his own hand in writing, “I will repay it”—Verses 18, 19.

That was truly grace shown out in a wonderful degree. Paul put Philemon under obligation to obey him—not by authority, but by the constraint of love. “Albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.”

Oh, yes, this is diplomatic surely and marvelously so. Paul was writing by the Holy Spirit. He was catching Philemon with guile; but it was Divine guile that does not harm but rather does good. That was the only kind of guile in which the apostle dealt—Holy Spirit guile. “Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord,” he added. It is always in order to be courteous. Some folk imagine that to be true to God and the Word we should be rough and ready. They think that politeness is not a necessary asset in the Christian life; but Paul did not so think. According to this letter, he actually spread on the honey and made no apology for it. He said in another letter, “If meat make my brother to offend”—that is, be disturbed or hindered on the Christian racecourse—“I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend”—I Cor. 8:13. He might have added, “If kindness or praise or courtesy make my brother happier or more victorious, I will not spare my words on this line.” Paul made himself “all things to all men,” that he “might by all means save some”—I Cor. 9:22. Spurgeon said, “Many preachers and self-appointed leaders make themselves all things to all men that they may save a sum.” But not so our apostle. He labored at his own expense for the welfare of others; hence, he could exhort with the authority that comes from the throne above. He courteously entreated. We may often cause people to disobey the admonitions of the Scriptures by our manner of exhortation. The lack of spirit diplomacy is often keenly felt. Holy Spirit tact is a wonderful mollifier, as Paul learned. It is like unto the ointment that was poured upon Aaron’s head, and ran “down to the skirts of his garments.” It often heals friction and causes the “brethren to dwell together in unity”—Psalm 133:2.

A Hope of Freedom

“But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you”—Verse 22.

1:22 But withal prepare me also a lodging; for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.

1:23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;

1:24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.

1:25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul was expecting to be set at liberty, which he, no doubt, experienced later; but he was again apprehended, as we learn from history, and died under the reign of Nero a Roman emperor. He was beheaded by the sword outside the city, even as his beloved Lord was taken and died outside the city of Jerusalem.

Epaphras was with Paul in Rome when he wrote to Philemon, but not a prisoner in the same sense as was the apostle. He perhaps voluntarily shared the apostle's imprisonment by taking up his residence with him for a while; hence, he saluted Philemon, as did also Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas and Lucas. Those were his fellow laborers, as he writes—Verses 23, 24. Dear noblemen of God! They shared Paul's sorrows and pain, and they will share in his reward. Then followed the benediction, which was customary in so many of his epistles. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen"—Verse 25.

What Occasioned the Epistle?

This letter was written as the result of Paul's deep interest in Onesimus, a slave who had fled from Colosse to Rome to escape from Philemon his master who was a rich and influential man of that city. We say that was the reason, but only on the surface. The greater reason for this letter lies hidden. The Lord always used circumstances or providence in some assembly, or as with this case in some individual life, to call forth a letter on a special line or need. So with the Philemon epistle, which we will learn as we note some facts.

It is claimed that the Phrygian slave was the lowest and most debased of all types to be found in heathendom. They displayed the very worst traits of character which their servile condition developed. Onesimus probably was no exception. We would infer from Paul's words that he helped himself to his master's goods when he ran away. Somehow he reached Rome, the great center of the empire of that name, with a youthful yearning no doubt to see the greatest city in splendor and vice that the world had to offer.

Captured by the Spirit

But God had His eye on that stripling youth. He might escape Philemon, but he could not get away from the greater Master—the Lord. He came in touch with Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, a prisoner in Rome for the sake of the Gospel as he declared. Onesimus was cast into the same prison, probably for some crime which he had committed. He received the due reward for his sins; while it may be written of Paul and his imprisonment, even as was said of Jesus on the Cross, "This Man hath done nothing amiss"—Luke 23:41. But God was in all of those circumstances. They worked good for Paul and for the repentant Onesimus. The runaway slave of

Philemon, no doubt, un-bosomed himself to his fellow prisoner—the slave of Jehovah—who could not run away from his Master and would not if he could. He was persuaded to accept the Gospel which he had so often heard in his master’s house, and he was saved.

It is not stated how long he remained with Paul in prison; but, this much is clear, it was long enough for the apostle to realize that Onesimus was no ordinary criminal regardless of the fact of his former record. He made himself almost indispensable to Paul, as we are able to read between the lines. He learned to love and appreciate him as a brother in the Lord; but he did not feel that he could conscientiously keep him without Philemon’s consent. Hence, he sent him back to his former master. He also desired his friend to see and appreciate the great change that had been made in his erstwhile slave by his acceptance of Christ. Therefore, he wrote this letter and gave it to Onesimus to deliver to Philemon. That was another strategic stroke on Paul’s part. Here is a prolific spiritual lesson. We carry in our hands the very promises of Christ, which demand access to God’s grace. We may present them to the Father and receive their fulfillment in our lives. For example, Jesus said in His prayer—“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”—John 17:22, 23. Let us hold this word before the Father and enjoy the glory.

Scholars claim that this little letter is a masterpiece of diction, as well as of diplomacy. Politeness is here combined with a naturalness which is truly captivating. Its manly and straightforward statement of facts, with its marvelous expression of appeal, charms and persuades as a breath of perfume from a garden of flowers. It is a beautiful example of Christian love. May we learn its lessons.

Who Was Philemon?

Philemon was an influential Christian man. The church at Colosse met in his house, as we read in verse two. His name signifies, “alone that kisses.” Apphia, the woman mentioned in connection with him, was probably his wife. Her name means, “a dear one” or “one that produces.” She was a fruitful useful saint of that assembly.

Archippus, the third character mentioned here, was probably the pastor of the assembly gathered in Philemon’s house—at least in the absence of Epaphras—¹Col. 4:12. We would infer this from the meaning of his name, “governor of the horses, or racers”; also from the fact that Paul warns him to “take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it”—Colossians 4:17.

¹ Colossians 4:12 “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.”

Symbolic Illumination

All these facts are interesting; but it is when we see the spiritual value of this little letter that it assumes some real importance. Then we are transported with delight at its truth. Oh! It makes the Scriptures so perfect, so dependable, so satisfying, and so instructive.

Someone has dared to say that there are no typical teachings in Paul's letters, or in the whole of the New Testament. Others, just as ignorantly bold, have taken up the saying and repeated it as Gospel truth. But such are entirely mistaken. Herein are hidden some great treasures—in spiritual lore. Here typical teaching opens up and reveals itself, as we meditate upon the epistle.

Let us look upon Philemon, that godly influential gentleman of Colosse, as a type of God. Does that surprise you? Why should it? Abraham (Genesis 22 and 24) and the Pharaoh in connection with Joseph (Genesis 41) are types of God. This all Bible students admit. Philemon's name, signifying "he that kisses," most beautifully expresses "the God of all grace." "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" to redeem humanity, and take those who believe to His heart of love and kiss them into life.

Onesimus, "the profitable," figures each one of Adam's race who hears the Gospel and repents and believes; and, thus, comes into fellowship with Christ and God. We were not profitable to God, neither were we living in the power of our name in our ruined estate; but after we were reconciled we became profitable, even as Onesimus, to God as well as men. We then became His slave forever, not by constraint, but of love.

Paul, "the little man," represents Christ the Go-between, the Daysman. He interposed Himself. He filled up the breach that separated God from man, and brought them together. Thus, we have the reconciliation effected by Christ on the Cross, figured most wondrously by this little letter to Philemon.

Let us note some more proof-positive facts along the line of correspondence. Paul, a type of Christ, was a common friend of both Philemon and Onesimus. He loved them both; though he was acquainted with Philemon, type of God, years before he met Onesimus. He knew him from the beginning, as it were, as his equal, his partner, his comrade, and friend.

Onesimus he met later in prison, where he had become identified with him as a wrongdoer; though it was not because of any fault of Paul's that he was there. Onesimus was a criminal, and not at all the equal of Paul (the man of letters and refinement) either morally, socially, or spiritually. He was a robber, a fugitive from justice, and a runaway slave; while the apostle was the opposite of all that. He was a holy, God-fearing, free man when he met

Onesimus. But when the latter accepted Christ, he became Paul's equal before God if not before man, as to his standing. They were then brothers in a new creation, joined in a bond of life that never can be broken.

Man Brought to God

Furthermore, it was Paul figuring Christ, that brought Philemon and Onesimus together. He assumed all the obligation that was upon the former slave with all its consequences, saying that he would repay all the debt. He gracefully reminded Philemon that he was under obligation to him. What favor Paul had bestowed on Philemon, that put him into his debt, is not recorded. It is quite reasonable to suppose that he was saved from heathendom and sin under Paul's untiring toils. Even so, Christ can say to His Father and God, that He is in His Son's debt. By His death on the Cross Jesus Christ, the Man, has put God in His debt as it were; for, thereby, He has brought man back to his Creator. Man, even as Onesimus, had departed from God for a season that he might be received back forever. Hallelujah!

Observe the diplomatic stroke of Paul. He waived justice, and simply begged that grace be shown to Onesimus. He acknowledged that he had failed his master; but he took him under his wing, as it were, and said to Philemon, "Take him back and forgive him for my sake." Oh, can you not see the parallel? It is surely fragrant of Calvary and its results to us. Paul sent the unprofitable servant back to Philemon to be received as a partner of his, yes, even as himself. Hence, there was no other course open to Philemon. He perforce must yield to the request of the little man to whom he owed so much. He was in Paul's debt, as it were; though the latter only gracefully touched this point. It is a marvelous picture. All the debt of Onesimus with its attendant results were laid over upon the shoulders of Paul. He wrote with his own hand, emphatically declaring, "I will repay it"—Verse 19.

Who can say that this is not typical of the glorious victory of Calvary? There Christ, the mighty Kinsman-Redeemer, made Himself a party of the first part to pay all the debt we owed to God. He took upon Himself all our obligations and our bankrupt condition; and, in that way, He has put all to right between God and man. He has put all His assets, as the incomparable God-Man, to our credit on the ledger of God's book. He sets all these assets over against our debts and inquires of the heavenly tribunal, "Is it not enough?" The answer is recorded, "Yea, yea, it is more than sufficient to cover all their indebtedness." We may come to God with Christ's letter in our hands and say, "He has written, 'I will repay'."

Hallelujah! Our hearts are joyful. Praise wells up in our whole being at the wondrous grace which God has bestowed on man. We sing with great glee.