

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 18 – Philemon

Paul's letter to Philemon is very different from every other book of the New Testament, not teaching doctrine so much, but clearly displaying sound doctrine in the lives of people who are being transformed by God's saving grace in Christ. It was written at the same time as the letter to the Colossians, was delivered by the same messengers, and Philemon was a member of that church in Colosse.

Philemon was a Christian, had been converted years earlier under Paul's ministry, and, more than that, he was also a wealthy businessman who tried to use his money to enhance the kingdom of God. It should be noted, too, that he was a slave-owner at a time when that was more widely accepted. Onesimus, on the other hand, had once been a slave of Philemon. He had robbed his master, fled from that area, ultimately made it to Rome, and while there was also converted under Paul's ministry. Onesimus proved in time to be a true disciple of Christ, someone altogether trustworthy and a great help to Paul.

As one might well imagine, however, this peculiar circumstance became a problem for the apostle. On the one hand, he wanted to keep Onesimus in his service – he really did not want to lose him – but, on the other hand, he recognized that he could not retain Onesimus without permission from Philemon. Therefore, with Tychicus having these two letters in hand, to the Colossians and to Philemon, Paul sent Onesimus back to Colosse to face his former master.

Philemon is asked to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself, with open arms and a loving embrace, and the apostle further requests that, if there is any debt yet to be paid, it should be put to Paul's own account – though the debt of Philemon to Paul is already more than can be repaid.

It is true that we do not normally read any book of the Bible in this light, but this epistle to Philemon clearly sets the standard for all letter-writing. It shows courtesy to the one who is addressed, respect for the one it is written about, and gentleness with compassion are found oozing out of every sentence. Above all, it is an expression of Christ-like love and serves as a powerful witness to all the world of what it means to live the Christian life, loving God with all one's heart and one's neighbour as himself.

This letter is directed to Philemon, as I say, but it is clear that others in the church were meant to read it also (v.2). Paul begins by expressing his appreciation for Philemon, acknowledging the outward demonstration of his love and faith, and how it is that many believers have been refreshed by means of him (vv. 4-7).

The apostle then goes on to request of Philemon that he receive Onesimus, that he receive him not merely as a slave any longer but now as a brother in Christ. Paul himself would be so greatly refreshed if he did so take him in, and what is more, knowing Philemon as he does, the apostle is confident that he will do even more than what he is asking him to do (vv. 8-22).

Besides Paul's love and respect for his fellow believers, what stands out bright as a beacon in this letter is the amazing grace of God in the salvation of Onesimus. Was this man not an unprofitable sinner, someone altogether unworthy (as we all are) of divine favour? Yet here he is, a new creation in Christ Jesus and wholly consecrated to the Lord. What a transformation of character and demonstration of God's sanctifying grace! His name means "useful," and so the apostle finds him to be, someone made useful in serving others and a blessing from God.

It could not have been easy for Onesimus to go back to Philemon, knowing that his former master could put him to death – as slave-owners had every legal right to do to runaway slaves who had absconded with their possessions – nevertheless, Onesimus was eager to do the right thing and was prepared to submit to whatever penalty might be imposed upon him.

How did Philemon respond to this dramatic and wholly unexpected turn of events? We do not know, for we are not told. Tradition has it that Onesimus was released from all legal obligation to Philemon, following which he returned to Rome and continued to minister to the needs of Paul. We should not simply assume that to be the case, of course, but, with the apostle's own confidence in Philemon's reputation and commitment to doing what is right and good and pleasing to the Lord, it is difficult to imagine anything else.

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