

The Epistle to Philemon

Introduction

This beautiful little letter addressed by Paul to Philemon does not occupy the right place in the New Testament. It should be put after the Epistle to the Colossians, for it was written at the same time as that Epistle. Tychicus carried from Rome the two Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians. Onesimus, his travelling companion, received from the prisoner of the Lord this personal letter to Philemon. It was therefore written at the same time as Colossians, during the first imprisonment of the Apostle Paul, about the year 61 or 62. Its genuineness cannot be doubted, though some critics have done so. Dean Alford says: "The internal evidence of the Epistle itself is so decisive for its Pauline origin--the occasion and object of it so simple, and unassignable to any fraudulent intent, that one would imagine the impugner of so many of the Epistles would have at least spared this one, and that in modern times, as in ancient, according to Tertullian and Jerome, 'Sua illam brevitās defendisset.' ("Its own brevity would be its defence.") The objections raised against this Epistle we do not need to state nor investigate, for they are pure inventions and do not require an answer.

The occasion and object are both plainly indicated in the Epistle itself. Onesimus, a slave, probably a Phrygian, who were considered the lowest of all, had run away from his master, Philemon, who was a Christian. It is more than probable that he had stolen money from Philemon (verse 18). He was attracted to Rome, the great world-city, thinking perhaps he would be undetected there. What happened to him in Rome and how he came in touch with Paul is not made known in the Epistle. He may have been in dire want and destitution. Perhaps he had heard Paul's name mentioned in his master's house and learning of his presence in Rome as a prisoner, he got in touch with him. This we know, that he heard the gospel preached by the apostle, and believing, he was saved. He then told the apostle his story and Paul sent him back to his master with this precious letter. And Onesimus who returns to Philemon is no longer "unprofitable"; not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved" (verse 16).

The Epistle itself shows the sweet and tender character of the great man of God who penned it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It has been remarked, "Dignity, generosity, prudence, friendship, affection, politeness, skillful address, purity are apparent. Hence it has been termed with great propriety, 'the polite Epistle.'"

Suggestive are Luther's words on this letter to Philemon: "The Epistle showeth a right noble, lovely example of Christian love. Here we see how St. Paul layeth himself out for the poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleadeth his cause with his master; and so setteth himself, as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Yet all this doeth he not with power or force, as if he had right thereto; but he strippeth himself of his right, and thus enforceth Philemon to forego his right also. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, this also doth St. Paul for Onesimus with Philemon; for Christ also stripped Himself of His right, and by love and humility enforced the Father to lay aside His wrath, and to take us to His grace for the sake of Christ, who lovingly pleadeth our cause, and with all His heart layeth Himself out for us. For we are all His Onesimi, to my thinking."

Analysis and Annotation

1. The greeting (1-3)
2. Recognition of Philemon's faith and love (4-7)
3. Concerning the reception of Onesimus (8-21) 4.

The conclusion (22-25)

Verses 1-3

He speaks of himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus; the Lord had made him a prisoner. He addresses Philemon (meaning: friendly, loving), the beloved, and his fellow-laborer. Apphia was probably the wife of Philemon; Archippus is called "fellow soldier"; he ministered in the Colossian assembly (Col. 4:17). Greeting is also extended "to the church" which was gathered in the house of Philemon. While the Epistle is addressed to Philemon personally and Paul appeals to him in behalf of Onesimus, the gathered assembly was equally to be interested in this runaway Slave, who was now returning as a brother beloved and therefore to be received by them in Christian fellowship. The Lord had received Onesimus and he had become through grace, a member of the body of Christ; he belonged to the Colossian assembly. Therefore in addressing the Colossians Paul had written of Onesimus as "a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Col. 4:9).

Verses 4-7

He thanked God for Philemon, making mention of him always in his prayers. He did not know Philemon personally, but had heard of his love and faith toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints. And he prayed for him "that the fellowship of the faith may become effectual by the acknowledgment of every good thing that is in us toward Christ Jesus." His faith was to manifest itself still more by exhibiting every good thing which Christians possess to the glory of Christ. With these words of commendation, recognition and encouragement, he opens the way to plead for Onesimus.

Verses 8-21

For this reason, because of love which was in Paul's heart for Philemon, he did not use his authority to enjoin upon him what was meet as to the reception of a good-for-nothing slave, who had been saved by grace and accepted in the Beloved. He beseeches instead, and that "for love's sake"--his love for Philemon and Philemon's love for Onesimus, for he was entitled to this love, being a saint in Christ. And he beseeches, "being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of the Lord." Courteously he repeats "I beseech thee," and then he mentions him who was so dear to his own heart--"I beseech thee for my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, who in times past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me." Onesimus (meaning helpful) shows the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A miserable, unprofitable slave, a runaway thief, had become a child of God, born again, and the loving servant of the Lord presses him to his bosom, calls him "my child" and speaks of him as being now profitable to him and to Philemon. Oh! the wonders of divine grace.

"Whom I have sent again; thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels. 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." What loving words these are! He gives Philemon to understand that Onesimus had endeared himself in such a way that he was as dear to him as his own heart. He would have liked to retain him and keep him at his side in Rome, for he would have performed all the services for Paul which Philemon would have rendered to him if he were in Rome. But without Philemon's consent he would do nothing, so that his action might not be of necessity, forced by what Paul had done, and not voluntarily.

"For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever, 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?" How delicately he expresses it all! He does not speak of Onesimus as having run away, as trying to escape forever from serfdom, but that "he departed for a season." God's providence is beautifully touched upon, when Paul thus states that he perhaps departed for a season (Greek, an hour) so that Philemon might receive him forever, not now as a

slave, but above a slave, a brother beloved. And so that Philemon might not take offense at Paul asking him to receive his runaway slave as a brother beloved, he tells Philemon that he is a beloved brother especially to himself--and then how much more to Philemon who had a claim on him.

Human slavery, so universal in apostolic days, so full of misery, is indirectly dealt with in this letter to Philemon. It may be rightly called the first antislavery document and petition ever written and presented.

"Paul lays here broad and deep the foundation of a new relation between master and servant, a relation in which, while there is subordination of the one to the other, there is also a common brotherhood to be acknowledged and an equality before God to be maintained. Christianity would melt the fetters from the enslaved by the fervour of its love. Men's method commonly is, to strike them off by armed revolution" (Professor Moorhead).

And he continues, "If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account." Verse 17 connects well with verse 12. If Philemon counted Paul as in Christian fellowship, he is to receive Onesimus as if he were Paul, "receive him as myself." Onesimus had probably confessed his theft to Paul, and again he uses the choicest words to approach this delicate matter. He does not call it "theft" outright, but writes "if he hath wronged thee" and that again he softens to "or oweth thee aught," then he declares himself ready to make good the loss and assume the debt in place of the slave Onesimus--"put that on mine account." These five words "put that on mine account" are translated in Rom. 5#13, by the word "impute." How blessedly this illustrates the gospel. indeed this Epistle to Philemon is a perfect and practical illustration of the gospel of grace, the gospel Paul preached, and which is unfolded in the larger Epistles. What the gospel does for the poor slave of sin, how he becomes a son and a brother, profitable instead of unprofitable, a member of the body of Christ, may be traced in these verses.

He wrote this Epistle, not as he usually did, by an amanuensis, but with his own hand! That shows again what a fine character he was. He had full confidence in Philemon not alone that he would grant him his request, but that he would even do more than he had asked.

We do not know from Scripture what became of Onesimus. According to the "Apostolical Canons" he was emancipated by his master. Another tradition says that he became a servant of the Lord ministering in Macedonia , and that he was martyred in Rome . We shall meet him with all the other saints in glory.

Verses 22-25

Paul during his first imprisonment always anticipated his release; he and others prayed for it (Phile. 22). And so he expects to come to Colosse, and asked Philemon to prepare him a lodging. The salutations from Epaphras, Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas and Lucas, with the word of blessing, conclude the Epistle.