

Philemon

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In deciding what to study next, Debbie insisted I should go into Philemon. She said, what about Philemon... why is it even in the Bible... what does God want us to learn from it?

Being the wise and understanding person I am and falling back on what has given me such success in the past, I said, 'Yes dear.'

Philemon is Paul's shortest letter, only 2nd and 3rd John are shorter.

Paul was the Apostle Jesus Christ chose to teach us most of Church Doctrine and even this short letter, written personally to his friend, Philemon, has important doctrinal truth for us.

Since this letter is personal, it wasn't intended to be sent around and read in other Churches. We can imagine that Philemon kept the letter, never imagining God's intention for it to be included in the estimated 5 billion Bibles that would eventually be printed.

Somehow, the letter was preserved and copied down through the years until it was accepted for inclusion in the final Canon of Scripture in the fourth Century.

People try to claim that the Bible is filled with errors from being copied so much for so many years. The first answer to that is the truth that God, Himself, is more than able to guard His Word and preserve it until now.

God told Jeremiah, "for I am watching over My word to accomplish it." Jer. 1:12

So shall **my word** be that **goes out of my mouth**: it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing I sent it to do.' Isa 55:11

'The words of the LORD *are* pure words,
Like silver tried in a furnace of earth,
Purified seven times.

⁷You shall keep them, O LORD,

You shall preserve them from this generation forever..' Psa. 12:6

We can be certain that the words of this small letter are just what Paul wrote and exactly what God intended to be preserved for us.

With that in mind... just what did God want us to learn from reading Philemon's mail?

First, let's just read it through... **Philemon**:

Greeting

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother, to Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philemon's Love and Faith

⁴I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, ⁵hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

The Plea for Onesimus

⁸Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹*yet* for love's sake I rather appeal *to you*—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten *while* in my chains, ¹¹who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

¹²I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

¹⁵For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Philemon's Obedience Encouraged

¹⁷If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me. ¹⁸But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. ²⁰Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

²¹Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

Farewell

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴*as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

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

We see Onesimus just one other time in Scripture, toward the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians, chap 4: 'Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. ⁸I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, ⁹with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is *one* of you. They will make known to you all things which *are happening* here.' It could be that both, Philemon's letter from Paul and Paul's letter to the Colossians were taken together, at the same time, to Colossae.

Both his letters to Philemon and to the Colossians were written, by Paul, during his first imprisonment in Rome, around AD 61. Since Paul refers to Onesimus, in Colossians, as 'one of you,' we take it that Onesimus and Philemon were from Colossae.

Paul says Timothy is with him as well as Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke... they're all the same ones who are with him when he wrote to the Colossians.

It's interesting to note that later, when Paul writes to Timothy, who is no longer with him, he writes, ' "All of those from Asia have forsaken me" Demas has forsaken me, having loved the present world" 2 Tim 1:15

Paul writes that he is sending this letter with Tychicus and that Onesimus would be coming also. The letter involves Onesimus who had been a slave of Philemon who had evidently stolen something, probably money, from his master, Philemon.

Paul is interceding for Onesimus, that Philemon would receive him back, not just as his slave, but even more, as a Christian brother.

It's important that we stop here and understand; God, through Paul, is not condoning the practice of slavery; it's just the way it was and has always been. God does not command Philemon to free his slave however Paul, does, in fact, imply that he would be grateful if Philemon were to give Onesimus his freedom that he might return to Paul.

Paul had led Onesimus to faith in Christ; it's interesting to realize that Philemon, a believer, had not led Onesimus to Christ. I think this is one of the major points of this short epistle. Christian slave owners, employers today, their first and foremost responsibility, before God, is to do everything in their power to faithfully lead every employee to Christ.

The same is true for every one of us: our friend, our neighbor, our family member: we are commanded to do everything in our power to faithfully lead each one to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first thing we see, the first words are: ' Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus!' I thought Paul was a prisoner of the Romans!

In his letter to the Romans, written a few years before this, he wrote, 'And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among

many brethren. ³⁰Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.' Rom 8 :28

And in his first letter to the Corinthians, also written a few years before Philemon and Colossians, he wrote: 'Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.' 1 Cor10:31

Paul understood that everything passes through God's hands and plans for him. He was always in the center of God's will for his life. Therefore he could understand that he was a prisoner in Rome according to God's will and plan. Christians were being persecuted and martyred then and now; it isn't personal... they hate the Lord Jesus Christ, trying to persecute Him through us.

If we suffer, the reality is, Jesus Christ is suffering through us; He takes that personally. If we are glorified, we must remember that He is being glorified through us and if we take that glory for ourselves, He will also take that personally.

The whole point of this letter is to convince Philemon to receive back Onesimus. It's fun to watch all that Paul does in moving Philemon: 'To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer...' He addresses Philemon as a peer, an equal, even though Paul had led Philemon to Christ so that Philemon should have considered Paul as a kind of spiritual father... but he is elevating him as an equal because that is what he hopes to instill in Philemon's response to Onesimus. Now, even though he is a slave, by worldly estimation, in Christ, he is fully equal to Philemon and Philemon should actually esteem Onesimus as higher than himself: ' Therefore if *there is* any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. ³Let nothing *be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Phipp 2:1

This is actually quite revolutionary, that a Christian master should esteem his slave as better than himself, even within the legal and customary institution of slavery.

'...hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints...' Again, he is elevating Philemon by telling of the 'fame' of his love and faith toward Christ and ALL the saints: Onesimus is now a member of 'ALL the saints.'

'... that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.' If every good thing is in you, Philemon, then I know that you will see your response to Onesimus as so important, before me and especially before the Lord.

'For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.' Paul is really pouring it on: 'Therefore, since I have so built you up to the point where I know you could not refuse what I am suggesting, even though I could command you, which, in essence, is what I really am doing, but I will still say that it is merely a request... 'yet for love's sake, remember it is me asking, Paul, an old guy in prison for my faith... remember, you're still free... able to live your life freely... God hasn't seen fit to put you into prison... do it for me...'

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten *while* in my chains, ¹¹who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. Now Onesimus is a believer... just like you and me... I led him to the Lord... you know... it really should have been you who did so, years ago... if you had, he never would have stolen from you and run away in the first place... but I won't say that... I'll simply trust your intelligence to infer it from my implication.'

'I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.'

I wanted him here with me... see how I am sacrificing for you? How can you do less... if you gladly receive him and then send him back to me... don't you see how you will be helping to further the Gospel?' Actually, if Philemon did send Onesimus back to Paul to help him... Philemon will have done eternally more than he could ever have imagined because Paul, while in Rome, and elsewhere, while being helped by Onesimus, and others, was writing out the Gospel which would lead multiplied millions to Christ before it is all over.

'But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.' Yeah, Paul... right... not by compulsion... Paul is using textbook passive aggressive compulsion disguised as a request for voluntary response. For Philemon to do anything differently than Paul's 'request' is to consciously reject all that Paul is saying... that would be very difficult if Philemon is a true believer, which surely he was.

But he is also giving all of us, down through the ages, a first rate lesson on how to share the Gospel... to present it in such a way that the only way it can be refused is through an outright rejection of the heart. If the Gospel is fully and properly explained, to reject it, a person must make a conscious decision to reject all that God offers through the Gospel. If we don't fully explain it so that they don't fully understand it, then their rejection is partially the fault of our faulty explanation. We can only clearly explain it if we fully understand it.

'For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.' Who knows, Paul is saying, 'if he hadn't stolen from you and run away... if he had stayed with you... he might never have come to faith in Christ because obviously, you had never led him to Christ before he left,' and maybe he had been Philemon's slave from birth... even though Philemon hosts a Church group in his own home... why wasn't Onesimus already a believer? Was he kept too busy always serving everyone else?

'If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me.' Again, treating Philemon as an equal but then immediately reminding him... 'oh and not to mention, but did I mention, 'that you owe me even your own self...' if not for me you'd still be in darkness... doesn't that count for something... for everything?' If he owes you, put it on my account... but I never charged you for introducing you to eternal life.

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.' Oh, and by the way... I trust I'll be freed and able to visit you... just to see how things are going. We would hope that Philemon wouldn't wait until just the day before Paul is set to arrive, to make some important changes... 'Onesimus... Paul's coming tomorrow... put on your best face and make it look like I'm treating you as a Christian should... or else!'

The main point of the letter to Philemon: all of us, family, friends, employers, employees, no matter what a person's social status, we should always bless and be a blessing... always ready and never afraid to share the Gospel... always esteeming others, all others, as equals and even more so as better than ourselves, always lifting others up as we would the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

We are told these things in God's Word, but here He gives us a true picture of what He means.

Even one as lowly as a slave... and there was no one lower than a slave. We are to recognize, that not only are we the Bride of Christ, the adopted sons and daughters of God, but we are also, while we are still here in this, the first installment of our eternal lives, to reckon ourselves as the slaves, the bondservants of the Lord Jesus Christ. Even the Apostles did so in introducing some of their letters:

'Paul, the prisoner of Christ.'

'James, a bondservant of the Lord Jesus Chsit.'

Peter, a bondservant of the Lord Jesus Christ.'

It is so easy to think of ourselves as, 'Tom, whom God is so blessed to have on His side in these dark days...'

'Tom, whom you are so blessed to open the Word and pour forth his wisdom to you...' 'Tom, who deserves to be treated like the prince that he is...' 'Tom, who has been so overlooked and maligned, who deserves so much more than words could ever tell...'

It should just be, 'Tom, a servant of the Lord and of you...' But that's usually a bridge just too far.

Take heart: 'For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. ³⁰ Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.' Rom 8:30

Good time, great times... unimaginable times are coming... soon.