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THE BOOK OF PHILEMON (How God Had Saved A Runaway Slave)

I. The Author

The author of this letter was "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ...." He names Timothy as the co-sender (1:1). Paul wrote this letter while he was a prisoner in Rome as recorded in Acts 28. Philemon is one of the four "Prison Epistles" that Paul wrote while he was in prison at Rome during his first imprisonment. The other three letters were Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. SPECIAL NOTE: He may have also written "Hebrews" at that time.

II. The Date

We don't know the exact date of the letter, but we believe that it was written before A.D. 70. We also know from Colossians 4:7-9 that it was written and sent at the same time the Colossian Letter was sent. The Dickson Bible places the date at 62-63 A.D. and that is probably about as good a guess as any.

III. The Readers

The letter was sent to a man named "Philemon." He was a resident of the city of Colossae. We know this because Onesimus was his slave and Onesimus was one of the Colossians (Col. 4:9). Also, the same people are involved in both the letter to the Colossians and the one to Philemon as can be seen by comparing Col. 1:1 and 4:10,12,14 &17 with Philemon verses 1,2,23,&24. Paul himself had converted Philemon, although when, and under what circumstances, is not known. We do know from this letter that Philemon was a dedicated disciple and a consecrated Christian.

IV. The Purpose

The letter is primarily a request from Paul to Philemon to receive back a runaway slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had ran away from his master and had gone to Rome, where he met Paul and was converted to Christ by him. Paul then sends him back, along with this letter, explaining to Philemon the conversion of Onesimus and urging him to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. And considering the contents of the letter and the character of Philemon, there is no doubt that the letter accomplished its purpose.

- V. Brief Outline
 Theme: HOW GOD HAD SAVED A RUNAWAY SLAVE
- I. Paul's PRAISE of Philemon (vss 1-7)
 - A. His family (vss 1-3)
 - B. His faith (vss 4-7)
 - II. Paul's PLEA for Onesimus (vss 8-17)
 - A. The request (vss 8-11)
 - B. The return (vss 12-17)
 - III. Paul's PLEDGE to Philemon (vss 18-25)
 - A. The promise (vss 18-21)
 - B. The preparation (vss 22-25)
- I. PRAISE OF PHILEMON (vs. 1-7)

Verse 1: PAUL, A PRISONER OF JESUS CHRIST, AND TIMOTHY OUR BROTHER, TO PHILEMON OUR DEARLY BELOVED FRIEND, AND FELLOW LABORER - This letter begins with Paul reminding Philemon that he was a prisoner in Rome for the cause of Christ - hence, he refers to himself as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." He names Timothy as the co-sender, and addresses the letter to a man named Philemon. This man was a fellow worker in the gospel and one whom Paul dearly loved. Note the following:

- (1) Philemon v. 10: Paul was "in chains" when he wrote this letter.
- (2) Col. 4:7-9: Tychicus brought the letter to Colossae at the same time that Onesimus brought this letter to Philemon.
- (3) Col. 4:9: Since Onesimus was one of the Colossians, it is obvious that Philemon was too.
- (4) Timothy may have written this letter, with the exception of the statement in verse 19.

Verse 2: TO THE BELOVED APPHIA, ARCHIPPUS OUR FELLOW SOLDIER, AND TO THE CHURCH IN YOUR HOUSE - It is generally believed that Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus was his son. This is probably right because there would be no better reason for them to be specifically mentioned in such a personal letter than being members of Philemon's family. The "church in your house" probably refers to the church that met in his house. (They, too, would need to know about the conversion of Onesimus.) Consider the following:

- (1) One author wrote, "Paul's salutation, in his epistle to Philemon, included Philemon, and Apphia, Philemon's wife, and Archippus, Philemon's son...." (Annual Lesson Commentary, 1976-77, p. 216).
- (2) Col. 4:17: Archippus may have been the minister of the church in Colossae (or possibly Laodicea).

Verse 3: GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST – Paul extends favor and peace from both the Father and the Son. This is Paul’s usual address, and it is worthy of note that he always mentions grace before he does peace, because without the unmerited favor of God, there could be no real and lasting peace.

Verse 4: I THANK MY GOD, MAKING MENTION OF YOU ALWAYS IN MY PRAYERS – Thanksgiving was a characteristic of the apostle Paul. He not only preached it, but he also practiced it. And here he expresses the thanksgiving he had given to God because of the faith of Philemon. Prayer was also a characteristic of Paul and evidently he prayed for many people individually and by name. He states here that he mentioned Philemon in his prayers always. This shows that faithful men like Philemon need prayer, and we need to pray for them as well as for those who are not faithful. Observe the following points:

- (1) Paul refers to God as “my God.” God is the God of all, but He is also the God of the individual.
- (2) The words THINK and THANK are nearly alike in spelling and if a Christian thinks he will thank.

Verse 5: HEARING OF YOUR LOVE AND FAITH, WHICH YOU HAVE TOWARD THE LORD JESUS AND TOWARD ALL THE SAINTS – Paul had heard, probably from Epaphras (Col. 1:4-5), as well as others, about the faith and love that Philemon had both toward Christ and all Christians. Of course, we cannot really love Christ and despise our brethren “in Christ.” We must always bear in mind the fact that to love the Saviour is also to love all saints. If we truly love Christ, we will also love those for whom He died. Notice also the following verses:

- (1) I John 4:21: “And this commandment we have from Him, that he who loves God must love his brother also.”
- (2) James 2:1-12: We are to love all saints and not have respect of persons concerning the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 6: THAT THE SHARING OF YOUR FAITH MAY BECOME EFFECTIVE BY THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF EVERY GOOD THING WHICH IS IN YOU IN CHRIST JESUS – Paul desired that Philemon’s faith might become effective in reaching out and influencing other people. Paul prayed that as Philemon’s faith was known, it might be effective in causing others to acknowledge the good that was in him because he was in Christ.

Verse 7: FOR WE HAVE GREAT JOY AND CONSOLATION IN YOUR LOVE BECAUSE THE HEARTS OF THE SAINTS ARE REFRESHED BY YOU, BROTHER – Paul found great joy and comfort because of the generous and benevolent love that Philemon had for others. The kindness and generosity that he had shown to Christians had refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Note: Paul is building his case for what he is about to say to Philemon about Onesimus.

II. PLEA FOR ONESIMUS (vss 8-17)

Verse 8: THEREFORE, THOUGH I MIGHT BE VERY BOLD IN CHRIST TO COMMAND YOU WHAT IS FITTING – As an apostle, Paul could boldly command Philemon to do what was proper, or suitable, on any occasion. But because of the faith and love of Philemon, he decided to do it another way.

Note: The word “therefore” refers ahead to verse 9: “therefore (because of your love and faith)...I rather appeal to you...”

Verse 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 – Because of the love Paul had for Philemon and Philemon’s love for others, he chose to appeal to him concerning the matter in which he writes. He reminds Philemon that he is now an old man and also a prisoner for the cause of Christ, which would further challenge his attention and consideration.

Note: Barnes says that Paul was “now not far from sixty.” (C.P., p. 301). One author says, “Paul was then about sixty years of age.” (A.L.C., 1976-77, p. 217). Wilbur Fields writes, “In Paul’s time with its limited medical services, and in consideration of all that Paul had suffered (II Cor. 11:23-12:9), sixty years would indeed have made him an old man.” (C.P., p. 267).

Verse 10: I APPEAL TO YOU FOR MY SON ONESIMUS, WHOM I HAVE BEGOTTEN WHILE IN MY CHAINS – Paul was asking concerning a runaway slave named Onesimus, whom he had converted while in chains at Rome. He was not Paul’s son in the flesh, but his son “in the faith” – because he had converted him. Exactly how, or under what circumstances, Onesimus came in contact with Paul is not known, but it is known that Paul was still “in chains” when he converted him. Consider the following:

- (1) Col. 4:9: Onesimus was from Colossae and probably carried this letter back to Philemon.
- (2) I Tim. 1:2: Timothy was also Paul’s “son in the faith.”
- (3) I Cor. 4:15: Paul had also begotten the Corinthians through the gospel. See also James 1:18.

Verse 11: WHO ONCE WAS UNPROFITABLE, BUT NOW IS PROFITABLE TO YOU AND TO ME – Paul makes no effort to cover up any wrong Onesimus might have done but readily admits that in time past he was unprofitable as a slave. However, Paul also emphasizes the transformation that had taken place in the life of Onesimus, and now stresses that he was profitable both to Philemon and to himself. Since the word Onesimus means “profitable,” Paul is probably making a play on his name, and telling Philemon that now “Onesimus will live up to his name.”

Observe the following:

- (1) II Cor. 5:17: When one becomes a Christian, he is a new creature.
- (2) Too many people are unwilling to forget a man’s past, and to recognize that in Christ we become new creatures. “Once a thief,

always a thief" is not necessarily true. Once a thief takes Christ by belief, he's no longer a thief. (Fields).

(3) Onesimus means "profitable." (Dickson Bible Dictionary, p. 153).

Verse 12: I AM SENDING HIM BACK. YOU THEREFORE RECEIVE HIM, THAT IS, MY OWN HEART- Here we learn that it was Paul's idea to send Onesimus back to Philemon. But in sending him back he also sent an earnest request that Philemon receive him back as one dearly and deeply loved by Paul.

Verse 13: WHOM I WISH TO KEEP WITH ME, THAT ON YOUR BEHALF HE MIGHT MINISTER TO ME IN MY CHAINS FOR THE GOSPEL - Had Paul followed his own natural inclinations, he would have kept Onesimus in Rome to minister to him. He needed someone just like Onesimus to help him since he was restricted as a prisoner. Furthermore, Philemon was indebted to him since Paul had converted Philemon to Christ. Onesimus could have helped Paul in Philemon's place - i.e. he could have helped Paul like Philemon would have done if he had had the opportunity.

Verse 14: BUT WITHOUT YOUR CONSENT I WANTED TO DO NOTHING, THAT GOOD DEED MIGHT NOT BE BY COMPULSION, AS IT WERE, BUT VOLUNTARY -

Even though Paul did need someone like Onesimus, he would not seriously entertain the thought of keeping him without Philemon's freely extended permission. Forced aid was not what Paul desired. If Philemon helped him, Paul wanted it to be willingly and of his own accord.

Note: Paul would want Philemon's help to be voluntary and not by compulsion.

Verse 15: FOR PERHAPS HE DEPARTED FOR A WHILE, FOR THIS PURPOSE THAT YOU MIGHT RECEIVE HIM FOREVER - Here Paul suggests that the departing of Onesimus was a possible case of divine providence. He states that perhaps his temporary departure was intended to pave the way for his permanent return. Paul was obviously a firm believer in the over-ruling providence of God for all men (Acts 17:25) and a special providence for His children (Romans 8:28). Paul strongly suggests that the case of Onesimus was a case of providence.

Note: Barnes writes, "The meaning is, that it is possible that this was permitted in the providence of God in order that Onesimus might be brought under the influence of the gospel..." (C.P., p. 304).

Verse 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 - Paul exhorts Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not simply as a slave, but mainly as a brother beloved. He is now a brother beloved especially to Paul, but even more to Philemon because of both the fleshly (master-slave) and spiritual (brethren in the Lord) relationships.

(1) Gal. 3:26-29: "In Christ" all are one whether they be masters or

slaves.

- (2) Servant in the KJV means "a slave." (Young Concord, p. 864).
- (3) The phrase "in the flesh" is "properly used in reference to any relationship which may exist pertaining to the present world, as contradistinguished from that which is formed primarily by religion...." (Barnes, C.P., p. 305).

Verse 17: IF THEN YOU COUNT ME AS A PARTNER, RECEIVE HIM AS YOU WOULD ME – This is one of the many "pressure points" that Paul uses in this letter in order to get Philemon to receive Onesimus back. Philemon counted Paul as a partner, and such being the case, Paul uses their Philemon to receive Onesimus just as if he were Paul partnership in the faith to encourage him to receive Onesimus. In fact, Paul tells himself. If we understand the serious consequences that Onesimus could suffer if Philemon did not forgive and receive him back, then we can better understand the reason why Paul put so much pressure on Philemon in this letter.

- (1) Fields wrote, "Extreme cruelty to slaves was nothing uncommon... crucifixion was the common punishment for even petty thievery by slaves." (C.P., p. 256).

III. PLEDGE TO PHILEMON (vss 18-25)

Verse 18: BUT IF HE HAS WRONGED YOU, OR OWES ANYTHING, PUT THAT ON MY ACCOUNT – Paul has already stated that Onesimus was in time past unprofitable (vs 11), and now he says that whatever wrong he had done to Philemon was to be put on his (Paul's) account. Anything that Onesimus had done or owed was to be charged to Paul.

Verse 19: I, PAUL AM WRITING WITH MY OWN HAND, I WILL REPAY --- NOT TO MENTION TO YOU THAT YOU OWE ME YOUR OWN SELF BESIDES – In this verse Paul promises personally to square up all debts of Onesimus should Philemon insist on it. If Paul did not write this entire letter himself, he at least wrote with his own hand this statement. He usually dictated his letters for others to write, but he wrote this portion of this letter himself. He then very delicately reminds Philemon of the greater debt that he owed Paul because of his conversion through the preaching and teaching of the apostle.

Verse 20: YES, BROTHER, LET ME HAVE JOY FROM YOU IN THE LORD: REFRESH MY HEART IN THE LORD – If Philemon would receive Onesimus back in peace, it would be a great source of joy and encouragement to Paul. His heart would be refreshed by Philemon's obedience to his request.

Verse 21: HAVING CONFIDENCE IN YOUR OBEDIENCE, I WRITE TO YOU, KNOWING THAT YOU WILL DO EVEN MORE THAN I SAY – Paul was persuaded by his personal knowledge of Philemon that he would do even more than he had asked. This verse tells us what kind of man that Paul knew Philemon to be and assures us that Onesimus was kindly received – even though there is no direct statement to that effect.

Verse 22: BUT MEANWHILE, ALSO PREPARE A GUEST ROOM FOR ME FOR I TRUST THAT THROUGH YOUR PRAYERS I SHALL BE GRANTED TO YOU –

He clinches his written request by stating he expected to visit Philemon soon. It would definitely be harder for Philemon to turn down Paul's request if he knew he had to face him in the near future. Observe that Paul does not request the prayers of Philemon, but rather assumes them. Also, notice that he expected to be released from prison because of the prayers of Philemon, and this is an indirect argument for the two Roman imprisonments of Paul.

Note: II Tim. 4:6-8: During the second Roman imprisonment Paul expected to die, not be released.

Verse 23: EPAPHRAS, MY FELLOW PRISONER IN CHRIST JESUS, GREETES YOU – As he does in several of his letters, Paul closes by naming several brethren with him who also send greetings. Epaphras was evidently a minister of the Colossian Church and was at that time a prisoner with Paul in Rome. He, therefore, sent them greetings.

He may have been their former minister. Observe the following verses:

- (1) Col. 1:7-8: Epaphras was a faithful minister of the Colossian Church who declared to Paul the love of the Colossians.
- (2) Col. 4:12: Epaphras also sent greetings to the Colossian Church.

Verse 24: AS DO MARK, ARISTARCHUS, DEMAS, LUKE, MY FELLOW LABORERS – He also sends greetings from these other four, whom he also names specifically in the Colossian letter. Consider:

- (1) Col. 4:10: Aristarchus was also a prisoner with Paul at Rome.
- (2) Col. 4:10: Mark refers to John Mark – who was the nephew of Barnabas and the writer of the Gospel of Mark.
- (3) Col. 4:14; II Tim. 4:10: Demas is the one who later forsook Paul because of his love for this present world.
- (4) Col. 4:14: Luke refers to "Luke the beloved Physician," and writer of the books of Luke and Acts.

Verse 25: THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST BE WITH YOUR SPIRIT. AMEN – The extending of grace in the last part of the letter is found in every epistle of Paul. As usual, this letter also begins (vs 3) and ends (vs 25) with Paul extending the "grace" of God as given through Christ to the readers. This includes Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met in his house.

SPECIAL NOTE: "Did Philemon do as Paul requested?" I surely believe he did. And while there is no direct statement to that effect, the confidence Paul had in him and the dedication of Philemon himself surely indicate that he would have done as Paul requested.

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