

Through the Bible Book by Book

New Testament

by Myer Pearlman

Copyright @ 1935

PHILEMON (Read the Epistle)

Theme: The Epistle to Philemon is the only example of Paul's private correspondence preserved to us.

From the glimpse it affords us of the apostle's courtesy, prudence and skillful address it has been known as the "*Polite Epistle*." It does not contain any direct teaching concerning doctrine or Christian conduct. Its chief value lies in the picture it gives us of the practical outworking of Christian doctrine in everyday life, and of the relation of Christianity to social problems.

We shall gather our theme from the story told by the Epistle, a story which centers around a runaway slave named Onesimus. The latter was more fortunate than some of his fellow-slaves in that he had for master a Christian, Philemon, a convert of Paul. For reasons not mentioned, Onesimus ran away from his master, and in so doing he probably took with him some of his master's property. He made his way to Rome, where he was converted under Paul's preaching. In him the apostle found a sincere convert and a devoted friend.

So dear did Onesimus become to him that Paul would have retained him to minister to him in his captivity. But the apostle had to make a sacrifice. Though Onesimus had repented of his sin, there was a call for restitution which could be made only by the slave's returning and submitting himself to his master. The claim of duty involved a sacrifice not only for Paul, but it demanded a still greater one from Onesimus, who on returning to his master would be liable to severe punishment - crucifixion was a general penalty imposed upon runaway slaves.

The sense of right required Paul to return the slave, but the constraint of love caused him to intercede for him and save him from punishment. Taking up his pen he wrote a courteous, tactful letter of eager, affectionate entreaty, identifying himself with Onesimus.

After saluting Philemon and his family (vv. 1-3), Paul commends him for his love, faith and hospitality (vv.4-7). The apostle has a request to make. As Paul the apostle, he could command; but as Paul the aged, the prisoner of the Lord, he rather beseeched Philemon (vv. 8,9). His request is that the latter receive again Onesimus, one who was once unprofitable, but who is now become profitable - Onesimus, Paul's own son in the faith (vv. 10-12). So attached had he become to the slave that he would have retained him as servant but without Philemon's consent he would not act (vv. 13, 14).

Perhaps it was in God's providence that Onesimus should have departed for a short time, in order that he might return to be forever with his master, not as a servant but as a brother (vv. 15, 16).

Paul identifies himself with Onesimus; if the latter owes anything the apostle will pay it. But Philemon should remember that to Paul he is indebted, in a sense, for his salvation (v. 19). That Philemon will obey, and even do more than Paul asks, is the latter's confidence (v. 21). The Epistle concludes with the usual salutations (vv. 22-25).

From verses 16 and 21 we may safely infer that Onesimus was given his freedom. Thus by the regeneration of the individual and by the uniting of master and slave in Christ was the problem of slavery solved - at least in one family.

We shall sum up the theme of the Epistle as follows: the power of the gospel in the solution of social problems.

When Written: It was sent by Tychicus with the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians.

Contents:

I. Introduction: Greetings. vv. 1-3.

II. Commendation of Philemon. vv.4-1.

III. Intercession for Onesimus. vv. 8-21.

IV. Conclusion: Salutations. vv. 22-25.

The Value of the Epistle:

1. Its *personal value* lies in the insight it gives into the character of Paul, revealing his love, humility, courtesy, unselfishness and tact.
2. Its *providential value*. We learn here that God may be in the most untoward circumstances (v. 15).
3. Its *practical value*. We are encouraged to seek and redeem the lowest and most degraded. Onesimus had nothing to commend him, for he was a runaway slave, and worse still, a Phrygian slave, from a region noted for the vice and stupidity of its inhabitants. But Paul won him for Christ.
4. Its *social value*. The Epistle presents the relation of Christianity to slavery. During Paul's time there were about six million slaves in the Roman empire. Their lot, in general, was miserable. Considered as the property of their master, they were completely at his mercy.

They had no rights by law. For the slightest offenses they could be scourged, mutilated, crucified, or thrown to the wild beasts. No permanent marriages were allowed among them, but only temporary unions, which could be broken at the will of the masters. It may be asked, Why did not Christianity attempt to overthrow this system? Because to have done so would have required a tremendous revolution - and the religion of Christ reforms by love and not by force. It teaches principles that undermine and overthrow wrong systems.

This method of reformation is well illustrated in the case of Philemon and Onesimus.

Master and slave were united in the Spirit of Christ, and in that union all social distinctions were obliterated (Galatians 3:28). Though Paul did not give a direct command to Philemon that he free Onesimus, the words in verses 16 and 21 would imply that such was the apostle's desire.

5. Its *spiritual value*. It furnishes us some striking types of our salvation.

The following incidents will suggest types to the thoughtful student:

- Onesimus' forsaking his master; Paul's finding of him;
- Paul's interceding for him;
- His identifying himself with the slave;
- His offering to pay his debt;
- Philemon's receiving Onesimus on Paul's account;
- The slave's restoration to his master's favor.

~ end of Philemon ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
