

PHILEMON

PHILEMON — FROM “PROFITLESS” SLAVE TO “PROFITABLE” BROTHER

Philemon, like some other of the epistles, is not located in the canon chronologically. It will be seen to have been written by the apostle while a prisoner at Rome. One supposes might be that the second imprisonment was meant, because it follows 2 Timothy. But it was addressed to Philemon, beyond doubt, on the earlier occasion. See verse 22 as a hint of this. In verse 23 Epaphras is named as one known to Philemon, who, according to ^{<51007>}Colossians 1:7, and 4:12, was a minister at Colosse, and perhaps Philemon and his household were members of his flock. As Philemon owed his salvation to Paul, (verse 19), we may believe that the latter had made his acquaintance during his stay in Ephesus and its vicinity (^{<44901>}Acts 19-20), for Colosse was in that neighborhood.

Philemon had a slave named Onesimus who seemed to have run away from his master, perhaps having stolen from him besides (v. 18), and had found his way to Rome, and was thrown into the way of Paul. We would rather say God led him into the way of Paul. Perhaps he had known Paul when he lived with Philemon at Colosse. At all events, the circumstances are changed now, and under the power of a burdened conscience, and perhaps the condition in which he finds his old friend as a prisoner, he is moved to give more earnest heed to the message, is converted and is rejoicing in the Lord.

But one of the first duties of the converted man is confession and restitution of wrong. Onesimus knows this and is ready to return, but shrinks from doing so unless he shall have some document to show the genuineness of the change wrought in him, and some plea from the friend of both his master and himself that may intercede for him and what a loving letter Paul writes.

OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE

The epistle begins with the salutation, verses 1-3. "The church in thy house," is mentioned, showing that in the primitive times the gatherings of Christians were in private homes.

Now comes the thanksgiving (vv. 4-7). Paul had good reason to remember Philemon in thanksgiving and prayer, for see what kind of man he was!

Following the thanksgiving is revealed the reason for the letter, the plea for Onesimus, vv. 8-21. He pleads though he might command (vv. 8-9). Onesimus has been converted by him while a prisoner in Rome (v. 10).

Onesimus means "profitable," but he had not been profitable to his master theretofore, he had belied his name. He had now, however, become profitable to both Philemon and Paul (v. 11). Paul would like to have kept him, he was so profitable to him, only he had not the mind of Philemon on the subject, and did not feel at liberty to do so (vv. 12-14). He was returning now to Philemon in a new relationship (vv. 15-16). It were worth while to have lost him for a while to get him back forever! What a striking testimony that saints shall know each other in the life to come! But he was now coming back not merely as a slave, but a beloved brother! This does not mean that the old relationship as master and slave should be dissolved (see ^{<4377>}1 Corinthians 7:17-24), but only that it should now be continued under these more blessed circumstances. Observe how delicately Paul pleads for him on the ground that he is now his (Paul's) brother (vv. 16-17). Paul is willing to assume whatever pecuniary responsibility might be attached to his running away, but tactfully insists that if Philemon considers, he will regard himself as still in the apostle's debt (vv. 18-19).

Following the plea, the letter concludes with personal allusions, and the benediction (vv. 22, 25). Who of the brethren named in verse 24 were with Paul in his second imprisonment? Which one did he ask to come unto him? See 2 Timothy.

ITS PLACE IN THE CANON

If some ask why such a personal letter should find a place among the inspired books of Scripture, it would seem sufficient to refer to the glimpses it affords of the social intercourse of Christians in the primitive days.

There is something else here, namely: Christianity does not rashly interfere with existing institutions, even when they are inimical to its principles. Philemon was not bidden to give Onesimus his freedom. Does Christianity, then, countenance human slavery? Nay, wherever Christianity has made headway, slavery has fallen. The truth makes flee. The union of believers in Jesus Christ promotes love to one another, and love ministers freedom.

There is still another lesson to be drawn. As Paul found Onesimus wandering from his master's house, so the Lord Jesus Christ found us wandering from God. As Paul pleaded for the restoration of Onesimus, asking that what he owed might be placed to his account, so Jesus Christ acts as our Advocate with the Father, having borne our sins. As Philemon received Onesimus on Paul's account, so God has received us, and made us what we never were before, "profitable" unto Him — "created in Christ Jesus unto good works which he hath before prepared for us to walk in them."

QUESTIONS

1. state what you know of the acquaintance of Paul and Philemon.
2. State what you know of the history of Onesimus.
3. State the four divisions of this epistle.
4. What reason is suggested for its appearance in the canon?
5. What moral lesson is found in it?
6. What spiritual analogies does it suggest?