

The New Testament, Book 18

Philemon

Philemon, with only one chapter of 25 verses, is one of the two smallest books of the New Testament (the other is Jude, also with only one chapter of 25 verses)¹. Because of its style, the thought given to it, and commentary concerning it over the centuries, are far out of proportion to its size. Some have called Philemon “the polite epistle.” Merrill Unger calls it “exquisite,” and “a masterpiece of Christian tactfulness and politeness.” Frances Siewert says that it is “written very tactfully...and in such a way as to build rapport, persuade the mind and move the emotions.”

Philemon is the fourth of the four “prison epistles,” written while Paul was a prisoner in Rome (under house arrest), during his first imprisonment there. The other three prison epistles are Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. II Timothy was also written from a prison in Rome; however, as we have seen, II Timothy was probably written during Paul’s second imprisonment, after two or three years of freedom. His second imprisonment was very different from the first; it was a cruel one, in a miserable Roman dungeon, awaiting martyrdom. And, because of its content and its recipient, II Timothy is counted among the “pastoral epistles².”

This brief epistle is a plea for forgiveness for one Onesimus, a slave who had run away from his master, Philemon. Onesimus had become a Christian under the ministry of Paul, who refers to him as “my son, Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.” He is returning to his master as an act of conscience.

Philemon was apparently a man of nobility and wealth, and a leader in the church at Colossae; he was himself one of Paul’s converts. Philemon’s home at Colossae was still standing and was well known during the life of Theodoret, prominent 5th Century Church historian. According to Church tradition, Philemon became Bishop of Colossae, and died a martyr.

The epistle is also addressed to one Apphia, probably Philemon’s wife, and to Archippus³. From this combination (Apphia and Archippus) we

¹ The smallest book in the entire Bible is the book of the prophet Obadiah, with one chapter of 21 verses.

² Again, we must remember that these categories into which we divide the epistles are a matter of opinion, there are differences of opinion about some of them, and the important thing is what is written in them--not the category in which they are placed.

³ If Apphia and Archippus were not closely related to Philemon, mention of them in connection with what was a purely domestic and personal matter would have been unlikely.

might infer that Archippus was a member of Philemon's family, or a close friend⁴. In this letter, Paul is not sending a directive to correct an error; rather, he is writing to a friend, to ask of him a favor for a third person.

A. Author. The author is Paul, as he says in the opening salutation; he includes Timothy in his greeting to Philemon, as he does in four other epistles⁵.

B. Place and Date. The letter to Philemon was written from Rome during Paul's first imprisonment, ca AD 60.

C. Occasion. Onesimus, a runaway slave belonging to Philemon, has traveled to Rome where he became a believer, a convert of Paul. It also seems that, in his departure from Philemon's home, Onesimus had stolen some of Philemon's belongings. Paul has sent Onesimus back to Colossae to deliver this letter, and to be reconciled to his master. During his journey, Onesimus also delivered the other three "prison epistles," to the churches at Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae. It seems that Tychicus accompanied him in delivering all four prison epistles. Although he is not mentioned in Philemon, Tychicus is identified as the co-deliverer of the letter to the Colossian church, of which Philemon was a leader⁶. He may, or may not, have accompanied his friend Onesimus when he went to see his master, to be forgiven and reconciled. Whether or not Tychicus accompanied Onesimus when he went to see Philemon is unknown and, I think, unimportant

D. Theme. The theme of Philemon is forgiveness and restoration; a secondary theme is the new creature in Christ Jesus. Philemon was not getting back the same slave who had run away; he was getting a new Onesimus.

E. Highlights. Philemon contains no highlights in the usual sense, such as often-quoted passages, or passages underlying important doctrines; however, significant portions include the following:

1. "I Beseech Thee for My Son." (verses 8-10)

Paul acknowledges his authority to order Philemon to receive and forgive Onesimus; but he chooses instead to entreat him as a friend, on behalf of the redeemed, and reformed, runaway slave.

2. Perhaps This Situation Is the Will of God. (verses 10-17)

⁴ This Archippus is urged to greater activity in the Colossian epistle (Col 4:17). According to tradition, he was one of the "other seventy" disciples of Jesus (Lk 10:1) and that he died as a martyr.

⁵ The other four are Philippians, Col, I Thes and II Thes.

⁶ Colossians 4:7-9.

Paul beseeches Philemon for “my son, Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.” He acknowledges that Onesimus has been an unprofitable servant in the past; yet, he says, he will now be a profitable servant, both to Philemon and himself. He says that in sending Onesimus back to his master, it is like sending his own heart. He says that he would like to keep Onesimus with him, to assist him in the ministry at Rome; but he would not do such a thing without the blessing of Philemon. Therefore, he is sending him back.

And then Paul suggests that, perhaps, the entire episode of the theft and flight of Onesimus was orchestrated by the Lord, so that Philemon would have, not only a returned and reformed servant, but a brother, forever. He urges Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul, himself⁷.

3. I Will Pay the Debt of Onesimus. (verses 18-21)

Apparently Onesimus has stolen some things from Philemon when he ran away to Rome, and Paul says that Philemon should consider that debt to be owed by Paul (“put that on mine own account”). He is writing this promise with his own hand, he says, apparently to make his assumption of the debt more binding. But then Paul reminds Philemon that he owes Paul a great deal more; in fact, he says (and not at all subtly), that Philemon owes Paul “thine own self,” for Philemon’s redemption and life in the Lord are the result of Paul’s ministry⁸. He asks Philemon to give him joy, and refreshing in his heart, by receiving and forgiving Onesimus, and tells him that he is confident that Philemon will not only grant his request, but will do even more.

4. Prepare a Place for Me. (verse 22)

Paul puts a little more pressure on Philemon (to forgive Onesimus) by asking him to prepare a place for Paul to stay, for he will be coming. In this way, he is saying (without actually stating it) that he will be coming to visit Philemon, and will see for himself what he has done about Onesimus. He will not be just a distant figure, writing a letter; instead, he will be coming there himself. And he says that his visit will be an answer to Philemon’s prayers.

5. Greetings and a Benediction. (verses 23-25)

Then, with greetings from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, who are there to assist him, and with a very brief benediction, Paul closes the letter.

⁷ Verse 10 belongs with both highlights 1 and 2.

⁸ It seems to me that, at this point (v 19), the celebrated tact gets a little thin. Humility was not Paul’s strong suit.

NOTES:

a. Epaphras was apparently a prisoner also (v 23, “my fellow prisoner”), at the time of writing. According to the Martyrologies, he was later the bishop at Colossae, and died as a martyr⁹.

b. This Demas, a faithful fellow-worker with Paul during his first imprisonment, deserted him during the second imprisonment, “having loved this present world...¹⁰.”

⁹ The Martyrologies are ancient lists of martyrs, some including brief biographies.

¹⁰ II Timothy 4:10.