

## **Small Letters with Big Messages**

### **The Epistle to Philemon**

**Intro: Most of the NT books are lengthy works with themes that are developed over many chapters and verses. For example, we have recently studied together Paul's letter to the Colossians.**

**But it is interesting to notice that even the shortest letters of the apostles of Christ were also considered important and valuable. The NT contains several short letters of only a single chapter that are often overlooked in our Bible study. For a few weeks we'll consider some of them together—Small letters with Big Messages. One of them is Paul's letter to Philemon.**

#### **Background to the letter**

Living in the area of Colossae near the Lycus Valley was an apparently well-to-do householder by the name of Philemon. He along with his wife (Apphia) and son (Archippus) had become disciples of Jesus, perhaps through the teaching of Epaphras. A congregation was formed there and perhaps because of his position Philemon had opened up his home to the saints to meet and used his wealth to help them in time of need.

But all was not well in Philemon's household. Among his slaves there was a man named Onesimus whose actions would cause considerable loss and difficulty for his master. Dissatisfied with his lot, he absconded, taking with him some of his master's money or possessions hoping to use them to experience a new life of freedom. He made his way to far-away Rome a place where he no doubt thought he could never be found and where he might begin a new life away from his master. But all of that was to change in a remarkable providence.

In Rome the apostle Paul had been imprisoned for some time awaiting his hearing before Nero; and while there was visited by one of the members of the church at Colossae by the name of Epaphras. He apparently had come to Rome to be of help to Paul, perhaps bringing with him support from the church in Colossae. It was he who apparently reported to Paul about the spiritual conditions that led to the writing of the epistle to the Colossians that we've recently studied together.

How Onesimus came in contact with Paul the text does not say (perhaps Epaphras recognized him and brought him to Paul); but it was to have a lasting impact upon Onesimus and Paul and Philemon, his master. As Onesimus listened to Paul's teaching he became persuaded that the faith of his former master was true and that he had committed a great wrong in robbing him and leaving him. This wayward slave was baptized in Rome becoming spiritually "free" from his past sins by obeying the gospel and became a "slave" of Jesus Christ. He showed his changed life by being of service to Paul in his imprisonment. But it became necessary for such a man who had wronged his master by leaving to make it right and return to Colossae. And this is what Paul encouraged him to do.

Get this scene in your mind. Word comes to Philemon that two visitors are approaching his villa. And imagine his surprise when they appear. One of them is Tychicus, a man that he may not have known. Here he stands holding in his hand a letter from the apostle Paul (of whom he has no doubt heard but never met); but more intriguing, standing behind him is his run-away slave Onesimus, willingly returning to his master. What did Paul have to say to Philemon? How would he handle the situation with his run-away slave Onesimus? Paul had expressly written to communicate a message to Philemon which would be heard by him, by his family, and all the church with him (v. 1-3).

### **Message of the letter**

#### ***Paul's letter naturally divides into two sections***

Paul's approach Philemon (v. 3-7)

Paul's appeal for Onesimus (v. 8-22)

#### ***Paul's approach to Philemon***

First Paul gave thanks for Philemon's wonderful example of faith and love toward Jesus and His people (v. 4-5).

He prays that the "fellowship of faith" (the faith that they share) will become effective in Paul's (and other's) knowledge of his doing every good thing for Christ's sake (v. 6).

He conveys his own joy and comfort in knowing how Philemon has refreshed the saints (v. 7).

Here is a wonderful example of genuine courtesy and appreciation for a man who as a disciple has used his wealth and position for the good of the cause of Christ. Philemon is a wonderful example of Christian hospitality.

#### ***Paul's appeal to Philemon***

Paul begins his appeal by acknowledging his apostolic right to command disciples to do what is right (v. 8). Yet in this case, he chooses instead simply to appeal to him out of love and with regard to Paul's age and condition as a prisoner of the gospel (v. 9). But what is the appeal?

Paul urges Philemon to see that the man standing before him now is not the man who left him some time ago.

Through Paul's teaching, he has become Paul's son in the faith, begotten under the challenging circumstances of his own imprisonment (v. 10).

Onesimus' salvation has made him a different man. Ironically, Onesimus (whose name means "useful") hadn't been very useful to his master, but now he truly lives up to that name being useful not only to Onesimus, but also to Paul (v. 11) Paul acknowledges that because of this he would have liked to have kept Onesimus in Rome because of the service that he could provide to him in prison; yet he realizes that he cannot rightly take advantage of another's slave against his will. What he hopes Philemon might consent to is to allow Onesimus to

serve Paul in his behalf and that out of Philemon's own free will. (v. 12-14)

Onesimus returns not as a useless runaway, but as something of far greater value, as a brother in Christ, willing and ready to do his master's bidding. And in that condition, he is useful both to Philemon and Paul (v. 15-16).

Paul appeals to him to accept him back as if he were Paul himself (v. 17) and that whatever wrong he has committed he will personally repay it. Yet Paul deftly reminds Philemon that through his teaching Philemon has a debt of his own, for he too was once a slave in sin but made free through the blood of Christ through teaching of the apostle Paul (v. 19).

And so Paul leaves the matter for Philemon to decide; but optimistic that he will do the right thing (v. 21) and such will bring additional refreshment to Paul's spirit (v. 20).

In the meantime he hopes that he will be released from prison and that he will have the opportunity to personally visit and stay with Philemon.

### **Big messages from a small letter**

#### ***The gospel can bring reconciliation to all broken relationships.***

Paul's letter makes clear what the gospel can do in a world of conflict and wrong-doing. Through conversion, sinners are made to see their wrongs, seek the forgiveness of those who they have wronged and make everything right again. Furthermore, the whole relationship is changed through the relationship of faith.

Even today the gospel can have that same impact upon the world and its relationships. It can break down the walls of social prejudice that divide and alienate men. It can heal a broken marriage or an estranged relationship with a rebellious child.

By why is this possible?

#### ***Our reconciliation with others is based upon our reconciliation with God.***

Philemon as a Roman master had every right to punish Onesimus and that severely for his disobedience and for whatever losses he had incurred. Yet Paul presents a powerful motivation for Philemon to forgive the debt—he himself had once been disobedient to his heavenly Lord and master and He, through the vicarious sufferings of Christ, had been released from the debt. Would he now refuse to this run-away what he had once received from the Lord and his apostle? The power to forgive and be reconciled to others is rooted in our own forgiveness. That is why God has so powerfully linked the two ideas together.

God's forgiveness became the basis for the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in one body.

*But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who*

*made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. (Ephesians 2:13-16)*

God's love for us becomes the motivation to show love for our brethren and our fellowman.

*In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:10-11)*

***Conclusion: What a powerful lesson Paul's letter to Philemon teaches us. A small letter—but oh what a great message it teaches us! We would like to believe that Philemon accepted his wayward slave back with the love of a brother in Christ and not only that but later sent him with Paul to help him in his work. That we can never know, but what we can know is how the gospel can bring healing and reconciliation to broken lives and relationships right now.***