

Synthetic Bible Studies

Containing an outline study of every book of the Bible
with suggestions for Sermons, Addresses and
Bible Expositions

By

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LESSON EIGHTEEN

PHILEMON

We now come to the last of the Epistles which, without serious objection from any quarter, are admitted to have been written by Paul. Philemon, however, 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, and the supposition at first might be that the second imprisonment was meant, because it follows II Timothy. But we should be mistaken there, as 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 Colossians 1:7, and 4:12, was a minister at Colossae, and perhaps therefore Philemon and his household were members of his flock. As Philemon, however, owed his salvation, under GOD, to the labors of Paul (v. 19), we may believe that the latter had made his acquaintance during his long stay in Ephesus and its vicinity (Acts 19, 20), for Colossae was in that neighborhood.

Story of the Epistle

The story of the Epistle seems to be something like this: Philemon had a slave named Onesimus who seemed to have runaway from his master, perhaps having stolen from him besides (v. 18), and, escaping the police, had found his way to Rome, and had gotten thrown into the company of Paul. The world would say this, but we would rather say that a gracious GOD led him into the way of Paul. Perhaps he had known Paul when he lived with Philemon at Colossae, and perhaps

Paul had labored with him in vain to accept the Gospel. At all events, circumstances are changed now, and under the power of a burdened conscience, the fear of arrest and punishment, and perhaps too, the very condition in which he now finds his old friend as a prisoner, he is moved to give more earnest heed to the message. He is converted and is rejoicing in the Lord.

But one of the first duties of a converted man, and without which he cannot know rejoicing, is confession and restitution of wrong done to his fellow-man, especially his fellow-Christian. Onesimus knows this and is ready to return to his master, 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 mutual friend of his master and himself that may intercede for him and avert that which under other circumstances would be almost certain to fall upon him on his return. And what a loving letter Paul writes! How it exemplifies his own exposition of what love is in the thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians.

The Outline

The Epistle begins as usual with the salutation (vv. 1-3).

Notice that Timothy's name is coupled with his own, a fact which lays that much more of an obligation upon Philemon to comply with his loving request. Notice, also, that Apphia is named, and Archippus, the first perhaps the wife, and the second the son of Philemon. The last named also seems to have become a public minister in the church.

"**The church in thy house**," is mentioned, showing that in primitive times the gatherings of Christians were in private homes; each gathering, and there may have been several in the one city at the same time, being a kind of church within the church, just as we now have several churches with different names in the one city or town. The picture thus afforded of the assemblies of these early Christians is very interesting, and a moving argument in favor of the "cottage" prayer meeting of our own time.

Now comes the thanksgiving (vv. 4-7).

Paul makes mention of Philemon in his prayers. It was his custom to do this, as we have seen, with all his converts.

- how far do we follow his example?
- how do our prayers compare with his in their range?
- what do we know of the experience, the joy, and the power of intercessors?
- we have not begun to pray until we pray thus.

Paul had good reason to remember Philemon in thanksgiving and prayer, for see what kind of man he was!

Especially notice the expression of his Christian faith in kindness and benevolence to other saints.

Following the thanksgiving, there is revealed the real reason for the letter,

the plea for Onesimus (vv. 8-21).

He pleads though he might command (vv. 8, 9); love is more potent than force. Onesimus has been converted by him while a prisoner in Rome (v. 10); are we equally faithful to what should be the main business of our lives, witnessing for JESUS, "**in season and out of season**"?

Onesimus means "*profitable*," but he had not been very profitable to his master theretofore, he had belied his name. He had now, however, become profitable to both Philemon and Paul (v. 11). The fruit of the Spirit in men greatly enhances their value. Paul would like to have kept him with him in Rome, 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 well worth while to have lost him for a while to get him back forever! What a striking, though incidental, testimony to the fact that saints shall know each other in the life to come! But he was now coming back not merely as a slave, but as a beloved brother! This does not mean that the old relationship as master and slave should be dissolved (I Corinthians 7:17-24), but only that it should now be continued under these different and 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 gently and tactfully insists that if Philemon considers the premises, he will regard himself as still in the Apostle's debt (vv. 18, 19).

- what is his closing plea (v. 20)?
- does he believe it will be acceded to (v. 21)?

Following the plea, the letter concludes with certain personal allusions,

greetings and the benediction (vv. 22, 25).

- who, only, of the brethren named in verse 24 were with Paul in his second imprisonment?
- which one did he ask to come unto him? See II Timothy.

Applicatory Words

If some were to ask why such a personal letter as this should find a place among the books of Holy Scripture, it would seem sufficient to reply that its value is found in the glimpses it affords of the social intercourse of Christians in the primitive days.

But there is something else here, already alluded to in our treatment of the text, viz: Christianity does not hastily nor rashly interfere with existing institutions, even when they, in the long run, are found to be inimical to its principles. Philemon was not bidden to give Onesimus his freedom.

Does Christianity, then, countenance or endorse human slavery?

Nay, wherever Christianity has made headway, slavery has fallen. The truth makes free. The union of believers in JESUS CHRIST, when rightly understood, promotes love to one another, and love ministers to freedom.

There is still another Gospel lesson to be drawn from this story by way of illustration.

As Paul found Onesimus wandering from his master's house and from the place of duty and love, 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 the Lord JESUS CHRIST acts as our Advocate with the Father, having borne our sins.

As Philemon, we may believe, 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 God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."**

~ end of Lesson 18 ~
