

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 65

Prison Epistles – Part Five

Philemon

The Glories of a One-Page Letter!

I. BACKGROUND

Acts ended with Paul in house arrest in Rome accompanied by Luke (who composed Acts) and others. During this approximate two-year stay (60-62 A.D.), Paul wrote the four letters we term “prison epistles.” We have already studied the three larger letters: Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians. This week, we finish with the fourth, Philemon. Philemon is a short, one chapter letter composed at the same time as Colossians.

We suspect the same time of authorship because the letter was written while Paul was in chains (verse 10) about Onesimus, who apparently carried the letter. Onesimus, along with Tychicus, also carried the Colossian letter (Col. 4:7-9). Colossians 4:9 adds the point that Onesimus is “one of you.” In Philemon, Paul also greets Archippus as he does in Colossians 4:17.

As with Paul’s other letter, an appropriate question to ask in studying Philemon is: Why did Paul want to write this letter? What need was Paul addressing? Was it merely a missionary report with encouragement and joyful instructions like Philippians? Was it addressing certain theological concerns and their practical ramifications like Colossians and Ephesians? Was it to set aright a church far off keel like the Corinthian letters? Was it to complete some teaching left unfinished by a rapid departure like the Thessalonian letters? Could it be an introduction letter that helped preserve the unity of a church like Romans? Or, was it a letter stopping the progress of a destructive legalism like Galatians?

Philemon is like none of the letters we have studied thus far. Philemon is a personal letter from the heart of Paul to the heart of Philemon concerning one man: Onesimus. Of all Paul’s writings, this is the only strictly private letter preserved for us today.¹

¹ Later, we will study the Timothy letters and Titus. They are all addressed to individuals but unlike Philemon, they cover issues of church governance and discipline where Philemon covers strictly a personal matter.

The letter sets forth Paul's request that Philemon welcome Onesimus back into his household. Onesimus was a runaway slave who came to know Jesus through Paul in Rome. Paul is sending the runaway back home to restore him to Philemon, the owner.

In studying the letter, we have several nuggets to gain from the letter itself. We will reach beyond the letter into church history as well for some reasonable conclusions that we can assess beyond the letter.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR THE LETTER

We are reminded when studying Philemon that slavery was a longstanding institution in the first century Roman world. Slaves were written up as "live chattel" or a "live instrument." Slaves had zero rights under the law; no more than a shovel or hammer has rights.

Slave owners had absolute rights over slaves. They could treat them however they wished, including putting them to death.

As we look at slavery in the Roman world, we do well to remember that it was different than the Hebrew slavery allowed under the Jewish law. Hebrew slavery, while bearing the same name, was a much different type. Jews were never to forget that they themselves had been slaves in Egypt. Therefore, Hebrew slaves were considered members of the "owners" family with religious rights as well as social rights. They were protected from tyranny and violence. If they were Jews, then they were given liberty after 6 years of service.

As mentioned earlier, however, slavery in the Roman world was vastly different. Lightfoot gives a good background to Roman slavery in his commentary on Philemon. Slaves had no relationships and were not allowed to marry.

If we consider that Paul wrote in the 60 to 62 timeframe, it is useful to read from the Roman historian Tacitus who wrote of an incident that occurred in 61 A.D., the very same timeframe. Writing just 48 years later (109 A.D.), Tacitus recorded:

"Soon afterwards one of his own slaves murdered the city-prefect, Pedanius Secundus, either because he had been refused his freedom, for which he had made a bargain, or in the jealousy of a love in which he could not brook his master's rivalry. Ancient custom required that the whole slave-establishment

which had dwelt under the same roof should be dragged to execution...” (Annals xiv)

This was major news in Rome. A debate was held in the Roman senate and the decision to carry out the penalty was upheld. All 400 slaves were killed en masse regardless of age, gender, or even knowledge of the crime. We do not know if this happened before or after Paul wrote Philemon, but it is interesting to compare Paul’s decisions and actions in Philemon with that of the Roman Senate!

III. PHILEMON TEXT

Paul writes as “Paul and Timothy” similar to what we see in many of his letters. But, here is a difference. Normally, Paul speaks in his letters as “we...” In Philemon, though, Paul uses the first person and writes the personal “I” over and over again.

Whereas in most of Paul’s letters he terms himself an apostle, in this letter it does not happen. Here, Paul is not “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus” as he identified himself in Colossians. Instead, he is “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” Paul is writing on behalf of a runaway slave. Paul does not set out his apostolic office and authority. Instead, Paul writes of himself as a prisoner, not of an earthly captor, but of Jesus Christ.

Paul addresses the letter to “Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home” (1-2). Philemon was the owner of the slave Onesimus, Apphia, most likely, Philemon’s wife, and Archippus probably Philemon’s son. We know from Colossians that Archippus was likely serving the Laodician church.²

Paul writes warmly. Calling Philemon a fellow worker is high praise from the Apostle to the Gentiles. No doubt to the extent that Philemon’s home served as the center for a house church, Philemon earned the moniker.

Paul wishes “grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The “you” here is plural, reflecting Paul’s greetings to all those referenced earlier. But the letter pivots the attention after this verse. The

² Colossians 4:17 follows on the heels of verse 16 where Paul instructs the Colossians to exchange letters with the Laodicians, a church 10 miles away. In verse 17, Paul urges Archippus to “complete the work” he has received from the Lord. Many scholars consider the comment in 17 following 16 as indicative that Archippus was serving the Laodicean church.

remaining “you”s in the letter are mostly singular. Paul writes the remaining letter very personally to Philemon.

Paul begins his attention to Philemon with thanksgiving and prayer. “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints” (4-5). We already see Paul’s delicate way of dealing with the slavery issue that forms the core of this letter. Paul is writing to reunite a slave (Onesimus) who is now a Christian with Philemon, his owner. And oh so delicately, Paul begins with thanksgiving for Philemon’s love for ALL the saints (which will now include Onesimus!).

Paul continues, “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” Paul emphasizes the importance not only of our relationship with Christ, but how we demonstrate that faith to those around us. Can you imagine Philemon reading this letter, just handed to him by the slave that had run away upon his return? As people watch Philemon read the letter, perhaps with the runaway still in their presence, Philemon reads the holy Paul’s prayer that those who watch Philemon would see Philemon’s faith actively shining “with a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” Not every slave and good thing we have materially, but every good thing we have in Christ.

Paul’s delicate touch continues, “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.” Again, powerful words being read with the return of a runaway slave, now turned saint, present Philemon’s love refreshing the heart, even of Onesimus?!

With this background, Paul now turns to the key for his writing, a personal plea for Onesimus. In verse 8, Paul writes, “therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love.” Paul is not ordering Philemon to do anything. Paul is not invoking his apostolic authority. Paul does not say, “thus saith the Lord.” Paul merely asks, allowing Philemon to make the godly decision, for his “favor.” Paul says, “I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” Paul reemphasizes his position as a prisoner belonging to Christ as he seeks his favor.

“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus.” Not Paul’s literal son; Philemon’s literal slave; yet, Paul’s son in the faith. For Paul adds “who became my son while I was in chains.” Paul was involved in the rebirth of Onesimus while Paul was in chains in Rome.

We should not be surprised that a runaway slave would go to Rome, even from Colossae. Indeed, Rome was the capital and with well over a million in population, would be the easiest place for a runaway slave to get lost in the masses. But even in Rome, God has his eye out on those for his kingdom. Onesimus, in ways we are not told, came under the influence of Paul and found a real Lord, as he was running to escape from just such a relationship on earth.

In verse 11, Paul writes a pun, again in the same delicate way he has written the whole letter. Speaking of the slave Onesimus, Paul writes, “formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.” The pun is off of the name “Onesimus” (Ονησιμος), which comes from the Greek verb (νινημι) meaning “profit, benefit or help. Onesimus’s name literally means “useful.” So referencing Mr. Useful, Paul writes that “formerly he was *useless* but now he has become *useful*” both to Paul and Philemon.

What made Onesimus true to his name and useful? The transforming work of Jesus Christ. In full confidence of how faith controlled Philemon’s actions, Paul sends Onesimus back to the one who could rightfully punish the runaway with death. Paul writes, “I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced” (12-14).

Paul’s words are again very delicate. Paul all but asks for Philemon to grant this runaway freedom, when the world would dictate the harshest of punishments. But, Paul does not ask. Paul gives Philemon the chance to do the right thing on his own initiative. Paul sees reason behind the escape that exceeds the mind set, certainly of Onesimus when running, but also Philemon who discovered the slave missing. Paul writes, “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.” While Onesimus was “dear” to Paul, he was “even dearer to you [Philemon], both as a man and as a brother in the Lord” (16).

With that build up, Paul goes a bit further in his request of Philemon. Paul writes, “If you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.” You have to figure at this point, Onesimus will not only not be put to death, but probably not beaten either! What about restitution? No doubt Onesimus took food at least, if not much more when he hit the road. Paul covers that as well. Paul writes, “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me!” (18) There should be little doubt that Philemon was not going to be issuing a bill to saint Paul!

Paul writes his salutation in his own hand (19) adding a last significant “suggestion.” Paul writes a pun once more asking for a “benefit” from Philemon in the Lord (20). The Greek Paul uses for benefit is the same basic word as Onesimus (ναιμην). Paul doesn’t come right out and ask for the granting of freedom for Onesimus, but leaves no doubt as to what should be done! Wanting Philemon to welcome Onesimus as Paul himself, and asking for a forgiveness of all debts, Paul adds, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that *you will do even more than I ask.*” (21). Then as if putting a cherry on top of a sundae, Paul explains, “Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you...” (22).

After this, Paul concludes with the letter with additional greetings from others with him.

IV. Analysis and Historical Response

F. F. Bruce analyzes the book around three questions: (1) What is Paul asking for? (2) Did he get it? (3) Why was the letter preserved? Each of these questions well deserves and answer.

(1) What is Paul asking for?

Paul asks for Onesimus’s freedom, without punishment or payment. Paul doesn’t order it. Nor does Paul clearly ask for it. Paul lays out the case for it, with gentle prodding and future accountability. Paul allows Philemon to reach the conclusion of how one Christian Brother should treat another brother, even though the other is in his debt. This is delicately and beautifully done.

(2) Did he get it?

We do not know with 100% certainty for we are nowhere told. But can there really be any doubt as to what a fellow worker of Paul’s would do when reading a letter like this? What rejoicing must have come from the liberation of Onesimus. Similarly, how hard must this once useless runaway have truly worked once set free by love proceeding from faith in Jesus Christ.

(3) *Why was the letter preserved?*

Again, this we do not know for certain. But there are some interesting historical facts that might shed some illumination. Conjecture is that Onesimus was late teens or early twenties when he ran away. Also remember that once granted freedom, Onesimus would have continued to serve at the church, if not in Colossae, then certainly the “mother church” of the region in Ephesus. Now consider the writings of Ignatius, the Bishop of Syrian Antioch. 45 to 50 years after Onesimus is freed, Ignatius writes to the Ephesian church while on his way to Rome to be thrown to wild beasts. The Ephesian church is presided over by a Bishop named Onesimus! Now, certainly Onesimus was a common slave name in the time period, but how odd a slave would rise to the Bishop position in the major church of the region!

In the first six chapters of Ignatius’s letter, the Bishop Onesimus is mentioned by name 14 times. In this same part of the Ephesian letter, Ignatius echoes language from Philemon that certainly shows his familiarity with the letter. In 2:2, Ignatius reiterates Paul’s pun from verse 20 of Philemon.

One other interesting aspect to this possible identification of Onesimus involves the collecting of Paul’s letters. Goodspeed and a number of scholars believe that the body of Paul’s letters was first put together at Ephesus toward the end of the first century. That is when Onesimus would have been Bishop and, most likely, the overseer of the collection. Might that not shed additional light on why Paul’s letter that generated Onesimus’s freedom was saved and added to the collection?

Whether such reasonable inferences are true, the Holy Spirit certainly saw fit to include in scripture this delightful letter demonstrating Christian love and life in a fallen world.

V. POINTS FOR HOME

1. God’s love is new everyday
2. We are to shine his love.
3. We are to share his love.
4. God moves in wondrous ways.