

# Philemon

June 17, 2010

The Book of Philemon has only 25 verses. Consequently some would neglect it as an unnecessary Book to study. If so, the Lord would have not included this in the Bible. In my opinion, this Book explains about extending the grace of God to other like no other Books. It is so practical and so straight forward that you don't get room to dodge.

## A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

*Philemon 1-3 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, 2 to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

As we unfold Paul's letter to Philemon which was written A.D. 60-62, it will be helpful to understand the context of this personal correspondence.

Paul was arrested in Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. He finally was transferred to Rome for a hearing before Caesar Nero, he was under house arrest in his own rented quarters.

During that time, he presented the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Roman guards as well as anyone who came across. One of those people was Onesimus who was a runaway slave from Colosse.

At that time in the Roman Empire, nearly sixty million slaves labored in the fields, shops and homes of their masters. The majority of the slaves were from other countries where they were captured and transported to Rome to be slaves.

Their fates were not easy. They were not considered to be humans, but living tools. A master had absolute power over his slaves. He could do whatever he wanted including killing a slave at his whim.

At the same time, the Romans knew that there was constant anger and potential riots by these sixty million slaves against them. In effort to prevent any threat by them, they had an extremely cruel law for those runaway or disobedient slaves.

If a slave ran away and was captured later, at best he would be branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead, with the letter 'F' – standing for 'fugitivus', "runaway" – and at the worst he would be crucified.

Onesimus was hoping that he would get lost in metropolitan Rome, the spiritual cesspool of that time. By the way, to make the matters worse, he apparently had stolen something from Philemon to finance his escape. So when this young runaway slave made his 1200 miles journey from Colosse to Rome, he knew one thing for sure that he would never return to his master's home in Colosse.

Then he met Paul in Rome and became a believer in the Lord Jesus by the providential will of the Lord.

## **B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK**

As I already stated, the theme of this Book is 'grace'. I am daring to add 'the cost and joy of forgiveness' as an additional theme. It was written in such a tactful, cordial and persuasive manner that you almost cannot recognize apostle Paul's style that had the booming sound of his commands like in Galatians or Romans.

It would have been beneficial for Paul to keep Onesimus around him. But Philemon was Paul's friend and spiritual son. He wanted to do what was right by sending Onesimus back to Philemon with his own letter in Onesimus' defense.

## **C. INTRODUCTION**

Within the first three verses of this letter, apostle Paul reminded Philemon of a couple of things:

### **1) Grace and peace**

As always in our Christian lives, we must realize that we cannot have peace from God unless we have His grace first in our hearts.

### **2) A prisoner of Christ Jesus**

Paul had never considered himself as a prisoner of Rome, rather a grateful prisoner of Christ Jesus. He was not bound by the chain of a dictator, rather the love of Jesus Christ.

The early Christians did not have property of their own for church buildings up to the third century. The Jews had their synagogues, but Christians met in the homes of their congregation.

## **D. COMMENDATION**

*Philemon 4-7 I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, 5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, 6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. 7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.*

This portion of Scripture reminds me one of the memory verses we memorized from Hebrews:

*Hebrews 6:10 For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.*

Philemon and his family must have been a great spiritual oasis of refreshment to the believers of Colosse for apostle Paul to give him such a commendation. I hope that you all get this kind of commendation from other believers when your names are mentioned because you have such a servant heart like Jesus.

## **E. INTERCESSION**

*Philemon 8-16 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you--being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ-- 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. 12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in*

*my chains for the gospel. 14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. 15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave--a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Being an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul could easily pull a rank on Philemon, but he'd rather depend on the love of his brother Philemon. In v9 and 10, he repeated the same phrase "I appeal to you". What a servant heart Paul had!

Voluntary sacrifice and service, motivated by love, is what the Lord wants from His children.

It is easy for me to tell you guys what to do as the pastor of this church. But it would be so much better if I ask and appeal to you guys. I often forget that. I probably have offended many of you. Please forgive me. I will do my best to remember next time, I realize that a loving appeal is often better than an authoritative command because it is done in love.

The name 'Onesimus' means 'profitable'. In v11, Paul was using a play of word 'profitable' which is 'euchrestos' in Greek. And the name 'Philemon' means 'affectionate' or 'one who is kind'. If the slave was expected to live up to his name, then what about the master? Paul was asking Philemon to extend the grace he had received from the Lord to Onesimus.

How often do we want to lash out at the fellow believers because they did something wrong to us? And how often do we ask the Lord to forgive our sins even though we knew exactly what we were doing against the Lord? Isn't it true that the Christian army is the only one that shoots their own wounded? We are willing to forgive and accept an ex-con who had murdered a person, but some of us are not willing to forgive the fellow believers who have hurt our feelings.

*Matthew 6:12 and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. NLT*

We need to extend the grace of God as much as we received from the Lord. That means a lot more than we think we need to.

Think about the person who has hurt you the most. Does that person deserve your forgiveness? You answer that to the Lord. You may say, "You have no idea what that person did to me." Yes, you are right. I don't know. Then answer me, please. Do you know that your sins – including the very unforgiving heart of yours – have crucified our Lord Jesus on the cross?

Is it easy for God to extend His grace to us? Absolutely not. It cost Him His Son Jesus.

In v15-16, apostle Paul reminded Philemon that though he lost a slave once, but now he gained a brother in Christ by God's providence.

## **F. I WILL PICK UP THE TAB**

*Philemon 17-20 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. 18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay--not to mention to you*

*that you owe me even your own self besides. 20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.*

This is such a beautiful description of what Jesus has done for us.

God's people are identified with Jesus Christ that Father God receives them as He receives His Son. We certainly cannot approach God with any merit of our own, but God does receive us when we come to Him "in Jesus Christ." The word 'receive' in v17 means "to receive into one's family circle." Imagine a slave entering his master's family! But imagine a guilty sinner entering God's family!

Paul did not suggest that Philemon ignore the slave's crimes and forget about the debt Onesimus owed. Rather, Paul offered to pay the debt himself. "Put it on my account. I will repay it!" The language in v19 sounds like a legal promissory note of that time. This was Paul's assurance to his friend that the debt would be paid.

It takes more than love to solve the problem. Love must pay a price. God does not save us by His love. Though He loves the whole world, the whole world is not saved. God saves sinners by His grace, and grace is love that pays a price. God in His holiness could not ignore the debt that we owe, because God must be faithful to His own Law. So He paid the debt for us with His grace.

Theologians call this "the doctrine of imputation." To impute means "to put it on one's account." When Jesus Christ died on the cross, His last words were "It is finished." It literally means, "It is imputed."

Our sins were put on His account and He was treated the way we should have been treated. When I trusted Him as my Savior, His righteousness was put on my account; and now God accepts me in Jesus Christ. Jesus said to the Father, "He no longer owes You a debt because I paid it fully on the cross. Receive him as You would receive Me. Let him come into the family circle!"

In v19, Paul used this special relationship to encourage his friend to receive Onesimus. Philemon and Onesimus were not only spiritual brothers in the Lord, but they had the same "spiritual father"—Paul. Paul could afford to pay Onesimus' expenses because there was a sense in which Philemon owed Paul his salvation.

## **G. FAREWELL**

*Philemon 21-25 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. 25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

For a moment, put yourself in Philemon's sandals. Onesimus has wronged you, broken your trust and stolen from you. He was useless, but now he has returned. Would you forgive him and give him a second chance by extending your grace?

This time, put yourself in God's place. All of humankind has wronged you, broken your trust and stolen from you. Would you forgive them and give them a second chance by extending God's grace?

One more thing, remind yourself who wronged you, broken your trust and stolen something dear to you. Would you forgive that person and give him or her a second chance by extending your grace?

## **H. REMINDERS**

### **1) Every Christian was once a fugitive.**

We all were once enslaved to sin, runaways from birth and as well as by our behaviors and thoughts.

### **2) Our guilt was heavy and the penalty severe.**

Guilt hounded our conscience no matter how far we've tried to run away. Without Christ, we would have died in our sins, facing the eternal emptiness and torment of hell.

### **3) God's grace brought freedom in Christ.**

Through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we received freedom through His grace and mercy. All of our sins were imputed to Jesus' account and His holiness and righteousness imputed to ours.

### **4) We are His.**

The original owner of our lives – God – accepted us back.

## **I. WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ONESIMUS?**

Wouldn't you want to know whatever happened to Onesimus? From reading the character of Philemon, he probably accepted Onesimus back to his home. Then what?

A church father of the first century, Ignatius, writing fifty years later in a letter to the Ephesians, addressed their wonderful pastor, named Onesimus. I wouldn't be one bit surprised if this one time runaway slave had become the great pastor of Ephesus with the passing years.

Once we were lost, now we are found, amen?