

Note

Philemon – Part 1 of 1

Summary

Philemon was a rich Roman citizen, whose slave had run away, met Paul and received Jesus. Paul then asks Philemon to receive him back as a beloved brother, not a slave. Today, as Christians, we need to receive all with love into the church, even those society despises or avoids.

Transcript

Philemon – Part 1 of 1

Today, we come to the book of Philemon. It is by far the shortest epistle and it is the only epistle Paul ever wrote about one single individual. Usually, Paul writes epistles to a church, to the leader of the church, because the issue was in the church. This was about one individual, Philemon.

Who is Philemon? Philemon was a rich Roman citizen of the city of Colossi (Book of Colossians). Now, if you look back, the work at Colossi was started by Epaphras, as we were told in the book of Colossians. And Epaphras reached out to Philemon, a rich Roman gentile, and he was saved. It appears that he became one of the leaders of the church in Colossi because it mentions the church that worshipped in his house. Now, why is Paul writing this letter? Paul is writing this letter because one of Philemon's slaves had run away from him.

So either he was a bad rebellious slave, or Philemon was a bad cruel master before he became a believer. Onesimus, his slave ran away from Colossi. He ran as far as he could go -to Rome. That's a good long way off. Normally, when you are a runaway slave you cannot go to a village, because everybody knew everybody there, but in a big city, it's very easy to get lost in the crowd. Nobody bothers with you. So he went to the big city to disappear and somehow met Paul. Paul was in house arrest in Rome. Paul shared the gospel with Onesimus, the runaway slave who got saved and was totally changed.

Now that he is saved and became a disciple of Paul, he's such a blessing to Paul. Paul valued his help because he was now an old man. And yet Paul wanted to make sure that he got right with his past. He had done something wrong in running away from his master. So Paul sent him back to Philemon with a letter.

Onesimus is now sent back to Philemon to get his past right. Now, it's scary for a runaway slave to go back to his master because the charge against a runaway slave in the Roman Empire was very simple. If the slave ran away, he was crucified. Remember crucifixion was not just for Jesus. Crucifixion was for the worst kinds of crimes in the Roman Empire. So whenever a man was crucified, he was considered the worst kind of criminal. When Onesimus went back, there were two possibilities. He would either be crucified for running away, or he will be branded on his forehead with the word fugitive in Latin. And so these two outcomes were possible for Onesimus. But Paul writes this letter and we see a totally different outcome. He should be a condemned man but let's just read the letter to Philemon.

Verses 1 – 2:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

Philemon has a church in his house.

Verses 3 – 7:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Obviously, Philemon was a very well-liked Christian, a totally converted man and he had refreshed the hearts of the saints. He was a very charitable man, a lot of the saints were persecuted. And because he was wealthy, he probably took care of them, paid their bills, etc.

Then we go on to verse 8, which we see Paul's plea for his slave, Onesimus.

Verses 8 – 16:

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake, I prefer to appeal to you – I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and me.) I'm sending

him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother – especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So we see Paul making an appeal in these verses. He said, you know, I could command you, you're one of my disciples. You know me, you respect me, I could just tell you what to do. I could tell you, Onesimus is with me, I'm keeping him here. I know you will not disagree because I need help here in prison. To me, he is my son now. You know Paul has never had a natural family. Timothy was far away, sometimes Timothy was with him. But Timothy had to go off and you know, Onesimus could be a real blessing to him. But Paul says I appeal to you, not command you but appeal to you that you will receive him back as a brother. That is something quite amazing.

It says verse 16, he is no longer as a bondservant, that is a slave, but more than a slave- a beloved brother. Now when you read this, it's no big deal. But in the Roman stratified culture, it is amazing. Slaves were totally a different category, you can accept them in your house, but never as a brother, always a slave. You must remember that two-thirds of Rome at this time, 60% of Rome were made up of slaves and if you didn't put the slaves clearly under you, they could overrun you, because they outnumbered you. Many households had more slaves than they had their own relatives in it. And so the social stratification was very clear and nobody dared to change it because that would change a whole lot of the society.

Now Paul did not promote rebellion of slaves. Remember, Christianity is never about rebellion. It's not about outward rebellion, outward warfare. No, it's always about internal change. And we know that outward rebellion leads to counter rebellion and counter rebellion and it goes on and on. But when you change from inside out, it is a lasting change. Rebellions don't last long, coup d'état don't last long, but a change of heart? So he's asking Philemon, can you receive him as a brother?

That is an internal revolution of the heart. So we see here, what to you and me look like a letter about one slave and Philemon, is actually about us as

Christians learning to receive others whom we have all along despised or avoided because they're different from us economically, racially, or for other reasons.

Do you realize it's still very prevalent in the church? The rich mix with the rich, the poor sit in one corner. I see this in my church where all kinds of ethnic groups have their own corners. The majority group will accept them. They can worship here, I don't crucify them, I don't brand them in the forehead. But frankly, I cannot really accept them. That's the truth, it's the plain truth.

This is 2000 years after Philemon, after slavery, we still have our discriminations in the heart. Outwardly there are no problems. Do we just say Hi, or do we greet enthusiastically? So I hope you begin to see that this is put here for a reason.

So we see that finally, I believe Philemon hugged him as a brother and now Onesimus became useful to Philemon because his heart had been changed. No more the rebellious runaway slave, now a good son, a good brother to Philemon. Philemon now, no more the bossy master, but a good brother, a good dad to him. So, we see how hearts can be changed.

In Colossians 3:11 we read.....(Philemon lived in Colosse.)

Colossians 3: 11

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Now I hope that in our mind, we can receive anyone, however despised and horrible his past. Onesimus had run away. He had broken every rule, he probably stole money and ran, otherwise how could he had money to go to Rome?

Verse 17 – 21

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

So Paul is saying if he owes you anything, I will pay. I am sure he stole something. There's no other way he could have travelled all the way to Rome. And if you're going to run away, you better make sure it's worth all your trouble. Steal whatever you can and run. So Paul said, I will pay. So now do you realize this is really the gospel message, in this little story? We are slaves of sin, we ran away from God. Christ calls us back and paid the debt of our sin and now we return back to our master and become useful to our master. In the past, we were terrible. We mocked God's name, we rejected God but now we have come back.

So Paul is doing what Christ did for him. Paul was a persecutor, Christ met him, saved Him. And now Paul becomes useful to God. Paul meets a runaway slave, brings him back and said to Philemon, I will pay for him as Christ paid for us and he will be useful to you.

This is the Gospel story, but the real message is, Receive all as brothers. Now, churches today please don't look down on those who are terrible criminals before, or terribly poor, smelly, uneducated, different from you. In your social culture you treat all these people with disdain, but we are all one in Christ.

May God bless you! May the little lesson of Philemon change our outlook to everyone who is born again and brought into the family, to be our brothers, to hug them, to help them, to love them, not just to tolerate them. May God bless you and your church.