

LESSON SEVEN

PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

A. THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON:

This short letter is one of the most beautiful of all of Paul's epistles. It was a private letter that was concerned with a personal problem and gives us a deep insight of the apostle's dealings with his converts. Here we find Paul's devoted love to individual souls, which was one of the reasons for his success as a missionary.

Philemon was a wealthy man and a resident of Colosse. He was a respected and faithful lay member of the church. He and Paul were intimate friends and he had been converted under Paul's ministry.

The city of Colosse was located a few miles from Laodicea, on the trade route between Ephesus and the Euphrates. Some of the church in Colosse met in the home of Philemon. This showed that Philemon was a man of means, owning a house sufficiently large enough to accommodate the church. He also was a slave owner. It might seem strange that he owned slaves but in his days, slavery was commonly accepted and would seem no different than having hired domestic servants. Sometimes both master and slaves were Christians (I Timothy 6:1-2). For this reason Paul gave instructions for Christian slaves as well as their masters.

Onesimus was a slave who belonged to Philemon. He was a clever young man. Several years after Paul had left Asia and was imprisoned at Rome, Onesimus stole some money from his master, Philemon and ran away to Rome. Undoubtedly he had met Paul in Philemon's home at an earlier date. At Rome, he found Paul in prison and was converted under Paul's ministry.

This epistle was written while Paul was imprisoned the first time, at about the same time as his letter to the Colossians, possibly 62 AD. It was a beautiful letter interceding for the runaway slave and appealing to Philemon to receive him back as a Christian Brother.

B. INTRODUCTION: (Philemon 1-3).

Paul introduced himself as the writer of the letter and described himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He assumed the position of a supplicant; as the Lord's bondsman, he was going to plead for another bondsman. Six times in this letter, Paul made reference to his imprisonment. This certainly must have had a tremendous appeal to Philemon.

Timothy is mentioned in the salutation, but this does not mean that he assisted in the writing of the letter. It did mean that Timothy stood in complete agreement with Paul on the matter in which the letter contained. Timothy is called "our brother." It is assumed that he was well known to Philemon and that Timothy was keenly interested in Onesimus.

Apphia was Philemon's wife. The fact that her name appears after Philemon would show the close relation. She would definitely have an interest in the return of Onesimus and would influence the position of her husband. We cannot be sure of the relation of Archippus to Philemon, but the fact that his name is mentioned here revealed that he had connections with the household. It is suggested that Archippus was Philemon's son. It should be noted that

Philemon is spoken of as being a fellow laborer while Archippus is described as being a fellow soldier. One was a companion of Paul in toil, the other Paul's companion in the ring of battle.

C. THANKSGIVING FOR PHILEMON: (Philemon 4-7).

Paul wisely did not immediately introduce the purpose of his letter but expressed his love for Philemon. Word had come to the apostle how Philemon had demonstrated his love for the Christians by ministering to them. This love for the church on the part of Philemon meant much to the Christians and when the word came to the apostle, it refreshed and encouraged Paul. Paul expressed the grateful thanksgiving for the nobleman in Philemon's character. His love for Philemon is expressed by one word, "brother." The position of this at the close of the expression of thanksgiving lays great emphasis upon Paul's love and appreciation for Philemon. With this expression of Christian love, Paul was now ready to make his appeal.

D. THE APPEAL FOR ONESIMUS: (Philemon 8-17).

As a runaway slave who had stolen from his master, Onesimus could expect scourging and possibly crucifixion under Roman law. As a Christian, he could have remained in Rome and never had gone back. But this would not have been the correct thing to do and certainly would never have made restitution. Paul advised him to return to his master and wrote this letter of appeal for reconciliation upon the part of Philemon.

The name "Onesimus" meant "profitable." Paul laid emphasis upon this and reminded Philemon that while Onesimus had been unprofitable in the past, he was now profitable both to Philemon and to Paul. Paul spoke of himself as being "the aged and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ." At this particular time, Paul was about 60 years of age but he was now a veteran in the gospel. The fact of his years of service and the price that he had paid for the gospel, he trusted would influence Philemon.

The appeal to Philemon was that Onesimus would be received back not just as a slave but as a brother beloved in the Lord. Paul appealed to Philemon that he would receive Onesimus just as he would receive Paul himself.

E. THE PLEDGE OF PAUL: (Philemon 18-22).

To remove the last hindrance that might arise in the mind of Philemon concerning the matter, Paul pledged to repay any debt that Onesimus owed. Onesimus would not be able to make monetary restitution, which Philemon might feel was due. Paul assumed the debt incurred by him. As the spiritual father of Onesimus, he assumed the obligation for him.

Paul put his own signature to the letter to make it legal and binding. It is possible that Paul wrote this entire epistle with his own hand. Paul reminded Philemon that he owed him a greater debt than Onesimus owed Philemon. However, this did not take away from Paul's sincerity in pledging to repay any obligation owed to Philemon by Onesimus.

F. CONCLUSION: (Philemon 23-25).

At the conclusion of his letter, Paul mentioned that he hoped that he would visit Colosse and requested Philemon to prepare him lodging. He mentioned several friends and sent greetings from them. Epaphras was also from Colosse and was well known to Philemon. He was the founder of the Colossian church and was now with Paul at Rome. The other four men mentioned are described as being Paul's fellow workers. It should also be noted that Demas is

mentioned here as an honorable associate with Paul. It is said that Demas later forsook Paul, "*having loved this present world*" (*II Timothy 4:10*). It would seem that Paul, writing the letter, had no doubt as to the outcome of the matter. He knew that Philemon would accept Onesimus back as a brother. In verse 21 where Paul wrote "*knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say*" is a hint that Paul expected Philemon to free Onesimus. We have no proof of what really happened. However, tradition states that Philemon did receive him back and gave Onesimus his liberty. This tradition also states that Onesimus became a minister of the gospel and a bishop in Berea. Of course, this we cannot prove but we certainly would like to believe it.

G. THE LESSON TAUGHT IN THIS EPISTLE:

This epistle is a beautiful story of forgiveness and reconciliation. There are two main lessons here that we should note.

1. Paul who brought the gospel to Onesimus became the one who pleads for Onesimus' reconciliation with his master. It is not enough just to preach the gospel and to win a convert, the minister is responsible to see that the convert is fully restored and does the right thing in every way.
2. The importance of restitution is taught here. Onesimus could have remained in Rome as a Christian and never returned to Colosse. By returning, he was making restitution. Certainly restitution has a very important place in the plan of salvation.

LESSON SEVEN

SELF HELP TEST

- A. Where is the city of Colosse located?
- B. Who was the founder of the Colossian Church?
- C. Who was Philemon?
- D. What was the name of Philemon's slave?
- E. What two crimes did this slave commit?
- F. What was the punishment of a runaway slave?
- G. Where was Paul when he wrote this epistle?
- H. Where was Onesimus converted?
- I. Who was Philemon's wife?
- J. Who was Archippus?
- K. Who offered to pay the debt owing to Philemon?
- L. What was Paul's request to Philemon?
- M. Who carried this letter to Philemon?
- N. How is restitution taught in this epistle? O.
According to traditions, how did the story end?