

The Epistle to Philemon

by: Arthur Goodwin

However or wherever we read Scripture, there is always one verse which can be written over the whole passage that we are reading. It is 2 Timothy 3:16, where it says: 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness'. What do we learn, what is profitable from the passage of the Word of God that is being examined? There are two ways of achieving this. Firstly there is the didactic understanding, that is listening to the exposition and endeavouring to grasp that which the preacher is seeking to teach, or reading the Word for oneself with the object of learning what is the meaning of the passage. Such might be termed the objective approach. The second is more subjective and it is to listen or read and by so doing to allow the Word of God to wholly embrace me — to allow the spirit of the very words and thoughts to have their effect upon my soul. The epistle to Philemon has this latter character. There is not a word of doctrine in it, but every verse exudes a spirit of love and grace, and it is this that should be positively noticed as we are read through the letter.

Paul's letter to Colosse

Now let us have a brief examination of the epistle and of the circumstances that led to its being written. Some regard it as an appendix to the epistle to the Colossians; others as a personal letter sent by Paul to accompany his letter to the assembly at Colosse. Colossians 4:7-9 makes it clear that Onesimus accompanied Tychicus the deliverer to Colosse, where Philemon the addressee of the letter lived. It is possible and indeed probable that both contentions are true. There is a clear connection to the Colossian letter. The epistles to both Timothy and Titus are full of doctrinal teaching, but the tenor of the Philemon letter would urge that the heart and the affections of the reader would be aroused to provoke a spirit of love and grace in him.

The main characters

There are three main characters referred to in the epistle. Firstly there is Paul the writer, and he refers to himself as Paul the aged and moreover the prisoner of

Jesus Christ. This imprisonment would be in Rome and the first of his two incarcerations there. The second is Philemon, who was apparently a well-to-do citizen of Colosse and a member of the church there. Paul addresses him as 'the beloved and fellow workman' (Philem. 1:1). Apparently he had laboured with the apostle at some previous time. Then there is Onesimus, a one time slave of Philemon, who had absconded from his service and had eventually reached Rome. Perhaps his idea was that in this well populated city the chances of his detection would be very much minimised. Whilst he had been in Rome he had come under the preaching of the gospel by the apostle and had been converted. Paul writes of him as his child and one who had been begotten in his bonds (v. 9).

The subject of slavery

It might be advisable to say a few words on the subject of slavery and the position that we find it has in Scripture. Some have thought it strange and have even criticised the Scriptures, because the Bible and particularly the New Testament does not condemn it. Slavery has been a long established practice, going right back to the beginning of man's sojourn on earth and was only ended in the latter part of the 19th century, although it is true to say that even today there are, in the world, places where slavery still exists. There have always been good and bad slave masters.

You will remember that in the Old Testament there was provision made for this. Any slave who loved his master and loved his family, and did not wish to accept freedom when it was offered to him, was taken and his ear was pierced with an awl and henceforth he belonged to his master for ever (Ex. 21:6). The Scriptures do not pronounce upon slavery but leave the matter open. But nevertheless the morality of Christianity must have had its effect in those places where it was practised. Paul in 1 Timothy 6:1-2 wrote: 'Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and His doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren'.

The church in Philemon's house

Besides Philemon others are included as the addressees of the letter. The first is 'our beloved Apphia', and without doubt she would be the wife of Philemon. Also Archippus, who is described as our fellow soldier, and he appears to be a resident of the household. Some have thought that he was the son of Philemon. And lastly, the letter is addressed 'to the church in thy house' (Philem. 1:2). In the early days of Christianity the church had not been fragmented into the hundreds of divisions that it is today. Denominationalism was unknown. In any one town, be it small or great, there would be a certain company of believers and these would comprise the church in that city. It may have been possible for all of them to meet in one place if such a building could be found to accommodate them, but if not they would meet in smaller companies, and sometimes one of these may have congregated in the private home of one of its number. And so it was in the case of Philemon, and Paul speaks of that company as 'the church in thy house'. It might be pertinent to point out that this is the only occasion in all his letters where the apostle Paul directly addresses a woman, and in this case he calls her 'the sister'. There appears to be good reason for this, for Paul is writing concerning the return of a runaway slave and she as the one in charge of the administration of the household would have to deal with the situation, and so the apostle wisely gives her advance notice.

Verses 1-7

Now let us take a look at the substance and purpose of his letter, but in doing so remember that we are not looking for teaching or doctrine. Rather in the words of the text already quoted we are seeking to find instruction or guidance in righteousness — that is the right spiritual way to deal with the situation that the letter covers. So Paul does not begin by asserting his apostolic authority as he does in most of his letters. Instead he speaks of his present circumstances. He is now Paul the aged and moreover a prisoner of Jesus Christ. In verse 4 he thanks God for Philemon making mention of him in his prayers. What an example the apostle is to all of us. How often do we pray specifically, that is by name, for those whom we know who are in need of the help of God, or do we rely upon a composite prayer that embraces all?

It had probably been some considerable time since Paul had seen Philemon, but nevertheless he had constantly heard of his love and of his faith which he had towards the Lord Jesus and moreover towards all the saints. Divine love is active, and here we find it being demonstrated in Philemon. He had a love for the saints as well as a love for sinners. His name means 'friendly' or 'attached', and indeed one translator gives the meaning of it as 'one who kisses'. Philemon lived up to

the meaning of his name and thereby demonstrated that he was in the good of 1 John 3:14, where we read: 'We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren'. Love amongst the brethren should be a feature of church life. In verse 6 we learn something of Philemon's faith and see that it was certainly something that was not stagnant. The expression of it was an energetic display of every benefit he enjoyed in company with Paul and other followers of Christ. The outward manifestation of his faith was spontaneous and not of necessity. And then in verse 7 we are told that the love displayed by Philemon was an encouragement and a source of refreshment to all the saints with whom he had fellowship.

Verses 8-16

In verses 8 to 16 we have the main burden of the letter, the matter which was deeply concerning the apostle Paul and which was greatly upon his heart. He was sending back a runaway slave to his master and he was concerned as to how Philemon would receive him. As we have already stated, slavery was an established practice and slave owners had a right at law, and in such a case as that of Onesimus, he could have been dealt with very severely. But Onesimus was no ordinary slave. A change had taken place during the absence from his master. He had been converted, he was now a Christian and henceforth relationships between master and slave were different. Although still master and slave, they were now brothers in Christ. This is the term that Paul uses in addressing Philemon. All those in Christ are on a common platform, and this now applied to Philemon and his slave.

In Matthew 17 we have an illustration of this oneness. There we read of how the Lord asked Peter from whom the kings of the earth take tribute, of their own children or of strangers. Peter's reply is 'of strangers' (Matt. 17:26), and then the Lord sends him to the sea where he casts in his net and takes up a fish in which there is a coin to pay tribute for both the Lord and Peter. In the eyes of the law the Lord and Peter were of common standing. Not only does Paul address Philemon as brother, but he uses words such as 'enjoin' and 'beseech'. These are not expressions of command such as he might have used when asserting his apostolic authority, but rather those of love and grace. In verse 3 he had sought that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ might be shown to Philemon, and now in this letter he exhibits such in his approach to him. Such grace should be displayed by all believers, especially to one another.

Paul does not gloss over Onesimus's wrongdoing or seek to make excuses for him — despite the warm and loving feelings that he had for his child in the faith. Not only should love, grace and courtesy be shown amongst the Lord's people, but righteousness should also be predominant. If 'righteousness exalteth a nation' (Prov. 14:34), it should certainly be demonstrated in

the Christian circle. When he absconded, Onesimus had certainly proved unprofitable. To use business language, he had been a valuable asset and his disappearance was a great loss. But now returning, although still a slave, he is a brother in Christ and what a difference that makes. Not only will he be a better slave, but another member of Philemon's household will be a fellow member of the body of Christ. I was told of a wealthy brother in Ireland, whose coachman was a Christian and a member of the same church as his master. In the house he was the coachman, but in the church he was of the same standing as his master and did in fact hold a more responsible position there. Such a position is indicated in verse 12, where Paul refers to Onesimus as one with himself, and such a relationship is now formed between slave and master. What could Philemon do but to receive him?

In verses 13 and 14 we notice how Paul experimentally knew the spirit of love and grace and also of righteousness — such shine out in the words that he uses. He greatly desired to retain Onesimus' company. He was an old man, he was in prison, albeit still able to serve the Lord in the gospel and other ministry. For such reasons, and in a personal way too he would have much appreciated the services of a younger man. Had he the mind to retain Onesimus, Philemon, upon hearing of Paul's circumstances would no doubt have responded to his wish, having regard for Paul's need and remembering too that he was an apostle. But no! That would not have been a righteous course; that would not have been a brotherly way of treating Philemon. Philemon must be given the opportunity to show his own spirit of love and grace and be able to show it not of necessity, but willingly. So does the Lord deal with us. He delights when our response to Him is willing. Speaking of wisdom (and 1 Cor. 1:30 tells us that 'Christ Jesus ... is made unto us wisdom'), Proverbs 3:17 says that 'her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace'. His desires should be our desires. 'They which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him who died for them and rose again' (2 Cor. 5:15).

The 'perhaps' of verse 15 is significant, for it leaves room for the working of God. Onesimus is now a 'brother beloved' both to Paul and Philemon, and that which is especially applicable to Philemon is both 'in the flesh', that is in human relationship, and also 'in the Lord', that is in spiritual relationship.

Verses 17-21

Verses 17 to 19 are illustrative of a very important principle. The apostle first of all reminds Philemon that they were partners. The word used for this expression is 'koinonia', which is also translated 'fellowship' and means complete oneness. Then in verse 18 there is a suggestion that Onesimus had robbed his master before running away, and now Paul says: 'If he hath wronged

thee, or oweth thee ought put that to my account'. And then, confirming his suretyship, he adds: 'I will repay it'. This reminds us of the doctrine of imputation, although it is put before us as an illustration and not given as direct teaching. Psalm 32:2 says: 'Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity'. And Romans 4:8 confirms this with the words: 'Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin'. But man is a sinner, we all are, our sins are mountain high and in due time we will receive the wages of sin, for sin is a conscientious employer. So sin is imputed to us and the question arises, how can we become (if I may coin a word) unimputed? Paul said: 'Put Onesimus' debt to my account, I will repay it'.

I am sure that Paul would not wish us to say it, but quietly and reverently I would venture to say that here Paul is a beautiful type of our blessed Redeemer. In effect the Lord Jesus said: 'I will repay', and He did so upon the Cross. There in those three hours of darkness He accepted the wages that you and I would have received. He entered into the dark domain of death and redeemed or bought us back at the cost of, not silver or gold but with His own precious blood (1 Pet. 1:18). Our sins are lifted, removed for ever from the sight of God and no longer imputed to us. But is there someone who is wondering or indeed asking: 'How do I get into the good of these blessings, how can I be sure that they are effectual for me'? The answer is simple. Take your Bible and turn to John's gospel. In John 3:16 we read: 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have everlasting life'. Now turn to Acts 16:31 and listen to Paul's answer to the very question that you are asking: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved'.

It is recorded of Abraham in Romans 4:3 that he believed God and it was counted, or imputed unto him, not for sin but for righteousness. In Hebrews 7:22 we are told that Jesus was made a Surety of a better covenant. The Christian is in the good of that. Not the old covenant which said 'do this', but a new covenant which says 'all is done'. May I ask: 'Is this your place'? All that is required is a simple belief in the words of God regarding His Son. Could anything be more simple?

In verse 21 in the solicitations of Paul there is the hint that he is urging a new triumph of grace in the heart of Philemon, to wit that he might even grant Onesimus his freedom. We are not told if such took place, but I like to think that it did.

Verses 22-25

Lastly he asks that a lodging might be prepared for him. Clear evidence that he expected release from prison, but also showing what practical fellowship prevailed in the early church. He then sends greetings to individual saints, but not in any special order. All are

mentioned in the Colossian epistle, but there Aristarchus is a fellow prisoner, here it is Epaphras. Mark is referred to, but with no reference to his previous failure, and Demas with no reference to his future departure. His usual final greeting is given in verse 25.

In this meditation of this very beautiful letter we have tried to highlight some of the features which should characterise those of us who are of the Lord. May we have grace to demonstrate them in practical Christian life.
