

FROM SERVANT TO SON
INTRODUCTION TO PHILEMON
Pastor Keith E. Gephart

INTRODUCTION

Most Christians have never studied Philemon, and many have never heard a sermon or lesson on this book. What are some of the reasons:

- 1) It is quite brief—only II & III John are shorter.
- 2) It is private—not only addressed to a fellow worker of Paul, but involving a private matter in his life.
- 3) It is somewhat obscure—scholars are not agreed on what this letter is about.

But, one thing is certain. God has providentially preserved this letter for us and it is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness”, since it is **God-breathed**—“given by inspiration of God. Therefore, we must determine the purpose of this small book and what Paul was asking of Philemon, and we must know what its significance is for us in both belief and practice.

- I. THE AUTHOR: Paul the “prisoner of Christ Jesus” [along with Timothy]
 - A. Strong internal evidence
 - B. Strong external evidence

- II. RECIPIENT OF THE LETTER—Philemon [along with Apphia his wife, Archippus his son, and the house church]
 - A. Resident in Colossae
 - B. Letter sent along with Colossians, at the same time Ephesians taken to that city—61-62 AD.

- III. BEARER OF THE EPISTLE—Onesimus along with Tychicus as mediator (See Col. 4:7-9).

- IV. ISSUE DEALT WITH—return of Philemon’s “runaway slave”
 - A. Onesimus had not gone to Paul with the intent of being reconciled with his master; but, Paul turned the situation around once Onesimus was converted.
 - B. Philemon had not sent Onesimus to Paul in order to help Paul [“useless slave” and unsaved]

- V. REQUEST MADE BY PAUL in vv. 16-17: Accept Onesimus as Paul and as a brother.
 - A. Does this involve sending him back to Paul—no mention of such.
 - B. Does this involve his emancipation from slavery? Very Possible.

- VI. NT POSITION ON SLAVERY

- VII. VALUES OF THIS BOOK
 - A. Personal—light upon the character of Paul. W.H. Griffith Thomas notes Paul’s “earnest spirit his warm love, his delicate tact, his remarkable ingenuity, his complete courtesy, his inexorable justice, even his delightful playfulness combined with easy self-effacement and modesty” (150). The epistle is “*the polite epistle*”; here we see “delicacy, fine address, consummate courtesy, nice strokes of rhetoric.”
 - B. Ethical—sensitivity to what is right, even in the relationship between friends such as the apostle and Philemon. Paul manifests perfect courtesy and consideration are evidenced, yet without faltering in moral or ethical standards nor flattering dishonestly. He gives proper counsel to his friend while also recognizing Philemon’s rights within his cultural milieu. This epistle clearly manifests “the noble character of St. Paul”; in fact, nowhere does the nobility of the Apostle’s character receive a more vivid illustration than in this accidental pleading on behalf of a runaway slave.

- C. Providential—God is in control of all events, even those which seem insignificant, even everyday experiences.
- D. Practical—application of gospel truth to life’s most ordinary affairs, especially in domestic life.
- E. Evangelical—the encouragement to seek and to save the lost, even the least significant person. “Onesimus could not get away from Christ though he fled the home of a Christian”.
- F. Social—the relation of Christianity to social institutions such as slavery. Thomas remarks, “Today Christ can still triumph over adverse social conditions and over the oftentimes serious differences between men that both cause and are perpetuated by a given social order” (151). This epistle clearly evidences the “power of the gospel” to transform society.
- G. Spiritual—its analogy with the Gospel story.

CONCLUSION

As important as is the issue of slavery, that issue is not the primary focus of Philemon. The one primary focus and command given by Paul to Philemon is that Philemon must accept Onesimus as a Christian brother (v. 17). The exiting social relationships of the three men—Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul—have been transformed by the Gospel of Christ.

- 1) Onesimus has become Paul’s “son” through faith in Christ (v. 10).
- 2) Paul had led Philemon to faith in Christ also, and he owes to Paul his own self (v. 19).
- 3) Therefore, Philemon and Onesimus are “brothers” in Christ (v. 16) and along with Paul—who are all sons of God through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, each of these 3 men had to do something that was very difficult for them:

- 1) Paul has to send Onesimus back to Philemon—sending his “very heart” (v. 12).
- 2) Onesimus—who had gained some measure of freedom—must now go back to his master.
- 3) Philemon must now receive Onesimus as though he were Paul himself (v. 17).

Thus, the key emphasis of this book is **Christian *koinonia* or fellowship**. We see this emphasis in v. 6 in the “fellowship of your faith”—the fellowship that is produced by our mutual faith in Christ; believing in Christ joins us to other believers in an intimate family unit. Again in v. 17 we see the same emphasis in the word “partner” that opens the way for Paul’s central appeal to Philemon in relation to Philemon and Onesimus.

Our new relationship in Christ removes all “pride of place” and dictates how those other relationships are to be lived out. Paul spells out such responsibilities in this letter. In our individualistic society today believers tend to overlook the value and importance of such relationships.

In Christ we belong to one another; we enjoy each other’s company and support; and we are obliged to support, to the point of sacrificing our own time, interests, and money, our brothers and sisters.

YOU MUST FIND YOUR PLACE IN THE BODY OF CHRIST AND SACRIFICIALLY SERVE ONE ANOTHER.