

GOD WITH US

Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 26 – Philemon **A Story of Redemption**

Introduction

Philemon – the shortest of any of Paul’s letters – originally would have barely filled a single papyrus sheet. It’s not only the shortest; but also the most personal of all Paul’s letters. So personal, in fact, that scholars have questioned WHY it made it into the N.T. collection of just 13 letters from Paul. Surely he wrote more significant, weighty letters than this one during his 30+ years of ministry. The letter to Philemon presents no major doctrines. It corrects no major errors. It announces no grand plans or bold visions. In terms of content, it’s not in the same league with the likes of Romans or Ephesians or Colossians. It doesn’t give us insight into the end-times like the Thessalonian letters. It doesn’t address huge church issues, like the Corinthian letters. It’s a short, personal note to a close friend about a new friend of Paul, and a person that he and Philemon now have in common. So, what value does this short letter add to the New Testament collection?

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. What this little letter lacks in scope and depth, it makes up for in terms of the real-life story it contains. You can argue with someone’s arguments; but you can’t argue with the story of a radically changed life. And that’s what this little letter gives us – the story of a changed life.

Paul meets Onesimus

Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote this personal letter. If you recall the ending of Colossians, he asked them to pray that even though his prison door was locked, God might open up a door for the message of Christ to still go forth. When Paul made that request, he had right with him a stunning example of how there are always “open doors for the gospel” even when it seems like the doors are closed.

God had brought a runaway slave from Colossae into Paul’s life. Onesimus had run away from his master, Philemon, who just happened to be one of Paul’s close friends and a leader in the

Colossian church. Onesimus probably ran away to Rome hoping to get “lost in the crowd.”

Isn't that so true of human nature? We often run away from God and try to hide (Adam and Eve did that in Genesis 3). We try to get lost in the crowd, so that God won't be able to find us. But we can never outrun the love and compassion of our God, who is everywhere-present. I remember being a wandering soul in college, often hitch-hiking from Birmingham to Lansing late at night. I recall God sending a Christian to pick me up one Sunday night, and taking me to a Billy Graham Crusade in Lansing. I later moved out to Utah to be near Shirley, then my girlfriend. God sent two wonderful servants to her sorority house to invite her (and me) to an evangelistic event on campus. We can run, but we can't hide from the amazing reach of God's compassionate arms. Therefore, do not ever give up praying for those who are "in the far-off land." There is no "far-off land" for God!

Onesimus ran to Rome to try to get lost in the crowd . . . and he ended up sitting face to face with the apostle Paul. Maybe he did something wrong and was arrested. Maybe he met someone who knew someone who knew Paul. We do not know the details; but one way or another, this runaway slave ended up running into the greatest messenger of the gospel in the ancient world . . . and the close friend of the very master he had run away from!

King David wrote: *“Where can I go to hide from your presence?”* Onesimus could have echoed this same question.

Onesimus becomes a Christian

Through some conversations, Paul led Onesimus to faith in Jesus as his Savior. We know this because Paul specifically states in this letter that he had “given birth to a child during his imprisonment.” After Paul disciplined him for an unknown period, it was time to send Onesimus back to Philemon. But Onesimus was going to need some help explaining things to Philemon. *The letter of Philemon is Paul's “letter of recommendation” which Onesimus will present to Philemon when he gets home.*

So Onesimus departed from Rome, along with a couple other members from Paul's ministry team, and headed for home in Colossae. When he arrived, he would present the letter from Paul to Philemon.

Paul commends Philemon: 1-7

Paul started most of his letters with some formal greeting in which he commended the audience for certain things.

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for the sake of Christ. For I have had great joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother” (vv.1-7).

Philemon had a reputation as a man who genuinely loved people. *“I hear of your love toward Jesus and toward all God’s people.” “I have great joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of God’s people are refreshed through you.”* The Greek word for “refreshed” means to “give rest.” To put it simply: Philemon was a “breath of fresh air” in an otherwise stress-filled world. He was a blessing to many others, including Paul.

It’s a great gift to exercise in the body of Christ – the gift of refreshing others. When we were in Aberdeen for 3 years, we were refreshed by the Cordiners. They were a wealthy family with a big house. He owned the Ford Dealership in town. Every Sunday Mrs. Cordiner would prepare a meal big enough for many guests. They didn’t know who those guests would be. They just prepared and then went to church. As they met people new and old at church, they invited them back to the house. One of our first Sundays in Aberdeen, we were on the receiving end of that invitation to the Cordiner home. Thirty years later I still remember it like it was yesterday. That’s great ministry to have – the ministry of refreshing the hearts of the saints.

Paul makes his request to Philemon: 8-11

Philemon has received Paul’s compliment, and now he gets to Paul’s real reason for writing. Paul will ask Philemon to refresh him (and others) in the way he receives Onesimus back into his home.

“Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you – since I am such a person as Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I fathered in my imprisonment, who previously was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me” (vv.8-11).

When he read the words, “my son Onesimus,” Philemon began to piece together a most unexpected story. Paul tucks in here a play on words. The Greek name “Onesimus” means “useful.” The problem was the “useful” had become “useless.” Paul writes this:

“Onesimus (“Useful”) whom I fathered in my imprisonment, who previously was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me” (v.11).

Mr. “useful” had become Mr. “useless,” but now, because of Christ, he is Mr. “useful” again! Now Onesimus can live up to his true name being useful to both Philemon and Paul. This summarizes well the matter in this short letter. Christ has turned this man’s life around, so Paul is asking Philemon and the others in his household to recognize his conversion – that he is a new man, inside and out – and he’s ready for a new start.

In Colossians 4:9, Paul refers to Onesimus as, ***“our faithful and dear brother”*** which are descriptive words that Paul used to describe Tychicus (4:7,8)! Onesimus was NOT faithful to Philemon, but once he believed in Christ, and grew as a believer being disciplined by Paul, he became a “faithful and dear brother”. Onesimus grew into a man who was useful and faithful. That is the power of Christ.

This is what Jesus is so good at doing: taking broken lives and putting them back on track again. Taking that which is useless and making it useful again. He comes into our lives, erases the mistakes of our past and begins to write the chapters of our future. Paul wrote in 2Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” There is another aspect of reconciliation here. Because once a person is reconciled to God, there should flow reconciliation with people we were formerly alienated from. This was illustrated with Onesimus. Now that he is rightly connected to God, he will move back toward Philemon to be rightly re-connected to him. Reconciliation with God and reconciliation with man are always the two-sides of “the gospel.”

Paul's love for Onesimus: 12-16

“I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wanted to keep with me, so that in your behalf he might be at my service in my imprisonment for the gospel; but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion, but of your own free will. For perhaps it was for this reason that he was separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 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” (vv.12-16).

Paul didn't just lead Onesimus to Christ. He also developed a real heart for him. *“I'm sending my very heart back to you.”* Paul didn't see people in light of man-made categories, or levels of status in society, like roles or positions. He saw every person as a special creation of God. He had really grown to love this man, and would have kept him there in Rome with himself, if he could have. But he felt a duty to send him back to Philemon.

Paul says something profound here that gives us perspective and hope.

“For perhaps it was for this reason that he was separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother . . .”

Some saw a runaway slave. Paul saw a God of second chances drawing this man to Himself. Onesimus is a real-life example of the “prodigal son” in Luke 15, on the run away from the father's house to the far-off land. But it's in the far-off land that God gets his attention, and turns his heart back toward home.

As the worship song reminds us: God IS the “way-maker” Who never stops working, no, you never stop working. Even when I don't feel it, you're working; even when I don't see it, you're working. You never stop working! This should give us all hope. There is no “far-off land” as far as God is concerned; because He is everywhere present, and everywhere working, every day. Paul encourages us all to see life through the eyes of God. To see not just a person on the run; but to see a God Who is always at work drawing people everywhere back to Himself.

Practical Concerns: 17-20

There were practical, material considerations in the return of Onesimus. Perhaps he had stolen money from Philemon when he ran away. Whatever the situation was, Paul was ready to step in and take on any debt owed by Onesimus to Philemon.

“If then you regard me as a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, have written this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me profit (Greek: onaimain – a play on the name Onesimus) from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ” (vv.17-20).

Paul says: *Accept him as you would accept me. Put his debts on my account.* He also makes a play on words here: Let me “benefit” from you; or “profit” from you. (The Greek onaimain is a verb based on the same root as the name Onesimon.)

In his relationship with Onesimus and Philemon, Paul presents to us a picture of Jesus, the Father and redemption. Jesus comes to be our Savior. He pays the debt for our sins. Then he says to the Father: Accept this person as you would accept Me. Put his/her debts on My account. Then we are welcomed back into the Father’s house. Thus, while the book of Philemon does not directly present any major doctrine, it pictures THE major doctrine in the New Testament – the doctrine of salvation through Christ.

Paul’s final word of Confidence: 21-25

The letter ends with Paul expressing his confidence in Philemon.

“Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. At the same time also prepare me a guest room, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (vv.21-25).

Paul is hopeful because he knows Philemon’s heart. He knows that Philemon will go above and beyond what he is asking of him. Back

to our original question: Why did this little letter make it into the canon of the New Testament? We can suggest a number of things:

- 1) It gives us a real-life story of what happens when a person becomes a Christian. It reminds us of the power of the gospel to change a life. It's the story of a life made new by the God of second chances.
- 2) It illustrates the dual aspects of the gospel: reconciliation with God and with man.
- 3) It reminds us of God's amazing love for all kinds of people. The extent to which the Father will go to chase down a runaway son. It reminds us of God's amazing love.
- 4) It reminds us of Jesus – how He paid our debts and sent us back to the Father's house.

If it was just those 4 reasons alone, that would be enough to explain why this little book found its place among the 13 inspired writings of Paul. It is a personal story that parallels the ultimate story of redemption. But there may be one more reason.

The “rest of the story ...”

For this we look to church history after the N.T. era. We know that Paul was released from this first Roman imprisonment, that he was able to travel widely throughout the Roman empire again, before being imprisoned a 2nd time. It is likely that he did make it back to Ephesus in Asia Minor, not far from the city of Colossae. We can conjecture that Paul met up with Philemon and Onesimus again, in the church that met in Philemon's house. It could be that Philemon granted Paul's request that Onesimus be allowed to accompany Paul for the remainder of his life and ministry. We don't know for sure. But there is an intriguing possibility:

Jump ahead in time about 50 years from the time the letter was written, to the year 110 A.D., after all the original apostles have died off and a 2nd generation of leaders have taken the lead in the early church. A great Christian leader from Antioch, by the name of Ignatius, was being taken to Rome to stand trial. On his journey, he wrote letters to the various churches in the cities along the route to Rome (the Letters of Ignatius). These letters were encouraging believers to remain true to the Lord Jesus, no matter what the cost. We have those letters today.

In the first chapter of his letter “to the Ephesians” he has much to say about their wonderful bishop – the spiritual leader of all the churches in Asia Minor – a man named Onesimus. Could it be that this one-time runaway slave grew up in his faith and ultimately became the spiritual leader of all the churches in Asia Minor?

What is so intriguing is that Ignatius, in his letter, makes the same play on words as in Paul’s letter to Philemon. Remember when Paul made a play on words with the name Onesimus?

Paul: Yes, my dear brother, let me have this profit (oinaimon) from you.

Ignatius: May I always have profit (oinaimon) from you.

This much is clear: Ignatius knew about Paul’s letter to Philemon, and he knew exactly what he was doing when he repeated that play on words. Scholars of the caliber of the late F.F. Bruce believed that indeed, this may be the same Onesimus.

And one more thing:

It is also thought by N.T. scholars that the collection of Paul’s letters – the 13 letters that made it into the N.T. – *that collection was finally completed at Ephesus*. Some scholars have suggested that Onesimus may have not only been the bishop of Asia Minor, centered in Ephesus, but *he may have overseen the collection of Paul’s “inspired” letters*. And he may have been pleased when the committee decided that his own personal letter, the letter containing the story of his transformation, met all the qualifications of a truly Spirit-inspired letter.

Whatever the “rest of the story” might be . . . the basic story is clear. God is a God of second chances. Whatever your past might be, there is a future waiting for you that is truly amazing. It is a future of dignity and freedom and usefulness . . . and it is all wrapped up in the One who said to the Father: Accept him as you would accept me. And if he owes you any debt, put it on My account.

Discussion Questions

1. What does this personal letter tell you about Paul?
2. What do you learn about the man Philemon?
3. Ponder the transformation of Onesimus. Review the adjectives used to describe him. How does this story encourage you?