÷THIRTEENTH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

COMMENTARY

PHILEMON

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Salute To A Man of True Faith – Philemon 1-7

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÷LESSON 1

SALUTE TO A MAN OF TRUE FAITH

Philemon 1-7

This epistle was written by Paul when he was a prisoner at Rome. It seems to have been written at the same time and sent by the same person as the Epistle to the Colossians, since the same persons were with the apostle at the writing of both. (Compare vv. 23, 24 with Col. 4:10-14).

It is probable that Philemon was a Colossian, since his servant, Onesimus, is said to be one of the Colossians (Co. 4:9).

Onesimus, Philemon's servant, had either embezzled or stolen his master's goods and fled to Rome. While at Rome he had heard Paul preach (Paul was a prisoner in his own hired house and regularly preached he gospel to all who visited him). Onesimus had been converted and manifested such grace and gifts that Paul would have kept him with him (vv. 11-13), but he was now sending him back to Philemon, entreating Philemon to receive him not only as to be reconciled to Onesimus, but to receive him as a beloved brother (v. 16).

(Vs. 1.) 'A prisoner of Christ.' In the same sense in which he calls himself 'an apostle of Christ, Paul now calls himself 'the prisoner of Christ'. The chains by which he was bound were there because of the gospel of Christ. It was by our Lord's will that he was a prisoner. He was not ashamed, but rather gloried in the privilege of being identified with Christ in suffering (2 Cor. 12:9, 10).

'And Timothy our brother.' Timothy was with Paul and joined with him in this epistle. He was well known to Philemon and united with Paul in this request.

'Unto Philemon.' Many reports have come to us concerning Philemon. He is said to be a Gentile, a Colossian, a rich, respected and hospitable man. Paul calls him a 'fellow-labourer' in the gospel, indicating that Philemon was involved with Paul in the ministry of the gospel.

(Vs. 2.) "Apphia" is a woman's name. It is believed that she was the wife of Philemon, since she is placed next to him and before Archippus, a minister of the Word. Philemon's wife certainly needed to be of the same mind as her husband in receiving the runaway servant, otherwise she could have been a great hindrance to this reconciliation. Archippus is believed to have been a preacher of the gospel and a minister of the church (Col. 4:17). Paul addressed the epistle to him because of his interest in the family of Philemon and Onesimus' new relationship with the church there.

"And to the church in thy house." Evidently, Philemon had a large household, including family, children, servants and visitors, who worshipped the Lord and studied the Word on a regular basis in his house. They were like a church made up of themselves.

(Vs. 3.) This is the same form of salutation Paul used in other epistles. 'Grace to you,' is an increase of grace as to its degrees, exercise and growth. Every grace is imperfect in this life and those who have the most stand in need of more. By 'peace' is meant peace with God through Christ, peace in our own consciences and peace with one another. The source of all grace and peace is our Lord.

(Vs. 4.) The apostle was a man who spent much time in prayer, not only for himself, but for all the churches, ministers of the gospel and believers (Eph. 1:15, 16; Phil. 1:3, 4). Two important characteristics of believers are revealed here: "I give thanks to God, and I pray for you"!

(Vs. 5.) The praise Paul had for Philemon included briefly the whole character of a believer. It consists mainly of two parts: firstly, faith in Christ and, secondly, love for one another! All the actions and duties of our life relate to these: faith and love! (Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4). Faith especially looks to Christ, for through him alone can the Father be known and only in him can eternal life be had (I John 5:11-13). Love is not limited to the saints, for the believer loves all men, but since they are of the household and family of God they are especially loved (I John 4:7-11).

(Vs. 6.) These words are connected with verse 4. Paul prayed that Philemon's faith, exercising itself by good works, might be proved to be true faith! He called it the "communication of faith" because it is not in mere words and profession; it is manifested to men by actual deeds. Although faith is a principle of the heart, it communicates itself to others by deeds (James 2:17-20).

Every grace and any other good thing that is in a believer, or done for the good of others by a believer, should be acknowledged as coming from Christ Jesus, who is the source of all love and grace. What we do in love for others we do because Christ dwells in us, and we give him all the glory (I Cor. 15:10).

(Vs. 7.) It is plain enough that Paul was saying that he had great joy and consolation because Philemon ministered relief, comfort and strength to those in need. Not only did Philemon relieve their physical needs, but their hearts were filled with gladness, pressures of the mind were relieved and they gained pleasure of soul in his kindness.

÷LESSON 2

ONCE UNPROFITABLE, NOW PROFITABLE

Philemon 8-15

(Vs. 8.) 'Philemon,' Paul states, 'I could, as an apostle of Christ and a minister of the gospel, use my authority and command you to receive, forgive and be reconciled to Onesimus' (Heb. 13:7, 17; I Thess. 5:12, 13). We, as believers, are commanded to love one another, to be reconciled to one another and to forgive those who repent. Upon this foundation the apostle could have commanded Philemon to do what was right (Luke 17:3, 4).

(Vs. 9.) "For love's sake I beseech thee." This is the true and proper motivation for all good works (2 Cor. 5:14, 15; 1 Peter 4:8).

1. For the sake of God's love for us (by which love he chose us, redeemed us and called us).

2. For the sake of the love which we have for him.

3. For the sake of the love Paul had for Philemon and Philemon had for Paul.

4. For the sake of love Philemon had for Onesimus, now a true believer in Christ.

Paul mentioned his office in verse 8. Now he mentions his age and repeats the fact that he is in prison for the sake of this gospel of grace and love. This advice (to receive Onesimus) comes from an apostle, an elder an old man of considerable wisdom and experience and from one who has proved his devotion by suffering.

(Vs. 10.) Paul calls Onesimus his son, not only out of affection for him, but because Paul was his spiritual father; Onesimus had been saved under the preaching of Paul. Though Paul was bound, the Word of God was not (2 Tim. 2:9, 10). Onesimus was born again by the Word of God preached by Paul while in prison, so he was especially dear to him.

(Vs. 11.) In past days Onesimus had been an unprofitable, useless servant. He had been a bad example to other servants and a rebel who had probably stolen from Philemon and fled to Rome. All men by nature are unprofitable to God and men (Rom. 3:12), good for nothing but to be cast out and burned.

Now the regenerated, redeemed ex-slave is profitable to himself, for godliness is great gain, profitable to Philemon as a good servant and a helper in the gospel ministry and profitable to others as an example, a testimony to the grace of God and a brother in the assembly!

(Vs. 12-14.) "I am sending him back to you. You receive him, therefore, not reluctantly, suspiciously, or on probation, but as though you were receiving my very own heart. I would have kept him here with me to assist me and minister to my needs in your stead; but without first consulting you and having your permission, I would not do it." This shows two things.

1. The great modesty and humility of the apostle Paul. Though he had the spiritual authority to keep Onesimus and command Philemon to abide by his decision, he would do nothing with another man's property without his consent.

2. The gifts, benevolence and assistance which we render to one another must not be by compulsion and pressure, but willing and voluntary; otherwise it is of no spiritual value! If Philemon chose to return Onesimus to Paul, then all would be blessed and God glorified. By his example Paul shows that ministers are to draw disciples by love rather than drag them by force!

(Vs. 15.) If we are angry on account of offences done to us by men, our minds ought to be comforted with the thought that those things done through hatred and ill-will result, by the good providence of God, in our good and the accomplishment of his purpose for us and them (Rom. 8:28; Gen. 45:5-8; 50:19, 20).

Onesimus ran away from Philemon with evil in his heart. Philemon was deprived of his servant, employee and perhaps of the goods stolen. But in all of this God was sovereignly working his will. Onesimus ran directly into the arms of Paul and the gospel. Philemon not only received back a servant, but a brother beloved for all eternity. Had Onesimus never left in anger he would not have returned in joy!

Let us endeavour to look upon and accept all success and affliction as being in the good providence of our Lord!

÷LESSON 3

"CHARGE IT TO ME"

Philemon 16-25

Paul exhorted Philemon to receive, forgive and be reconciled to his runaway servant, Onesimus, who had been converted to faith in Christ and whom Paul was now sending home bearing this epistle (Col. 4:8, 9).

(Vs. 16.) 1. Onesimus was to be received as a servant, for a servant he was, and there is no reason to believe that his call by grace had dissolved this relationship with his employer (I Cor. 7:21-24). Believers are not to despise authority, hard work, not a humble station in life, but rather will glorify Christ by rendering honour to whom honour is due! (Rom. 13:7, 8).

2. Another relationship now existed between Onesimus and Philemon: they were now brothers in Christ. Paul said, 'He is beloved to me, who am the instrument of his conversion, but more beloved to you, being of the same nation, the same household, an object of your concern and prayers for a long time and now one in Christ.

(Vs. 17.) "If you count me your partner, companion and friend in the grace of Christ as being engaged in common cause, partakers of a common faith and interested in the same common salvation, receive Onesimus into your heart, home and affections as you would receive me if I come to you? (Matt. 25:40, 45).

(Vs. 18.) "If Onesimus has wronged you by idling away time, spoiling his work, or corrupting fellow-servants, if he owes you anything by robbing you and wasting your goods, charge it to me! I will stand good for all his debts and damages." Philemon would surely see in this statement the grace and mercy of Christ, to whom our great debt of sin was imputed and who paid in full all that we owed (Rom. 4:7, 8; Gal. 3:13, 14).

(Vs. 19.) Paul beseeches Philemon to receive Onesimus freely with no strings attached, to ask nothing of him for past debts, offences, or duties. "Anything you feel that he owes you, charge it to me; and as I have written this with my own hand and signed it, I will repay you!" The meaning is, "Do not contend with this man over what he owes you unless you choose to have me as your debtor in his stead! Then we would be forced to talk about what you owe me!"

Where and what would Philemon be if Paul had not, through much suffering and trial, brought him the gospel? He is saying to Philemon, "If you feel impressed to talk about what Onesimus owes you materially, I would remind you that you owe me your very life!"

(Vs. 20.) "Yes, brother, by doing what I ask of you in regard to Onesimus, you will give me much joy and inward pleasure. Nothing could be more cheering and comforting to me than to see believers walking in love and obedience to the commands of Christ" (3 John 3, 4).

(Vs. 21.) "I write these words to you in perfect confidence that you will not only do what I have asked of you, but that you will do even more."

This is characteristic of men and women who love Christ. It is not reluctant obedience to assigned duties, rules, tithes and what is expected of them. Rather, above and beyond these rules and laws they serve Christ and his church. It is not "What must I do?" It is "What can I do?" It is not doing what is expected and commanded but, motivated by love for Christ, giving myself, my treasure and my time to him.

(Vs. 22.) "Prepare a guest room for me. It may be that God will hear your prayers and I shall have the privilege of visiting you and ministering the gospel again to your household."

(Vs. 23.) Epaphras was a Colossian, a minister of the church of Colosse, and was well known to Philemon (Col. 1:7). He may have been sent to Paul by the Colossians, as Epaphroditus was sent by the Philippians, and was committed to prison with Paul.

(Vs. 24.) Others who were there and sent their greetings were John Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke. Paul called them his "fellow-workers". Demas was the same person who afterwards left Paul (2 Tim. 4:10). Mark was Barnabas's sister's son, whom Paul and Barnabas took to Antioch, who became a matter of contention between Paul and Barnabas, but who later was reconciled to Paul. Aristarchus was of Macedonia and went with Paul on his voyage to Rome. Luke was the beloved physician who wrote the Acts of the Apostles and the book which bears his name.

(Vs. 25.) "The grace (blessing and favour) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, be with your spirit! Amen, so be it!"

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