

PHILEMON-- RECONCILING LOVE AT WORK

Theme: An introduction to the story of Philemon, and its illustration of the work of reconciliation

This morning, we begin a brief study of a tiny New Testament letter. But as small as it is, the lessons to be learned from it are very significant--and very practical.

The New Testament letter of Philemon was written by the apostle Paul somewhere around the year 62 A.D. It is usually classified in the New Testament as one of Paul's 'prison epistles'; because, as you might expect, Paul wrote it while in prison (vv. 9, 10, 13, 22, 23). But some have suggested that, whereas an epistle is a formal letter written to a general audience, this tiny letter is small enough and personal enough to be considered the New Testament's 'post-card'.

Its recipient was the man whose name became associated with the letter--Philemon. He was a man of sufficient means to have had household servants; and with a big enough home to provide a meeting place for a church (v. 2). Also mentioned in the greeting of the letter are Apphia (his wife), and Archippus (thought by some Bible teachers to be Philemon's son). Archippus was apparently a leader in the church with some measure of ministry responsibility. Paul wrote to the church in Colossae and said, "And say to Archippus, 'Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it'" (Colossians 4:17). It may be that Archippus was the pastor of the church in Colossae. This little letter should be read in close connection with the New Testament books of Colossians and Ephesians; because it appears that they were all written by Paul and sent out at the same time.

The focus of this letter is--in a secondary sense--to alert Philemon to the fact that Paul expected to soon be released from prison, and that Philemon should prepare a place for Paul to stay (v. 22). But the primary reason for the letter was to make a gentle appeal to Philemon to forgive and be reconciled to Onesimus. When Paul wrote to the Colossians, he asked them to be sure to welcome "Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Colossians 4:9a); and as Onesimus returned to his home city, Paul sent this letter to Philemon with him.

The story of this man Onesimus--and how it was that he, a Colossian, was returning to his home town--is a remarkable one. Slaves were common in ancient Rome; and Onesimus was a slave who had belonged to the household of Philemon. Apparently, this slave had caused a lot of heartache and damage to Philemon and his family. It may be that he even stole from Philemon's household. Apparently, while the young slave was on the run from his master, he met up with the prisoner Paul--either because he had also ended up in the same prison as Paul, or was already knew something about Paul and came to him in a time of trouble. In any case, in a time of great distress in the young man's life, God sovereignly led Onesimus to Paul; and Paul, in turn, led Onesimus to Christ. And now, Paul was sending the runaway-slave back to his Christian master; "no longer as a slave but more than a slave--a beloved brother" (v. 16). Paul wrote to urge his dear friend and brother in Christ to receive this repentant slave back.

Onesimus' name means "profitable". And he had proven to be anything but a profitable slave to Philemon. Nevertheless Paul wrote to Philemon and said that he "once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel" (Philemon 11-13).

Formerly, Micronesia was a failure as a slave (and it's pretty hard to think of how much more of a failure someone could be than to be a failure as a slave). But through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, even *he* became immeasurably useful to the cause of Christ; so much so that Paul would have kept him nearby if he could.

A basic outline of this little letter might look like this:

I. PAUL'S GREETING (vv. 1-3).

II. PAUL'S GRATITUDE FOR PHILEMON'S CHARACTER (vv. 4-7).

III. PAUL'S APPEAL FOR 'BROTHER ONESIMUS' (vv. 8-17).

IV. PAUL'S PROMISE TO REPAY ANY LOSSES (vv. 18-21).

V. PAUL'S REQUEST FOR PROVISION (vv. 22-25).

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A key verse of this letter would be v. 18, "But if he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account." And that certainly makes this wonderful letter an illustration of Jesus' own willingness to take our debts upon Himself to reconcile us to God (see 2 Corinthians 5:18-25). "Reconciliation" means that a cause of separation between two parties has been removed; and that the two--formerly hostile toward one another--are now brought together and made friends again. And that's what God does for us through Christ--reconciling us to Himself.

But another thing we learn from this letter is how *we* can play a part in the ministry of reconciliation within the body of Christ. And that will be our focus over the next few weeks. In the next four lessons--the Lord willing--we'll consider:

Philemon--and what we can learn about the one who is offended.

Micronesia--and what we can learn about the one who did the offending.

Paul--and what we can learn about the role we play in facilitating reconciliation.

The Lord Jesus--and what we can learn about why the work of reconciliation is now necessary and possible by Him.