

VALUABLE LESSONS FROM PHILEMON

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Philemon, a slave-holder, and a convert of Paul, apparently during the period of his Ephesian sojourn, had joined the company of saints in Christ at Colossae, and the church met in his house.
2. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon's, for some offense against his master, had been obliged to flee, which was a further offence in the eye of the law.
 - a. After his flight, he seems to have taken shelter where such people so often do – in the crowds of a great city, where, having come into contact with the apostle Paul, he had been converted to Christ.
 - b. This was the circumstance which brought about the event we are reading about in this Epistle of Paul to Philemon.
3. From Col.4:7-9 we learn:
 - a. That Onesimus was a native of Colossae.
 - b. That this epistle to Philemon was delivered to Colossae by Onesimus, the run-away-slave, and by Tychicus, a well known and trusted brother in the Lord, who several times had been the messenger of Paul, Eph.6:21,22; 2Tim.4:12; Tit.3:12; Ac.20:4,5.
4. Both the occasion and the style of this letter are interesting.
 - a. Paul is making intercession for this run-away-slave to effect his reconciliation with his slave-master, Philemon.
 - b. Paul's aim, his confident hope, was to procure for this run-away-slave, whom he is sending back to his slave-master, a free pardon from his master for his wrong against his master.
 - c. But more than that, he is seeking for Onesimus a place with Philemon as "a brother beloved...in the Lord."
 - d. As to the style of the letter, we hope to bring that out as we develop the lessons learned from the epistle.

II. DISCUSSION

A. TO PREPARE THE WAY FOR A DISCUSSION OF THE VALUABLE LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EPISTLE, WE FIRST OFFER A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENTS OF VV.1-22 OF THE LETTER.

1. Vv.1-3: The superscription, comprising salutations to Philemon himself, to Apphia (probably his wife), to Archippus, and to the church meeting in Philemon's house.

2. Vv.4-7: The apostle thanks God for the good report of Philemon which he had heard concerning his love and faith towards the Lord Jesus, and kindness towards all his fellow-Christians.
3. Vv.8-21: Here he introduces and develops the specific occasion of his letter, Viz. his intercession on behalf of Onesimus.
 - a. Which, according to V.8, he has a right to make with all boldness in Christ; but according to V.9, he does not command, but rather entreats as a favor, the granting of his request to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.
 - b. Vv.10-14 explain what it is, viz:
 - (1) A kind and forgiving reception of Onesimus on the basis of the fact that he was one who, in time past, was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me, Vv.10,11.
 - (2) I have sent him back to you with the request that you receive him, V.12.
 - (3) I have sent him back even though I would have gladly retained him with me to minister unto me in the bonds of the gospel, V.13.
 - (4) But without thy consent would I do nothing; that thy benefit (goodness) should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly, V.14.
 - c. Vv.15,16: Paul's hopes were, and perhaps it was in the providence of God that this had happened for Onesimus' conversion to Christ and his future usefulness to Philemon, both in the flesh, and in the Lord.
 - d. Vv.17-19: Paul continues his appeal to Philemon along with a promise to Philemon.
 - (1) V.17, the appeal: Receive him as myself if you count me or accept me as a partner.
 - (2) Vv.18,19, the promise: If he hath wronged you, or owes you anything, I will repay it.
 - (a) The implication is that he does.
 - (b) He may have stolen from or defrauded Philemon on some way,
 - e. Vv.20,21: His expressed confidence in Philemon that he will not only comply with Paul's request, but would even go beyond it.
 - f. V.22: His plan for a future visit to Philemon stated.
4. Now we shall consider several truths taught in this epistle and/or lessons learned from it that are so needed in our time and our world.

B. 1ST THE LETTER IS A BRILLIANT AFIRMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN'S ETHICS, OF MORAL PRINCIPLES THAT GOVERN CHRISTIANS, OF IDEAL HUMAN CHARACTER, RIGHT ACTIONS AND ENDS.

1. Both Paul and Onesimus, the converted slave, were convinced that the right thing to do was for Onesimus to return to his master, making right the earlier wrongs.
 - a. How do we know this was Onesimus' conviction?
 - b. We know it by the very fact that he was willingly returning!
2. This, no doubt, may seem strange to the modern, worldly mind unlearned I the sacred truth of the revealed word of God!
 - a. The very idea! Willingly, voluntarily return an escaped slave?!
 - b. Send him back into slavery? No way!
3. But, like it nor not, slavery was a long-standing, legal institution of that age, and Christians were to, and did, respect and abide by the laws pertaining to such until a better day should dawn, which it would do, and did do, eventually!
4. To these godly men, these Christians, the issue was not, "What is the safest thing to do?" "What is the most fleshly, materially profitable thing to do?" Nor, "What is the best for us?"
 - a. Rather, it was: "What is the RIGHT thing to do?"
5. This is character – moral character! The evidence of true conversion to Christ!

C. 2ND THIS DOCUMENT IS A TREMENDOUS TRIBUTE TO COURAGE A GREAT TEST OF ONE'S FAITH IN DOING WHAT HE KNEW TO BE RIGHT EVEN IN THE FACE OF POSSIBLE GREAT PERSONAL DANGER.

1. Onesimus was a relatively new convert, but his passion, his desire for doing the right thing, to right former wrongs, even in the face of the possibility of personal danger, was tremendous.
2. This is so evident when we consider the fact that at that time the slave owner had complete control over his "property".
 - a. He could whip him.
 - b. He could even kill him at his own pleasure.
 - c. A runaway when caught and returned could be branded as a fugitive by having the letter "F" burned into the skin of his forehead! – branded like an animal!

3. Onesimus had no certain knowledge as to his fate when he returned to Philemon, his slave-master; but he, at the request of the apostle Paul, willingly returned to whatever he might face.
4. That's courage! That's bravery! That's genuine faith of great degree!
5. How do you suppose our faith and courage would compare? Would we even consider similar action with possible physical harm awaiting?

D. 3RD THIS BOOK IS UNIQUE FOR THE SOCIAL IMPACT IT HAS EXERCISED.

1. It has been said that no document in the history of the world has so altered, or had more influence over, humanity's attitude toward the institution of slavery as has this letter to Philemon.
2. Paul urged Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, (as) a brother beloved...in the Lord" (V.16).
3. When people treat others as "beloved" kinsmen and brethren "in the Lord," the master/owner relationship fades into oblivion, regardless of the legal sanction.
4. This caliber of "leaven" was precisely that which eventually called for formal emancipation, in spite of continued, stubborn opposition to it on the part of some for whatever reason or reasons.
5. "Law" (strict legal action) keeps a man in check (1Tim.1:9); however, the gospel, the saving grace of God, changes his heart.
6. Even the crusty old skeptic Bertrand Russell acknowledged that Christianity paved the way for the eventual demise of slavery (Unpopular Essays, Simon & Schuster, 1950, p.137)

E. 4TH THE EPISTLE IS A THRILLING AFFIRMATION OF THE REALITY THAT THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD MAY BE WORKING IN CIRCUMSTANCES AND EVENTS OF WHICH WE ARE NOT AWARE, AND CAN NEVER BE SURE.

1. Note V.15. Paul cautions Philemon that "perhaps" (peradventure, possibly, maybe) he (Onesimus) therefore departed (was separated) from you for a season, that thou shouldst receive him for ever."
2. While Paul could not say for certain, in the absence of direct divine revelation, that God had orchestrated at least some of these events that had worked out so wonderfully – for him, for Onesimus, and, presently, for Philemon as well – the situation appeared to have divine "fingerprints" all over it!

3. We can say this because Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit used the passive voice form “was separated” which hints of an action initiated by someone other than the runaway himself.
 - a. And, of course, if it is the case that that is so; then that someone would have to have been God himself.
 - b. Cf. Est.4:14.
4. How God in heaven is able to manipulate specific human events, while honoring man’s freedom of choice, is a mystery that no person can fathom.
 - a. That God has done so in time past we have scriptural proof; such as the case of Joseph being sent into Egypt, Gen.45:5-8.
 - b. That he may still have been doing so in the days of Onesimus and Philemon is implied in our text.
 - c. That he may still do so today, we have no doubt, even though we have no way to prove he does so in any specific events.

F. 5TH THIS BEAUTIFUL LETTER IS A MASTERFUL EXAMPLE OF THE ART OF GENTLE PERSUASION, WHICH IS SOMETHING PAUL OFTEN USED, AS OPPOSED TO THE STIFF FORCE OF AUTHORITATIVE COMMANDMENT.

1. It is “psychological” masterpiece – in the best use of that term.
2. Paul does not wish to, nor resort to flexing his apostolic muscle, but he does intend to “nudge” Philemon in the right direction by gentle, direct persuasion.
3. The words of Vv.17-19 would, no doubt, be like darts piercing Philemon’s heart.
 - a. This clearly indicates that at some point in the past, Paul had been instrumental in converting Philemon, saving his soul. Cf. 1Cor.4:15 9:1,2.
 - b. The obvious implication seems to be that in view of this, could you not see your way clear to seriously consider granting me this request concerning your run-away-slave, who is now your brother in the Lord?

G. 6TH THE LETTER ALSO SERVES TO ADMONISH US TO REMEMBER THE POWER OF EVANGELISM, THE POWER OF THE PREACHED WORD, THE GOSPEL, THE POWER OF GOD UNTO SALVATION, TO REACH THE HEART OF THE MOST UNLIKELY CANDIDATE.

1. Onesimus was a native of Phrygia (Col.4:9), and a run-away-slave, as well as one who in all probability had defrauded his master in some manner (Vv.18,19), and one who would fear discovery.
2. Moreover, the slaves of Phrygia in general are said to have had a particularly nasty reputation.
3. It was proverbial to suggest that Phrygian slaves grew better with beatings.
4. Nevertheless here was one who, even under what we might think were improbable circumstances, was reached by the gospel and converted to Christ with strong convictions.
5. Proving once again, as it did in the case of Saul of Tarsus, that the gospel can work its power in any heart that is honest, regardless of one's jaded background.
6. Do we believe it? Will we act accordingly and reach out to find such people? Will we keep our faith in the power of the gospel and keep preaching and teaching it in its fullness without compromise or apology?

H. 7TH FINALLY THIS WONDERFUL LITTLE EPISTLE PACKS A THRILLING ESCHATOLOGICAL MESSAGE.

1. By "eschatology" we mean a fact pertaining to "last things" – eternal issues.
2. We say this because in V.15 we have evidence pertaining to "last things" when it says: "For perhaps he therefore departed (was separated from you) for a season, that thou shouldest receive him (that you might have him) forever."
3. The key is the word "forever". It implies:
 - a. That now that Onesimus is a Christian, a "beloved brother...in the Lord," these two – the slave and the master – will enjoy an entirely different relationship with one another here and now and forever.
 - b. That the relationship is not merely one of time in the flesh, but one of eternity in the world to come – that is, in the land of forever.
 - c. That their familiar relationship (one of recognition) will endure beyond the temporal aspects of earth's environment; that it will extend to heaven itself.
4. We know from other passages that spiritual relationships in Christ as new-born creatures are not destroyed, do not end or cease, at death.
5. What a thrilling piece of evidence we find in this little epistle, in the case of Onesimus and Philemon, for post-earthly recognition – for recognition in heaven.

III. CONCLUSION

1. As to the style of writing in the epistle mentioned earlier take note of the following quote from H.A.W. Meyer:

“The aim of the letter is pursued with so much Christian love and wisdom, with so grate psychological tact, and, without sacrifice of the apostolic authority, in a manner so thoughtfully condescending, adroit, delicate, and irresistible that the brief letter – which is in the finest sense ‘seasoned with salt’ as a most precious and characteristic relic of the great apostle – belongs, even as regards it Attic refinement and gracefulness, to the epistolary masterpieces of antiquity.”

(“Attic” – “applied to literary or artistic style, simple, pure, and refined.”)

2. Thus in this study we have learned and emphasized some seven great truths brought out brilliantly in this little epistle, and have done so in keeping with the spirit of our former lesson on “The Desired Grace Of Gentleness.”
3. We have, among other things, emphasized Paul’s gentle style of writing in dealing with Philemon, with reference to a delicate situation, in his request in making intercession on behalf of Onesimus.
4. Note again Vv.8-10; Vv.13-16-21.
5. But don’t forget these seven great truths taught herein.

(Credit to Wayne Jackson, The Christian Courier, June 2004, p.7)