

=THE EPISTLES=

Lesson 12

Paul's Epistle to Philemon

INTRODUCTION: The book of Philemon is a private letter. It is the only one of its kind written by the Apostle Paul, and it is the shortest of all of Paul's Epistles. Philemon lived at Colosse. He was a wealthy man perhaps, and was a member of the church in Colosse, Colossians 4:9, 10. The Apostle Paul had won Philemon to Christ. He was a fine Christian man who had a slave named Onesimus. In some way, Onesimus had committed a crime against his master. He had robbed Philemon and fled to Rome. While in Rome he was apprehended and put in prison. It was there that he met the Apostle Paul. Paul witnessed to him and won him to Christ. Paul then writes a letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. In fact, the book of Philemon is a letter written by Paul to Philemon asking him to accept Onesimus back. He sends the letter with Onesimus, pleading mercy from Philemon.

I. THE OUTLINE OF THE LETTER.

1. Paul writes concerning Philemon.
  - 1) Paul reminds Philemon that he prays for him.
  - 2) He reminds Philemon that he thanks God for his Christian faith characterized by his love.
2. Paul writes concerning Onesimus.
  - 1) Paul admits that Onesimus is a sinner and that he has done wrong. He tells of Onesimus' flight to Rome.
  - 2) He speaks of Onesimus' conversion and explains that he is not the same man that fled from Philemon. He is now a brother in Christ.
3. Paul intercedes for Onesimus.
  - 1) He asks for a good reception for Onesimus on the part of Philemon.
  - 2) Paul pleads for Philemon to accept Onesimus just as he would have accepted Paul if he were coming back.

II. THERE IS A BEAUTIFUL PICTURE OF THE GOSPEL IN THIS EPISTLE.

1. Philemon is a type of God the Father. He has been sinned against by man.
2. Onesimus is a type of man who has sinned against the Father, and because of his sin, he has been separated from the Father.
3. His being apprehended and put in prison is a type of the bonds of sin.
4. Paul is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ.
  - 1) Paul puts Onesimus' sins on his account. (Philemon 18) This pictures the fact that our sins are placed on Jesus' account.
  - 2) Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul. Here is a picture of Jesus paying the price for our sins, thereby enabling God to receive us just as He would receive the Lord Jesus Christ. Picture Paul coming to see Philemon. They had been good friends. Paul had won Philemon to Christ. What a wonderful reception would be his! Paul pleads for this same reception for Onesimus. Here is a picture of Jesus pleading for us at the right hand of God the Father.
  - 3) Paul beseeches Philemon not to receive Onesimus as a servant, but as a brother beloved. Here is a picture of the sinner coming to Jesus Christ, and Jesus becomes his Intercessor. We can come back to the Father because of Jesus, but we do not come back as a servant. We come back as a brother beloved, a brother to our Older Brother, the Lord Jesus Christ. We come back to a higher standing than we had before we fell. In other words, when we come to the Father through Jesus, we are as welcome as Jesus is when He comes to the Father.
  - 4) Onesimus is to be received "for ever." (Philemon 15) Just as verse 16 says, he should be received "Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved," and verse 17 says, "receive him as myself"; verse 15 says, "receive him for ever." Here is a picture of our eternal salvation. When we come to Christ, He receives us forever! Here is a beautiful picture of salvation: Philemon, the Father; Paul, the Saviour; Onesimus, the sinner. It is all by mercy.

- 5) The letter of Philemon is a type of the Word of God. What did Onesimus bring when he returned to Philemon? Did he bring his own merit? No. Did he bring his own goodness? No. Did he promise to turn over a new leaf? No. He was guilty. He could not pay his own debt. The only hope he had was if Philemon would honor the letter from Paul. Here is the type of the sinner. Our only hope is for God to honor His Word. The Word of God is our hope for Heaven, just as the letter was Onesimus' hope for restoration and acceptance before Philemon.

III. PAUL, THE SOUL WINNER. Here's a wonderful truth: Wherever Paul was, he was winning souls. Here he is, an old man in jail, but he witnesses to the prisoners, and from this particular occasion and conversion there comes this beautiful, sweet story of Philemon.

CONCLUSION: In addition to all that Paul asks Philemon to do, there is also his observation that a great change had taken place in Onesimus. Paul had seen the fruit of his salvation. Onesimus did not come back because he was good; he came back because he had the letter and he had Paul as the intercessor to pay his price. However, he was a changed man because of this. This is the way the Christian is. He does not change so he can come back to God; he changes because he has come back to God. He does not turn over a new leaf in order to be a Christian; he does so because he is a Christian. Thank God for the salvation pictured so beautifully in this little personal letter from Paul to Philemon.