

THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

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THE DOCTRINE OF IMPUTATION APPLIED

Memory Verse: Philemon 17-18

Lesson: Philemon 1-25

This letter seems to be a personal letter, but of its divine inspiration there can be no doubt. Philemon was a Christian of Colosse who was likely a convert of Paul's. His slave, Onesimus, robbed him and fled to Rome, where he had been converted under Paul's ministry and became a faithful and beloved brother – Philemon 10. Colossians 4:7-9 "All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here. Paul sends him back with this beautiful letter, containing a plea for Onesimus to be received as a brother.

This is a prison epistle and should be dated about 64 A.D., and was written before the letters to Timothy and Titus.

I. PAUL'S SALUTATION TO PHILEMON – Verses 1-3

A. Paul's Greeting – Verses 1-2

- a. From Paul a prisoner of Jesus Christ – Verse 1. He considered his imprisonment to be the will of God.
- b. To Philemon a dearly beloved brother and a fellowlabourer – Verse 1
- c. To Apphia and Archippus also – Verse 2. Apphia may have been the wife of Philemon, and Archippus may have been his son or a prominent member of the Church – Colossians 4:17
- d. To the church in thy house – Verse 2. Churches met in homes in the New Testament because they had no church buildings – Romans 16:5, 23; 1 Corinthians 16:19

B. Paul's Benediction – Verse 3

II. PAUL'S PRAISE OF PHILEMON – Verses 4-7

A. Philemon's Character – Verses 4-5

- a. He was the cause of thanks and prayers – Verse 4
- b. He was known for his love and faith – Verse 5

B. Philemon's Communication – Verses 6-7

- a. Paul prayed that Philemon's faith might be communicated to others – Verse 6. See James 2:14, 17 "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone." Philippians 4:8 "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." 2 Peter 1:5, 8 "And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

C. Philemon's love for the saints – Verse 7

III. PAUL'S PLEA FOR ONESIMUS – Verses 8-21

It has been estimated that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. (This would be about half of the population.) They were treated as merchandise, and bought and sold at will. The common slave was sold for the equivalent of 500 days wages. Skilled slaves were sold for up to ten times that amount. When a slave ran away, the owner would register the name and description with the officials, putting the slave on the wanted list. Such slaves could be sentenced to death, but reasonable owners would want to protect their investment.

A. Paul's Plea For A Son – Verses 8-13

- a. He pleads rather than exercise apostolic authority – Verse 8
- b. He pleads for love's sake – Verse 9
- c. He pleads his own age and state – Verse 9. Who could deny this suffering saint?
- d. He pleads his own relationship to Onesimus – Verse 10. Galatians 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." This did not mean that he was no longer a slave.
- e. He pleads the changed character of Onesimus – Verse 11. Onesimus means "profitable." Philemon means "affectionate."
- f. He pleads for a tender reception of Onesimus – Verse 12

- g. He pleads his own confidence in Onesimus – Verse 13. Paul could have used Onesimus in Rome, but he could not in good conscience keep him without permission.
- B. Paul’s Plea For A Brother – Verses 14-16
- a. Paul’s courtesy and tact – Verse 14
 - b. God’s providence at work – Verse 15; Romans 8:28 “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”
 - c. The changed relationship of Onesimus – Verse 16. He departed a slave, but returned as a brother.
- C. Paul’s Plea For A Proper Reckoning – Verses 17-21
- a. Receive him as myself – Verse 17. “Receive” means to receive into one’s family circle. Onesimus as a slave is to be admitted to the family circle. What a change! Ephesians 1:6 “To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.” 2 Corinthians 5:21 “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”
 - b. What he owes put on my account – Verse 18; James 2:23 “And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.” Paul is saying, “charge what he owes to me.”
 - c. He reminds Philemon of spiritual indebtedness – Verse 19. He says that he will repay Philemon, but reminds him that he already owes Paul.
 - d. He explains his own need for joy – Verse 20
 - e. He explains his confidence in Philemon – Verse 21

IV. PAUL’S CONCLUSION – Verses 22-25

- A. A Sincere Request – Verse 22. Paul expected to come to Colosse.
- B. The Simple Greetings – Verses 23-25

NOTE: This beautiful story furnishes an analogy of our redemption. “The sinner is God’s property (by creation), and he has not only run away from his Master, but robbed Him. The Law affords him no right of Asylum, but Grace concedes him the right of appeal. He flees for refuge to Jesus, whom God counts as a partner. In Him he is begotten anew, as a son, and finds both an Intercessor and a Father; he returns to God, and is received, not as a slave, but as Christ Himself, and all the debt is put to Christ’s account.” When Christ died on the cross, my sins were put on His account, and He was punished as I should have been punished. When I repented and received Him as my Saviour, His righteousness was put on my account. Now God the Father accepts me into the family circle as Jesus Christ is accepted. This is the beautiful doctrine of imputation.

STUDY QUESTION

1. Give the approximate date of the epistle and from where it was written.
2. How did Paul describe Philemon?
3. Where did Philemon live?
4. What indicates that this was written toward the end of Paul’s ministry?
5. What had been the relationship of Onesimus to Philemon in the past?
6. What had Onesimus done that was wrong?
7. Where was Onesimus converted to Christ?
8. Explain how the doctrine of imputation is illustrated in this epistle.
9. Explain how this story furnishes us with an analogy of our redemption.
10. Quote the memory verse.